



The Role of Persons with Disabilities in the Political Decision Making Process in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

This study examines the political inclusion of persons with disabilities (PWDs) within right-wing political parties in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania, by analyzing the gap between legal norms, programmatic commitments, and the actual level of inclusion of persons with disabilities in political decision-making. The application of a mixed methodology, combining the analysis of official documents, party programs and statutes, structured interviews with key political actors, and focus groups with persons with disabilities, confirms the hypothesis that the inclusion of PWDs often remains symbolic and constrained by structural, cultural, and organizational barriers. The data generated through the combination of three qualitative methods, discourse analysis, structured interviews, and focus groups, are interpreted through three theoretical perspectives: the theory of political representation, institutional and organizational theory, and the theory of political participation. The study highlights the need for organizational transformation within political parties in order to move from formal participation to substantive participation, as well as the need for a shift in the mindset of the disability community itself, encouraging persons with disabilities to view themselves not as a marginalized group, but as an important factor in reshaping political balances and influencing decision-making processes.

Keywords: *political participation, persons with disabilities, right-wing parties, Western Balkans, political representation, decision making, disability rights, democratic participation, social inclusion*

1. Introduction

At the global level, persons with disabilities constitute a significant proportion of the population. According to the World Health Organization, they account for around 15% of the world's population, or more than one billion people. They should potentially be an integral part of society, playing diverse roles as parents, students, employees, professionals, artists, and politicians. Despite this potential, however, persons with disabilities have historically been among the most marginalized communities. Stereotypes, prejudice, labeling, stigma, and discriminatory practices have often positioned them as second-class citizens, preventing them from accessing services and participating fully in political processes (Anderson, 2010; Honneth, 2007). At the same time, in many cases they also remain politically inactive because of low self-

assessment regarding their own capacity to influence change (Verba et al., 1995).

These phenomena, especially those related to political processes, appear in particularly concerning forms in the Western Balkans, where this community face a political and institutional environment that often fails to guarantee their real participation in decision-making processes within political parties and at different levels of government (Lami & Lami, 2022). Although Western Balkan countries have adopted legal frameworks aligned with international standards, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the practical implementation of these standards remains partial. Across the region, physical, institutional, and cultural barriers continue to discourage the inclusion of persons with disabilities in political processes (Helwig et al., 2023). Limited accessibility of infrastructure, the absence of materials adapted to this community, stereotypes, prejudice, stigma, and the limited capacities of organizations representing persons with disabilities are among the barriers most frequently identified in the Western Balkans.

In this context, political parties remain key actors in the inclusion of persons with disabilities in public life. Right-wing parties in the Western Balkans, in particular, play an important role, as they are often dominant forces on the political scene and influential actors in shaping social and economic policies. However, with reference to the degree of representation in the political life of these parties, a mismatch can be observed between political discourse and actual practice. In the discourse of right-wing political parties in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania, principles of equality and inclusion are frequently embraced, yet in reality these parties rarely create sustainable mechanisms for integrating persons with disabilities into leadership structures, candidate selection processes, or the drafting of political platforms. The absence of dedicated forums for persons with disabilities, their limited representation at leadership levels within parties, and the very low number of elected members of parliament and local councilors have deepened the exclusion gap, portraying them more as second-class citizens than as political actors capable of contributing to the improvement of their own social status (Phillips, 1995; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024). Based on party documents, structured interviews, and focus groups, it appears that in most cases the inclusion of persons with disabilities within right-wing parties remains more symbolic than substantively oriented toward empowerment and representation (Phillips, 1995). This situation has created a paradox over the years: right-wing parties theoretically possess the potential and resources to minimize the effects of internal organizational and cultural barriers for this community, yet in practice these factors operate as constraining variables (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995).

A similar logic has also been identified in previous studies on the political representation of other underrepresented groups, such as youth in Albania, where it has been found that although there have been small improvements both in numbers and in the quality of participation, their presence in decision-making positions remains limited (Berdufi and Pacukaj 2022).

This situation deprives such groups of the possibility of exercising a proactive role in political parties and in key political and governmental structures. From this perspective, the issue of the representation of persons with disabilities can also be read as part of a broader problem of the limited inclusion of groups that, although formally part of the democratic system, continue to have insufficient access to real levels of decision-making.

Given this long-standing and consolidated situation, this study is of particular importance because it aims to analyze in depth the impact of social, political, and organizational factors within right-wing parties in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania, with the purpose of identifying the inhibiting factors that discourage the inclusion of persons with disabilities in political decision-making within political parties and in governance at both the central and local levels.

2. Literature Review

The theoretical framework of this study is built on a group of political theories that offer different explanations of how political actors, parties, and democratic institutions interact with marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities. The study is grounded in the theory of political representation, institutional and organizational theory, and the theory of political participation. By combining these three theoretical perspectives, the study seeks to understand how mechanisms of inclusion for persons with disabilities are constructed, justified, and practiced within right-wing parties in the Western Balkans.

First, the study draws on the theory of political representation, particularly Pitkin's (1967) argument, which divides representation into four dimensions: formal representation, descriptive representation, symbolic representation, and substantive representation. In the context of this study, formal representation refers to the presence of legal and institutional mechanisms that enable persons with disabilities to participate in parties. Descriptive representation analyzes whether persons with disabilities are actually present in party structures, while symbolic representation examines whether parties use them for public image purposes without granting them a real role. Most important for this study is substantive

representation, which focuses on whether the interests of persons with disabilities are reflected in the policies and decision-making of right-wing parties. These four dimensions provide the analytical basis for understanding whether the inclusion of this community is real, sustainable, and translated into political action, or whether it remains confined to rhetoric and symbolism.

Second, the study refers to institutional and organizational theories that explain the ways in which parties structure the participation of different actors. For theorists such as Panebianco (1988), Katz and Mair (1995), and Levitsky (2003), parties are institutions of mediation that channel citizen participation and interests. Political parties mainly rely on formal and informal rules that often reproduce internal hierarchies and limit the access of marginalized groups. Katz and Mair's (1995) "cartel party" model suggests that modern parties become increasingly closed, privileging party elites rather than expanding their social base. From this perspective, the inclusion of persons with disabilities often depends not on the declared willingness of parties, but on their internal structure, organizational culture, political incentives, and electoral pressures. This theory helps explain why right-wing parties in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania have limited space for including persons with disabilities in political decision-making, especially when they do not perceive immediate electoral benefits.

Third, the study is grounded in the theory of political participation, particularly the work of Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995), who analyze how individuals and groups interact with political processes. They argue that political participation depends on three categories of resources: political motivation, civic skills, and structural resources such as time, social capital, and channels of access. Persons with disabilities often lack these resources because of systemic barriers, discrimination, and the absence of physical and institutional access. This theory is essential for analyzing whether right-wing parties in the countries under examination seek to ensure real instruments for the participation of this particular community, or whether they reinforce barriers that make such participation merely formal.

The combination of these three theories constructs an analytical framework that treats the political inclusion of persons with disabilities as a complex process generated by the interaction of party structures, electoral strategies, and the resources available for exercising power. At the same time, the parties examined in this study help test the explanatory validity of these three theories in the context of Western Balkan countries.

3. Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative research approach, appropriate for understanding the reasoning, perceptions, and motivations of political actors and persons with disabilities regarding their inclusion in decision-making processes both within and outside political formations, primarily within the main right-wing parties in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. The epistemological approach of the study is interpretive-constructivist, assuming that political realities are products of the meanings and experiences of the actors themselves (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This means that the analysis does not aim to test causal relationships, but rather to construct deeper understandings of the factors that shape the inclusion or exclusion of persons with disabilities within right-wing parties in the region.

Within this framework, a comparative method was applied, enabling the analysis of similarities and differences among different right-wing parties in three Western Balkan countries: North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania, specifically the Democratic Party of Albania (DP), the Democratic Prosperity Party (PDP), the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), VMRO-DPMNE, and the Alliance for Albanians (AA). Comparison served as an analytical mechanism for identifying patterns, trends, and institutional mechanisms that negatively affect the political inclusion of persons with disabilities. The study relied on three qualitative methods: discourse analysis, structured interviews, and focus groups.

To secure primary and secondary data, discourse analysis was used in the examination of political party internal documents such as statutes, regulations, nomination procedures, and programs. The following parties were included in this process: the Democratic Party of Albania (DP), the Democratic Prosperity Party (PDP), the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), VMRO-DPMNE, and the Alliance for Albanians (AA). This documentary analysis aimed to identify how and to what extent the inclusion of persons with disabilities is reflected in the core organizational documents of these parties.

Another important methodological component of the study was the use of three focus groups with representatives of the community of persons with disabilities in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. The total focus group sample included 43 participants. The purpose of these groups was to generate in-depth data on the direct experiences of persons with disabilities with political parties, addressing issues such as inclusion in party leadership structures, the participation of people of different ages in party activities, and the existence of conditions, materials, and spaces that enable equal

participation in political processes.

Overall, the methodological design of this study aimed to construct a comprehensive and credible picture of the mechanisms that structure the political inclusion of persons with disabilities in right-wing parties in North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo by combining primary data generated through the three methods described above with secondary data produced by official documents, reports, and studies of international and local institutions.

4. Main Research Question

What impact do social, political, organizational, and institutional mechanisms have on hindering the political inclusion of persons with disabilities within right-wing parties in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania?

4.1 Secondary Research Questions

1. What perceptions and attitudes do right-wing political parties hold regarding the inclusion of persons with disabilities?
2. What party structures exist to support the participation of persons with disabilities?
3. What are the main barriers that persons with disabilities face within political parties?

4.2 Hypotheses

H1. The political inclusion of persons with disabilities in right-wing parties in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania is influenced mainly by the lack of spaces for persons with disabilities within internal party structures.

H2. Political parties often conceptualize the inclusion of persons with disabilities symbolically, more for purposes of public image than for real participation.

H3. Persons with disabilities play a limited role in influencing the agendas of political parties because of low capacities and lack of organization for exerting pressure.

5. Results

5.1 Programs of the Main Right-Wing Parties in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania

The analysis of the programs of the main right-wing parties in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania included VMRO-DPMNE, the Alliance for Albanians Program (AAP), the Democratic Party (DP) in Albania, the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). Based on discourse analysis, the programs of these parties show many similarities when discussing persons with disabilities. All of these parties include general references to human rights and mention the need to respect the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, identifying this group as a category deserving particular attention. However, the empirical analysis shows that this attention is declarative in nature and is not reflected in internal institutional mechanisms that enable effective representation and equal participation of persons with disabilities in political decision-making.

Based on the structured interviews conducted with senior representatives of these parties, the reasons for this situation differ, but the essence is the same. According to the chair of the Democratic Party's committee on social policies, the reason is related to the limited interest of persons with disabilities in becoming involved in political life: "Their interest in being part of the membership of the DP and its leadership structures is minimal" (senior party representative, personal communication, 2024). Similarly, a senior representative in the LDK, Kosovo, stated: "During the drafting of social programs for different categories, proposals regarding priority issues for this community do not come from persons with disabilities themselves, but from the party leadership staff. This often creates a gap between the issues that concern persons with disabilities and the program that the LDK has for this community" (senior party representative, personal communication, 2024).

From the perspective of the theory of representation (Mansbridge, 2003; Pitkin, 1967), the parties analyzed demonstrate mainly symbolic representation. They include persons with disabilities in programmatic declarations and proposed projects, such as fiscal benefits, employment in public administration, vocational training, and support for the economic activities. However, substantive representation, which implies the real ability of this community to influence decision-making and exercise active citizenship, is lacking. This divide between symbolic and substantive representation

is consistent with Pitkin's theory, according to which effective representation requires not only formal presence but also real opportunities to pursue the interests of the represented group. In the case of the parties analyzed, persons with disabilities often remain outside decision-making processes and lack the opportunity to influence the political agenda in a substantive way.

From the perspective of institutional and organizational theories, such as those advanced by Katz and Mair (1995), the lack of internal mechanisms that allow equal participation and integration of persons with disabilities in decision-making indicates organizational barriers that hinder the implementation of CRPD-related policies. None of the parties analyzed has built operative structures that enable equal inclusion, facilitated access to documents, and real opportunities to participate in decision-making, leaving persons with disabilities in a marginalized position within political life and limiting the effectiveness of proposed policies.

From the perspective of theories of political participation, such as Verba et al. (1995), the lack of supportive structures and the absence of systematic recognition of the needs of persons with disabilities hinder the exercise of their active citizenship. Participation is not limited to voting; it also includes the opportunity to influence decision-making and take part in the formulation of policies, a dimension that remains underdeveloped in all the parties analyzed. In this context, the gap between programmatic declarations and actual practice is highlighted both by the focus groups and by the structured interviews conducted with senior representatives of these political parties.

In summary, the analysis of the programs of VMRO-DPMNE, the Alliance for Albanians Program (AAP), the Democratic Party (DP) in Albania, the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) underscores the need to integrate symbolic representation with substantive representation, to create institutional mechanisms that allow equal participation, and to implement CRPD standards in practice. Only in this way can the gap between normative declarations and practical reality be overcome, ensuring that persons with disabilities are not only subjects of policy but active actors involved in political decision-making.

5.2 Party Statutes

The analysis of the statutes of the political parties under review reveals similar problems in the treatment of persons with disabilities. In all the parties studied, the rights of persons with disabilities are not specifically defined in the statutes; rather, they are included within the general rights of members. For example, the statutes of VMRO-DPMNE provide that any adult citizen of North Macedonia can be a member of the party regardless of nationality, religious beliefs, gender, social status, or economic status. Likewise, in the statutes of AAP, DP, AAK, and LDK, the rights of persons with disabilities are not specifically defined; instead, their rights, obligations, and responsibilities are addressed in the same sections that apply to all other members (Lami & Lami, 2022).

From the perspective of representation theory, this situation reflects mainly symbolic representation (Pitkin, 1967). VMRO-DPMNE, AAP, DP, AAK, and LDK declare equality and respect for human rights, including references to the CRPD, but they do not create structures that enable substantive representation, that is, the real ability of persons with disabilities to influence decision-making and advance within leadership bodies. This absence of concrete mechanisms, such as reserved candidacies or support measures for equal participation, constitutes an institutional barrier to the realization of effective representation.

From the perspective of institutional and organizational theory, as discussed by Katz and Mair (1995), party statutes function as instruments that formalize structures and procedures but do not address the practical needs of persons with disabilities. The statutes of VMRO-DPMNE, AAP, DP, and AAK emphasize equal status for all citizens of North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania and respect for universal human rights, but they do not specify how these rights are to be implemented for persons with disabilities. Membership remains the same as for everyone else, without adapted application procedures, facilitated access to documents, or support during intra-party decision-making. This indicates a lack of institutional guarantees for equal participation.

This problem was also raised as a concern by persons with disabilities themselves during the focus groups conducted for this study. Participants stated that, given their specific needs, persons with disabilities should have a special status in the statutes of political parties. Good practices from some European parties could serve as references for drafting party statutes in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. As one participant argued, "Candidate quotas or political party quotas for persons with disabilities can be an important step in ensuring the inclusion and representation of persons with disabilities" (focus group participant, personal communication, 2024). Another participant noted that quotas should be determined depending on the number of persons with disabilities and the electoral system in force in North Macedonia (focus group participant, personal communication, 2024).

From the perspective of political participation theories, such as Verba et al. (1995), the lack of supporting structures hinders the exercise of active citizenship by persons with disabilities. While statutes formalize general rights, party practice does not provide support to address real barriers, leaving persons with disabilities in a disadvantaged position. Their representation thus remains more declarative than substantive, failing to ensure that the interests of this group are reflected in decision-making or internal party policies. This is particularly problematic given that Article 29 of the CRPD obliges states to ensure that persons with disabilities can participate fully and effectively in political and public life and to actively promote their participation in public affairs, including in political parties (United Nations, 1948; United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2019).

In summary, the statutes of the parties studied show that the problems are similar: the rights of persons with disabilities are included only in general terms, but there are no guarantees or concrete mechanisms for equal participation and substantive representation. This reality underscores the need to adapt party statutes and organizational structures in line with CRPD standards, including measures for accessibility, support during the membership process, and mechanisms that ensure effective representation of persons with disabilities within political parties.

5.3 Political Decision-Making

The analysis of the internal functioning of political parties in Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo clearly shows that decision-making processes are the product of the interaction between party organizational structure, political culture, and the relationship that these actors maintain with the electorate. According to the classical conception of political representation, parties serve as bridges through which the interests of voters are translated into public action (Duverger, 1954). However, empirical data and comparative observation show that in all three countries the concentration of power in the hands of party elites has distorted political representation (Katz & Mair, 1995).

In Albania, this phenomenon has been particularly evident since the 2008 constitutional changes, when the proportional system with closed lists was introduced (Constitution of the Republic of Albania 2008). This change in the electoral framework deepened the gap between the vote as an instrument of representation and the power of party leaders as the primary decision-making actors in determining political careers, reproducing the model anticipated by Michels in the "iron law of oligarchy," according to which a party, once institutionalized, develops internal mechanisms that consolidate the elite and reduce the influence of broad membership structures (Michels, 1911). The same tendency is visible in North Macedonia, where VMRO-DPMNE, during the period 2006–2016, created a centralized and personalized decision-making structure. In Kosovo, traditional parties such as PDK and AAK have historically functioned around central figures, manifesting the model of executive centralization of decision-making that Panebianco (1988) describes as a natural consequence of the transformation of a movement into a state apparatus.

Political participation theory emphasizes that the level of democracy within parties is measured not only by declarations, statutes, and regulations, but by the ability of members to exercise real influence over decisions (Verba et al., 1995). In this context, the data obtained from the analysis of party materials, structured interviews, and focus groups show that in the three countries under examination participation is more formal than real. In Albania, although the statutes of the main parties provide for membership consultation, actual decision-making regarding candidate selection, executive appointments, or the definition of the political agenda is conducted by a limited group of leaders without meaningful consultation or the presence of different social groups. Similarly, in North Macedonia, although VMRO-DPMNE and other major parties have branches throughout the country, they function mainly through decision-making finalized at the center, with few real mechanisms for the inclusion of social groups in drafting or proposing socio-economic issues or potential candidates who could represent them. In one structured interview with senior party representatives, it was explicitly stated that "the issues that we define as priorities for different social communities often do not correspond to the real concerns that these communities have" (senior party representative, personal communication, 2024). In Kosovo, one senior PDK representative stated that "even in the few cases when candidates from the community of persons with disabilities are selected to run in general elections, they are not voted for by the disability community itself" (senior party representative, personal communication, 2024). Meanwhile, a person with disabilities in a focus group stated that "the number of candidates proposed for general elections in the last ten years does not exceed seven" (focus group participant, personal communication, 2024).

Institutional theory, including the work of March and Olsen, suggests that political organizations produce political behavior not only through the will of actors but through their own structures. What happens in the three countries studied confirms this. The degree of centralization is not simply a consequence of political culture, but also the result of the distribution of resources and internal procedures. In Albania, the central apparatus holds virtually unlimited authority over

electoral lists, financial resources, and public communication, making it practically impossible to shift power from the leadership to local structures. In North Macedonia, VMRO-DPMNE is an example of an organization that has maintained the same operating model even when its leadership has changed, which Selznick (1957) describes as the autonomization of institutions from individuals, where the organizational apparatus outlives leaders and shapes their behavior. In Kosovo, the major right-wing parties function according to the same logic. Using Panebianco's conceptual framework, one could argue that these parties have expanded the role of the central apparatus at the expense of the participation of different social groups (Panebianco, 1988).

In all three countries, it becomes clear that the relationship between the citizen and the party has undergone a deep fracture in which the party no longer functions as an intermediary of public interest, but in many cases becomes an apparatus that responds primarily to the logic of political and electoral survival. As participants from the community of persons with disabilities stated during the focus groups, "party leaders often make agreements with leaders of associations representing persons with disabilities at the expense of our interests, in exchange for favors offered to them or to their family members" (focus group participant, personal communication, 2024). In a similar vein, another participant in a focus group in Kosovo argued that "we are a considerable number of voters who could produce approximately 15 parliamentary mandates in Albania, but we are disorganized and unable to exert pressure on political parties" (focus group participant, personal communication, 2024).

This situation creates tension between the degree of representation, which theoretically should be based on different social categories, and the power of party elites to determine the fate of members' political careers. On the one hand, this reflects the growing tendency of modern democracies to move from a model of representatives controlled by the electoral mandate toward a model administered by trusted elites acting "in the name of the public." On the other hand, it becomes clear that the party as an institution remains not only the main instrument of electoral politics, but also the filter that decides which interests enter and which are excluded from the political process. As Panebianco (1988) emphasizes, once a party consolidates its structures, any internal reform becomes more difficult than electoral competition itself, because it challenges the very architecture of power on which the party is built. This phenomenon applies to all three cases analyzed and explains why reforms within parties are rarer and slower than electoral promises.

These findings suggest that the key challenge for political parties in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania is no longer merely winning elections, but transforming their internal decision-making processes so that the representation of different social groups does not remain a normative concept, but becomes practice (Mair, 2013). Without institutional changes that enable the reorganization of human resources, transparency in candidate selection procedures, and a real increase in membership access to candidate selection rather than elite control, parties are unlikely to narrow the gap between formal democracy and oligarchy that characterizes their party systems.

6. Accessibility

Data on the degree of accessibility of information for persons with disabilities in the political parties of North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania reveal a deep gap between formal legislation and reality. Article 21 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides that states must ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise their right to freedom of expression and information on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice (United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2019). However, the real situation on the ground shows that political parties have not taken sufficient measures to fulfill these obligations. The Committee has also expressed concern about the practical exclusion of persons with disabilities from public life, especially women with disabilities, and about the lack of accessibility at all stages of the electoral process, in particular the accessibility of polling stations and voting materials for persons with disabilities (United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2019).

In North Macedonia, VMRO-DPMNE faces infrastructural and logistical shortcomings that prevent the participation of persons with disabilities in party activities. According to representatives of the disability community, buildings are often inaccessible to those who use wheelchairs or mobility devices, while party materials are not prepared in accessible formats such as Braille or simplified texts. One participant stated that "very little has been done in this regard" (representative of persons with disabilities, personal communication, 2024). In Kosovo, with reference to LDK and AAK, focus group participants stated that parties do not have the necessary infrastructure to enable access to information in political party activities, despite the fact that the law obliges them to guarantee this right (focus group participant, personal communication, 2024). Similarly, in Albania, with reference to the Democratic Party, focus group participants stated that there are no materials for all disability categories; for example, for hearing-impaired persons there are neither the

capacity nor the materials to support participation in many electoral activities, and the same is true for visually impaired persons (focus group participant, personal communication, 2024). This lack of access to information prevents participants from forming independent positions and influencing decision-making. From the perspective of representation theory, this illustrates formal representation without real substance: the presence of persons with disabilities in party structures does not guarantee that they are informed or, still less, included in decision-making processes.

Representatives of political parties themselves acknowledge that buildings and halls where political activities are held are often not suitable for accessibility. Political information is likewise not published in formats and applications adapted for persons with disabilities. One participant stated: "At activities where party meetings are held, there are no sign language interpreters and no materials in Braille" (focus group participant, personal communication, Tirana, 2024). Studies by disability organizations also emphasize that urban and infrastructural barriers are widespread, limiting movement and access to information (Handikos & Kosovo Disability Forum, 2019). From the perspective of political participation theory, this confirms the argument advanced by Fung (2006) and Smith (2009): legal participation is not equivalent to real participation. Citizens must be able to access information, move freely, and influence decision-making, all of which are lacking in practice. The right to participate in political and public life is interrelated with and inseparable from the other rights provided in the CRPD. This means that the violation of the right to participate in political and public life can result in the denial of other human rights of persons with disabilities. Despite the legal obligation, accessibility remains one of the key barriers to the participation of persons with disabilities, particularly the lack of physical accessibility to party headquarters and the inaccessibility of the information they provide to citizens. In this context, the political parties were asked to indicate which elements of accessibility they had in place, yet their responses were highly contradictory. This situation underlines the importance of affirmative measures and platforms dedicated to persons with disabilities, such as quotas or departments within parties, in order to ensure real participation in accordance with Article 29 of the CRPD (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2022).

7. Conclusions

This study on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes within and outside the main right-wing parties in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania highlights a major gap between legal norms and actual practice. The analysis of party programs, regulations, and statutes, the structured interviews with senior representatives of these parties, and the three focus groups conducted with persons with disabilities show that although there are good practices in European Union countries, a consolidated legal framework, and normative declarations for the protection and integration of persons with disabilities in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania, institutional and organizational mechanisms remain weak and often symbolic. This situation directly affects the level of substantive participation of persons with disabilities, leaving them in a marginalized and passive position rather than as active political actors working to improve their own economic, social, and political status.

From the perspective of political representation theory, the gap between formal and substantive representation shows that the inclusion of persons with disabilities within right-wing parties is largely symbolic. Programmatic declarations and statutes provide formal opportunities, but the absence of support structures, accessible information, and accessible spaces reduces the ability of persons with disabilities to exercise real influence on decision-making. This confirms Pitkin's (1967) thesis on the importance of substantive representation in translating formal rights into effective participation and the exercise of active citizenship.

Organizational and institutional theory helps explain why right-wing parties fail to integrate persons with disabilities into their structures. The cartel party model proposed by Katz and Mair (1995) and the analysis developed by Panebianco (1988) show that modern parties often become closed organizations that privilege elites, thereby reducing the space for the inclusion of marginalized groups. This explains why parties that declare equality in their documents and electoral campaigns do not in reality create mechanisms to ensure the real participation of persons with disabilities. Cultural barriers, the lack of support structures, and the centralization of decision-making hinder not only substantive representation but also the internal development of the capacities of persons with disabilities to influence political agendas.

From the perspective of political participation theory, it is clear that the participation of persons with disabilities is not merely a matter of individual will, but a systemic problem. Physical barriers, lack of access to information, and inadequate infrastructure restrict opportunities to influence decision-making and prevent the exercise of rights guaranteed by the CRPD. This confirms the argument of Verba et al. (1995), according to which political participation requires not only motivation and skills, but also infrastructure.

The study raises the concern that the real inclusion of persons with disabilities requires a combination of enabling policies, the transformation of organizational practices, and the creation of institutional mechanisms that integrate substantive representation with formal representation. Only in this way can the gap between legal norms, declarations, and programmatic aspects on the one hand, and the practical reality of political inclusion on the other, be overcome. The findings underscore the need for an integrated approach that takes into account norms, structures, and organizational culture within parties, making persons with disabilities a genuine part of political decision-making rather than merely symbolic beneficiaries. Such an approach is essential for the consolidation of democracy, the strengthening of the representation of all social groups, and the guarantee of the active participation of citizens with disabilities in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania.

8. Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

8.1 Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used generative AI solely for language support, including grammar checking, spelling correction, and minor improvements in clarity and readability. No AI tool was used to generate data, analyze results, develop core arguments, or draw conclusions. All intellectual content, interpretations, and final revisions were produced and verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the content of this article.

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