



TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN ELECTION ADMINISTRATION: THE CASE OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study examines the progress of training and professional development in election administration in North Macedonia, focusing on the experience of the State Election Commission (SEC). It analyses how training has evolved from largely ad hoc, election-driven activities into a more structured and institutionalized function supporting the professionalism and effectiveness of electoral processes.

Over the past decade, the SEC has strengthened its training system significantly. This includes the development of standardized curricula, the establishment of a certified pool of trainers and the introduction of blended learning approaches, including an e-learning platform. These measures have improved the consistency and quality of training for the temporary election workforce and contributed to more uniform implementation of electoral procedures across the country.

At the institutional level, training has increasingly been recognized as a strategic function. This is reflected in strategic planning documents and in recent amendments to the Electoral Code, which formally introduced the Centre for Continuous Electoral Education as a separate organizational unit. This represents an important step towards the professionalization and long-term sustainability of electoral training. However, the Centre has not yet been operationalized, resulting in a misalignment between the legal framework and the SEC's internal organizational structure. In the interim, training functions are performed but not fully institutionalized.

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The professional development of the SEC's permanent staff shows a similar pattern of gradual progress. Elements of a more systematic approach are emerging, such as training needs assessments and targeted capacity-building initiatives. However, the integration of training into human resource management, performance evaluation and career development remains limited. Strengthening these linkages will be critical for building a resilient and adaptive election administration.

The study also highlights the role of training and education for electoral stakeholders including political parties, candidates, media representatives and civil society organizations. These activities contribute to improved understanding of electoral rules, enhanced compliance and transparency. However, stakeholder training remains less structured than the SEC's own and would benefit from a more strategic and continuous approach.

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Overall, the case of North Macedonia illustrates that institutionalizing electoral training is a gradual and multi-dimensional process. It requires alignment between legal provisions, organizational structures, resource allocation and strategic priorities. The experience offers valuable lessons for other electoral management bodies, particularly in relation to building trainer networks, adopting blended learning models and embedding training within broader processes of institutional development and electoral reform.

INTRODUCTION

This case study examines the progress of training and professional development in election administration in North Macedonia, focusing on the experience of the State Election Commission (SEC). It explores how electoral training has evolved over time, the extent to which it has been institutionalized, and its role in strengthening the professionalism, consistency and integrity of electoral processes.

In line with International IDEA's analytical framework, the study considers training not only as an operational activity, but as a core institutional function that contributes to the long-term capacity, resilience and credibility of electoral management bodies (EMBs). It therefore examines both the systems that support training delivery and the broader organizational and strategic context in which it takes place.

The analysis is structured around four key dimensions:

1. *The institutional framework for training*, including the legal mandate, organizational arrangements and strategic positioning of training within the SEC.
2. *The professional development and professionalization of the permanent workforce*, assessing how learning and capacity development are integrated into human resource management and institutional development.
3. *The training of the temporary election workforce*, with particular attention to training models, standardization, quality assurance and lessons learned across electoral cycles.
4. *The training and education of electoral stakeholders*, including political parties, candidates, media and civil society—and explores how these efforts contribute to transparency, compliance and trust in the electoral process.

A cross-cutting theme throughout the study is the gradual institutionalization of training, including recent legal developments that introduced the Centre for Continuous Electoral Education (CCEE). Attention is given to how far these developments have been translated into operational structures and practices.

Methodologically, the study is based on a qualitative approach combining a review of legislative developments, analysis of strategic and operational documents, and semi-structured interviews with SEC Commissioners and key staff. It is further informed by stakeholder perspectives including feedback from political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs) and media representatives, which provide additional insight into the perceived effectiveness and impact of training activities. These sources are triangulated to assess progress, identify challenges and draw lessons on the institutionalization of electoral training and professional development.

1. BACKGROUND: NORTH MACEDONIA'S ELECTORAL SYSTEM

North Macedonia is a parliamentary democracy with a unicameral legislature, the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, which is composed of 120 members elected for a four-year term. Members of parliament are elected through a proportional representation system in six electoral districts, each returning 20 members, using closed party lists. In addition, the Electoral Code provides for the possibility of electing members from the diaspora. However, this has not been consistently implemented in practice, as the legal preconditions—particularly the minimum turnout thresholds required to validate these mandates—have proven difficult to fulfil (SEC 2021a). In addition to parliamentary elections, the Electoral Code regulates the conduct of

presidential and local elections, as well as national and municipal referendums. The president of the republic is elected through a majoritarian system by direct popular vote. Local elections are held for mayors and municipal councils, with mayors elected through a majoritarian system and councils elected through proportional representation. The legal framework also provides for organizing referendums at both national and local levels, which require specific procedures and administrative arrangements.

Elections are administered through a three-tier structure composed of the SEC, Municipal Election Commissions (MECs), and Electoral Boards (EBs). The SEC is a permanent, professional body responsible for the overall management and supervision of elections, including adopting regulations, coordinating lower-level bodies, overseeing the voter register and announcing results. In contrast, MECs and EBs are temporary bodies established for each electoral cycle, composed of appointed members who perform operational functions at local and polling station levels.

The Electoral Code (North Macedonia 2025a) regulates all key aspects of the electoral process including voter registration, candidate nomination, campaign conduct, media coverage, dispute resolution, and the organization and conduct of voting and counting. Over time, the code has undergone frequent amendments, often reflecting recommendations from international observation missions as well as domestic reform processes.

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The effective conduct of North Macedonia's elections relies heavily on a large temporary workforce recruited for each electoral cycle. This places particular importance on the design, standardization and delivery of training programmes for temporary election officials, as well as on the availability of clear and accessible guidance. At the same time, the increasing complexity of electoral processes underscores the need for continuing professional development (CPD) of the SEC's permanent staff.

In parallel, the role of electoral stakeholders such as political parties, candidates, media representatives and CSOs has become increasingly significant. Their level of understanding of electoral rules and procedures directly affects compliance, transparency and public trust in the process, highlighting the importance of targeted education and engagement activities. Meanwhile, recent amendments to the Electoral Code (SEC 2021a) have introduced provisions for the establishment of a Centre for Continuous Electoral Education (CCEE) within the Commission. These developments reflect a growing recognition of training and professional development as a core institutional function and as a key component of electoral integrity, transparency and sustainability.

2. ESTABLISHING AND INSTITUTIONALIZING ELECTORAL TRAINING

The establishment and subsequent evolution of electoral training in North Macedonia are closely linked to the development of the Electoral Code adopted in 2006 (Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia 2006). The 2006 framework did not provide an explicit mandate for systematic training, and early activities (2006–2010) were largely ad hoc and donor-driven, focusing primarily on operational readiness before elections (Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia 2006).

Subsequent amendments to the Electoral Code—and particularly those adopted between 2015 and 2024—gradually strengthened procedural clarity, introducing more formalized requirements for electoral administration (SEC 2021a; North Macedonia 2024). The 2024 amendments represent a turning point as they explicitly recognize the importance of education for different electoral stakeholders. Introducing a more systematic approach to training, they specify programmes for political parties, media and civil society.

This reflects a shift towards a more professionalized system, in which training moves beyond a purely operational, election-driven activity and becomes a core institutional function: a continuous and strategically embedded process that supports institutional capacity, consistent application of electoral procedures and overall quality in election administration. The Commission's strategic orientation towards continuous electoral education and professionalization is reflected in its strategic planning framework (see: SEC 2021b, 2025a). By strengthening the knowledge, skills and preparedness of both permanent and temporary election officials, training directly contributes to the EMB's ability to fulfil its mandate of ensuring the lawful, transparent and efficient conduct of elections, while reinforcing public trust in the integrity of the electoral process.

The development of electoral training in North Macedonia can be divided into three key phases:

1. *Initial phase (2006–2014): ad hoc and donor-driven training.* Training activities during this period were primarily organized before elections, often with the support of international partners, mostly the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mission to Skopje. While these efforts contributed to basic operational preparedness, they lacked continuity and institutional ownership (OSCE/ODIHR 2006, 2008).
2. *Consolidation phase (2015–2019): standardization and methodology development.* Following repeated electoral cycles and increased scrutiny, the SEC began to develop standardized training materials, manuals and cascade training systems.
3. *Institutionalization phase (2019–2025): system-building and innovation.* The introduction of a certified trainer network in 2019 marked a major

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step towards institutionalizing training. A pool of trainers was recruited, selected through a structured process and certified through training-of-trainers (ToT) programmes and written assessments.

Concurrently, in 2019, the SEC introduced its e-learning platform, enabling online training and continuous capacity development (SEC n.d.). This platform became particularly important in recent electoral cycles—2021, 2024 and 2025—supporting both permanent staff and temporary election officials.

Institutional structures and strategic positioning

Training within the SEC is currently positioned within the Sector for Continuous Training, Public Relations and International Cooperation (SEC 2024a). In parallel, a human resources (HR) unit has been established within a different sector of the Commission (SEC 2026), reflecting a gradual strengthening of the HR function. In line with the standard organizational structure of public institutions in North Macedonia, a ‘sector’ represents a higher-level organizational unit composed of one or more units reporting to it, each responsible for specific functional areas.

While both training and HR functions are relevant to staff development and institutional capacity, their placement in separate sectors suggests that linkages between training, performance management and career development are still evolving. This has implications for how far professional development can be managed as a fully integrated and strategic function.

Strategic plans of the SEC (2021–2024 and 2025–2028), as well as the mid-term review of the implementation of the 2021–2024 Strategic Plan, consistently identify continuous electoral education as a strategic priority, emphasizing professionalization of election administration, capacity development for stakeholders and strengthening civic and voter education (SEC 2021b, 2023, 2025a).

Training is formally acknowledged as a key function, but its implementation is often constrained by limited financial resources and competing institutional priorities.

Despite this strategic recognition, interview findings indicate a persistent gap between strategic intent and operational prioritization (Shabani 2026; Todorovska Aleksovska 2026). Training is formally acknowledged as a key function, but its implementation is often constrained by limited financial resources and competing institutional priorities.

Trainer networks and capacity development

The development of a nationwide trainer network represents one of the most significant achievements in the institutionalization of electoral training. The certification system introduced in 2019 established clear criteria for trainer selection, ToT programmes and evaluation through written assessments. The subsequent expansion of the trainer pool—to approximately 120 certified trainers in 2020 and 2021—has enabled the SEC to implement large-scale training programmes for electoral bodies.

Certified trainers are selected through a competitive process that includes the assessment of prior professional experience, formal interviews and performance-based evaluation. Trainers are engaged on an assignment basis,

primarily during electoral periods, and are typically experienced election administrators or individuals with relevant professional backgrounds. While not full-time staff, the pool of certified trainers can be mobilized for cascade training across the country. Their role includes delivering standardized training sessions, supporting practical exercises and ensuring consistent interpretation of procedures across the tiers of electoral administration.

Importantly, trainers have been selected in a way to represent a geographically, ethnically and gender-diverse group, including people with disabilities and individuals from different age groups and communities. This diversity contributes to more inclusive training delivery and reflects broader commitments to equitable representation in electoral processes.

Digitalization and continuous learning

The introduction of the e-learning platform in 2019 has significantly strengthened the sustainability of training efforts. The platform provides:

- online training modules for permanent SEC staff and electoral stakeholders;
- onboarding courses for newly appointed SEC staff;
- specialized training modules for temporary election officials, including members of MECs and EBs; and
- continuous learning opportunities beyond electoral cycles.

The content of the platform has been developed by SEC staff and subject experts, based on training needs assessments conducted for different target groups (permanent workforce, temporary election officials and external stakeholders). This ensures that the learning materials are tailored to specific roles, responsibilities and levels of expertise. In cooperation with other departments, the platform is updated, managed and quality-assured by the SEC unit responsible for training.

This digital approach supports a transition from event-based training to a continuous learning model, allowing for greater flexibility, accessibility and standardization.

Monitoring and evaluating learning

The SEC has developed mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating training activities, including: (a) post-training evaluation forms completed by participants; (b) trainer reports and observations from training sessions; (c) attendance records and participation data; and (d) aggregated analysis of training outcomes across regions and types of electoral bodies. These inputs are used to assess the effectiveness of training delivery and to identify areas for improvement, with lessons learned incorporated into subsequent training programmes.

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Innovations such as real-time monitoring tools have been piloted and have demonstrated potential for improving quality control and feedback mechanisms. These include the use of digital reporting forms completed by trainers immediately after sessions, centralized tracking of training delivery and attendance, and rapid feedback collection through online surveys or mobile-based tools. Such approaches allow for timely identification of gaps in delivery, inconsistencies across regions and emerging challenges.

However, interview findings suggest that while evaluation systems exist, their systematic use for institutional learning and long-term planning remains limited (Shabani 2026; Todorovska Aleksovska 2026).

Gender equality and inclusion

Gender equality and inclusiveness are increasingly integrated into electoral training practices in North Macedonia.

The composition of the trainer network reflects diversity, and the training programmes also incorporate inclusive approaches, ensuring accessibility and representation.

At the same time, interview findings indicate that gender considerations are not yet systematically mainstreamed across all aspects of training and institutional development (Shabani 2026; Todorovska Aleksovska 2026). They are often addressed at the operational level rather than embedded in formal policies and frameworks.

While the SEC has adopted internal by-laws related to the use of gender-sensitive language and the collection and presentation of sex-disaggregated data, their application remains inconsistent. This suggests that existing normative frameworks are not yet fully translated into routine practice, pointing to challenges in institutional ownership and continuity.

Strengthening gender mainstreaming within training systems remains an area for further development.

Strengthening gender mainstreaming within training systems remains an area for further development. This could include more systematic integration of gender perspectives into training needs assessments, curricula and materials; the use of sex-disaggregated data to monitor participation and outcomes; and the alignment of training activities, evaluation and planning with broader institutional priorities on gender equality. In this regard, the SEC's strategic commitment to gender mainstreaming provides an important framework.

The Centre for Continuous Electoral Education

A central element of institutionalizing electoral training in North Macedonia is the planned CCEE within the SEC.

The Electoral Code formally provides for the establishment of the CCEE as part of the Commission's organizational framework, assigning it a mandate to plan, develop and implement training and educational activities for electoral officials and stakeholders. In this context, the designation of a 'centre' implies a more functionally distinct entity than a standard sector or unit, with a dedicated

leadership function and a cross-cutting mandate that extends across multiple areas of the Commission's work. The envisaged model positioned the CCEE as an internal entity within the SEC, headed by a dedicated manager and structured into two sectors with specialized units responsible for different aspects of training and education.

Preparations for the CCEE have been supported by a comprehensive process, including conceptualization and endorsement by the SEC, feasibility studies and strategic roadmaps (2021–2024), integration into strategic planning documents, and the development of training methodologies, trainer networks and digital learning platforms (Guguchevska Filiposka 2023). These elements indicate a high level of technical and strategic readiness for institutionalization.

However, establishing and operationalizing the CCEE as a dedicated organizational structure within the SEC remains a work in progress. While training functions are active at the CEC, they remain within existing sectors rather than consolidated under a dedicated structure as envisaged in the legal and strategic framework. This represents a gap between formal institutional design (the CCEE) and implementation.

Interview findings and questionnaire responses point to several commonly cited explanations. These include the absence of sufficient, earmarked budget allocations, the need to further clarify the CCEE's positioning within the existing organization, and the challenges of aligning a new cross-cutting function with established institutional structures (Secretary General of SEC 2026; Interviewee A 2026; Interviewee B 2026; Member of SEC 2026). While these factors help explain the pace of implementation, they do not fully account for the continued delay in operationalizing the Centre—particularly given the level of technical preparedness and strategic alignment already achieved. The absence of a dedicated budget line and formally assigned staff positions, in particular, presents a barrier to fully institutionalizing CPD and wider electoral training.

A broader analysis suggests that progress is also shaped by institutional governance considerations. Establishing a dedicated training centre would introduce a permanent and centralized mandate for capacity development—requiring adjustments in roles, responsibilities and internal coordination mechanisms, as well as a degree of functional autonomy. As reflected in interviews, such changes will depend on clear institutional ownership, defined competencies and sustained commitment from leadership.

The experience illustrates a broader pattern observed in public sector reform processes, where the formal adoption of new institutional arrangements does not automatically translate into immediate operationalization. In the case of the SEC, the delayed establishment of the CCEE highlights the importance of aligning legal provisions, resource allocation and organizational structures. It also underscores that the long-term sustainability of training systems depends not only on technical capacity and established practices, but equally on institutional integration, ownership and coordinated support across the organization.

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The Law on Administrative Officers (civil servants) 2025 defines key principles related to recruitment, career progression, performance evaluation and professional development.

3. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PERMANENT EMB WORKFORCE

The professional development of the permanent workforce of the SEC, the country's apex EMB, takes place within the broader institutional and legal framework governing public administration in North Macedonia. The Law on Administrative Officers (civil servants) 2025 defines key principles related to recruitment, career progression, performance evaluation and professional development. It explicitly recognizes continuous training and professional development as integral components of public administration—linking competencies, performance and career advancement (North Macedonia 2025b).

Within this context, the SEC operates as a relatively small institution with a permanent professional workforce organized into several functional sectors. These include legal affairs, voter registry, financial management, training and public outreach, international cooperation, HR management and strategic planning. The organizational structure includes a Sector for Continuous Training, Public Relations and International Cooperation—where the training function sits—as well as a Sector for Human Resource Management, which has recently been strengthened to address systemic workforce challenges.

The SEC's headquarters is complemented by regional offices, which are mostly engaged with updating the voter registry. However, the permanent workforce remains concentrated at the central level, with a limited number of staff responsible for managing increasingly complex operational, legal and educational functions.

In recent years, the SEC has faced significant workforce challenges, including high employee turnover, a wave of retirements and difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified staff due to relatively low salaries. These factors have resulted in a growing proportion of newly recruited employees with limited prior experience in electoral administration, which creates additional pressure on internal training and CPD systems.

Learning needs assessment, performance management and career development

The identification of learning needs within the SEC has evolved from ad hoc approaches towards more structured processes, particularly following the strengthening of the HR function.

According to interview findings, the HR unit has introduced a more systematic approach to training needs assessment, involving: (a) analysis of competencies required for specific positions; (b) identification of gaps in knowledge and skills; and (c) preparation of reports with recommendations for targeted training interventions. This approach reflects alignment with the broader public administration framework, where competencies are defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and abilities required for effective job performance.

In practice, these processes are linked to the formal performance appraisal system for civil servants, as regulated by the Law on Administrative Officers. The appraisal process includes a mid-year review, conducted no later than 31 May, and an annual evaluation carried out in October in which line managers assess staff against defined competencies and performance objectives. The final annual rating is based on a combination of the supervisor's assessment and additional internal and external evaluations.

Performance discussions between staff and their supervisors allow for the identification of areas requiring improvement and create space for defining individual development priorities. The establishment of a career development and performance management unit within the HR sector dedicated to making these links represents an important institutional development. This team is tasked with linking training needs to broader career development pathways and performance management processes, while also contributing to the preparation of institutional training plans.

Nevertheless, interview data suggests that while these joined-up HR processes are increasingly formalized, implementation remains uneven (Mihajlovska 2026). There is a gap between the identification of training needs and the systematic delivery of corresponding training programmes, due in part to resource constraints and competing institutional priorities. In addition, participation in training is not yet consistently linked to performance evaluation outcomes or career advancement opportunities.

Further integrating learning needs assessment, performance management and career development would contribute to a more incentive-based approach to CPD and capacity building.

CPD and knowledge sharing

Professional development within the SEC is delivered through a combination of SEC-specific internal training, government-wide public administration training, and externally supported capacity-building programmes.

Internal training activities are coordinated primarily by the training function within the Sector for Continuous Training, Public Relations and International Cooperation. These activities focus on electoral-specific knowledge and skills including legal procedures, operational planning and preparation for electoral cycles, voter registration processes and communication with electoral stakeholders.

In parallel, SEC employees participate in CPD programmes provided under the broader public administration framework. The Law on Administrative Officers (North Macedonia 2025b) recognizes professional development as both a right and an obligation of civil servants and distinguishes between generic and specialized training. It also requires new employees to attend mandatory training and pass an examination after completion. Government-wide programmes aim to strengthen general competencies across the public sector, including both technical and transversal skills such as administrative

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procedures, ethics, communication, digital literacy, management and policy implementation.

Specialized professional development may also be requested by individual administrative officers where it is relevant to their job objectives and tasks, subject to approval by the secretary or the head of the institution. This provides a formal pathway for staff to seek training linked to their functional responsibilities, although access to such opportunities depends on institutional priorities, available funding and workload constraints.

External training opportunities are provided through cooperation with international partners such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the OSCE and others. These have contributed to strengthening specialized electoral knowledge, leadership capacities and exposure to comparative international practice. However, interview findings (Mihajlovska 2026) indicate that professional development remains partly dependent on donor-supported initiatives, raising concerns about sustainability. In the absence of consistent internal funding, training activities may be limited or irregular, particularly in periods without active international projects.

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Meanwhile, internal knowledge sharing represents an underutilized but potentially valuable component of CPD. The HR unit maintains records of staff competencies and training participation, providing a basis for identifying internal expertise. There is recognition that experienced staff could play a greater role in delivering internal training and supporting the development of less experienced colleagues.

However, systematic mechanisms for peer-to-peer learning, mentoring and knowledge transfer are not yet in place. While the public administration framework provides for CPD, it does not establish mentoring as a formalized or mandatory mode of delivery; knowledge sharing largely depends on informal practices rather than institutionalized processes. This affects not only the scope of training activities, but also predictability and long-term planning. Strengthening internal knowledge-sharing mechanisms could help address capacity gaps, particularly in the context of high staff turnover, and reduce reliance on external support.

Leadership and managerial capacity

Leadership and managerial competencies represent a critical dimension of professional development within the SEC, particularly given the complexity and sensitivity of electoral processes. Training in areas such as leadership, organizational management and crisis response is essential for ensuring effective coordination during electoral cycles, which often involve high operational pressure and political scrutiny.

Interview findings indicate that such training has been provided primarily through external programmes, often facilitated by international partners (Mihajlovska 2026). These programmes have contributed to strengthening managerial capacities and introducing modern approaches to organizational

leadership. However, there is limited evidence of a systematic internal programme for leadership development, and training in this area remains dependent on external opportunities. This limits the ability of the SEC to build a consistent pipeline of managerial competencies within the institution.

Technical specialization and functional expertise

The work of the SEC requires a high level of technical expertise across multiple domains including legal analysis, information technology, electoral operations and logistics. CPD programmes have increasingly focused on strengthening these specialized competencies. Legal staff require continuous updates on electoral legislation and jurisprudence, IT staff manage complex electoral systems and databases, and operational staff have to coordinate large-scale logistical processes.

Interview findings indicate that efforts have been made to align training with these functional needs. At the same time, the influx of new employees with lower levels of prior experience has created additional demand for foundational training in core areas of electoral administration. This highlights the importance of developing training pathways that combine introductory training for new staff with advanced specialization for experienced employees.

Digital learning and knowledge management

A significant development in the professionalization of the SEC workforce has been the introduction of digital learning tools and knowledge management systems.

The e-learning platform (SEC n.d.) functions as a central component of this system, providing online training modules and educational resources. The platform includes thematic courses covering key areas of electoral administration including legal procedures, operational guidelines and institutional processes.

While international partners have contributed to the development of certain training materials and methodologies, much of the content has been developed internally by SEC staff and subject experts. The platform's expansion has been closely linked to the availability of state budget resources, with new e-courses being developed as funding allows. This has contributed to strengthening institutional ownership, while maintaining continuity with earlier, externally supported initiatives.

A notable feature of the platform is its integration into the onboarding process for new employees. Newly recruited EMB staff are assigned specific courses that they are required to complete, enabling them to acquire basic knowledge and familiarize themselves with institutional procedures. This approach has proven particularly important in addressing the challenges associated with high staff turnover and the recruitment of less experienced personnel. By providing structured and accessible learning materials (summarized in Table 1), the platform supports faster integration of new employees into the organization.

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From an analytical perspective, the platform represents a shift towards institutionalized knowledge management—where learning resources are systematically developed, stored and reused. It also supports a blended learning model, combining online and in-person training. However, interview findings suggest that the full potential of the platform has not yet been realized (Shabani 2026; Todorovska Aleksovska 2026). Its use could be further expanded to support CPD and more advanced training modules.

Table 1. Overview of e-learning modules on education.sec.mk

Thematic area	Modules and content
Voters	• Interactive course for voters • Youth in elections • Local government and elections • Civil society and elections (inclusion and literacy)
Election bodies	SEC professional staff: • Gender mainstreaming in elections • Inclusiveness in elections Municipal Election Commissions: • Gender mainstreaming in elections • Inclusion of persons with disabilities • Operational training • Video guides (election materials, UBIG*) Electoral Boards: • Operational training • Gender mainstreaming in elections • Inclusion of persons with disabilities • Video guides (materials, UBIG)
Candidates	• Authorized representatives of candidate lists • Video guides
Observers and media	• Election observation • Media and democracy (objective reporting) • Video guides for electoral observer manuals
Cyber hygiene	• Interactive course on cyber hygiene

*UBIG: Use of biometric voter identification device.

Partnerships and external cooperation

Professional development within the SEC is significantly supported by partnerships with international organizations and, to a lesser extent, domestic institutions. International partners have played a key role in providing technical assistance, training programmes and financial support for capacity-building initiatives. These partnerships have enabled the SEC to access specialized expertise and adopt international best practices.

At the same time, North Macedonia has several universities offering programmes in political science, public administration and related fields, including Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, FON University, International Balkan University, University American College Skopje, and the State University of Tetovo. These institutions provide academic training in political systems, democratic governance and public administration. However, academic courses specifically focused on electoral administration remain limited. As a result, the EMB's cooperation with universities is not yet systematically developed, and the potential to integrate electoral training into formal education pathways remains underutilized.

Interview findings suggest that expanding partnerships with universities and domestic training providers could enhance the sustainability of the Commission's CPD programmes, reduce reliance on donor-funded initiatives and contribute to a more institutionalized training system (Secretary General of SEC 2026; Todorovska Aleksovska 2026).

The professional development of the SEC workforce is shaped by several structural challenges: high employee turnover, driven in part by low salary levels, reduces institutional continuity and increases the need for repeated introductory training. Also, limited financial resources constrain the ability to implement comprehensive training programmes.

The recent strengthening of the HR function and its cooperation with the training unit represents a positive development. The introduction of structured needs assessments, onboarding training through the learning management system and efforts to improve coordination between units indicate a move towards a more integrated approach to professional development.

However, achieving full institutionalization of professional development will require:

- stronger internal prioritization of training;
- more consistent allocation of resources;
- integration of training with performance management systems; and
- expansion of digital learning and knowledge management tools.

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The experience of the SEC demonstrates that building a professional and resilient permanent workforce requires not only training programmes but also institutional systems that support continuous learning, knowledge sharing and career development.

4. TRAINING THE TEMPORARY ELECTION WORKFORCE

The administration of elections in North Macedonia relies on a large temporary workforce operating within a three-tier institutional structure defined by the Electoral Code (the SEC, MECs and EBs).

While the SEC provides central coordination and oversight, the implementation of electoral procedures is carried out by approximately 1,000 MEC members and around 35,000 EB members with diverse backgrounds and levels of prior electoral experience. This creates a structural dependency on effective training mechanisms capable of training large numbers of individuals within limited timeframes. The effectiveness of training for the temporary election workforce is closely dependent on the capacity and preparedness of the permanent SEC staff responsible for its design and delivery.

The Electoral Code establishes a mixed system of appointments, combining institutional selection with political nomination.

Recruitment, appointment and participation

The Electoral Code establishes a mixed system of appointments, combining institutional selection with political nomination (North Macedonia 2025a). Members of MECs and EBs are selected through a system of random assignment from a database of public administration employees, designed to ensure impartiality and an equitable distribution of responsibilities. While this approach supports neutrality, it limits the extent to which prior training and experience can be systematically leveraged across electoral cycles.

MEC members are appointed for five-year terms and are composed exclusively of public administration officials. In contrast, EBs are constituted for each electoral cycle, with a four-year mandate framework, and include a significant proportion of politically nominated members. Specifically, approximately 40 per cent of EB members are nominated by political parties, with these nominations renewed ahead of each election.

Electoral bodies must meet legal criteria for gender and ethnic representation. Each gender must comprise at least 30 per cent of the membership, and in municipalities where at least 20 per cent of citizens belong to non-majority ethnic communities, these groups must be equitably represented. This model contributes to inclusiveness and political balance, but it also introduces operational challenges for training systems. It leads to high turnover among EB members, many of whom participate in the electoral process only once.

Interview findings indicate that this turnover significantly affects training efficiency, as the SEC must repeatedly train large numbers of first-time participants (Shabani 2026; Todorovska Aleksovska 2026; Interviewee B

2026). These challenges are reflected in external assessments, which have pointed to the importance of ensuring full participation and consistent preparation of all election officials (OSCE/ODIHR 2019, 2020, 2022). Still, more recent observations have noted improvements in training organization and methodology, indicating gradual strengthening of the system (OSCE/ODIHR 2024, 2025).

Identification of training needs

Training needs are identified through a combination of legal requirements, operational experience and institutional learning processes.

At a basic level, the Electoral Code defines the responsibilities of EMBs, providing the foundation for identifying required competencies. However, the SEC has progressively adopted a more evidence-based approach, drawing on post-election evaluations, internal assessments and external recommendations.

In practice, training needs are also shaped by operational feedback. Interview data indicates that evaluation results, such as lower performance scores in specific municipalities, are used to refine training content and delivery methods (Shabani 2026; Todorovska Aleksovska 2026). For example, findings from training evaluations have led to increased emphasis on inclusive approaches, including gender-sensitive content and the participation of underrepresented groups, as well as the strengthening of practical components in areas where procedural errors were identified. This reflects an increasingly adaptive approach, where training programmes evolve in response to identified challenges.

At the same time, broader challenges remain, including variability in training outcomes across regions, time constraints during electoral periods, and the need to balance standardized content with context-specific adjustments.

Curriculum design, materials and methodologies

Consistent use of standardized curricula and materials has contributed to operational clarity and reduced discrepancies in how procedures are interpreted and applied.

The Programmes for Mandatory Education of members of MECs and EBs for the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections and the 2025 local elections provided training objectives, content and timelines (SEC 2024b, 2025b). The curriculum focuses on core operational competencies and emphasizes practical application. Training methodologies increasingly incorporate interactive and scenario-based learning, enabling participants to engage with realistic situations and practise decision making in conditions that simulate polling day (Box 1). This shift from predominantly theoretical instruction towards competency-based training responds to long-standing recommendations and has contributed to improved preparedness of election officials.

Training methodologies increasingly incorporate interactive and scenario-based learning, enabling participants to engage with realistic situations and practise decision making in conditions that simulate polling day.

Training scenarios are periodically updated based on post-election evaluations, allowing the curriculum to reflect recurring challenges and emerging issues observed in practice. This again demonstrates an adaptive approach to curriculum design, where training content evolves in response to operational feedback.

Box 1. Simulation Exercise: Use of biometric voter identification device

As part of practical training, Electoral Board members participate in simulation exercises involving the use of the biometric voter identification device (UBIG). The exercise replicates polling day conditions and requires participants to process a sequence of voters while applying legal procedures and device protocols in real time.

Participants are presented with a series of 'what if' scenarios, including:

- a voter whose fingerprint is not recognized by the device;
- a voter presenting valid identification but not appearing in the voter list;
- a device malfunction or temporary connectivity issue;
- a voter requiring assisted voting; and
- discrepancies between the device output and the printed voter list.

Working in assigned roles (president, members), participants must decide on the appropriate course of action, document the case correctly and ensure compliance with procedures. Trainers observe and provide feedback, focusing on accuracy, consistency and adherence to legal requirements. This exercise strengthens both technical proficiency and decision making under pressure, while reinforcing standardized procedures and inclusive practices in voter identification.

Cascade delivery model

To address the scale of the temporary workforce the SEC applies a cascade training model, enabling efficient nationwide delivery within tight electoral timelines. The model operates through successive levels, from ToT programmes at the central level, to training of MEC and EB members by SEC staff and certified trainers at the local level. This approach facilitates rapid dissemination of knowledge and supports standardization of training delivery.

Ensuring consistency across training sessions nevertheless requires strong coordination and quality-assurance mechanisms, discussed further below.

Participation, incentives and quality control

Training for members of election administration bodies is defined as mandatory, but ensuring full participation has been an ongoing challenge. Participation has historically been uneven, particularly among party-appointed members. In response, the SEC introduced a financial incentive in 2024, whereby members who did not attend mandatory training received 30 per cent reduced compensation for the duration of their assignment (Interviewee C 2026; Member of SEC 2026). This measure proved effective, contributing to increased participation in the 2025 electoral cycle.

In parallel, the SEC is strengthening cooperation with political parties, including through their legal committees, to improve awareness and encourage participation among nominated members. These efforts focus not only on raising awareness of the Electoral Code and codes of conduct, but also on enhancing understanding of electoral procedures and the practical responsibilities associated with participation in election administration. This reflects a recognition that training effectiveness depends not only on institutional measures but also on stakeholder engagement.

Quality control mechanisms have also evolved. Interview findings highlight the testing of digital tools for monitoring attendance and collecting feedback in real time, including systems based on barcode registration and evaluation forms. In addition, the use of the e-learning platform allows for tracking the completion of online training modules, providing further data on participation and engagement. Together, these innovations support more systematic and data-driven management of training processes.

5. TRAINING AND EDUCATING ELECTORAL STAKEHOLDERS

The introduction of a dedicated Programme for Education of Electoral Stakeholders for the 2024 elections marked a significant step forward. The programme emphasizes the clarification of roles and responsibilities, compliance with electoral rules and promoting informed participation (SEC 2024c). However, the programme's implementation depends on the availability of financial and organizational resources—not being supported by dedicated funding.

Training needs are identified through tools such as questionnaires, consultations and focus groups. Stakeholder responses indicate a strong preference for practical, targeted guidance, particularly on electoral procedures, legal obligations, media conduct and mechanisms for addressing irregularities.

Training programmes for political parties and candidates focus on enhancing understanding of the Electoral Code, campaign regulations and ethical standards. These programmes aim to strengthen compliance and reduce procedural errors, particularly in areas such as candidate nomination, campaign conduct, financial reporting obligations and interaction with EMBs. Stakeholder feedback highlights the importance of clear, accessible guidance on legal requirements, while interview findings point to the need for more consistent engagement with political actors, including structured cooperation with party legal committees to improve participation and compliance (Survey data 2026a).

Training programmes for media focus on electoral procedures, ethical reporting, balanced coverage and countering misinformation. Survey responses indicate a strong demand for practical and continuous learning

Training needs are identified through tools such as questionnaires, consultations and focus groups.

formats. Media representatives emphasize that training should be delivered by experienced professionals and should move beyond formal, one-off sessions. They highlight the need for ongoing updates on legal and procedural changes, as well as short, thematic briefings and modular online courses tailored to specific topics (Survey data 2026b). The SEC's e-learning platform provides a suitable basis for this approach. The existence of an active memorandum of understanding with the Media Information Agency (MIA) offers an important opportunity to institutionalize cooperation, including through joint briefings, coordinated information-sharing and development of educational content.

Training programmes for CSOs focus on observation methodologies, reporting of irregularities and engagement with diverse voter groups. Stakeholder responses highlight the importance of closer cooperation between the SEC and CSOs, particularly in outreach to underrepresented communities (Survey data 2026c). Interview findings suggest that more proactive and sustained engagement is needed to fully leverage the role of civil society in strengthening electoral processes. Training initiatives also support coordination between CSOs and institutions in law enforcement and dispute resolution, contributing to clearer understanding of roles and shared goals (Secretary General of SEC 2026; Member of SEC 2026; Interviewee A 2026).

Overall, stakeholder education programmes contribute to improved compliance, enhanced transparency and more consistent application of electoral procedures. The integration of digital learning tools, combined with more targeted and continuous engagement, represents a positive development. While further efforts are needed to ensure sustainability and institutional ownership, the evolving approach to stakeholder training reflects a broader shift towards a more inclusive, informed and resilient electoral environment.

6. CONCLUSION

This case study demonstrates that the institutionalization of electoral training is a gradual and multi-dimensional process that extends beyond the delivery of training activities. In North Macedonia, the SEC has progressively transformed electoral training from an ad hoc, election-driven function into a more systematic and professionalized system. Through the development of standardized curricula, certified trainer networks, blended learning methodologies and digital learning tools, the SEC has established a solid foundation for building the knowledge and capacities of election officials and electoral stakeholders.

A key finding of the study is that operational capacity can be successfully developed even before full institutionalization is achieved.

A key finding of the study is that operational capacity can be successfully developed even before full institutionalization is achieved. The SEC has created a functioning training system capable of preparing large numbers of temporary election officials, supporting stakeholder education and delivering continuous learning opportunities through its e-learning platform. The use of certified trainers, cascade training methodologies and digital learning approaches

represents a set of practices that may be relevant and adaptable for other EMBs facing similar operational challenges.

At the same time, the case illustrates that the existence of effective training activities does not automatically result in full institutionalization. Despite significant technical preparation, strategic planning and legal recognition, the CCEE has not yet been operationalized as a dedicated organizational structure. This highlights the importance of aligning legal provisions, organizational arrangements, staffing and resource allocation. The experience suggests that sustainable institutional reform depends not only on technical readiness but also on clear institutional ownership, leadership commitment and the availability of dedicated resources.

The analysis further demonstrates that professional development is most effective when it is integrated into broader human resource management processes. While the SEC has introduced more systematic approaches to learning needs assessment, onboarding and performance management, important gaps remain in linking training, career development and knowledge management. Internal knowledge-sharing mechanisms and mentoring practices remain underdeveloped, limiting the institution's ability to retain and transfer expertise, particularly in the context of staff turnover and retirements.

The findings also point to the growing importance of workforce resilience in contemporary electoral administration. EMBs increasingly operate in environments characterized by technological change, disinformation, cyber threats, political polarization and evolving legal requirements. In this context, a well-trained and adaptable permanent workforce is essential not only for effective election administration but also for safeguarding institutional memory, maintaining operational continuity and strengthening public confidence in electoral processes.

Across all dimensions examined in this study, digital learning and knowledge management emerge as important enabling factors for sustainability, accessibility and scalability. At the same time, the study highlights that gender equality and inclusion remain areas where formal commitments have not yet been fully translated into routine institutional practice. Strengthening the integration of gender considerations into training systems, professional development processes and institutional planning remains an important area for future development.

More broadly, the experience of North Macedonia suggests that sustainable electoral training systems are not built solely through methodologies, training materials or technological tools. Their long-term effectiveness depends on the extent to which training is embedded within institutional structures, linked to human resource development, supported by predictable resources and recognized as a strategic function of electoral governance. In this regard, the case offers valuable lessons for other EMBs seeking to strengthen professionalism, resilience and public trust through continuous learning and institutional development.

The findings also point to the growing importance of workforce resilience in contemporary electoral administration.

ABBREVIATIONS

CCEE	Centre for Continuous Electoral Education
CPD	Continuing professional development
CSO	Civil society organization
EB	Electoral Board
EMB	Electoral management body
HR	Human resources
MEC	Municipal Election Commission
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
SEC	State Election Commission
ToT	Training-of-trainers

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