**BULGARIAN PASSPORTS: EXISTENTIAL NECESSITY OR IDENTITY CRISIS?**

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**Abstract**

**The introduction of the Schengen visa regime - as a defence mechanism to prevent immigration in the European Community - imposed restriction on the mobility to the ex-Yugoslav countries, which used to travel freely before its brake up in 1989. However, the imposition of the visa regime did not prevent migration from the Western Balkan countries. On the contrary, it augmented illegal ways to cross the border and incited many citizens to apply for a foreign passport.**

**Prior the visa liberalization granted to Western Balkan countries in 2010, an increased demand of Bulgarian passport was noted by citizens from Macedonia. This phenomenon picked notably after Bulgaria entered the EU in 2007.**

**This paper will focus on Bulgarian passport acquisition by Macedonian citizens seen as a tool of free movement within the Europe Union and opportunity to work in its member states. It will analyze the application for Bulgarian official documents, its causes and possible consequences. By examining the above mentioned case-study, my attempt is to open a debate on whether the increased foreign passport acquisition is solely driven by existential reasons or it has hidden identity grounds.**

***Keywords*:** *passports*, *crisis*, *identity*, *visa*, *migration*.

**Introduction**

2013 marked the last European Union enlargement, granting the Republic of Croatia with a place in the “big family”. Almost one decade after the first ex-Yugoslav republic – Slovenia entered the EU, the situation for the rest of the Western Balkan countries appears not promising in terms of possible accession to the Union in the near future. Macedonia alongside with Serbia remain with the status of official candidates, Montenegro is in a negotiating positions, Albania and Kosovo are being considered as potential candidates, whilst Bosnia and Herzegovina stays in its puzzle position.

After the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the enlargement of the EU became a number one political debate in the post-socialist countries. Today, after more than two decades it is still a discussed topic, especially among Western Balkan countries. Whilst neighboring countries which joined the EU in 2004[[2]](#footnote-2) and 2007[[3]](#footnote-3) respectively, already debate on supranational related issues and even side effect of being a member state, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia are running late in the never-ending marathon called European Union accession.

If we leave apart the political debates, what has concerned more the population living in the ex-Yugoslav space, was the imposition of the Schengen visa regime[[4]](#footnote-4) (Dinan 2005:393), a defense mechanism adopted by the European Community in order to prevent immigration to the Community. People from Yugoslavia used to travel freely before its brake-up in 1989 and the restricted mobility had a very negative impact, especially on its younger population. However, the imposition of the visa regime did not prevent migration from Western Balkan countries. On the contrary, it augmented illegal ways to cross the border and incited many citizens to apply for a foreign passport.

The acquisition of a foreign passport, possibly from a member state country, represents not only a legal tool to move freely within the EU, but it is, additionally, a possibility to work in one of its member states. Prior the visa liberalization granted to Western Balkan countries in 2010[[5]](#footnote-5), an increased demand of Bulgarian passport was noted by citizens from Macedonia. This phenomenon picked notably after Bulgaria entered the EU in 2007. For instance, the same increased demand was registered among Moldova citizens applying for Romanian passports.

**Historical Background**

Among the Balkan countries, Macedonia was the last one to experience the national awakening and to form a separate independent state, firstly as a constituent republic of the Yugoslav Federation in 1944 and finally as an independent country in 1991. During the last one hundred years, Macedonia has experienced negative bilateral relationship with all its neighbors and some of them are grounds of current political debates. For instance, the name dispute with Greece and the denial of the existence of a Macedonian minority living in the Greek state; the refusal to recognize the Autocephalous Macedonian Church by the Serbian Orthodox Church; the discriminated position of the Macedonian minority in Albania and Bulgaria.

Historically, the rivalry among Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece to control the territory of Macedonia is mostly visible after the Treaty of Bucharest in 1913 and the partition of the territory of Macedonia among the three countries. Territorial pretensions towards Macedonia were caused mainly by the desire of Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece to increase their territories and consequently to incorporate Serbian, Bulgarian or Greek population living in what was known as ‘geographic Macedonia’ (Magosci 2002:88). Therefore, after 1913 and especially in the interwar period, Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek assimilation policy increased continuously towards the Macedonian population, affecting particularly the educational and religious sphere. Religious domination of the Macedonian population has even more distant roots. In fact, after the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870, the Greek Patriarchate faced a serious opponent, who besides the common Orthodox religion shared a similar Slavic language with the Macedonian followers. For centuries, under the Ottoman rule, the Greek Patriarchate was the main Orthodox Church to control the Christian population in the so-called millet system (Chepreganov 2008). After losing the primate in the religious sphere, the rivalry between the two Churches augmented even further and it spread to the educational domain as well. Children from neighboring villages were forced to go to different schools – Bulgarian, Serbian or Greek, and sometimes brothers from the same family developed different national identity, simply because did not attend the same national school. By attending Bulgarian, Greek or Serbian schools, pupils learned one of those languages and went to the respective Church, which later influenced the development of their identity as well. Another example of Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek assimilation policy was the forced change of toponyms and surnames. For instance, in the interwar period there are several cases of people who during their lifetime had carried both a Bulgarian surname ending in *–ov* and a Serbian surname ending in *–ich*.

The already weak Macedonian identity, influenced by the assimilation policy of its neighbors, and represented mostly by rural uneducated population, could not emerge earlier than World War Two. Macedonians, being not recognized as a separate nation prior 1944, do not exist in any statistical records, and are usually included in the graph of one of the neighboring countries. Such policy was not limited in the Balkan area solely, it reflected as well in the overseas countries where Macedonians started settling since late 19th century and where Bulgarian, Serbian and Greek propaganda continued *pari passum* to the one developed in the homeland. This "*genocide by census redefinition*" (Weiner; Geertz 1973) both in Ottoman statistics and in overseas countries’ statistical records where mass migration of Macedonians in the interwar period was registered, has resulted with the impossibility of defining the real approximate number of ethnic Macedonians prior 1944. Moreover, it contributes to the general mythopoeic Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek narrative of the non-existence of Macedonian people and their regarding as Southern Serbs, Macedono-Bulgarians, Slavophone Greeks etc.

**Case study**

I have been researching the phenomenon of ‘Bulgarian passports’, as it is simple called in Macedonian language („бугарски пасоши“), since 2009. My studies have been solely qualitative, focusing mostly on the causes, application procedure and possible consequences of the phenomenon. The numbers of the applicants in the past 10-15 years speak about the phenomenon itself.

*During the period between 2001 and 2007, 31.958 applicants received Bulgarian passports: half of them, the equivalent of approximately 14.000, were Macedonians* (Cvetkovska 2008). According to the Report for the migration situation in Republic of Bulgaria in 2006, Macedonia was the first among the top 5 countries of applicants for Bulgarian citizenship. In the period between 2001 and 2006, 10.850 Macedonians applied for Bulgarian citizenship. Macedonia was followed by Moldova (9.187 applications), Russia (1.751), Ukraine (1.233) and Serbia and Montenegro (1.089), which prior 2006 were still united in one country (Tchorbadjyska 2007). Newer statistics indicate the number has doubled. In 2011 alone, 10.000 Macedonians received Bulgarian documents: 6.500 received Bulgarian passports on the basis of their origin, whilst 3.500 received citizenship after claiming Bulgarian nationality presented in a written statement. In 2012 the Bulgarian Justice Ministry grated more than 17.000 people with Bulgarian citizenship and in 2013 the number dropped to 8.000. Both in 2012 and 2013 Macedonians were 40% of the total number of applicants (Marusic 2014). The trend continues in 2014 as well, with no official figures available yet. Although numbers are quite alarming, the Macedonian Government has not undertaken any serious actions to prevent its further intensification. Data are mostly collected from newspapers, media news and other similar qualitative researches carried so far.

The above mentioned data lead to several public debates and questions to examine: *Are all these Macedonians actually Bulgarians? Why do they in reality apply for Bulgarian documents? Is the acquisition of the Bulgarian citizenship the only obvious solution of poverty in Macedonia? Why it became a public discourse? What possible consequences might this phenomenon reveal in future?*

It is commonly known that people living in Eastern Macedonia, bordering with Bulgaria, survive thanks to Bulgarian passports who allow them to work as track drivers or seasonal workers within the EU. Numerous are the benefits that this EU passport could give to an ordinary Macedonian citizen: from a work permit in an EU member state to a great deal in buying used cars from Bulgaria. Moreover, in the past it was common for Macedonian students studying in Bulgaria to apply for Bulgarian documents in order to reduce academic fees and have the possibility to apply for scholarships.

In the winter of 2013, I conducted a qualitative research on a small sample of 40 ethnic Macedonians mostly from Skopje[[6]](#footnote-6). I used semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The aim of this research was to obtain preliminary results for further statistically relevant investigations. Out of the 40 interviewees, aged 18-50, both female and male, employed, unemployed and students, 8 have stated to have a received a Bulgarian citizenship and passport in the past decade, one being in the process of obtaining the documents.

The procedure for applying for Bulgarian documents was described as quite simple. Among the documents required there were listed an application form, a statement of Bulgarian origin for the person who applies and their antecessors (the applicant itself should state that he/she and his family – father and grandfather – are of Bulgarian origin), Macedonian personal document translated into Bulgarian language and medical examination certificate of good health. After the application is done, an interview with the Bulgarian authorities is carried. Among the common questions asked in the Bulgarian Ministry of Justice are Bulgarian national holidays and the reason for applying for Bulgarian citizenship. My interlocutors informed me that people (usually from Macedonia, Serbia, Russia, Moldova and Ukraine) waiting for the interview would help each other prepare for the questions. Once the citizenship is obtained, the procedure for obtaining the Bulgarian passport is similar to the one in Macedonia. The whole procedure might last from less than one year up to more than three years, but usually it takes between one and two years. For all the steps, applicants are required to go to Bulgaria up to three times, which might be the reason people decide often to carry the procedure themselves, instead of using the service of an agency or individual agents.

Agents used to charge from 200 to 250 Euros for the service. In 2009, an agent from Eastern Macedonia informed me that during the period between 2004 and 2006 he facilitated approximately the issuing of 1.000 Bulgarian documents alone[[7]](#footnote-7). He noted that after Bulgaria entered the EU in 2007, the demands have diminished, mainly because the Bulgarian administration had become stricter (Avirovic 2010:53). Advertisements from agents who facilitated acquisition of Bulgarian citizenship used to appear regularly in Macedonian daily newspapers.

The **reasons** to apply for a Bulgarian passport that emerged from my small survey indicate current work or willingness to work in an EU member state country, followed by the easier circumstances of movement within the Union and discontent from the endless transition period in Macedonia. Only one person indicated to have Bulgarian origin. The benefits of owning a Bulgarian passport were again in the employment sector: interviewees consider that they have/will have the possibility to work in a foreign country without any administrative burden or the need to be in a political party in their homeland Macedonia. They might use benefits from both countries, better carrier opportunities, healthcare system and education, enjoy the rights of their fellow EU member state citizens or to have it *just in case* they might need it in the future.

As far as the reasons to apply for a Bulgarian passport are concerned, a previous research by Vasiliki P. Neofotistos confirms the same results as his interviewees’ indicated lack of employment opportunities, distrust in politics, corruption and visible dis­crepancies in standard of living as main motives of acquiring Bulgarian documents (2008).

The majority of the interviewees without a Bulgarian passport would not apply for a foreign passport from a neighboring country. Those who might apply would opt for Serbian (6), Bulgarian (3) and Greek (1) passport. None of them would apply for an Albanian passport. The reason of excluding the Albanian option might be related to past ethnic tensions between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians. Other neighboring countries might have been chosen due to family origin rather than prospective possibilities, since, for instance, Serbia is not yet part of the EU.

In the winter of 2015 I had the chance to meet again with two of my interviewees (a couple: male aged 36 and female aged 35) who at the time (2013) were in the process of applying of Bulgarian citizenship for economic reasons i.e. permanent migration from Macedonia. Currently one of them already lives in Italy and stated that the Bulgarian passport had helped him to find easily a job, since he did not have to apply for the Italian residence permit (*permesso di soggiorno*) which is a requirement for Macedonian citizens.

When asked whether the acquisition of a Bulgarian citizenship or passport might threaten Macedonian identity, responses were directly proportional to the number of people having a Bulgarian document: 27 think it threatens it, 10 do not agree with this statement. As one of the interlocutors stated (male, aged 36):

*I do not think that a Bulgarian passport threatens Macedonian identity as long as people give up the Macedonian passport. Even if that is the case, citizenship does not equal identity especially in modern societies where nation-states are extinct.*

However, I do not claim that those who think this phenomenon threatens Macedonian identity are not willing to apply for Bulgarian citizenship in order to preserve their national identity, given the fact that most of the interlocutors have already acquired or are willing to apply for a foreign passport. Most possibly, those are people with a stable job who are not willing to migrate nor to use any benefit from a Bulgarian i.e. EU documents. Anyways, I would not exclude patriotism as drive, although it was not stated openly by any of the interviewees.

In this regard, from a 2012 research on this topic I published a declaration by a Macedonian citizen who acquired Bulgarian passports which was kindly given to me by Gjorgji Chakarjanevski, a Macedonian historian, who has been researching how the acquisition of Bulgarian documents might affect the identity of Macedonian people. In the past years he has been collecting official declarations by Macedonian citizens who acquired Bulgarian passports and wish to leave a statement for further generations explaining that the reason for holding a Bulgarian passport is purely existential and does not affect their Macedonian identity. These declarations are certified by notaries and sealed with notary’s stamp. The declaration I was given is a statement of a Macedonian citizen from Strumica in regard with his national feeling prior the application for foreign passport from 2005. He states that he acquired a Bulgarian passport in order to travel freely in foreign countries being he a driver by profession, but that he declares himself as Macedonian citizen and of Macedonian nationality. He concludes that the statement was made *as present and future evidence for [his] Macedonian national feeling and in order to protect both [himself] and [his] family, from eventual abuse by anyone and at any time (Avirovic 2012).*

However, being this document a singular case presented, does not imply to all people who apply for Bulgarian citizenship or documents. However, it might represent a useful input for further research and shed light on the current phenomenon.

**Conclusion**

The phenomenon of acquiring Bulgarian citizenship and passport by ethnic Macedonians has a negative impact and might have even further consequences in the future. Firstly, it raises the past problem of reliable statistics. Macedonian people travelling with Bulgarian passport are accounted as Bulgarian nationals, the same problem Macedonians faced (involuntarily) before the creation of the Macedonian state. For historians, who rely principally on facts and documents in their researches, such statistics might distort the “historical truth”. Secondly, it affects seriously the already contested national identity of ethnic Macedonians by its neighbors since other ethnic groups are not affected.[[8]](#footnote-8) Bulgaria recognizes the Macedonian state but not its language as separate from the Bulgarian. Macedonian minority, especially the one living in the Pirin region, is not recognized as such and is denied the right to freely organize in political parties. Finally, the rising number of “artificial” Bulgarian citizens abroad opens the floor to misleading numbers of the already difficult-to count Macedonian Diaspora.

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2. Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia joined the EU in 2004. See more about the 2004 Enlargement in: Desmond Dinan, *Ever Closer Union, An Introduction to European Integration,* Palglave Macmillan, Hampshire: 2005, pp.143-158. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Schengen Agreement was signed by the Benelux countries, France and Germany in 1985, but became operational in 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia were the first group of countries granted visa liberalization, followed by Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Two interviewees are originating from Eastern Macedonia, Shtip and Kochani respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Interview with individual agent for facilitation of issuing of Bulgarian documents from Negotino,

   (16 June 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Other ethnicities living in Macedonia (Albanians, Turks, Serbs, Vlachs, Roma and Bosniacs, and other) do not apply or rarely apply for Bulgarian passports. This is mainly due to the distinct languages and the differentiation in the name etymology, features shared otherwise between Bulgarians and Macedonians. Neofotistos (2008) claims that only ethnic Macedonians (and not Albanians, Serbs or members of other ethnonational communities in Macedonia) are eligible to apply for Bulgarian citizenship. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)