

Policy Paper

INTEGRATION OF FOREIGN CITIZENS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Access to Rights, Institutional Challenges and Policy
Recommendations

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Executive Summary

In the last years, the Republic of North Macedonia notes significant changes to migration trends. While the number of detected attempts for illegal crossing of state borders is continuously decreasing, the number of foreign workers is marked by a record-breaking growth: from 65 in 2020 to 3,320 in 2025. These trends indicate that North Macedonia is gradually transforming from a transit country into a country that is increasingly attracting foreign workers and long-term residents.

This policy paper analyses the legal framework and practical exercise of rights by foreign citizens in the areas of residence, housing, education, healthcare and social protection, and labour. The analysis is based on review of relevant legislation and interviews conducted with representatives from institutions, local self-governments, academia, civil society, and international organizations.

Analysis findings show that North Macedonia has a relatively developed legal framework that facilitates access to basic rights for different categories of foreign citizens. Practical exercise of these rights, however, remains limited due to administrative complexity of procedures, insufficient coordination among institutions, non-digitalized services, limited availability of information in understandable language, and lack of systemic data on foreigners.

Practical barriers are identified in all areas analysed, limiting effective exercise of rights. In the area of residence status, these are seen in complex administrative procedures and long decision-making deadlines. In the area of education, main challenges concern recognition of foreign qualifications and language integration, while in the area of healthcare, access to services largely depends on timely regulation of residence status and health insurance. As regards the social protection system, the legal status remains a key factor for access to rights, while on the labour market foreigners continue to face administrative dependence on the employer, limited availability of information, and language barriers.

The research shows that institutions do not dispose with centralized and desegregated data on foreign citizens, which further prevents monitoring of their position and evidence-based policy creation. At the same time, civil society organizations play a crucial role in provision of legal aid and assistance, but their contribution is still not systematically integrated within relevant policies. At times of such migration trends, a shift is needed from policies primarily aimed at regulation of migration towards policies that will ensure effective integration and equal access to rights.

For that purpose, this policy paper suggests a set of priority recommendations aimed at strengthening institutional capacity for integration of foreign citizens. The recommendations concern advancement of the strategic framework on integration, improved institutional coordination and digitalized administrative procedures, establishment of integrated system on data collection and analysis, facilitated access to public services, strengthened protection of labour rights, and development of local integration mechanisms in partnership with civil society organizations.

Effective integration of foreign citizens is a precondition for human rights protection, sustainable economic development, more efficient operation of institutions, and successful alignment of the Republic of North Macedonia with EU standards in the areas of migration, integration, and human rights protection.

Key Findings

- **North Macedonia is increasingly becoming a destination country for foreign citizens.** The number of foreign workers has jumped from **65 in 2020 to 3,320 in 2025**, which indicates to the need for systemic integration policies.
- **The legal framework, to great extent, provides access to basic rights.** Practical exercise of these rights, however, remains uneven and is often limited by administrative and institutional barriers.
- **Administrative procedures and institutional coordination pose the greatest systemic challenge.** Complex procedures, insufficient digitalization and limited exchange of data further complicate access to rights and public services.
- **Lack of integrated and desegregated data prevent evidence-based policy creation.** The institutions lack comprehensive insight in the position and needs of foreign citizens.
- **Language barriers and limited information hinder effective access to rights.** Lack of multilingual information and adequate support prevent use of public services and legal protection mechanisms.
- **Foreign workers remain a particularly vulnerable category.** While the legislation guarantees equal treatment, challenges are noted in the practice relating to exercise of labour rights, access to information, and use of protection mechanisms.
- **Civil society organizations play a crucial role in enabling access to rights.** They provide legal aid, information and mediation with the institutions, but their contribution is still not systematically integrated within relevant policies.
- **The growing migration trends require a shift from migration management to integration policies.** A better coordinated institutional approach is needed to ensure equal access to rights and to support long-term integration of foreign citizens.

Key Indicators

The indicators below illustrate key migration trends and analysis findings.

Foreign workers (2020)	65	Baseline situation
Foreign workers (2025)	3 320	Growth by more than 50 times
Biggest groups of foreign workers (2025)	Турција, Непал, Индија, Бангладеш	Main countries of origin
Detected attempts for illegal crossing (2022)	27 391	Highest value
Detected attempts (Jan.-Sep. 2025)	3 814	Continuous drop
Social protection beneficiaries (2024)	257	Beneficiaries of SWC Skopje
Persons who left the country/are inaccessible (2025)	166	Possible secondary migrations

Methodology and Structure

This policy paper is based on qualitative and document analysis of the legal framework, institutional practices, and available data relating to the access to social and economic rights for foreign citizens in the Republic of North Macedonia.

The analysis was developed on the basis of:

- analysis of relevant national laws and bylaws;
- review of institutional reports, statistical data, and other official documents;
- written communication with relevant public institutions;
- semi-structured interviews with representatives from institutions, civil society organizations and other relevant actors;
- analysis of practical cases and experiences related to access to rights and public services.

The research also included consultations with institutions competent for internal affairs, labour and social policy, education, healthcare and judiciary, as well as civil society organizations that work with foreign citizens, asylum seekers and foreign workers.

The analysis combines normative analysis of the legal framework with assessment of its practical enforcement in order to identify gaps between law-stipulated guarantees and their implementation in practice.

The policy paper is structured in three sections. The first section presents migration trends and the institutional context. The second section analyses practical exercise of rights by foreign citizens in the areas of residence, housing, education, healthcare and social protection, as well as work and labour rights. The third section summarizes the conclusions and outlines recommendations aimed at promotion of public policies.

Migration Trends in North Macedonia

In the last years, migration movements in the Republic of North Macedonia were characterized by two parallel tendencies. On one hand, the number of detected attempts for illegal crossing of state borders is continuously decreasing, but on the other hand, the number of foreign citizens who reside and work in the country is continuously increasing. These trends show that, in spite of its traditional role as transit country, North Macedonia is being increasingly profiled as destination country for foreign workers and other categories of foreign citizens.

Particularly prominent is the growth of economic migration, boosted by the lack of domestic labour in several sectors of the economy, especially in construction, processing and hospitality industries. In the period 2020 - 2025, the number of foreign workers has increased from 65 to 3,320, accounting for a growth by more than 50 times. Furthermore, the legal framework stipulates exemptions from the system of annual quotas for certain categories of foreign workers, which contributes to a more flexible engagement of labour in implementation of developmental and strategic infrastructure projects.

At the same time, the number of detected attempts for illegal crossing of state borders is marked by continuous drop. From 27,391 cases in 2022, this figure has dropped to 13,954 in 2023 and 6,807 in 2024, with 3,184 illegal crossings detected in the period Jan-Sep 2025. These data are indicative of a change in migration movements and gradually decreasing pressure from irregular transit migrations.

In spite of these changes, the institutions still do not dispose with comprehensive and integrated data on residence, movement and integration of foreign citizens. Absence of systemic and desegregated information further prevents monitoring of their status and hinders policy creation and public service planning in the areas of employment, education, healthcare, and social protection.

The growing number of foreign citizens who live and work in North Macedonia indicates to the need for public policies not to focus only on migration management, but to also address long-term integration and equal access to rights.

Institutional Context and Systemic Challenges

Data and Institutional Barriers

Quality, timely and desegregated data are a precondition for evidence-based policy creation and efficient planning of public services. While competent institutions dispose with administrative data as part of their competences, these data remain fragmented and are not connected within an integrated national system.

To great extent, there are no publicly available and desegregated statistical data on access to education, healthcare and social protection, labour market and other public services for foreign citizens. On that account, the institutions do not have complete insight into the position and needs of different categories of foreign citizens, which further hinders policy creation, monitoring and evaluation.

Furthermore, the research identifies institutional and administrative barriers that impact access to rights. Interviewed participants frequently referred to complex administrative procedures, repeated submission of same documents before different institutions, insufficient exchange of data, and limited interinstitutional coordination.

These challenges are further exacerbated by insufficient digitalization of administrative services, unavailability of information in understandable language, and unequal administrative capacity at institutions, especially outside bigger urban areas. As a result, administrative procedures oftentimes last too long and access to rights depends on support that foreign citizens could receive from employers, civil society organizations or other intermediaries.

Lack of integral data, coordinated administrative procedures and functional exchange of information are one of the main systemic obstacles to effective integration and equal access to rights for foreign citizens.

Horizontal Challenges to Rights Protection

While the legal framework anticipates mechanisms for protection of foreign citizens' rights, analysis findings show that practical exercise thereof remains limited. According to interviewed participants, the low number of complaints submitted to competent institutions should not be interpreted as indicator on absence of rights violations. On the contrary, it could be indicative of limited information on available protection mechanisms, language barriers, fear of possible consequences for their work and residence status, as well as insufficient trust in the institutions.

These challenges appear in almost all areas covered by the analysis irrespective of the fact whether it is a matter of residence status, access to healthcare, education, social protection, housing or employment. Practical access to rights often depends on the fact whether foreign citizens dispose with timely information, language support and adequate assistance when communicating with the institutions.

In this context, an important role is played by civil society organizations that provide legal aid, information, mediation in communicating with institutions, and support for exercise of rights. Their contribution, however, often depends on project funding and is still not systematically integrated within institutional mechanisms for protection and integration of foreign citizens.

The research shows that effective exercise of rights does not depend only on existence of adequate legal framework, but also on available information, trust in protection mechanisms, timely administrative support, and sustainable cooperation between institutions and the civil society.

Access to Rights

Residence and Freedom of Movement

The Law on Foreigners governs the procedure for regulation of foreign citizens' residence status, including issuance of single work and residence permits, as well as conditions for acquiring permanent residence. Regulated residence status is a precondition for exercise of several other rights, including the right to employment, education, healthcare, and social protection.

While the relevant legal framework is in effect, information we received show that, in the practice, procedures for regulation of residence status are oftentimes long and administratively complex. The procedure involves several institutions and a number of consecutive administrative steps, which could lead to significant delays in issuance of necessary permits.

A particular challenge is identified in coordination among competent institutions, especially between the Ministry of Interior and the Employment Service Agency. Interviewed employers shared that duration of administrative procedures often exceed the three-month validity period of employment decisions issued by the Employment Service Agency. As a consequence thereof, in some cases, the employment procedure must be started anew, which creates additional administrative costs, delays the employment process, and instils uncertainty for both employers and foreign workers.

The research uncovers practical challenges relating to limited administrative capacity, submission of hardcopy documents, and absence of electronic docket tracking. These circumstances have particular effect on persons whose residence is unregulated as they could delay or limit access to other rights and services.

Moreover, interviewed participants indicated that foreign citizens often do not dispose with sufficient information on procedures, necessary documents, and legal protection mechanisms. The lack of available information in understandable language additionally complicates timely regulation of their residence.

While the right to residence is clearly regulated by law, its effective enforcement in the practice depends on streamlining of administrative procedures, better institutional coordination, and greater availability of information for foreign citizens.

Accommodation and Housing

The legal framework anticipates different forms of accommodation and material support for asylum seekers, persons granted international protection and other vulnerable categories of foreign citizens. At the same time, the legislation recognizes the role of local self-government units in the integration process and anticipates special measures for protection of vulnerable categories.

The practice shows that, in spite of the established legal framework, practical challenges are most often connected to securing adequate accommodation and long-term integration. In the case of foreign workers, housing is frequently secured by the employers, which enables faster resolution of their housing issue, but at the same time creates additional dependence

on the employer. Having in mind that accommodation conditions are not subject to regular and systemic institutional supervision, there is a risk of inadequate housing conditions and limited possibilities for protection of rights.

In the area of international protection, there are accommodation and support mechanisms in place, including the Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers and the National Referral Mechanism for Victims of Human Trafficking. Interviewed participants assessed that these mechanisms provide basic support, but underlined the need for greater capacity and better connection with integration measures, especially after expiration of the initial accommodation period.

At local level, municipalities with greater concentration of foreign citizens are faced with a growing demand and additional pressure on their housing fund. At the same time, the research does not identify significant increase of hate speech or physical incidents targeting foreign citizens, which is indicative of a relatively high level of social tolerance. However, there are no formalized local integration mechanisms and regular communication among institutions, local authorities, employers, and foreign citizens.

The right to accommodation does not depend solely on provision of physical dwellings, but also on the quality of living conditions, institutional supervision and measures that facilitate long-term integration of foreign citizens into local communities.

Education

The legal framework in the Republic of North Macedonia provides access to primary, secondary and higher education for foreign citizens under conditions regulated by law and anticipates support measures for integration of certain categories of foreign citizens. Nevertheless, interviewed participants noted that practical exercise of the right to education continues to be limited by administrative, language and institutional barriers.

At the level of primary and secondary education, the most frequently identified challenges are related to securing necessary enrolment documents, language barriers, and limited support mechanisms for educational integration. Interviewed participants noted that oftentimes the schools do not have established systemic programs for language support nor does the teaching staff regularly attend specialized training for work with students from different linguistic and cultural environments. This could affect their successful involvement in the learning process and social integration.

One of the most significant systemic challenges is related to recognition of foreign educational qualifications. Oftentimes, procedures for recognition of foreign educational qualifications are long, administratively complex, and still depend on submission of hardcopy documents. Additional difficulties emerge when documents are issued in languages for which there are no court-certified translators available, which results in additional costs, longer deadlines, and uncertainty for persons who wish to continue their education or enter the labour market.

At the level of higher education, access to university studies depends on recognition of previously acquired education and regulation of their residence. Some participants referred to cases when student visas had been denied without sufficient justification, which reduces transparency and predictability of these procedures. In addition, limited offer of study programs and English language courses, as well as lack of scholarships and other forms of financial support, emerge as additional barriers for attracting and keeping foreign students.

Asylum seekers and persons granted international protection are a particularly vulnerable group as the absence of mechanisms for recognition of their previously acquired knowledge and competences could lead to inadequate involvement in the education system and could further complicate their long-term integration.

Recognition of foreign qualifications remains one of the most important administrative barriers to integration of foreign citizens as it directly impacts access to education, employment and professional development.

While the legislation provides access to education, effective integration of foreign pupils and students necessitates streamlined procedures for recognition of qualifications, stronger language and institutional support, and systemic monitoring of their involvement in the education system.

Healthcare

The legal framework ensures access to health protection for foreign citizens depending on their legal status. Foreigners with established labour relations have access to mandatory health insurance, while asylum seekers and persons granted international protection are covered under special mechanisms for provision of healthcare services.

The analysis shows that, to great extent, practical access to healthcare depends on timely regulation of their residence status, activation of health insurance, and efficiency of administrative procedures. In the practice, delays in regulation of residence or irregularities in reporting and payment of salary contributions could temporarily leave foreign citizens without active health insurance, on the account of which they are forced to independently cover healthcare services.

In the case of asylum seekers and persons granted international protection, access to healthcare is secured under separate mechanisms instead of the regular health insurance system. While this model provides access to basic healthcare services, interviewed participants indicated that, in the practice, there could be differences in availability and continuity of healthcare services compared to those provided under the regular system.

Furthermore, the research underlines the need for a more systemic language support and cultural mediation at healthcare facilities, especially when communicating with persons who do not know the Macedonian language. The lack of clearly defined procedures for coordination among different healthcare and social services could additionally complicate provision of continuous healthcare, especially for vulnerable categories of foreign citizens.

Access to healthcare is closely related to regulated residence and active health insurance, on the account of which administrative delays could directly impact timely use of healthcare services.

While the legislation provides access to healthcare for different categories of foreign citizens, effective exercise of these rights necessitates timely regulated residence and health insurance, as well as better language and institutional support within the healthcare system.

Social Protection

The legal framework provides access to rights within the social protection system depending on the legal status of foreign citizens. Persons with permanent residence, recognized refugee status and persons under subsidiary protection have access to rights under conditions equitable to those enjoyed by the nationals, while foreigners with temporary residence are granted a more limited scope of social protection rights. The legislation anticipates special services for vulnerable categories, including victims of human trafficking, victims of gender-based violence, and asylum seekers.

Practical access to social protection, however, often depends on regulated legal status, complexity of administrative procedures, and availability of information on available rights and services. Limited information and insufficient support in communication with institutions creates a situation where some foreign citizens rely on civil society and international organizations for mediation and access to services.

According to data from the Social Work Centre – Skopje, in 2024 a total of 257 foreign citizens have used services under the social protection system. Data shows that beneficiaries are not limited only to persons granted international protection, but actually cover different categories of foreign citizens, including families with children, underage children, pregnant women, and persons exposed to risk of exploitation. This shows that the need for social support concerns different categories of foreign citizens who reside in the country.

Also, the research shows there is no centralized national monitoring for use of social protection services by foreign citizens. Most often, data are collected at the level of individual institutions and do not allow comprehensive analysis of needs, access to services, and effects of implemented measures.

Access to social protection greatly depends on the legal status of foreign citizens, while the absence of integrated data and administrative complexities restrict timely exercise of rights and services.

While the legislation provides access to social protection for different categories of foreign citizens, effective exercise of these rights necessitates streamlined administrative procedures, better information for beneficiaries, and establishment of national system on monitoring use of social protection services.

Employment

Foreign workers: 65 → 3 320 (2020–2025)

In the period 2020–2025, the number of foreign workers in North Macedonia has increased by more than 50 times, which is indicative of the significant role assigned to foreign labour on the domestic labour market.

The legal framework ensures access to the labour market for foreign citizens through the so-called single work and residence permit, as well as under special regimes for certain categories of foreigners. The legislation anticipates equal rights in terms of salary, working hours, safety and health at work, and social insurance, while access to certain professions continues to depend on recognition of professional qualifications and fulfilment of law-stipulated conditions.

Analysis findings show that oftentimes foreign citizens are employed in sectors marked by chronic lack of domestic labour, especially in the construction, hospitality and manufacturing industries. In these sectors, foreign labour becomes an increasingly important factor for maintenance of economic activity.

Despite the legal guarantees, foreign workers remain exposed to greater vulnerability. Interviewed participants noted that administratively complex procedures for obtaining work and residence permits could delay the start of labour relations and create uncertainty for both workers and employers.

An additional challenge is seen in effective exercise of labour rights. Dependence on the employer in respect to regulation of work and residence status, limited information on rights and language barriers increase the vulnerability of foreign workers. Trade unions reported that oftentimes employment contracts and collective agreements are not available in a language understood by workers, which limits their capacity to understand and protect their rights.

The research observes cases of overtime work, insufficient training on safety and health at work, limited access to information on use of protective gear, as well as differences in working conditions and earnings compared to domestic workers. At the same time, trade union membership among foreign workers remains low, mainly due to language barriers, short-term stays, and lack of information on trade union protection mechanisms.

Foreign workers' dependence on the employer for regulation of work and regulation status increases their vulnerability and could limit reporting on violation of labour rights and labour exploitation.

Fast growth of foreign labour, in addition to an efficient system for issuance of permits, also necessitates stronger mechanisms for protection of labour rights, available information and effective inspection supervision to ensure equal working conditions for all workers.

Conclusion

Анализата покажува дека Република Северна Македонија располага со релативно The analysis shows that the Republic of North Macedonia has a relatively developed legal framework on protection of foreign citizens' rights. However, practical exercise of these rights remains limited due to administrative, institutional and language barriers, as well as due to lack of integrated data and systemic integration policies.

At the same time, the growth observed in terms of the number of foreign citizens and changes noted under migration movements show that the state is gradually transforming from a transit into a destination country. This requires the policies to be focused only on migration management, but geared towards enabling conditions for long-term integration and equal access to rights.

Successful integration of foreign citizens is not merely an issue of human rights protection, but also a precondition for sustainable economic development, social cohesion, and attainment of EU standards in the area of migration and integration.

Recommendations

Priority #1

Urgent measures (in the next 12 months)

1. Updating and ensuring effective implementation of the national integration policy

The Strategy for Integration of Refugees and Foreigners in the Republic of North Macedonia 2017-2027 should be revised and updated, having in mind new migration trends, especially the significant increase of foreign workers and greater presence of other categories of foreigners. At the same time, efforts are needed to ensure effective implementation of the strategy by means of updated action plans, clearly assigned institutional competences, measurable indicators, and regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

2. Streamlining and digitalizing administrative procedures

Procedures for regulation of residence status, work permits, health insurance and recognition of foreign qualifications should be streamlined and digitalized by establishing electronic services and introducing an opportunity for real-time monitoring of these procedures.

3. Strengthening institutional coordination

Formalized mechanisms should be established for regular coordination and exchange of information between the Ministry of Interior, the Employment Service Agency, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Policy, Demographics and Youth, and other competent institutions.

Priority #2

Medium-term measures (1 to 3 years)

4. Establishing an integrated data system

A national system for collection, exchange and analysis of desegregated data on foreigners should be established, including regular publication of statistical data that would allow evidence-based policy creation.

5. Ensuring equal access to public services

Administrative and language barriers should be reduced by means of:

- provision of multilingual information;
- development of electronic services;
- availability of translators and interpreters when needed;
- improved access to education, healthcare, social protection, and free legal aid.

6. Improving recognition of foreign qualifications

Procedures on recognition of foreign educational and professional qualifications should be streamlined and accelerated by reducing administrative requirements, digitalizing procedures, and providing adequate translation services.

7. Strengthening the role of civil society organizations

Formal mechanisms should be established for cooperation among institutions, local self-government units, and civil society organizations that provide services for foreigners. At the same

time, **a sustainable mechanism on institutional support and financing** should be formed for free legal aid, psychosocial support, information dissemination and other services provided by civil society organizations in order to ensure continuity of their operation independently from project-based funding.

Priority #3

Long-term measures (continuously)

8. Enhancing protection of labour rights

Inspection supervision on working conditions for foreign workers should be enhanced, and the following should be secured:

- availability of employment contracts and information on labour rights in a language understood by workers;
- easier access to mechanisms for reporting violations of labour rights;
- greater information on trade union protections;
- promotion of the legal and administrative framework to ensure a more flexible change of employer without automatic loss of the right to temporary residence, with adequate protective mechanisms for prevention of labour exploitation and excessive dependence on the employer.

9. Developing local integration policies

Local integration programs should be developed at municipalities with higher number of foreigners and they should include:

- language support;
- civic orientation;
- access to information and public services;
- activities to encourage social inclusion.

Implementation of these recommendations will contribute to more efficient, better coordinated and more inclusive system for exercise of rights and integration of foreigners; will strengthen the institutional resilience and will ensure a more sustainable cooperation with the civil society, thus contributing to further alignment of the Republic of North Macedonia with EU standards in the areas of migration, integration and human rights.

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- Semi-structured interviews with representatives from state institutions, independent bodies, international organizations, civil society organizations and other relevant actors, conducted as part of this research.



