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The EU in my profession: how the knowledge of EU policies helps young generations in Bulgaria to shape their professional future

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This brief summarises the results of a recent study, undertaken by the Bulgarian European Studies Association, on the extent to which the knowledge of EU policies is helping young generations in Bulgaria shape their professional future.¹ It also offers insights for improvements in teaching the EU and organising student mobility by analysing data from an extensive survey that involved more than 400 students in 10 different disciplines.

Introduction

In the aftermath of its 10 years EU membership anniversary, Bulgaria finds itself in an ongoing process of realigning its policies with the European standards by adapting its policy implementation practices and catching up with the EU-wide dynamics. Freedom of movement is

seen by Bulgarian citizens as the most significant advantage of the country's EU integration over the 10-year period, and the most highly valued benefits of membership are the new opportunity to access the EU job market, to travel, and to study abroad.² Thus, the higher education system in Bulgaria is currently facing a twofold challenge – to meet the new demands associated with the successful integration of Bulgaria's economy into the wider EU area and to prepare young generations for the rapidly changing EU-wide job market.

The impact of the knowledge of EU policies on the job market has attracted little attention in academic research and literature. So far, the focus has been put on European studies as a new job specialisation, which has overshadowed the issue of incorporating EU policies teaching and

¹ More information about the project (in Bulgarian) can be found at <https://www.eumypro.eu/>.

² Lessenski, M. (2017), *10 Years in the EU: Public Opinion and Bulgaria's Membership in the EU*, European Polices Initiative,

Open Society Institute Sofia, https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/10godiniEU_ObshtestvenoMnenie_Iuli2017_EN.pdf

learning into the established professions.³ In an effort to evaluate the extent to which the knowledge of EU policies is helping young generations in Bulgaria to shape their professional future, the Bulgarian European Studies Association (BESA) has launched a Jean Monnet project funded by a grant from the EU's Erasmus+ Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport.

Higher education reforms, changing patterns of learning and the study of EU policies

The higher education system in Bulgaria has been in line with the Bologna process since the first years of membership: as of 2007, the three-cycled training system was introduced, together with the transferrable credit system. The establishment of the necessary infrastructure for Bulgaria's effective participation in the Erasmus+ programme has been promoted throughout the country's higher education institutions. Today, a total of 51 universities are delivering tertiary education in Bulgaria, 72 % of which are public. As to the geographical coverage of both public and private higher education institutions, half of them are situated in the capital and the rest in the countryside. A system for institutional and programme accreditation of higher education establishments is effective (with some important amendments) as of 2011, which takes into consideration, *inter alia*, the quality of the education and the level of student mobility. Yet,

if the level of Europeanisation of higher education is considered, a clear tendency to put emphasis on procedural rather than on substantive instruments can be observed.

Against this backdrop, the study undertaken by the BESA analyses the impact of teaching EU policies on the employability of students and professionals across a number of disciplines – Economics (financial and commercial studies), Law, Language, Ecology, Agriculture, Architecture, Medicine, Engineering, and Tourism. Based on an extensive survey involving more than 400 students in 10 higher education institutions (both public and private, centrally located and in the countryside), it maps and analyses the level of general knowledge of the EU, the specific knowledge of the respective EU policy in the studied field, and the influence of the latter and of student mobility within the EU for the future professional development of the respondents.

The level of general knowledge is distributed unevenly among three different groups. The first group, having the highest level of general knowledge of the EU, comprises students from law, commerce, finance and agriculture faculties. The second group, having a good level of EU knowledge, includes students of environmental protection, tourism and medicine. The third group, claiming to have medium to insufficient knowledge of the EU, consists of students from the faculties of

³ Baroncelli, S., Fonti, F., and Stevancevic, G. (2014), "Mapping innovative teaching methods and tools in European Studies: Results from a comprehensive study", in S. Baroncelli, R. Farneti,

I. Horga, and S. Vanhoonacker (Eds.) *Teaching and learning the European Union*. Springer, pp.89-109

engineering, architecture and applied languages. A clear correlation can be observed between the level of general knowledge of the EU and the presence of specialised courses on EU policies in the university curricula – all students from the first group have underlined that the primary source of their good understanding of the integration process is the presence of a compulsory course on the issue.

Unsurprisingly, the students from the third group are unaware of any possible impact of the knowledge of EU policies on their future career – this reaches 90 % for the students of applied languages and 70 % for those studying applied languages and engineering. At the other end of the spectrum, only 10 to 15 % of the students in commerce and agriculture from the first group claim that they are unaware of such implications, and none of the students in law and finances do not know. Opinions diverge as well on the issue of EU regulation of different professions: students in tourism would welcome a rather strict regulation in their professional field, while students in engineering, medicine and architecture are in favour of more limited regulation.

Another focus of the study is the impact of student mobility on the students' professional development according to their self-assessment. Only 6 % of respondents have taken advantage of the Erasmus+ mobility scheme, although 90 % of respondents admitted they are sufficiently aware of the opportunities offered by their respective university. The

administrative burden that stems from the different managerial practices in foreign universities is the most mentioned reason for refraining from applying for the student mobility programme.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Bulgarian students make a clear distinction between their need for “informative” (focused on content) and “formative” learning (seen as related to the formation of professional ethos). Thus, they welcome the teaching of EU policies in their university curricula and praise mobility programmes for offering the opportunity to develop their future professional set of skills and values abroad.

The study also pointed to a number of recommendations to be implemented in the higher education sector, namely:

- The need for better incorporation of EU policies into the core university curricula;
- The need for a more effective use of innovative teaching tools such as e-learning, problem-based learning, and learning through the use of social networks.
- The need to enhance student mobility programmes, with an emphasis on establishing an EU-based e-platform for managing the whole process – from establishing the first contact with the receiving university to the reporting back and evaluation.

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