

ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS AND TOURISM: THE CASE OF THE MANDATORY REPLACEMENT OF TRAVEL DOCUMENTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the impact of the mandatory replacement of travel documents, introduced through the implementation of the Prespa Agreement, on the travel plans of citizens, their choice of destination, and the operations of travel agencies in the Republic of North Macedonia. The research was conducted using two structured surveys – one targeting the general population and the other aimed at travel agencies throughout the country. The collected data were analysed to identify trends and measurable effects of the new travel document regulations. The results indicated that the imposed administrative changes caused delays or cancellations of travel plans, reduced interest in early booking offers, and increased demand for destinations that do not require a passport. Travel agencies reported a decline in reservations, financial losses, and growing concerns among travellers. These results have practical implications for policymakers and tourism professionals, highlighting the importance of timely communication, flexible administrative policies, and strategic planning to reduce disruptions and maintain the resilience of the tourism industry.

Key words: *policy impact, travel documents, tourist decision-making, travel agencies, North Macedonia*

1. Introduction

In contemporary tourism, administrative barriers represent a significant factor that directly influences tourism mobility, travel planning, and the work operations of different tourism entities. Changes in legal regulations, particularly those related to travel documents, can impose additional burdens on citizens and disrupt the normal functioning of tourism supply and demand. In this case, the mandatory change of travel documents in the Republic of North Macedonia, implemented as part of the obligations arising from the Prespa Agreement, which changed the country's official constitutional name. The signing of the Prespa Agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Greece on 17 June 2018 marked the end of the decades-long dispute over the country's name, paving the way for Euro-Atlantic integration. As part of the agreement, the Republic of Macedonia consented to change its constitutional name to Republic of North Macedonia, a decision that was later formalised through constitutional amendments in January 2019.

In response, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia adopted a national transition plan for updating official documents, setting February 12, 2024, as the final deadline for replacing all travel documents. As of February 13, 2024, travel documents issued under the former name (Republic

of Macedonia) ceased to be valid, and only those issued under the name Republic of North Macedonia remained legally recognised. The change in travel documents in 2024 does not stem from a tourism-related or administrative necessity but rather from a political agreement with significant implications for national sovereignty and international integration. Although formally administrative and anticipated, this regulatory change led to substantial operational, logistical, social, and administrative challenges – including prolonged queues for document issuance, appointment shortages, system congestion, technical difficulties, and heightened public concern. In the months preceding the deadline, scheduling systems were overwhelmed, appointment availability declined, application processing encountered technical issues, and long queues formed outside administrative offices. These difficulties coincided with the peak planning period for spring and summer travel, further complicating the conditions for tourism-related activities. Beyond individual travel plans, the regulation significantly impacted the operations of travel agencies, which faced reduced bookings, cancellations of travel arrangements, and increased requests for postponements. From a tourism perspective, this situation represents a typical example of indirect political regulation that imposes administrative barriers, affecting travellers' behaviour, destination choices, and the operations of tourism agencies. Although the document change was a legal obligation arising from an international agreement, the absence of parallel measures to facilitate the transition – such as extending the validity of old documents during an interim period – exacerbated administrative hurdles and reduced citizen mobility. The abrupt and stringent implementation of the regulation transformed the passport change from a technical process into a factor that disrupted seasonal tourism planning and the economic stability of the tourism sector.

This study aims to examine the impact of the mandatory changes in travel documents, introduced as an administrative requirement following the implementation of the Prespa Agreement, on tourism practices and the operations of travel agencies in the Republic of North Macedonia. The research seeks to identify changes in travellers' behaviour, their adaptability to new conditions, and the economic and operational effects on tourism agencies. The study analyses the consequences of this administrative measure using data from two survey-based investigations – one conducted among citizens and the other among tourism agencies. The findings from these surveys will provide deeper insights into the challenges posed by administrative regulations and their influence on the tourism sector in North Macedonia. The objective is to understand how a binding regulation, despite its technical necessity, can lead to significant repercussions for the national tourism system.

2. Literature review

Tourism is closely intertwined with global politics and can influence international diplomacy (Suntikul & Butler, 2010). The tourism services market faces many restrictions and barriers that hinder its development. Institutional constraints are key in forming these barriers (Abeer, 2023). Administrative barriers, such as visa regimes, passport policies, and other restrictions related to travel documents, pose a serious challenge to global mobility and tourism activity. While countries have the legitimate right to control the entry of foreign nationals, the question of the economic and social consequences of such measures should be raised, especially in the context of tourism. While the literature acknowledges the influences of international relations and political factors on tourist flows (Khalid et al., 2024), surprisingly few studies explicitly examine the effect of sanctions on tourism. They have been primarily explored within the political science, economic, and public policy frameworks (Cortright & Lopez, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2010).

'The impediments to tourism fall into two general groups; those that affect individual travellers and those that affect businesses dealing with travellers' (Ascher, 1984, p. 3). 'International travellers are subject to passport and visa requirements... For example, excessive passport fees can inhibit outbound travel and artificially limit consumer demand for travel services' (Ascher, 1984, p. 4). Neumayer (2010) suggests that visa restrictions significantly reduce travellers' movements, with bilateral tourist flows falling by an average of 52% to 63%. Additional research by the same author, in collaboration with Czaika, confirms that these restrictions reduce not only tourism but also bilateral trade and foreign direct investment, especially in lower-income countries (Czaika & Neumayer, 2017). According to the World Tourism Organisation, countries with more favourable and open visa regimes attract significantly more tourists, and the mere facilitation of administrative procedures can

lead to an increase in tourist inflows (World Tourism Organisation, 2024). Ascher (1984, p. 12) concludes that 'although tourism is a vital and growing international service industry, in some degree, it is inhibited from reaching its full potential because of government-imposed impediments that affect travellers, transportation companies, tour operators, and other travel businesses'.

3. Methodology

The research is based on a quantitative methodological approach through structured surveys intended for two target groups: (1) citizens/potential travellers and (2) travel agencies operating in the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia. The research aims to obtain data on the impact of the mandatory change of travel documents on the tourist behaviour of potential travellers and the work operations of travel agencies.

3.1. Citizens '/potential travellers' survey

The survey was conducted online, by sharing a form that was created specifically for the purposes of the research, using the Google Forms tool. The form was distributed via the social networks Facebook and Instagram, as well as via the communication applications Viber and WhatsApp. The survey was conducted in the period February – March 2024. A total of 179 respondents participated in the survey. All participants completed the survey questionnaire accurately and completely, so all 179 responses were taken into account in the analysis. The respondents came from different parts of the country and were of different age categories and both genders. The data were processed using basic statistical methods, including frequency analysis and cross-section of results by demographic parameters.

The survey of citizens/potential travellers is designed to gather information about:

- Gender, age and geographical distribution of respondents;
- The impact of mandatory change of travel documents on travel plans (cancellation/postponement of already paid arrangements, rerouting to destinations where entry with an ID card is allowed or to destinations within the country's borders);
- Financial consequences, such as missed discounts for early bookings.

3.2. Survey of travel agencies

The survey was sent directly to over 100 travel agencies via email, and 42 agencies confirmed their participation and completed the survey. This response rate provides insight into the views of small, medium and large tourism entities from different cities and regions. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis.

The survey for travel agencies aimed to collect data on:

- Decrease in the number of reservations compared to the same period in previous years;
- Typical clients' reactions (concern, indecision, procrastination);
- Agencies' perception of the impact of the regulation on the tourism season and expected financial losses.

These parallel surveys allow for a comparison between the perceptions and experiences of end users (travellers) and those of economic operators (travel agencies), which contributes to a comprehensive assessment of the impact of the introduced administrative obligation.

4. Analysis of the survey results

4.1. Demographic profile of respondents

A total of 179 respondents participated in the survey. Regarding gender, 62.6% of the respondents are women, while 37.4% are men. The age structure is relatively evenly distributed: the

majority of the respondents are aged 20 to 35 (34.1%), followed by the group from 36 to 50 (33.5%). Respondents aged 50 to 65 comprise 25.1% of the sample, 5.6% are over 65, and only 1.7% are under 20. As for the geographical distribution, most respondents live in Skopje, i.e., 81% of the total. The remaining respondents are from different parts of the country, such as Veles (3.4%), Kumanovo (2.2%), Resen (1.7%), as well as Bitola, Pehchevo and Prilep (1.1% each). The remaining few respondents come from other cities, including Ohrid, Shtip, Gevgelija, Kriva Palanka, Delchevo, Kavadarci, and others, each represented by 0.6%.

This demographic profile shows that the research is predominantly based on responses from female respondents, with a predominantly young to middle-aged structure, and that most of the sample comes from an urban environment, primarily from the capital. Although it does not represent a nationally representative sample, such a structure provides valuable insight into the experiences of those groups who travel most frequently and are directly affected by the change in travel documents.

4.2. Impact on travel plans and destination choice

The survey results indicate that the mandatory change in travel documents significantly impacted the respondents' travel plans. As many as 51.2% of them stated that this administrative change impacted their travel intentions. Despite the administrative restrictions, 48.8% of the respondents stated that their travel plans had not changed, most often because they already had a valid travel document or were travelling to destinations with more flexible entry conditions. This ratio indicates that more than half of the respondents felt directly affected by the new regulation.

Regarding how their travel decision was changed, 16% of the respondents stated that they needed to cancel or postpone an already paid arrangement due to the changes in travel documents. 30.8% stated that the situation prompted them to consider choosing a destination where travel is only possible with an ID card, while 22.6% stated that they planned a vacation within the country.

These results confirm the direct impact of administrative barriers on tourist behaviour, with some citizens delaying, cancelling, or adjusting their travel plans. The change in destination due to passport restrictions indicates that travel document regulations can also affect tourist flows, redirecting tourists to destinations with simplified travel conditions. Such changes have the potential to disrupt season planning and change the competitiveness of specific destinations in the tourism market.

4.3. Impact on reservations and agency operations

The analysis of the survey results conducted among travel agencies shows that the mandatory change of travel documents has significantly affected the agencies' work operations in the country. 81.4% of the agencies that participated in the survey reported a decrease in the number of reservations compared to the same period in previous years. More than half of them, i.e., 51.4%, estimate that they have a drop in reservations of between 10% and 25%. An additional 34.3% note a 25% to 50% decrease, while 8.6% of the agencies reported a decrease of 50% to 75%. 5.7% responded that their decrease was below 10%. These figures confirm the strength of the new regulation's impact on tourism entities' market operations.

The decline in bookings occurs in different regions across the country, with no apparent connection to the size of the agency, its experience, or whether it has its own leases. The highest decline is registered in Prilep, Kocani, and Skopje, where agencies report a decrease of 50% to 70%, while in other cities, the percentages vary from 10% to 50%.

In addition, 74.4% of the surveyed agencies have noted cases of cancellation of already paid arrangements because clients could not obtain a new travel document in time. 86% of the agencies also report requests to postpone trips until travellers receive new documents. This indicates that administrative change is not only a psychological factor but also has concrete consequences in terms of interrupted or postponed trips, directly affecting travel agencies' income.

93% of agencies confirmed that their clients, when making a new reservation, are interested in the agency's policies for cancelling or postponing a trip if they fail to obtain a new passport in time. As confirmed by all surveyed agencies, the concern among clients is present in all regions where they come from, which further strengthens the thesis that the impact of the regulation is widespread and systematic.

These results indicate that the administrative barrier imposed through the change in travel documents has caused real market distortions in the tourism industry. Travel agencies have found themselves in a position of increased risk, loss of income, and the need to constantly adapt their business practices in conditions of administrative uncertainty and distrust among clients.

4.4. Psychological and economic effects on travellers and agencies

The research shows that the mandatory change of travel documents has caused significant psychological and financial pressure on both travellers and travel agencies. According to the survey results, 57.4% of respondents regularly paid for early booking discounts in previous years. Among them, 78.7% stated that they failed to take advantage of such a discount this year, and for 54.2% of those who did not pay on time, one of the reasons was the mandatory change of travel documents, which resulted in missed benefits and increased travel costs. This has further made travel more difficult for many citizens, especially those on a limited budget.

The psychological dimension of the problem is also seen through the increased concern of citizens related to timely obtaining a new passport, administrative pressure, and the uncertainty about whether they will be able to travel on the planned date. Additionally, a significant number of respondents who do not yet possess a travel document with the new name of the country stated that they feel an obligation and pressure to apply in the short term, given that old passports are no longer accepted.

For travel agencies, the effects are particularly pronounced in the expected economic losses. According to the survey, 67.4% of agencies predict losses this season compared to previous years. Of these, 41.4% expect a loss of 5% to 20%, 37.9% expect a loss of 20% to 40%, and another 13.8% estimate that the loss will be between 40% and 60%. This data indicates a serious disruption to the financial stability of the agencies, especially during a period when a large number of arrangements for the upcoming season were to be realised.

In conclusion, it can be confirmed that the administrative regulation that led to the change of travel documents did not remain without consequences for the psychological and economic state of the parties concerned. Travel agencies and citizens faced a situation of increased risk, limited predictability, and a general sense of uncertainty, which made it difficult to realise tourism activities in the first half of 2024.

5. Discussion, implications and recommendations

From the literature review, it can be determined that there is a lack of research examining the impact of mandatory changes in travel documents (introduced as an administrative requirement) on tourism practices and the operations of travel agencies. Hence, this paper introduces novelty and expands knowledge. The research results clearly indicate that the mandatory change of travel documents in the Republic of North Macedonia, although formally an administrative and expected measure, had serious consequences on the tourist behaviour of citizens and on the operations of travel agencies. Both surveys show that the new regulation has led to delayed or cancelled trips, changes in destinations, a drop in reservations and economic losses, with both citizens and agencies expressing a sense of uncertainty and pressure. Among citizens, the most pronounced phenomenon is the postponement of trips due to the lack of a new travel document, which in some cases led to complete cancellation or rerouting to other destinations. On the other hand, travel agencies are facing concrete operational and economic consequences – a decline in reservations, increased cancellations and foreseeable financial losses. At the same time, all agencies report increased concerns among clients and the need for more flexible agency policies. It is worth emphasising that psychological effects – stress, uncertainty and the perception of insufficient institutional support – emerge as an important segment of the impact, especially in conditions of limited time and high administrative pressure. The overall picture confirms that administrative barriers, even when not introduced with tourism intent, have the potential to disrupt the stability and predictability of tourism systems.

The research results indicate a clear need for careful management of administrative processes that can affect tourism demand and the functioning of travel agencies. The change of travel documents, as an obligation arising from an international agreement, cannot be avoided, but its

implementation can and should be properly planned, flexible and supported by parallel measures that will reduce the damage to the tourism sector. First, institutions must inform the public in a timely and transparent manner about administrative changes that may affect travel. The lack of comprehensive communication and timely public campaigns leads to confusion, concern, and delays in citizens' reactions, which directly affects their ability to travel and the work of travel agencies. Additionally, in similar cases, a transitional period should be envisaged in which the old documents would remain valid for a certain period of time. Such measures can ensure continuity of passenger flows and reduce the burden on the administrative apparatus, which is not always prepared for increased pressure. For travel agencies, it is advisable to provide institutional support in such situations, either through fiscal incentives or direct logistical assistance (e.g., access to priority terms for clients with confirmed reservations). This will preserve the stability of the sector, which is extremely sensitive to external shocks and administrative restrictions. It is also necessary to develop a national strategy for managing administrative barriers to tourism, which would encompass not only passport or visa issues, but also other forms of regulations that can hinder travel, such as border policies, health certificates or digital procedures. Such a strategy would enable predictability, coordination, and more efficient handling of identical or similar situations in the future. Finally, there is a need for greater involvement of travel agencies and professional associations in the administrative decision-making process, especially when they directly affect travel and tourism. Consistent involvement of all stakeholders can contribute to a more efficient, transparent and sustainable tourism policy.

6. Conclusion

The research conducted within the framework of this paper aims to analyse the impact of the mandatory change of travel documents, an administrative measure resulting from the Prespa Agreement, on the travel behaviour of citizens and the operation of travel agencies in the Republic of North Macedonia. Specific effects of this regulation were identified through two separate surveys – one aimed at the citizens/potential travellers and the other at travel agencies.

The results indicate that many citizens were forced to postpone or cancel their trips because they did not possess a valid travel document. For some of the respondents, the change of documents also led to a change in the chosen tourism destination, which further confirms the thesis that administrative barriers can affect the destination choice of travellers. On the other hand, travel agencies are experiencing a decline in reservations, an increased number of cancellations, and expected financial losses, which indicates a substantial economic impact of the administrative decision on tour operators.

This paper argues that such administrative interventions, even when implemented with a legitimate legal and political basis, can disrupt tourist flows, especially if they are not accompanied by appropriate supporting measures. In this context, the research indicates the need for better coordination between institutions, greater transparency in communication with the public and timely prediction of the consequences of administrative decisions on the sensitive tourism sector.

By analysing this specific example, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of administrative barriers and their impact on tourism. The knowledge gained will serve as a basis for more sustainable and effective public policymaking in the future.

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