**Persons with disabilities were not allowed to vote independently, in secrecy and with dignity**

**Podgorica PR Press Service** – On election day, persons with disabilities were not allowed to exercise their right to vote independently, in secrecy and with dignity. **The Union of the Blind of Montenegro** announced that persons with disabilities were among polling board members at only 17 of the total number of observed polling stations – 505.

Preliminary findings on the accessibility for persons with disabilities during election day were presented at the press conference held by the Union. These findings highlighted a set of problems and the need for immediate solutions.

“Non-compliance with stipulated legal procedures that guarantee accessibility for unhindered voting of persons with disabilities was noted in each of the 5 observed categories at 505 polling stations in 80% of municipalities of Montenegro,“ **said Ms. Katarina Bigović Kulić, Deputy Director at the Union of the Blind**. She stated that the surrounding area was not fully accessible at as many as 87.3% of the polling stations observed, while polling stations access routes were fully inaccessible at more than a half of the polling stations.

“Polling station locations were not adequately selected either, because polling station entrance area was not fully accessible at 83.8% of the observed polling stations. When it comes to the entrance areas with no flat surfaces, in 63% of cases there was no ramp or the existing ramps had a slope that exceeded 8%, and there was a step or more of them. All this made impossible for persons with disabilities and other citizens who used some kind of assistive tool to access the polling station without obstructions,” added Bigović Kulić.

She said that polling station access routes were fully accessible for persons with physical disabilities at just over a third of the observed polling stations. At 96.2% of polling stations corridors were at least 120 cm wide, which enabled wheelchair users to move unhindered.

“Only 21.4% of polling stations were fully accessible for visually impaired persons. On the other hand, it is encouraging that brochures in Braille and ballot templates were available at the vast majority of polling stations. Unfortunately, carpet runners which should contrast with the floor color, were not installed at 66.5% of the observed polling stations,” said Bigović Kulić.

As mentioned by Bigović Kulić, just over a half of the polling stations were fully accessible for persons of a short statute and wheelchair users. That means that a low-level shelf for voting was properly put up and the height at which the ballot box was placed did not exceed 85 cm at these polling stations.

“Representatives of persons with disabilities were among polling board members at only 17 out of 505 polling stations observed, which indicates that persons with disabilities were not recognized as equal participants in the electoral process,” concluded Bigović Kulić.

**Project Manager Anđela Dragović** said that for the first time such a systematic observation of polling stations accessibility was carried out in Montenegro. The goal of this observation was to obtain impartial and objective information on the situation concerning polling stations accessibility, and to identify areas for improvement the opportunities for barrier-free participation of persons with disabilities in the electoral process.

“Unhindered observation was also enabled by the positive decision of the State Election Commission, which allowed the observers to make necessary measurements at polling stations (corridors, entrance door width, and height of a ballot box…). We are especially delighted by the fact that a significant number of persons with disabilities took part in election day activities,” stated Dragović.

Representatives of the Union invited the Parliament, the Government of Montenegro and other competent institutions, electoral administration, political parties, civil society organizations and media to work together on the implementation of the recommendations that have been published in the preliminary assessment and which should be a part of the electoral reform.

In the upcoming period, the Union will publish the Final report with detailed recommendations aimed at further advocacy of the accessibility of the election process for persons with disabilities.

The observation was carried out with the financial and technical support of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) from the USA. The findings of this observation belong to the Union of the Blind and do not necessarily reflect the attitude of the NDI, donors or the US Government.

The full preliminary analysis and all infographics can be found at [www.ss-cg.org](http://www.ss-cg.org).

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