

UDK 342. 711 (497. 2 : = 163. 3)  
Short scientific article**BULGARIAN PASSPORTS: EXISTENTIAL NECESSITY OR IDENTITY CRISIS?<sup>1</sup>****Irena AVIROVIC<sup>2</sup>**Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje  
Faculty of Philosophy

*Abstract:* The introduction of the Schengen visa regime – as a defence mechanism to prevent immigration in the European Community – imposed restriction on the mobility of the ex-Yugoslav countries, which used to travel freely before its breakup in 1989. However, the imposition of the visa regime did not prevent migration from the Western Balkan countries. On the contrary, it augmented the illegal ways to cross the border and incited many citizens to apply for a foreign passport. Prior to the visa liberalization granted to Western Balkan countries in 2010, an increased demand for Bulgarian passports was noted among 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 European Union and an opportunity to work in its member states. It will analyze the application for Bulgarian official documents, its causes and possible consequences. By examining the abovementioned 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.

**1. Introduction**

The year 2013 marked the last enlargement of the European Union, 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 negotiating positions, Albania and Kosovo are being considered as potential candidates, whilst Bosnia and Herzegovina stays in its puzzled position.

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at International Scientific Conference *Facing Social Traumas: A Challenge for Sociological Research*, Faculty of Philosophy, within Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Skopje 23-24 April, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> e-mail: avirovic@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

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<sup>3</sup> and 2007<sup>4</sup> respectively, already debate on supranational related issues and even the side effects of being a member state, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia are running late in the never-ending marathon called the European Union accession.

If we leave political debates aside, what has concerned more the population living in the ex-Yugoslav space, was the imposition of the Schengen visa regime<sup>5</sup> (Dinan 2005:393), a defense mechanism adopted by the European Community in order to prevent immigration. 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 additionally, a possibility to work in one of its member states. Prior the visa liberalization granted to Western Balkan countries in 2010<sup>6</sup>, an increased demand for Bulgarian passports 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 Moldovan citizens applying for Romanian passports.

## 2. Historical Background

Among the Balkan countries, Macedonia was the last one to experience 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 relationships with all its neighbors and some of these are the 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

---

<sup>3</sup> Cyprus, the 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*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire: 2005, pp.143-158.

<sup>4</sup> Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The Schengen Agreement was signed by the Benelux countries, France and Germany in 1985, but became operational in 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia was the first group of countries granted visa liberalization, followed by Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

by the Serbian Orthodox Church; the discriminated position of the Macedonian minority in Albania and Bulgaria.

Historically, the rivalry among Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece for control of 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 policies increased continuously towards the Macedonian population, affecting particularly the educational and the religious sphere. Religious domination over the Macedonian population has even more distant roots. In fact, after the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchy in 1870, the Greek Patriarchy faced a serious opponent, which besides the common Orthodox religion shared a similar Slavic language with the Macedonian followers. For centuries under the Ottoman rule, the Greek Patriarchy was the main Orthodox Church to control the Christian population in the so-called millet system (Chepreganov 2008). After losing primacy 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 identities, simply because they 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 policies was the forced change of toponyms and surnames. For instance, in the interwar period there are several cases of people who had carried both a Bulgarian surname ending in *-ov*, and a Serbian surname ending in *-ich*, during their lifetime.

The already weak Macedonian identity, influenced by the assimilation policies of its neighbors, and represented mostly by rural uneducated population, could not emerge earlier than World War Two. Macedonians, not being recognized as a separate nation prior to 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 solely to the Balkan area, it reflected in the overseas countries as well, where Macedonians started settling since late 19<sup>th</sup> 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 to 1944. Moreover, it contributes to the general mythopoeic Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek narratives of

the non-existence of Macedonian people and their regarding as Southern Serbs, Macedono-Bulgarians, Slavophone Greeks etc.

### 3. 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 procedures 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). More recent 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 represented 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 abovementioned 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 to poverty in Macedonia? Why did it become a public discourse? What possible consequences might this phenomenon reveal in the future?*

It is commonly known that people living in Eastern Macedonia, bordering with Bulgaria, survive thanks to Bulgarian passports, which allow them to work as truck drivers or seasonal workers within the EU. Numerous are the benefits that this EU passport could provide to the ordinary Macedonian citizen: from a work permit in an EU member state to a great deal in buying used cars from Bulgaria. Moreover, it was common in the past 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<sup>7</sup>. 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 received 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 the following were listed: an application form, a statement of Bulgarian origin for the person who applies and their ancestors (the applicant itself should state that he/she and his family – father and grandfather – are of Bulgarian origin), a Macedonian personal document translated into Bulgarian language and a medical examination certificate of good health. After the application is done, an interview with the Bulgarian authorities is carried out. Among the common questions asked in the Bulgarian Ministry of Justice are the 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 often decide to carry out the procedure themselves, instead of using the services 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 the issuing of approximately 1,000 Bulgarian documents alone<sup>8</sup>. 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 considered 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 of Macedonia. They might use benefits from both countries, better career opportunities,

---

<sup>7</sup>Two interviewees are originating from Eastern Macedonia, from Štip and Kočani respectively.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with an individual agent for facilitation of issuing of Bulgarian documents from Negotino (16 June 2009).

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 (2008) 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.

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: a male aged 36 and a female aged 35) who at the time (2013) were in the process of applying for Bulgarian citizenship for economic reasons i.e. for permanent migration from Macedonia. Currently one of them already lives in Italy and stated that the Bulgarian passport had helped him to find a job easily, 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 their Macedonian identity, the 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 the 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 the 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 probably, those are people with stable jobs who are not willing to migrate nor to use any benefits from a Bulgarian i.e. EU documents. Anyways, I would not exclude patriotism as a 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 a Bulgarian passport 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

wished 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 a notary stamp. The declaration I was given is a statement of a Macedonian citizen from Strumica in regard to 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, him being a driver by profession, but that he declares himself as a 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 the eventual abuse by anyone and at any time (Avirovic 2012).*

However, this document being 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.

#### 4. 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 passports 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.

---

<sup>9</sup> Other ethnicities living in Macedonia (Albanians, Turks, Serbs, Vlachs, Roma and Bosniaks, 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 otherwise shared among 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.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Avirovic, I. 2010. *Patterns of Migration – Patterns of Segregation? A Macedonian Micro-study*, Saarbrücken (Germany): VDM Verlag Dr. Müller.
- Avirovic, I. 2012. “Macedonian Post-Socialist Migration” *Der Donauraum: Zeitschrift des Institutes für den Donauraum und Mitteleuropa* (IDM), 52. Jahrgang, 3-4: 465-481.
- Chepreganov, T. (ed.). 2008, *Istorija na makedonskiot narod*, Skopje: Institut za nacionalna istorija.
- Cvetkovska, Zh. 19 September 2008. “Makedoncite vodat record po baranja za bugarski pasosh”, Macedonian daily newspaper ‘Dnevnik’. Retrieved July 3<sup>rd</sup>2009 (<http://www.dnevnik.com.mk/?itemID=95BA45E72161D0469C6E587A2D4FD8FA&arc=1>)
- Dinan, D. 2005. *Ever Closer Union, An Introduction to European Integration*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Magosci, P. R. 2002. *Historical Atlas of Central Europe*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture. Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers.
- Marusic, S. J. 5 August 2014. “More Macedonians Apply for Bulgarian Citizenship” *Balkan Insight*. Retrieved April 1<sup>st</sup> 2015 (<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/more-macedonians-apply-for-bulgarian-citizenship>)
- Neofotistos, V. P. 2008. “Bulgarian Passports, Macedonian Identity, the Invention of EU citizenship in the Republic of Macedonia”, *EthnoAnthropoZoom*. Retrieved March 31<sup>st</sup> 2015 ([http://www.iea.pmf.ukim.edu.mk/EAZ/EAZ\\_10\\_2014/ENG/Neofotistos\\_EAZ\\_10\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.iea.pmf.ukim.edu.mk/EAZ/EAZ_10_2014/ENG/Neofotistos_EAZ_10_ENG.pdf))
- Tchorbadjyska, A. 2007. “Bulgarian Experiences with Visa Policy in the Accession Process: A Story of Visa Lists, Citizenship and Limitations on Citizens’ Rights”, *Regio, Electronic Periodicals Archive & Database*: Volume 10:101. Retrieved February 26<sup>th</sup> 2013 (<http://epa.oszk.hu/00400/00476/00007/pdf/088-105.pdf>)



## БУГАРСКИ ПАСОШИ: ЕГЗИСТЕНЦИЈАЛНА НУЖНОСТ ИЛИ КРИЗА НА ИДЕНТИТЕТОТ?

Ирена АВИРОВИЌ

*Апстракт:* Воведувањето на Шенгенскиот визен режим – како одбранбен механизам за спречување на имиграцијата во Европската заедница – наметна ограничување на движењето на бившите југословенски држави, кои патуваа слободно пред распадот во 1989 година. Сепак, наметнувањето на визниот режим не ја спречи миграцијата од земјите од Западен Балкан. Сосема спротивно, ги зголеми нелегалните начини да се мине границата и стимулираше многу граѓани да аплицираат за странски пасош. Пред визната либерализација за земјите од Западен Балкан од 2010 година, беше забележан пораст на барањата за бугарски пасош од страна на македонски граѓани. Овој феномен нагло порасна по влегувањето на Бугарија во Европската унија во 2007 година. Трудот ќе се фокусира на стекнувањето бугарски пасоши од страна на македонски граѓани како средство за слободно движење во рамки на Европската унија и можност да се работи во нејзините земји-членки. Ќе направи анализа на апликациите за бугарски официјални документи, причините за и можните последици. Низ истражувањето на гореспоменатата студија на случај, мојата цел е да се поттикне дебата за тоа дали зголеменото стекнување со странски пасош е под влијание на причини врзани за егзистенцијата или поседува латентни идентитетски основи.

*Клучни зборови:* пасоши, криза, идентитет, виза, миграции.