

POLICY BRIEF

THE MOBILITY PATTERNS OF MACEDONIAN STUDENTS AFTER VISA LIBERALIZATION

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Introduction

The visa liberalization process was a challenging step for Macedonia. However, the hard work and determination of the country led to a successful completion of the task for a visa-free travel. The visa free regime was perceived as a great opportunity for Macedonian citizens to travel and experience Europe. This was especially important for the young people in the country, who looked forward to traveling without visa and studying abroad. At the same time, it shed a new light on the issue of students and young people mobility, making it more evident to the state institutions and policy makers and uncovering an underlying problem of low student mobility, which still prevails in the educational system. The Europe 2020 Strategy of the EU envisions student mobility by which an EU average of at least 20% of higher education graduates should have had a “period of higher education-related study or training (including work placement) abroad”. However, Macedonian government institutions and universities have significant difficulties to meet these objectives, even though officially

the country supports the strategy.¹ This research paper shows that although due to the visa liberalization process the number of students travelling abroad has increased since December 2009, the number of students at Macedonian faculties who use exchange programs remains very low.

This paper examines what are the difficulties for achieving mobility, applies gap analysis to identify the key problems and at the end provides essential recommendations to institutions on promoting student mobility and encouraging students to broaden their knowledge and skills in other countries. Regarding mobility, this brief will only focus on students using mobility programs that last one or two semesters in other EU countries. The rationale behind this is to explore the progress of the internationalization process of higher education in the country, and in addition provide further guidance to enhance the mobility of Macedonian students.

1 FM Poposki: Macedonia's goal is sooner EU, NATO accession, <http://vlada.mk/node/3168?language=en-gb>

SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE VISA LIBERALIZATION PROCESS

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EU/Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki acknowledges “the importance the peoples of the Western Balkans attach to the perspective of liberalization) of the EU’s visa regime towards them” and promises discussions with the Commission about the necessary reforms and requirements, but there is no serious follow-up.

May 2006

The European Commission requests the Council to authorize it to negotiate visa facilitation and readmission agreements with Macedonia, presenting the required negotiating mandate for adoption by the Council.

20 Nov 2006

Negotiations of the visa facilitation and readmission agreements with the Western Balkan countries are launched.

13 April – 16 May 2007

Visa facilitation and readmission agreements are agreed and initialized with all five Western Balkan countries. Signature in autumn 2007, entry into force on January 1st, 2008)

8 May 2008

Visa roadmap presented to Macedonia.

15 July 2009

Commission submits proposal to introduce visa-free travel for Macedonia and other WB countries.

12 Nov 2009

European Parliament plenary adopts its (non-binding) opinion on the Commission proposal.

30 Nov 2009

Decision of the Justice and Home Affairs Council to give visa-free travel to Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia
19 Dec 2009 Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia begin to enjoy visa-free travel to Schengen countries.

(Source: ESI: www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=de&id=350)

Methodology

In order to portray the background of the problem discussed, our brief calls upon data gathered by CRPM through two representative telephone surveys conducted in 2009 and 2010.

The surveys aimed at discovering the mobility patterns of citizens before and after the visa liberalization. The sample in the 2009 survey was comprised of 73 student respondents out of which 54,8% (40) were male and 45,2% (33) female. 63% were ethnic Macedonians, 31,5% ethnic Albanians, 4.1% Roma and 1.4% Serbian. The sample of the 2010 survey was comprised of 58 student respondents out of which 39.7% were ethnic Macedonians, 56.9% were Albanians and 3.4% were Roma.¹

Due to the lack of official statistical data for the purposes of this study, the Center for Research and Policy Making requested information from the public universities. The questions were aimed at gaining informa-

¹ Please note that the surveys were not focused on the student population, but the population of the Republic of Macedonia in general, hence the relatively low total number of students.

tion about the preparedness of faculties to support and educate their students with regards to mobility possibilities, the bilateral agreements with other faculties, the mobility programs used and whether they kept data about the students participating in these programs.

The received data from the universities is not official, but was to a large extent collected for the purposes of this brief. Moreover, before going any deeper into the issue it has to be noted that for the research process it has been extremely difficult to obtain data on students enrolled in mobility programs from the faculties and other institutions. Specifically, while requesting information from 23 faculties from the University Ss. Cyril and Methodius, only 11 provided the data by the end of the data-gathering period. Another limitation concerns the data acquired from the surveys in 2009 and 2010, which although representative with regard to the characteristics of the sample, were not comprised of a fully identical set of questions.

Mobility of students before and after the visa liberalization process

The question that we are concerned with in this paper is “How did the entry into force of visa liberalization on 19 December 2009 affect the mobility patterns of Macedonian students?” Data gathered by CRPM in two surveys conducted before and after the lifting of visa requirements provide insight into this question. From the received answers, it becomes clear that before the visa liberalization in 2009, the number of students who have traveled in an EU country was significantly lower than students that travelled after. In 2009 with “Yes” answered 8.1%, of the respondents while with “No” 91.9% from the respondents. In 2010 with “Yes” answered 57,9% of the respondents while with “No”, 42,1 %. Table 1 portrays that male respondents have travelled more in the period before the liberalization (5.4% difference), while female respondents more after the liberalization (8% difference).

Table 1. “Have you traveled in a EU country in the period before 2009?” and “Have you traveled in a EU country in the period from 19.12.2009-19.12.2010?”

	2009			2010		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
men	10.5%	89.5%	100%	54.5%	45.5%	100%
women	5.1%	94.9%	100%	62.5%	37.5%	100%

If we make a closer examination of the reasons why students have not traveled at all, we can note the fol-

lowing results in the survey conducted in 2009 (Table 2). Most of the student respondents have stated that they cannot financially afford to travel, while 21.8% of the student respondents have listed the acquisition of a biometric passport as a problem.

Table 2. “Reasons for not traveling”-year 2009 (one answer possible)

Reasons	Percentage
I do not have finances	29.1%
I do not have time	18.2%
I do not like to travel	7.3%
I do not have a biometric passport	21.8%
Other	14.5%
No answer	9%
Total	100%

In 2010 we have a change in the responses, where 37.5% stated that they simply do not possess the desire to travel (Table 3). For this particular reason, faculties can motivate their students to use mobility programs to upgrade their knowledge and experience a different culture. In addition, these results are followed by another group of respondents, 25% which indicated the lack of a biometric passport as reason for not traveling.

Table 3. “Reasons for not traveling” - year 2010 (one answer possible)

Reasons	Percentage
I do not have a biometric passport	25%
I do not have sufficient resources	16.7%
I do not have time	20.8%
I do not have the will to travel	37.5%
Other	0%
Total	100%

If we make a closer observation on the students that have traveled to an EU country we can examine their favorite destinations (Chart 1). In total, 57,9% of the student respondents from the survey in 2010 said that they traveled to an EU country, while 42.1% stated that they have not. Of those who have traveled to an EU country, the most popular destination is Switzerland with 10% followed by Germany with 8% and Greece, Italy and Slovenia with 6%.

Survey results have shown that education as a reason for travel with students enrolled in Macedonian universities is significantly lower compared to other reasons such as tourism or visiting relatives. Most of the respondents, 42%, listed tourism as their most frequent reason for travel, 16% stated their reason to be visits to relatives and only 10% - education (Chart 2). The obtained data suggest that a closer examination on the low response rate is needed in order to establish why traveling for educational purposes is low.

Chart 1. Destinations of travel after visa liberalization

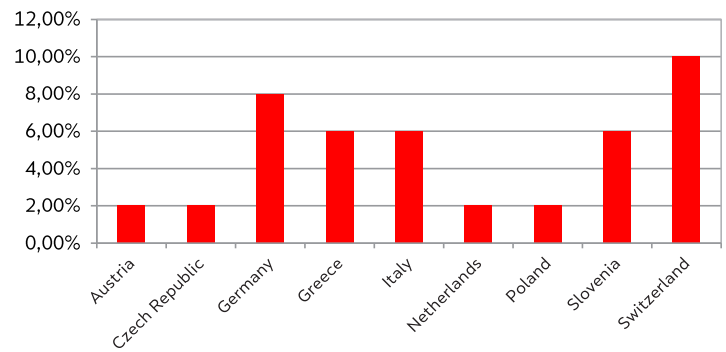
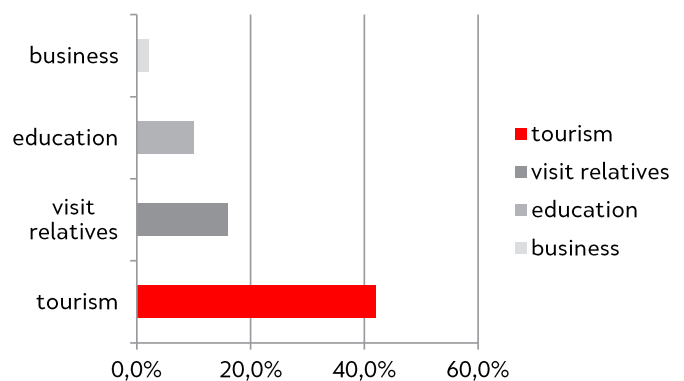


Chart 2. Most frequent reasons for traveling



Mobility of students enrolled at Macedonian universities

The basic outline of the data suggested that a closer investigation of the matter was needed in order to determine whether students received support by state institutions and universities when they were searching for possibilities to study abroad. Requests for information were sent to 23 of the state faculties in order to enquire on the possibilities and supportive mechanisms for the students who want to pursue internship or educational opportunities outside the country. Only 11 of the faculties responded. The data received leads to the following results:

- ➔ According to the sample we acquired for the purposes of this study, a total of 66 students from eight faculties used mobility programs in the period 2009/2010 and 2010/2011. In addition, the faculties have signed over 60 bilateral agreements. These agreements envision potential student mobility and exchange of academic staff. This number is very low if we consider that the total number of enrolled students in the academic year 2009/2010 was 45 558.³
- ➔ None of the faculties have an office that would inform students about various possibilities for mobility and support them in the organization of their study visit. The non-existence of such offices makes it difficult

for students to be acquainted about the different options for mobility and support from their faculty and professors. This limits the possibility for a student to experience a new academic environment and enrich his/her knowledge in a specific area. The 11 faculties which responded noted that they have designated people in charge of mobility programs, but they do not have offices for mobility.

- ➔ Ten faculties of the 11 which replied to our request stated that they are beneficiaries from one or more of the following programs: Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus, CEEPUS, ERASMUS, JOINEUSSE, ERAWEB, EUROWEB, VestNet, BASILEUS and have bilateral agreements with foreign universities. Macedonia became eligible to use European mobility programs in 2008 when the University St. Cyril and Methodius signed the Erasmus Mundus mobility charter. However, there is still confusion with regards to the actual beneficiaries from the multitude of opportunities offered by the EU.
- ➔ None of the 11 faculties have a database which contains information about the students who have used mobility programs. Other than the Universities, requests for information were sent to the Ministry of Education and Science. According to the Ministry only

- two students used mobility programs within the period 2009 to 2012.⁴ A factor that may influence the number may be the corruption scandal that led to the freezing of the European grants and placed a temporary terminated the work of the National Agency.⁵ In September 2011, the Government announced that after a year and a half of suspension, the European funds will be available in the beginning of 2012.⁶

It is evident from our background research and gathered data that there are problems with the competencies and coordination among the institutions. According to the Law on the establishment of the National Agency for Educational Programs and Mobility, the Ministry for Education and Science should oversee the work of the National Agency.⁷ The National Agency's responsibility is the promotion and implementation of the European educational programs. Regarding the mobility of students with bilateral agreements, when a request for mobility is sent to the faculty other than the National Agency, the faculty should form a commission which decides whether the request fulfills all the appropriate criteria. Afterwards, the faculty forwards the request for approval to the Ministry for Education and Science.

Based on our research, this division of competencies is insufficient to stimulate student mobility. More action is needed on the problem on several levels.

- 3 State Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia "Enrolled students in the year 2009/2010" <http://www.stat.gov.mk/Publikacii/2.4.11.11.pdf>
- 4 For clarification: Aside from the data requested from the faculties, request was also sent to the Ministry for education and science. We wanted to examine whether the Ministry kept records of how many students left for mobility programs. The reply shows a rather contradictory number when compared to the data obtained from the faculties.
- 5 For more information, see: Traces of the scandal with the EU funds are disappearing, <http://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/NewsDetal.asp?vest=511101015137&id=9&prilog=0&setlzdanie=21980>
- 6 For more information, see: The suspension for the usage of EU funds has been lifted, Government of the Republic of Macedonia, <http://vlada.mk/node/515>
- 7 Law for the establishment of the National Agency for Educational Programs and Mobility, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia 113/07

Conclusions and recommendations

The data indicates that the mobility of the students is mostly concentrated on tourism with only a small portion for educational purposes such as faculties, study visits, etc.

Several problems obstruct the mobility of the students, such as the lack of information, trained public servants in ministries, low incentives created by faculties, a lack of structures supporting mobility and others. The received data from the faculties furthermore shows a lack of institutional coherence and clear vision of the duties and responsibilities between the Ministry of Education and Science, the National Agency for Mobility, the Rectory of the University, the Universities and students.

In summary:

- While students leave the country more frequently since December 2009 for holidays or to visit relatives, the number of students using mobility programs for study visits is still very low.
- There is no clear division of competencies among the Ministry of Education and Science, the National Agency and the Rectory of the University Ss. Cyril and Methodius University of the Republic of Macedonia (UKIM).
- The faculties and the Ministry for Education and Science do not have proper databases which would enable a process of following which and how many students have used mobility opportunities.
- In order to actively respond to the aforementioned problems, several recommendations are given by the Center for Research and Policy Making.

The Ministry of Education and science should:

- Establish a monitoring and coordination system. A uniform database on students who have used mobility programs should be created and shared among universities. The creation of a da-

tabase will provide an overview of the different educational fields students chose; the countries they have studied in; the mobility programs used etc. A positive example is the Centre for International Mobility (CIMO) in Finland that functions as an independent expert organization within the premises of the Ministry for Education. CIMO's data collection was initiated by the Finnish Ministry of Education and forms a part of the performance management of higher education. The performance agreements concluded between the Ministry and the higher education institutions determine quantitative and qualitative targets, the resources needed to achieve these targets, the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes, and further development of operations. In order to achieve this, the competencies of specific institutions need to be reviewed and specified, in order to develop a clear list of duties and avoid overlapping.

- Create a guide for mobility in cooperation with the Rectory and the National Agency for Mobility.
- Conduct an awareness raising campaign together with the Universities and the National Agency for Mobility.

The National Agency for Mobility should:

- Train faculty staff on mobility programs.
- Support faculties in the establishment of offices for mobility.

Universities should:

- Establish offices for mobility.
- Appoint staff who will be responsible to educate students on mobility programs, and provide support during the student's application process.
- Implement and maintain a database for student mobility.