



De-Capturing
Academia,
Combatting
Brain-Drain

POLICY BRIEF

De-Capturing Academia, Combatting Brain-Drain

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The problem at hand:

In times when student enrollment rate in tertiary education in the country has dropped by over 60% if not more,¹ one reads of the novel “vision” of the executive branch intending to restrict the number of enrollments because “someone needs to work too.”²

Such policy displays utter oblivion of the fact that the European Union is undertaking a very ambitious strategic investment initiative in Western Balkans,³ seeking to bring it closer to the EU’s strategy of economic development, which is that of “innovation-based economy.” Therefore, what escapes the supposed vision of the top policy-makers is the fact that what needs to be nurtured in this country is the students’ and youth’s capacity for innovation, entrepreneurship, and IT competencies. We do not deny the fact that there will always be need of manual labor related vocational training, but ever so decreasingly – numerous studies demonstrate that by 2030 the economy will be mainly automated.⁴

Let us not merely speculate, let us not resort to purely deductive reasoning departing from key EU strategic documents exclusively. Rather, let us look at the defeating reality of student brain-drain in North Macedonia and the self-defeating reality of government’s unresearched, blind-guessing and improvisational reasoning failing to acknowledge the following: a) youth does

¹ My information is a year old, learned at a presentation of the Erasmus+ National Agency delivered on 26 May 2021, however there are other indications, received through media reports mainly, which do not give us a reason to believe the situation has improved, cf. the MIA article cited here.

² Antonija Popovska “In the Future the Highschool Graduates will be Taking an Academic Exam, not Everyone will be able to Enroll in a University,” <https://www.fakulteti.mk/news/13052022/vo-idnina-maturantite-kje-polagaat-akademski-test-nema-da-mozhe-sekoj-da-se-zapishe-na-fakultet>, accessed on 8 June 2022.

³ Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions: An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, available at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/communication_on_wb_economic_and_investment_plan_october_2020_en.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2lg-k_Gm8z2z0hdAPAFcdiCGhdKG1SA0g6zMaexD2HdjzGG2xa3Nhy1YQ, accessed on 13.03.2021.

⁴ The OECD has estimated that nearly half of all existing jobs are at risk of automation and that 60% of adults do not have basic ICT skills, which are likely to be vital in the future, according to a study released in 2019. Hence, education and social policies have to be adapted quickly in order to be able to respond to the challenges brought on by technological development. A number of scholarly articles put forward a similar claim: Eric Dahlin, *Are Robots Stealing Our Jobs?*, American Sociological Association (2019); Henrik Schwabe and Fulvio Castellacci *Automation, workers’ skills and job satisfaction*, *EconPapers* (2020); Michael Segal, *How automation is changing work: More robotics and artificial intelligence in the workplace doesn’t have to destroy your job*, *Nature* (November 2018).

wish to study, and b) it wishes to do so at universities and in countries that are far better academically and administratively equipped while yet remaining in the region. The number of students from North Macedonia enrolling in Slovenia and Croatia this year tops the usual number of enrollments at State University of Skopje-UKIM from 10 years ago.⁵ Here is a telling illustration: according to a Macedonian News Agency's (MIA's) source, in the past academic year, 800 students from North Macedonia have enrolled in Ljubljana University, whereas the Minister of Education and Science considers it a "success" and "matter of individual choice,"⁶ rendering visible the fact of utter absence of policy vision in a leading policy maker in the area at stake.

In the present, the Macedonian higher education sector operates according to a law adopted in 2018 that is not only hardly any improvement regarding the version of it which sparked mass protests in 2014 and 2015, but rather an act that normalizes, legalizes and deepens the problem of undermined academic autonomy. What it does is cement most of the amendments developed by the administration under the leadership of Nikola Gruevski's government, rendering the sector fully centralized (under the excessive control of the Ministry and other bodies of the executive branch).

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The Premise:

An era of what was termed "state capture" in the EU 2016 country progress report, intended to designate a type of authoritarian or hybrid regime practiced for more than a decade by the executive branch led by Nikola Gruevski, was supposed to be replaced by democratic governance. The kernel of such a democratizing shift would have been the implementation of the "Urgent Reform Priorities" (URP) set by the European Commission (EC) in the summer of 2015. The implication of this set of priorities as a precondition for democratization was that mere change in government does not vouch for the systemic transformation that was required. The last mention of URP appears in the country's 2020 progress report released by the EC.

"State capture" was mentioned in numerous analyses and reports in 2015-

⁵ Raw in-house data based on interviews with experts from the public sector.

⁶ Shajjiri: It is not a Failure that 800 Macedonian Students have Enrolled in Ljubljana [Шаќири: Не е неуспех што 800 македонски студенти се запишале на студии во Љубљана], Nova Makedonija (22 May 2022).

2017, and it referred to all sectors of society, placing emphasis on media. Freedom of expression was at the center of these analyses. Academia was relevant for said analyses, in particular for those produced by ISSHS in the wake of the plenums movement. In a great number of founding EU documents,⁷ “academic autonomy” is seen as a matter of “freedom of expression.” In the two years that preceded the adoption of URP, the most massive protests that emerged organically – not by orders or through organization of any political party – were those organized by the student-professor grassroots movement (the plenums) as well as those of the freelancers that included media too.

It is time to revisit the higher education sector as the litmus test of how much “de-capturing of the state” has taken place since 2017. It is important to delve into the question as to the degree in which the legislation and policy practices are only maintaining the façade of being in line with the Bologna Process while in fact subverting and violating the Process itself from within, just as it was the case during the rule of Gruevski’s state capture.

In the protest years, ISSHS published several studies presented at the European Policy Centre in Brussels in December 2015, explaining the “state capture” model of governance using the higher education as key case study (next to several other sectors, including media). Ever since, we never stopped monitoring the process of a supposed democratization regardless of the change in government. Let us reiterate and underscore that in 2018 the newly adopted law on higher education (HE) represented, quite simply, a legalization of the amendments proffered by the “captured state” once led by Gruevski. Namely, instead of a democratization of the sector, the level of centralization, in direct opposition to the European Standards and Guidelines, was cemented both when it comes to the autonomy in recognition and equivalence (students’ rights) and in academic excellence (teachers/scientist’ rights). The alleged measures to ensure quality have been completely defeated by the reality of UKIM’s ever lower steady sinking on the global ranking charts in the past several years.⁸ The Bologna implementation report for that year shows a level of centralization matched only by Turkey and Albania (see the visual below), in addition to the post-soviet Caucasus states.

⁷ Rome Ministerial Communiqué, EHEA Rome 2020 (19 November 2020), p. 1-2; cf. European Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Heading “Freedoms.”

⁸ To avoid promotion of products, such as the Shanghai ranking, we will quote the free of charge and AI based new ranking website, praised by institutions such as MIT, Academic Influence: <https://academicinfluence.com/schools/ss-cyril-methodius-university-skopje>

In North Macedonia, the supposed de-capturing of academia never really began, although it was the first point of social dissatisfaction exploding in mass and relentless resistance (2014-2015) which then led to a series of protests, the “colorful revolution” and, finally, change in government.

The potential explosivity of the current level of dissatisfaction is twofold: not only is the autonomy suppressed, not only is the centralization of recognition contributing to building a wall against the potential graduate returnees, but also – there are policies in place that practically create a mass exodus of youth and potential university students. On the other hand, centralization of diploma recognition, the low level of digital integration with the rest of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the absence of any policies that would foster entrepreneurship in innovation, create a deep social, economic and migration related rift within the society and vis-à-vis Europe.

What are the Urgent Needs to Be Addressed?

State institutions are in pressing need of an expert watchdog monitoring of the alignment of the higher education sector with that of the EU and its standards. Our argument is premised on in-house research informed insights, based on a series of empirical analyses carried out 2017-2020⁹ showing that, since 2008, the institutions of North Macedonia have been merely ticking the boxes while hollowing out the substance of the Bologna Process.

Moreover, in 2014, the “ticking of the boxes” did not provide mere superficial alignment but rather took a U-turn and has ever since been moving further away from the substance (and form) of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) that are the foundation of basic quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the principles and values embedded in the Erasmus Program. In fact, nowadays our system is in utter contradiction with – if not violation of – the goals and values of EHEA and the Erasmus Program: the rhetoric is in place, EU documents adopted, but their transformation into national laws and bylaws yields a closed system hostile to mobility, overly controlled by the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) undercutting the

⁹ A vast number of them are direct advocacy papers and informal consultancy studies that are not published and are thus no subject to standard citing.

autonomy of the academic institutions but also of the Agency for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in the Higher Education. The state of affairs, as presented, we argue, affects both the students and the professors and researchers whose autonomy is gravely curtailed.

Furthermore, according to the new EU accession methodology, North Macedonia is supposed to move forward sectorally not only per negotiations chapters. Higher education (and scientific research) is key in the European vision of a post-pandemic recovery according to which Western Balkans are expected to contribute to the building of a unified digital economy and trade based on – *innovation*.

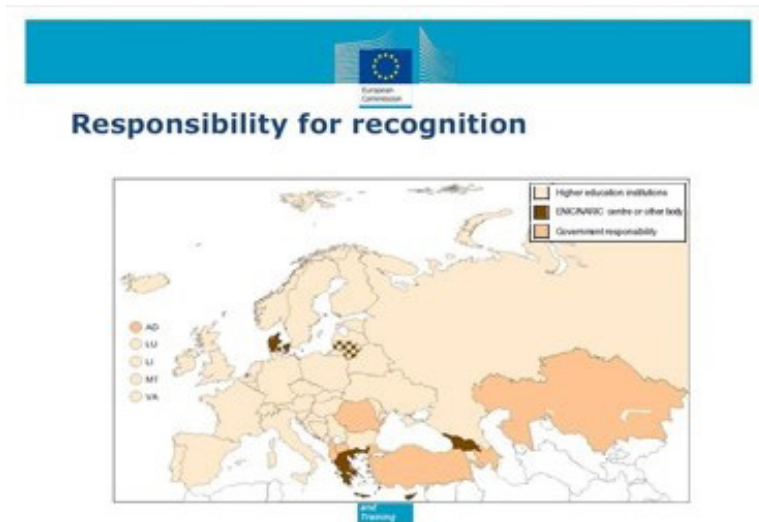
In other words, this issue is not narrowly specialized and restricted to academia but also affects matters of: 1) the EU integration process (sectoral advancement), 2) building an economy aligned with the 2030 strategies of the EU in line with the UN sustainability goals, i.e., an economy that is innovation based and higher education appears at its crux, 3) students' mobility rendering the sector reclusive toward incoming and returning students and graduates – the procedures of recognition and equivalence are such that they not only do not discourage the phenomenon of brain drain but rather help it metastasize, 4) the autonomy of the HE institutions is undermined and academic insularity of the country is deepened, and, finally, 5) an open, mobile academia could be and often is – such as in the UK but also in Estonia – a form of creative industry. The latter is a dimension utterly absent from any state educational policies and ought to be promoted and developed in terms of a policy vision.

The level of centralization remains as in the 2018 Report on the implementation of Bologna,¹⁰ if not worse (note: there is no data on North Macedonia in the 2020 Report on the implementation of the Bologna Process).¹¹ Currently, the founding faculty of the biggest and the oldest university in the country (UKIM) does not have accreditation for some of its oldest departments (on different levels, PhD in particular). It lacks the permission of the Ministry of Education and Sciences (MES) to carry out doctoral studies in some key areas. Thus, the Government decides what curricula and on what level will be carried out, infantilizing the most reputable HE institution in the country. The quality assurance and monitoring are carried out *ad hoc* by either MES or the Agency

¹⁰ The European Higher Education Area in 2018, Ch. 4 "Quality Assurance and Recognition," pp. 127-145.

¹¹ The European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Rome: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2020.

as a supposedly independent body yet founded by the Parliament which, in its turn, just as the judiciary, is in complete capture by the executive branch as per the Priebe Report in 2017 and ISSHS' Context Watch Reports 2016-2020 (government by implication, and as per the terminology of the Bologna progress report of 2018). This is a situation inherited from the era of the so-called "state capture" but never really remedied.



8 Recommendations

Decentralization of recognition and equivalence as the Erasmus enabled and promoted mobility – via ECTS and its Guide produced by Erasmus – is one of the founding stones of the Bologna Process itself. This includes both: a) endowing HE institutions with the authority to implement the Erasmus Charters they have signed, which oblige them to carry out recognition as per the Erasmus Guidelines and *thus autonomously*, b) rendering ENIC/NARIC centre independent from the MES as it is intended to be an independent body in relation to the government (see the cited Bologna implementation reports).

- The Agency for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (further in the text: Agency) ought to possess full autonomy from the MES and from the blurring of political party and the executive branch (via the parliament) acting in line with its own bylaws instead of passively executing detailed stipulations embedded in the legislation.
- National Criteria of academic excellence ought to be developed by the

Agency, in communication with renowned experts in Europe, abandoning the amateurish reliance on this or that journal database, even more so in these times when Open Access is among the top priorities of the European Strategy for Research and Innovation "ERA 2030."

- A clear distinction between quality ranking and mere legality ought to be understood and acknowledged by the policy makers – thus suppression of academic freedom in the name of "standards" as per the public servants in the government will be overcome. *Low rank brings low reputation of diploma*, and not everyone is after just any diploma (as our 800 students in Ljubljana prove to be the case). The distinction between legality and rank should be reflected in legislation and bylaws such as those of the Agency. Thus, the general prejudice toward the private HE institutions will be hopefully addressed as not all of them are diploma mills. Furthermore, facts about the corruption in many state universities will be revealed as recent studies seem to indicate they too are plagued by corruption and rendered mills themselves.
- True rather than merely nominal or demagogical autonomy in academia, contradicted by the very substance of the Law of N. Macedonia, is the beating heart of quality of education measured through competition and innovation which requires internationality instead of insularity. Analysis of legislation should be carried out by independent policy research organizations in order to extrapolate the contradictions at issue and, in collaboration with the institutions, seek for remedies through tailor-made policy solutions.

