

“Should I Stay or Should I Go?” Migration Patterns of Macedonia’s Young People

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The paper, based on ethnographic fieldwork, deals with the question about the Bulgarian citizenship obtained by many in the Macedonian border towns – Kriva Palanka and Kratovo. Looking at the governmental framework, and the Bulgarian state authorities’ rationalisation of the process, the paper provides a look at the everyday life in these towns, searching for the reasons of the Macedonians for applying for Bulgarian documents, the “grey area” in passport applications and finally the way the locals perceive their second citizenship. The main question becomes: How do people and, especially, young people rationalise possible repercussions of these processes on their identity and what turns out to be a symbolic load of the documents?

Keywords: passports, identity, border, double citizenship, Macedonia

Introduction

With this paper, I would like to draw attention to a topic which has garnered significant interest mostly outside of academia and predominantly in certain parts of the Balkans (specifically the ones in question – Bulgaria and Macedonia), and their governments and media. The question of dual citizenship and the obtaining of Bulgarian passports by the Macedonian population has become widely discussed and a “public secret” in the border region and among the wider public in the two countries.

Gradually, I became interested not in the migration patterns themselves, but in the reasons which young people realise as their main motive for leaving the country and the means facilitating their decision. In that sense, what came forward inevitably was the use of the personal documentation and the social meanings assigned to it and in turn – their influence on the identity and the Macedonian border social reality.

This text is based on ethnographic fieldwork¹ involving observations and 28 interviews, conducted mainly in the summer of 2016 in two border towns – Kriva Palanka and Kratovo.² The research in its wider context focused on a range of topics, concerning the past and the present of the tripoint between Serbia, Bulgaria and Macedonia, thus calling for respondents representing different age and social groups, having different occupation and educational status. While uncovering the diverse and multifaceted identity and political processes taking place at these frontiers, often understood as areas of “cross-pressures” (Agnew 2007), and in the case – specifically the eastern Macedonian border, a main public discourse was depicted – the one of migrations, double citizenships and “passport grey markets”. The subject proved to be of interest for almost all of my respondents, despite them coming from diverse social, political, cultural and generational backgrounds. Nevertheless, the main core of actors consisted of young Macedonians aged between 18 and 30. Most of them were either unemployed, or worked in the hospitality industry in the above-mentioned towns.

For the most part the interviews were informal, since this topic seemed to put too much pressure on the interlocutors. Additionally, the young Macedonians also preferred not to be bothered or to bother themselves (“*da ne se zamarat*”) with “political questions” or such which would require a lot of attention and longer conversing. The informal surrounding – cafés, bars or restaurants (*kafani*), was the preferred one for us to talk, but only in the context of having a good time (“*da uzhivame*”).

With regard to positioning myself within the field, two important perceptions of the researcher should be noted. Firstly, since this is the border region between Macedonia and Bulgaria, I am the “other” from across the border – for some I am an *embodiment* of the long-standing historiography-, history- and media-created “enemy” – someone who does not recognize them as Macedonians, but rather as Macedonian-Bulgarians as the public discourse in Bulgaria dictates. For others, especially in the light of the presented material, I am also the one who is bearing a prestigious identity at the point, as we are going to see later. Secondly, and after legitimizing myself in the community, I am “theirs” – not only anthropologically, fulfilling the Slavic image (keeping in mind that Bulgarians are widely perceived as

¹ The research was made possible through a project financed by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences “Program for career development of young scientists, BAS” of commenced in 2016 (ДФНП №177).

² Both selected towns are located on the Macedonian side of the Macedonian-Bulgarian border region, but while Kriva Palanka is located on the international road, connecting Bulgarian capital Sofia with the city of Kumanovo in the Republic of Macedonia and Skopje, Kratovo is located approximately 63 kilometres from the border itself and on the regional road, connecting it with the town of Probishtip. While the former is directly linked to the Bulgarian side, the latter has no means of transportation in that direction including such from Kriva Palanka, and is in a way isolated from direct communication with the border.

Tatars in Macedonia by an infamous theory; Донски 2000), but also by *poteklo* (by ancestry), having a family coming from the region of Kratovo/Prilep.

Background of the migration issue in Macedonia

Current migratory processes in the region are not a new phenomenon. The tradition of temporary labour migrations, particularly among males, has existed for centuries in a number of Balkan areas and specifically in the *Shopluk* ethno-cultural region.³ The main actors in these labour migrations are men, who earn money “abroad”, returning to their families seasonally or once or twice a year (Hristov 2008: 217; Hristov 2015). The men of this region have traditionally been builders, and many of them are still today. However, the new generation has higher aspirations. In its modern version, the process gains political implications, too.

At the end of the 1960s, Yugoslavia became the only socialist country that opened its borders to the West. During this period, due to signed bilateral agreements, the biggest share of the so called *Gastarbeiters* (guest workers) labour movement was directed towards Germany and other Western countries. This policy brought fame to the Yugoslav passport, known to (not only) other Eastern European countries for granting its owners great possibilities for travelling and freedom, not only within the federation but to the number of other countries as well. So, with the changes that occurred in the 1990s, many felt trapped in their own countries facing many more limitations than they did as part of the now dissolved Yugoslav federation. The generation which could travel visa-free just a few years earlier and their families now faced a reality in which a visa was needed in order to enter 176 out of 198 countries and administrative regions in the world (Avirovic 2012: 472). Furthermore, in these first years after gaining its independence Macedonia, as one of the economically less developed former Yugoslav republics, suffered difficulties in its internal and external markets (especially during the period 1994–1995 when Greece imposed embargo) and therefore despite the reforms and the attempts to achieve political and financial stabilization, the standard of living remained unsatisfactory for the citizens even in the years to come.

This had immediate impact on migration, especially after Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007 – an increase in the regular and irregular ways of crossing the Bulgarian-Macedonian border within the context of the modern labour migrations. It also created a certain general feeling among the Macedonians – a feeling of dissatisfaction not only with the domestic situation, but with its implication on the

³ The *Shopluk* ethno-historical region is a region which can be located in three modern countries: the Republic of Macedonia, the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Bulgaria. Nevertheless, many aspects of the region’s peculiarities remain largely undefined, namely the origin of the name, the clear borders and cultural specifics (more in Hristov 2014).

status of the state in comparison with its neighbours. Bulgaria, which once used to be much less developed, closed to the West and perceived from the Yugoslav point of view with laughter and pity, became a source and one of the most approachable ways for the Macedonians to regain, at least partially, their previous freedom of movement. This was pointed out by most of my older respondents, indicating the existing nostalgia towards the times when the state, under its federative status, experienced a better and much more honourable position among its neighbours. Now, the times have changed, and their children are applying for the “stronger” (*moken*) Bulgarian passport which serves as an entry to the European Union. This has been further reinforced, not only by the current internal Macedonian crisis, but also by its international conflicts, and especially the one with Greece, resulting in the NATO block (2008) and delayed EU membership due to concerns over the democratic processes in the country.⁴ The internal political instability in the past several years resulted in protests in 2015/2016 and the incapability of constituting a government in late 2016 and beginning of 2017, thus facilitating a situation in which labour mobility became the main goal and a part of the everyday discourses at the border.

According to Rumen Jonchev, cited by the Bulgarian newspaper *Sega*,⁵ the now former chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on the Policies Towards Bulgarians Who Live Abroad, by September 2015 around 200 thousand Macedonians had already applied for Bulgarian citizenship and were waiting for the processing of documents and applications. According to the Macedonian State Statistical Office, the overall population of the country amounts to 2,071,278 (31/12/2015), with an average unemployment rate of 23.1% (true for April 2016).⁶

Country	22/1/2012 – 18/1/2017	2007 – 21/1/2012
Republic of Macedonia	25,447	33,530
Republic of Moldova	10,689	11,638
Ukraine	6,033	1,866
Russian Federation	2,763	1,563
Republic of Serbia	2,629	2,981

Figure 1: Nationalities and number of individuals who acquired Bulgarian citizenship in the period 2007–2017. The top five countries are shown in the table.

Source: *Doklad za deynostta na komisijata...* 2017.

⁴ The 2016 report of the European Commission on Macedonia reads: “Concerning the political criteria, the country was faced with the continuation of the most severe political crisis since 2001. Democracy and rule of law have been constantly challenged, in particular due to state capture affecting the functioning of democratic institutions and key areas of society. The country suffers from a divisive political culture and a lack of capacity for compromise” (European Commission 2016: 4).

⁵ <http://www.segabg.com/article.php?id=768465> (last access 9 April 2017).

⁶ http://www.stat.gov.mk/KlucniIndikator_i_en.aspx (last access 9 April 2017).

According to the data of the Commission for Bulgarian Citizenship and Bulgarians Abroad at the Administration of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, a total number of 58,977 Macedonians were granted Bulgarian citizenship in the period between 2007 and January 2017 (Figure 1). The public and media discourse nevertheless claims much bigger numbers. The tendency of Macedonians to lead the chart in acquiring Bulgarian citizenship was kept throughout the whole period, followed by the nationals of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, the Republic of Serbia, the Russian Federation, etc. Between 1 January 2016 and 31 December 2016, 6,196 Macedonians became Bulgarian citizens, which is 2,330 more than the number for 2015 and more than twice as much as in 2014 (*Doklad za deynostta na komisiyata...* 2016).

According to the *National Strategy in the Field of Migration, Asylum and Integration (2011–2020)* the biggest share, around 90%, of the requests for the acquisition of Bulgarian citizenship are on the basis of “Bulgarian origin”. Hence, in 2010, the Law on the Bulgarian Citizenship, regulating the conditions for granting, release and restoring Bulgarian citizenship, was changed in order to make the procedure shorter. This was effectively translated to the following: “Up to the date of application, a residence in the Republic of Bulgaria, naturalization, Bulgarian language knowledge, existing income or profession to supply their living in Republic of Bulgaria and exemption from previous citizenship *are not required*” (emphasis mine, *Natsionalna strategija...* 2011: 26–27). The “Motives” part, providing the argumentation for the *Suggestion for Amendment and Addendum to the Law on Bulgarians Living Abroad*, citing a research conducted by UN (2011) about the countries with the highest number of population loss until 2050, which has placed Bulgaria at the top of the chart, reads:

“Taking this into account, we feel that no opportunity for increasing our nation, especially when an interest towards it is declared by people of Bulgarian origin or with Bulgarian consciousness, should be dismissed lightly.” (*Predlozhenie za izmenenie i dopalnenie...* 2015)

The long-projected vision of the political leaders towards Macedonians as rightful Bulgarians has justified the efforts made in this direction. This idea has been further established in the *National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on Migration and Integration (2008–2015)*:

“The sustainable character of the process for the acquisition of Bulgarian citizenship concerns some of the greatest in number, historically formed Bulgarian communities beyond state borders. First among them are the ones in the Republic of Macedonia and Moldova, followed by Ukraine, Serbia and Albania.” (*Natsionalna strategija...* 2008: 10)

The document also reflects the fact that usually those who are applying for citizenship on the basis of Bulgarian origin are aged between 20 and 40, and about 70% of all applicants come from the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Moldova. Concerning education, 55% have secondary education – about 70% are of the technical profile, and 30% declare themselves as farmers or small-scale merchants, 40% have completed higher education, and 5% have completed primary education (*ibid.*). Yet, they are not considered “classic immigrants”, but rather “labour migrants”, with off and on periods of stay in Bulgaria.

Strategies to save oneself

According to the Macedonian news agency *Meta.mk*, citing a survey conducted by the NGO InfoCentre in partnership with the Macedonian Centre for European Training, the “September 8” association and the Centre for Media Development, about 83.7% of young people in Macedonia want to leave the country and about 52.4% would like to settle in Western Europe, as opposed to 12% and 10% respectively to USA and Canada, and the Scandinavian countries.⁷ The same research shows that 89.8% of young people from the North-Eastern Statistical Region (where the studied towns are located) share a general dissatisfaction with their living conditions and are planning to leave. The young people in the region are mostly aiming to get a job in Italy, Germany, Austria, Slovenia or Switzerland.⁸

Bulgarian citizenship proves to bring many opportunities to the border towns. From “cheaper and not-that-hard-to-graduate-from” education to scholarships, jobs, traineeships, and, most importantly, to non-restricted travelling across the European Union countries, which also opens up foreign labour markets for Macedonian citizens.

During my stay in Kriva Palanka, Bulgarians from the biggest border town of Kyustendil were occasional visitors in the city. Bulgarian citizens organize weekly or monthly “shopping visits” aimed at buying mainly basic food supplies as they are “much cheaper and of higher quality” than the ones sold on the other side of the border. Another reason for these occasional border-crossings are restaurants, due to the same motives – they offer high quality food, good service and cheap prices. These weekly “economy-boosts” are of a great importance for the shop and restaurant-owners and the elderly sellers at the *Pazar* (open market), a view shared by Goce, a representative of the Kriva Palanka municipality.

⁷ <http://meta.mk/en/survey-83-7-of-the-youth-want-to-leave-macedonia/> (last access 9 April 2017).

⁸ For estimates, migration patterns throughout different historical periods and modern migratory experiences of the Macedonian Torbeshi (Macedonian-speaking Muslim minority group in Macedonia) see Bielenin-Lenczowska 2009.

Additionally, these contacts bring something much more important – information exchange. While on the market, the locals occasionally asked the Bulgarian guests about the life in their country and the quality of food, and were told by the Bulgarians that the market discrepancies appear due to the EU membership. Apparently, this conversation is not a one-time occasion, but many Bulgarians agree and support the opinion that joining the Union will bring economic de-stabilization and impoverishment not only in the region but in whole of Macedonia, as they feel the same happened in Bulgaria. Therefore, the EU-scepticism was justified with the “obvious negative repercussions which the membership has brought to their neighbours”, who obviously find better financial reasoning behind shopping for groceries abroad. Logically, with an income that is as low (especially in comparison to the EU standards) as the one in the region, most of the people feel as if they had “their backs to the wall” and are scared of further worsening of the situation.

Another repercussion which the Bulgarian EU membership brought to this border was the market imbalance, which led to differences in the standards of living on both sides. This border, as many others, proved to be particularly financially supportive for its inhabitants during transitional periods when they faced the economic crises and almost every household suffered shortages. Therefore, small-scale trade became a part of the everyday life on this border and a strategy for the compensation of economic deficit experienced in Bulgaria and Macedonia. Being a common practice, especially during the embargo period in Macedonia when great amounts of fuel were transported across the border, the pattern of procedure was established and Kyustendil lived through some of its most economically flourishing periods in the mid-90s. The considerable price differences that appeared after the accession to the European Union, for example in the price of cigarettes, led to the establishment of relatively stable cigarette smuggling along the border. After 2007, the smuggling flows towards and from Bulgaria compensated for whatever was needed in each market. While cigarettes were transported from Kriva Palanka, clothes and electronics are even to this day transported in Macedonia and find their way to the shops, while taxes are evaded. Contextualised by the lack of jobs, and stable and sufficient income, the trans-border “trade” was justified by the locals and was a common narrative not perceived as an exclusive element of everyday life. Therefore, the border became an economic resource, contributing to the financial situation in the border towns, as it “provided” differences in prices, taxes and legal regulations which were used by the border population.

Nevertheless, a few years ago, cigarette smuggling became dangerous for most people as “the border was tightened”, therefore the flow is now significantly smaller according to my respondents. One of the biggest unregulated businesses or “grey market area” in all of Eastern Macedonia, and especially in the places in focus here, is “middleman” service. These are usually unlicensed people who, for a sum

between 250 and 1500 euro,⁹ legalise, put together, translate and process the needed application documents for Bulgarian-citizens-to-be. These organisations also help, if needed, with the “proof of origin” documents if the candidate does not have it. In 2014 the Governmental Agency for the Bulgarians Abroad was investigated by the Prosecutor’s office of the Republic of Bulgaria on suspicion that hundreds of passports were issued without checking documents of origin. A reasonable doubt arises from the fact that some 18,000 applications¹⁰ for Bulgarian citizenship were introduced in 2012 and only 1,600 of them were rejected. Responding to the allegations the Agency cited historical books, as sufficient proof legitimising the family roots of the people of Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo.¹¹ Additionally, there is a new tendency among the Albanians who wish to get a Bulgarian passport. During fieldwork in Kyustendil, in an interview with respondents from the former Municipality administration, I was told that in the last few years they started registering companies and people buying lands, houses or apartments with the premise that in a few years they would apply for “naturalisation”.

In several Facebook posts from the “agencies”, shown in the picture below (Figure 2), middleman services are rushing the people to apply, due to the forthcoming Parliamentary elections in Bulgaria on 26 March 2016 as “this will change the conditions”, “and [the situation] for sure will not be the same”. In that sense it seems reasonable to suggest that the Bulgarian institutions, as part of a multi-level corruption scheme, are also part of the process.

Mostly through these middleman services many people from Kratovo and Kriva Palanka have gained Bulgarian documents. Some of the “new citizens” have even been registered at the same address in Kyustendil (sometimes from 10 to 12 people), or in a village nearby. Nevertheless, since the success of the process is not “guaranteed”, despite the close to unaffordable prices, many are left without their “golden ticket”. It is not a rare occasion for the middleman services to gather their payment and never to be seen or heard of anymore. This happened to Milica,¹² now in her late 20s, but since this business is on the shady side of the regulations, she could not go and file a complaint. She had to go back to her job as a clothes shop assistant and try to collect money again. According to Vlatko (65), some of the men working as construction workers, joined their acquaintances in one of the Western European

⁹ The price range is considerable, due to the fact that some of the agencies “officially” have prices between 250 and 350 euro, which vary depending on whether applicant comes from Serbia or Albania, and also depending on what is needed for a successful procedure. According to some of my respondents, it is even possible to forge some documents “proving” Bulgarian nascence. In all “more difficult” cases, the price is additionally negotiated.

¹⁰ <http://www.dw.com/bg/професионални-българи/a-17888419> (last access 9 April 2017).

¹¹ <http://www.mediapool.bg/darzhavna-agentsiya-proizvezhda-balgari-na-konveier-bez-dokumentiza-proizhod-news225990.html> (last access 9 April 2017).

¹² All names in the text have been changed due to the sensitive character of the chosen topic.

countries without Bulgarian documents and relied on their “boss” (if he is from the region) to “cover” them in front of the authorities.

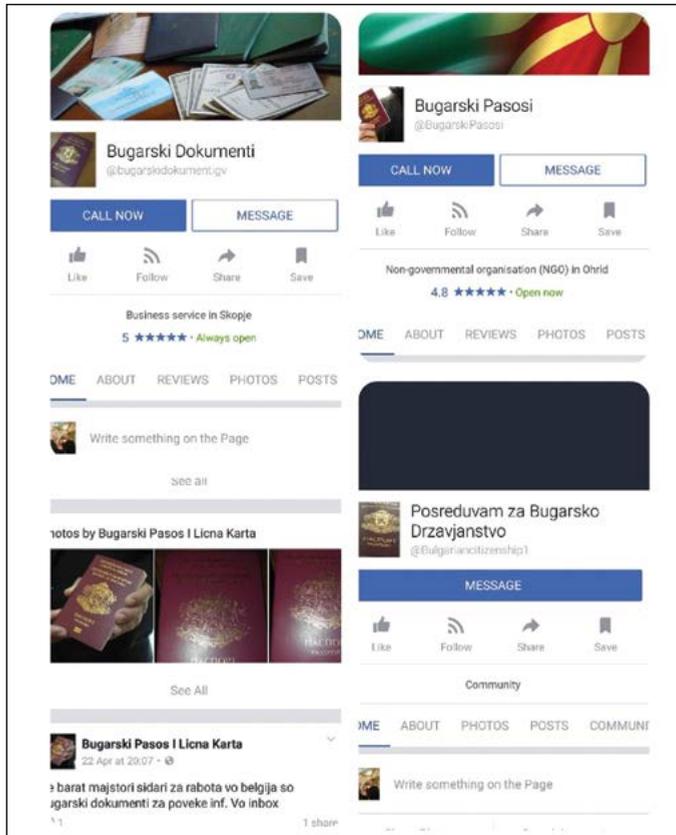


Figure 2: Facebook pages advertising help with the preparation of Bulgarian documents through a middleman. The pages provide phone contacts, lists of documents needed and sometimes prices. Sources: <https://www.facebook.com/bugarskidokumentigv/>; <https://www.facebook.com/BugarskiPasosi/>; <https://www.facebook.com/bugarskipasos1/>; <https://www.facebook.com/Bulgariancitizenship1/> (last access 9 April 2017).

Despite the initial expectation, according to many people it is not a question of the lack of job positions in the Municipality or in Macedonia in general. As stated by Gordana, a 25-year-old saleswoman at a bakery in Kriva Palanka, the main problem is that the jobs are not well paid:

“See, the thing is that if you want, you can find a job to earn a living. But what a living would that be? The wage is not even enough to pay your bills, and what about living like every young person would like to. If you want to save yourself [*da se spasis*] you just have to run out of here.”

During my fieldwork, a lot of the small shops, restaurants, coffee shops were searching for staff,¹³ but the main problem is that financial conditions are not satisfying. Very unmotivated, most of my younger respondents commonly summed the situation up as follows: "There is nothing to do here". Logically, the cafés and bars in Kriva Palanka were full of these young people who chose to stay in their home town or were still making plans to leave the country. On the same note, most of these youngsters still in high school or in their first year after graduation didn't express any desire to study further: "I don't want to go to school any more, I just want money" was a common summary of their future plans. The same attitude was expressed towards learning foreign languages. Knowing that they will often join their fellow Macedonians or ex-Yugoslav people in the designated country of migration, they did not feel pressure to do so.

The leitmotif of "saving oneself" ("*da se spasis*") was one of the main leading points when reasoning behind the search for double citizenship among young people was involved. The vision of political and economic instability, summarized in the failed efforts of the political leaders to stabilize the country's internal affairs by the end of 2016 as well as the unwillingness of the citizens to "deal with the situation" anymore, resulted in the idea of the inability to see a future for the country or its citizens. The fact that the biggest share of employees in the municipal, local authority and culture structures are politically tied to the local VMRO¹⁴ structures confirms that if "you want to do something here you have to 'back the right people'", as Viktor, a 55-year-old, summarises.

The political question raises fear not only of social marginalization, but also of economic marginalization. The story of a young woman particularly expresses these concerns. Knowing one another for several years, I was witness to her vital role for the community, as she was an active participant in most cultural events in the region – as a translator, organizer of public events, tourist guide, and was also invited to be a news anchor for the regional TV daughter-channel of the national *Sitel*. During anti-government protests at the end of 2015, people working in local authorities (including media) were mobilized to go to Skopje to support the government. Refusing to do so, not only because this was against her political views but because she was invited to the TV station and they "needed her", not vice versa, she refused to do so, and was fired the next day.

¹³ According to the State statistical data for February 2017, the average net wage for the people in the "Food and beverage service activities" is approximately 227 euro/month (<http://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/2017/4.1.17.32.pdf>, last access 6 April 2017).

¹⁴ "Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity" (abbreviation from Macedonian VMRO-DPMNE) – is the ruling party in Macedonia in the period between 2006 and 2016.

“In this sense”, she said, “I don’t want to sound nationalistic. But I have never wanted to have a Bulgarian passport. For me it sounds much more like a betrayal, misleading your own country. But well... I had to apply. Just in case, you know. This happened in 2015 but I can imagine what can follow – I need a plan B!”

“The Bulgarian passport is like an airplane”: the Bulgarian passport and its ascribed meanings

According to the interlocutors themselves and some Macedonian media, the Eastern Macedonian region is at the top of the charts in the number of people holding Bulgarian passports. It was repeatedly mentioned by almost everyone that about 80% of the locals in Kriva Palanka were already “Bulgarians” (as most of them would jokingly note¹⁵).

Being aware that I am not a local, the citizens of Kriva Palanka started approaching me, interested in what I was doing, and eventually the conversations started turning from jokingly pronounced marriage proposals (especially when younger ones were concerned) to suggested meetings in Sofia and/or bringing more female friends the next time I come. Usually in the context of a joke, many of them would mention they were thinking about finding a Bulgarian wife, especially if they have no documents to declare family connection to Bulgaria. For some of the interlocutors, on the serious side, this would be the fastest way to get a passport because otherwise it would take approximately two years or, in most cases, even longer.

Most of the informants drew a sharp line dividing the ethnic and the civic identity. While all declared their strong Macedonian roots, pride of history and culture, they nevertheless admitted the fact that they were now (at least according to the documents) part of two separate countries. During my first night in Kriva Palanka, some young men invited me to their table with the words:

¹⁵ An important note should be made regarding “jokes”. These remarks often made with laughter or in a humorous context seemed very much as strategy to delegitimize the Bulgarian identity, rather than to reinforce it. Some years ago it was shameful and equal to treason for the country to own a Bulgarian passport, so most people kept this information for themselves. Despite this process being widespread now, I would say it evokes similar feelings among the Bulgarian-citizenship-holders. Covering under the image of “all of us who are Bulgarians” they feel less responsible for “betraying” their country and nation. Another implication of humour and jokes, witnessed only in Kratovo, were the late night talks in a fast food place on the main square where young men would start talking about their recent travels in Bulgaria, twisting their tongues to replicate Bulgarian language and acting flamboyant, and describing their encounters with Bulgarians. Diminishing the “other” seems like another strategy to strongly separate themselves from the people on the other side of the border.

"Come join us! We are all Bulgarians here either ways [laugh]. We all have Bulgarian passports and as a matter of fact around 80% of Macedonians also have one. So, what else are we if not Bulgarians?"

"Bulgarian" does not bear negative connotation, but is rather a signifier that a person does not feel "ashamed", since he/she openly declares to be such. Many times later, when young people gathered, they would start showing their IDs, despite always emphasizing that, for example, they had no idea where the address of their registration was. In that sense the Bulgarian identity is *mimetic* – much more a label, emptied of its "original" meaning – without a feeling of belonging to the community, understanding of shared values or willingness to be included in its "life" on the other side of the border. Two identities exist: one is ethno-national and the other *declarative* – part of the daily joking narrative, being expressed cautiously but still spoken.

When I asked a football player, on his way to being transferred to Germany after getting his Bulgarian passport,¹⁶ whether the documents or the process of application in any way changed his feelings about himself, he answered as follows:

"I feel in no way Bulgarian. But you have to claim you do. So, you go there [for the interview], say a ton of crap about how you love and care for the country and you get what you want. If you tell them it's an economic reason they send you to the back of the line and you wait for ages."

In this sense, possession of a Bulgarian passport is not treated as a "betrayal" of their country, but rather an escape plan to "save themselves" ("*da se spasis*") for which they make a momentary compromise. The passports are a practical step for them ensuring at least a chance for better economic well-being and no-visa regime which would otherwise limit their stay and prevent them from finding a job abroad (at least for longer than 90 days) and certainly require additional payments.¹⁷ For young people, the fight for "a better" and "a normal" life justifies the efforts of having to go through the often expensive and quite slow process of obtaining documents for Bulgarian citizenship. This generation of Macedonian citizens appears to be much more invested in a practical approach towards their citizenship of choice than in the identity repercussions that it has. They claim that the steps taken for obtaining citizenship (namely, openly declaring their affiliation with the Bulgarian

¹⁶ He was almost rejected due to his Macedonian citizenship several years ago, since the taxes and documentation for his support and transfer would be much higher for him as a player coming from a non-EU country.

¹⁷ As of December 2009, the visa liberalisation was put into force and the Macedonian citizens travel visa-free to the European Union member states. This would imply that their stay must not exceed 90 days in a period of 180 days.

state, their Bulgarian consciousness, studying national history and holidays, etc. while being interviewed) do not affect their sense of belonging. The concern of being judged by their peers is dismissed for a simple reason: “Everyone here already owns one”.

As Neofotistos (2009: 21) observes, in another Macedonian border town several years ago, there was surely an underlying discourse which marked the passports as artefacts of the “border reality”. I have to notice that, while my interlocutors talked about passports, they used this word as a summary for citizenship and thus for both types of personal documents for Bulgarian citizenship – ID card and passport. While a passport is usually not a thing someone would carry with them, the ID cards were almost always used in a conversation as “proof”. The choice of passports as an embodiment of migration processes outside the country leads to the fact that, while the ID cards are usually the inter-state documents, the passports: “have expropriated from individuals and private entities the legitimate ‘means of movement’”, “particularly though by no means exclusively across international boundaries” (Torpey 2000: 4). Here they are analysed apart from their “official” function as “[authorizing] movement and establishing identity discourage people from choosing identities inconsistent with those validated by the state” (ibid.: 166). With the exclusivity which they are granted in Macedonian society, Bulgarian documents are ascribed additional functions and stripped off of others in the social context, created by the actors. Thus, if the passport is a direct implication of the state power and a border within itself, being a marker of “these who are ours”, then the Macedonians with double citizenship have the choice of being the “other” as a strategy of prosperity or at least of a better life.

In that sense, the passport is a “tool” or a “ticket” for a better life for these young people, since the common mentality has gathered around the simple truth: life is better everywhere else, but not in Macedonia. According to a 20-year-old citizen of Kriva Palanka: “The Bulgarian passport is like an airplane” (“*Bugarski pasos e kao avion*”). Therefore, the documents become an epitome of the hopes and dreams of a “promised land” of high wages and an easy life. Almost none of my interlocutors expressed any desire to live or work in Bulgaria. None of them seemed to even remember their home addresses at which they have been registered in the neighbouring state. Their documents were the symbol of their future life, of the simple freedom of movement and the “promised land” of Western Europe with high wages and an easy life.

The term citizenship is commonly described as a relationship between an individual and a state in which an individual owes allegiance, is subjected to taxation, etc. to that state and in turn is entitled to its protection, to equal rights and privileges. While all of my respondents did not express any affiliation with the Bulgarian state and did not plan to stay in the country, a “no strings attached” attitude becomes clear.

КАКО ДА ФАТИШ МАКЕДОНЕЦ: - Постави бугарски пасош



Figure 3: "How to catch a Macedonian: Just put a Bulgarian passport".
Source: <https://www.facebook.com/kamaj.net/photos/a.519981198064990.1073741828.519908374738939/1389238054472629/?type=3&theater>
(last access 9 April 2017).

Conclusion

The complex reality of having double citizenship on the Macedonian-Bulgarian border is preconditioned both by the Bulgarian state attitude towards its future citizens and the hardships of the social reality in Kriva Palanka and Kratovo. The low wages and the limited job positions mainly in restaurants, cafés, bars and number of shops do not leave "many options" to young people. Contextualised by the stories of a better and prosperous life abroad, mostly in the Western European countries, many become determined to leave the country and "save themselves". The way to legitimize their stay abroad for longer periods of time, however, points at having to apply for Bulgarian citizenship as easily approachable due to the country's policy

towards Macedonians. The question of “shame” of having to declare at least equal affiliation to another country is marked by the adoption of a declarative mimetic identity, usually expressed as: “We are all Bulgarians”. The “new” identity is a logical consequence of the documents which would confirm this. Making the pragmatic step of covering oneself with another citizenship is the “necessary evil” on the way of achieving a better life. The documents themselves become a symbol and a tool for this.

At the end of this text, it is important to focus attention to the wide use of these processes for political reasons in both Macedonia and Bulgaria. On the one hand, the political, media and social discourses in the former suggest the latter is “stealing” citizens in order to establish a Bulgarian minority in the state with the aim to consecutively commence its own political project there. On the other hand, the latter strategizes in order to symbolically reclaim its “historically formed Bulgarian communities beyond state borders” (*Natsionalna strategija...* 2008: 10), by which it also addresses its concerns of depopulation. Additionally, these processes direct attention towards two other important topics: *who* the migrant communities in Western Europe are, and *how* they can be addressed in a foreign context. There is also the question of redefinition of national and ethnic identity in the Balkans through these and similar identity strategies, which is still to be considered by academia.

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