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**BULGARIAN PASSPORTS, MACEDONIAN IDENTITY  
THE INVENTION OF EU CITIZENSHIP IN THE REPUBLIC OF  
MACEDONIA<sup>2</sup>**

*Abstract:* My concern here is with ethnic Macedonians, especially youth, who claim not to be interested in whether it is ideologically appropriate or inappropriate to apply for Bulgarian passports, but rather point to the practical and economic benefits that Bulgarian passports carry for their holders – mainly freedom to travel without a visa within the EU and access to a greater number of choices in their lives. The case of Macedonia, therefore, helps us view identification documents as objects that neither necessarily fix nationality nor are ineluctable guarantees of belonging to the (Bulgarian) nation-state, and understand state documentation practices are practices that do not always produce determined identities and citizen-subjects.

*Key words:* Bulgarian passports, Macedonians, identity, fetishization.

**BULGARIAN CITIZENSHIP**

complete legal processing service  
with naturalization number for ID card and passport  
(advertisement in Dnevnik newspaper, 29 July 2008)

Advertisements for Bulgarian citizenship, such as the one above, appear regularly in the daily newspaper *Dnevnik*, which has the largest circulation<sup>3</sup> and is one of the most widely read newspapers in the Republic of Macedonia. A country that emerged as an independent nation-state after the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991 and aspires to membership of the European Union (EU), Macedonia has a population of about two million

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<sup>3</sup> The circulation of *Dnevnik* ranges between 50,000 and 70,000 copies per day. Total daily newspaper circulation in the country is between 90,000 and 120,000 copies (see <http://star.dnevnik.com.mk/?section=infoen>)

people. According to estimates<sup>4</sup> given by the Bulgarian ambassador to Macedonia, 60,000 Macedonians were on the waiting list for Bulgarian citizenship at the end of 2007, the year when Bulgaria became a member of the EU, while over 10,000 Macedonians had already been granted Bulgarian passports prior to that date. Different estimates put the number of Macedonians who have applied for Bulgarian passports at around 100,000 (Pond 2006), or about 7.6 per cent of the Macedonian population,<sup>5</sup> though some of my interlocutors in the field have suggested that the percentage might be even higher.

On the basis of 20 interviews conducted in the summer of 2008 with ethnic Macedonian men and women aged 2535 in the capital city of Skopje and the southeastern town of Strumica, I examine here some of the social effects that Bulgaria's EU membership has for Macedonia and the meanings that identification (ID) documents have for ethnic Macedonians who declare that they are Bulgarian.

I chose to do research in the capital because Skopje is the location of the Bulgarian embassy in Macedonia. The reason for choosing Strumica is that the Strumica valley was the only part of today's Republic of Macedonia ceded to Bulgaria under the Treaty of Bucharest and was thus part of Bulgaria between 1913 and 1919.<sup>6</sup> My interlocutors were recruited by word of mouth; I also approached passport applicants waiting in the long queues outside the Bulgarian embassy in Skopje. Those who agreed to speak with me generally thought fit to let me know they were 'not ashamed' (*ne se sramam*) to have applied for Bulgarian passports. Such statements are a telling indication of the affects that documents can generate among their users (see NavaroYashin 2007), the harsh reactions that the practice of applying for Bulgarian ID documents can provoke, and the sharp divisions over whether or not Macedonian citizens should also hold Bulgarian citizenship.

It is thus important to note that I am not interested here in the case of ethnic Macedonians who oppose applying for Bulgarian passports on principle because they view such an action as undermining Macedonian national identity and territorial integrity, and facilitating Bulgarian cultural and political dominance in Macedonia. Fears that applications for Bulgarian passports constitute a national security risk emerge against the historical background of Bulgaria's efforts to 'Bulgarize' Macedonia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (AndonovPoljanski 1985, Hoppe 1986, Perry 1998, Tomasevich 2001) and the ongoing dispute over the existence of Macedonian language (Friedman 1999, Mahon 2004, Shea 1997), which the Bulgarian state still views as a dialect of Bulgarian. The case of Bulgarophile Macedonians who apply for Bulgarian passports also lies outside the scope of this article.

My concern here is with ethnic Macedonians, especially youth, who claim not to be interested in whether it is ideologically appropriate or inappropriate to apply for Bulgarian passports, but rather point to the practical and economic benefits that Bulgar-

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<sup>4</sup> Utrinski Vesnik, 18 December 2007, [www.utrinski.com.mk/?ItemID=08E6758A4AF149429A61D93CEC5742F5](http://www.utrinski.com.mk/?ItemID=08E6758A4AF149429A61D93CEC5742F5)

<sup>5</sup> According to the 2002 population census, ethnic Macedonians make up 1,297,981, or 64.18% of the country's total population of 2,022,547. Albanians make up 25.17% (509,083) Turks 3.85% (77,959), Roma 2.66% (53,879), Serbs 1.78% (35,939), Bosniaks 0.84% (17,018), Vlachs 0.48% (9695), and 1.04% (20,993) of the population are classified under 'other' groups (see State Statistical Office, Republic of Macedonia: [http://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/kniga\\_13.pdf](http://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/kniga_13.pdf))

<sup>6</sup> On the Bulgarian occupation of Macedonia, see Miller 1975.

ian passports carry for their holders – mainly freedom to travel without a visa within the EU and access to a greater number of choices in their lives.

The case of Macedonians who instrumentalize Bulgarian claims on their Macedonian identity and apply for Bulgarian passports to achieve their own ends broadens the scope of scholarly work on ID documents, which tends to link forms of personal identification with state surveillance and control. For example, a number of scholars (among others, Appadurai 1996, Caplan and Torpey 2001, Cohn and Dirks 1988, Scott 1998, Torpey 2000, Trouillot 2003) have examined how by issuing ID papers, and written documentation more generally, the state determines citizens/subjects whose activities and whereabouts it can then trace and observe closely. As I argue here, the case of Macedonia helps us to understand the ways in which social actors use forms of personal documentation to challenge the state's production of determined identities and its grip on citizens' daily lives, and at the same time invent new identities for themselves as citizens of the EU.

## **ID documents and the failed state**

Only ethnic Macedonians (and not Albanians, Serbs or members of other ethno-national communities in Macedonia) are eligible to apply for Bulgarian citizenship. Additionally, the Bulgarian government<sup>7</sup> claims as Bulgarians many thousands of Macedonians who live in Albania, and also the Gorans<sup>8</sup> of Kosovo and Albania. According to the Bulgarian Ministry of Justice,<sup>9</sup> application requirements for those who inhabit Macedonia include submission of the following documentation to the Bulgarian embassy in Skopje or the Bulgarian consulate in the town of Bitola: a health certificate, a certificate proving that the applicant has no criminal record, and a document, such as a birth certificate or passport, attesting that s/he has at least one parent of Bulgarian origin. Alternatively, the State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad can issue<sup>10</sup> a certificate of Bulgarian nationality on request; the presumption here is that 'ethnic Macedonian' really means 'ethnic Bulgarian'. Applicants are also required to sign a statement certifying that they are Bulgarian.

In practice, however, the procedure is a lot more lax, and hence encourages a large number of applications. According to my interlocutors who had no documentation to prove the Bulgarian origin of one of their parents (or any other close relatives), some of the Macedonian notaries authorized by the Bulgarian embassy in Macedonia to fill out and filed the paperwork often used false information, such as residential addresses and

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<sup>7</sup> Some Bulgarian anthropologists use their disciplinary qualifications to pursue the Bulgarian state's agenda of claiming ethnic Macedonians as Bulgarians, while others criticize the practice. See, for example Kultura: <http://www.kultura.bg/print.php?id=15149>. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point. I am also grateful to Maria Koinova for sharing with me her own insights into the debate in the pages of the journal Kultura.

<sup>8</sup> The Gorans are Slavic Muslims who speak a mixture of Macedonian, Serbian, Croatian and Arabic, and live in some of the mountainous regions of Kosovo and Albania over the Šar Planina mountain range in western Macedonia (see Poulton 1995).

<sup>9</sup> [www.justice.government.bg/new/Pages/Structure/Default.aspx?evntid=VfQoGGFqeGc%3d](http://www.justice.government.bg/new/Pages/Structure/Default.aspx?evntid=VfQoGGFqeGc%3d)

<sup>10</sup> See also [www.iwpr.net/?p=bcr&s=f&o=242497&apc\\_state=henibcr2005](http://www.iwpr.net/?p=bcr&s=f&o=242497&apc_state=henibcr2005)

names of fictitious forebears in Bulgaria, before they submitted the application packages to the Bulgarian embassy for official approval. In most cases I encountered the procedure took anywhere from three to five years, often depending on the amount of the bribe the applicants paid to the middlemen or bureaucrats processing the applications in order to expedite the process (despite efforts undertaken by the Bulgarian and Macedonian states to combat corruption); the overall cost started at a few hundred euros. Ethnic Macedonians are permitted to hold dual citizenship and, as of this writing, those who are granted Bulgarian passports do not need to renounce their Macedonian citizenship.

What are some of the reasons informing people's decision to apply for Bulgarian citizenship? Most of my interviewees said they were disillusioned with politicians<sup>11</sup> and frustrated by the lack of employment opportunities in the country. Such arguments become stronger against the background of tight social networks and political patronage, which interfere with graduation from college and the search for professional jobs. At the same time, and like postsocialist societies elsewhere (for example, see Burawoy and Verdery 1999), Macedonia is witnessing a gradual transformation of social values and ideals. In particular, even though the emphasis on college education and white-collar jobs remains paramount, members of a newly emergent capitalist class are introducing new consumption styles that centre on the purchase and ostentatious display of Western consumer goods, such as expensive cars and imported brand clothing. The visible discrepancies in standard of living between the haves and havenots play a significant role in producing a widespread discourse on corruption. In the words of Gordana, a single 26-year-old woman who worked as a babysitter in Skopje:

*You see how it is in Macedonia, you either have money or you don't, there is no middle [ground]. Have you seen the huge houses in [the suburb of] Bardovci? These are houses of Macedonians. I mean to say, how did you build something like this? Realistically, with an average salary, there is no chance for that to happen.*

It is within this framework that my interlocutors imagine the contemporary state as a failed entity, incapable of meeting the needs of its citizens (see also Gupta 1995). People in blue-collar occupations were particularly vocal critics of the sociopolitical order in the country. Darko, for example, a married 30-year-old supermarket employee in Skopje, had applied for a Bulgarian passport three years before we met. In his words:

*What does this state offer me? I graduated with a degree in economics and now cannot get a job unless I have connections (vrski). I work on Saturday and Sunday, I only have two days off each month, and for what? My salary is 8000 denars [about 140 euros]. And do you have time to get out, drink coffee? You do not. Pay the electricity? Buy something to survive? What to do? I love Macedonia, but when you have nothing positive to attract you to stay...*

Darko's frustration is widely shared by youth in Macedonia, even among people in white-collar jobs. Consider the example of Jana, a recently appointed schoolteacher who felt that she had no job security, particularly in the light of the parliamentary elections in the summer of 2008 and the possibility that a new political party would come to

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the cliché 'politics is a whore' in Macedonia, see Neofotistos 2009; for comparisons with Bosnia, see Helms 2007, Grandits 2007.

power and replace her with one of its supporters. When I spoke with her, she voiced her disappointment at the lack of viable alternatives:

*You have no other option, that is to say third option does not exist; that is to say, you either apply to get out of Macedonia, to prosper while you are abroad, or you stay here and if you know nobody to hire you, to push you let's say, even if you have qualifications, it's all for nothing [džabe]!*

As some of my interlocutors noted, the levels of corruption are so high in the country that the question one should ask is not why people apply, but rather why people should not apply, for Bulgarian passports. For Biljana, a married woman in her late 20s who worked as a salesperson in a grocery store in Strumica: 'Stories about people applying for Bulgarian passports have been in the media for months now. What has the state done to ensure that this does not happen? Nothing! Even politicians<sup>12</sup> hold Bulgarian passports, why should I not apply for one?' For Biljana then, the decision to apply for a Bulgarian passport is self-evident – simple common sense.

At the same time, and despite widespread dissatisfaction with the state, Bulgarian passports reportedly have no bearing whatsoever on Macedonian citizenship and ethno-national identification, and do not suggest Bulgarian ethno-national belonging. As 29-year-old Mare graphically put it: 'Documents only have value on paper. I am Macedonian, so what if I have a Bulgarian passport?' Her opinion is echoed by 32-year-old Slavko, a taxi driver in the town of Strumica who is married with two children: 'That's irrelevant [that I have applied for a Bulgarian passport], I will always be a man from Strumica!'

Having multiple identification documents then is not conterminous with endorsing multiple ethno-national identities. Thus applying for a Bulgarian passport is not regarded as renouncing one's Macedonian-ness, and so my interlocutors regard the practice of applying for passports as perfectly justified and commonsensical. To examine further how applying for Bulgarian passports has emerged as the commonsense thing<sup>13</sup> to do in Macedonia, I now turn to the meaning that these passports carry for ethnic Macedonians.

## The fetishization of Bulgarian passports

Bringing to mind scholarly arguments regarding the connection between ID documents and empowerment (for example, Caplan and Torpey 2001), most of the people with whom I conversed underlined the sense of empowerment that comes from holding a Bulgarian passport. Maria, for example, a single woman in her mid-20s from Strumica, arrived in Skopje to look for a job shortly after she graduated with a BA in pedagogy. It was the realization that she could work as a teacher only if she had social connections or

<sup>12</sup> Biljana makes reference to Ljupčo Georgievski (former leader of the political party VMRO-DPMNE and Macedonian Prime Minister between 1998 and 2002 (note that Georgievski uses a hachek over the 'c' to spell his first name, which is the Bulgarian, not the Macedonian, spelling). (editors' note: infact the difference is in the Cyrillic spelling where a Bulgarian way of spelling the name is Ljubčo, the one that the former leader of VMRO-DPMNE uses, instead of Macedonian spelling: Ljupčo).

<sup>13</sup> On anthropology as 'the study of common sense' see Herzfeld 2001.

paid corrupt bureaucrats a generous sum of money that, as she told me, made her decide to apply for a Bulgarian passport. For her,

*'it is irrelevant that you apply for a Bulgarian passport, you will get it so that you can go to a different country. You are more powerful [pomokjen] if you have a passport, you go to Switzerland and then you are the boss [gazda]. What can you do? Struggle for life!'*

Most of my interlocutors mentioned that Bulgarian passports provided an avenue to numerous and better options in life, such as access to lower-cost college education in Bulgaria, the right to travel in Europe with a visa, and the ability to purchase consumer goods (cars and clothing items, for example) that cost less in Bulgaria than in Macedonia because of lower taxes. Those who help, or looked for, jobs that required frequent travel outside Macedonia, such as driving trucks or working with Macedonian NGOs, considered holding a Bulgarian passport to be practical and to increase their chances of getting hired.

In the accounts of people with whom I conversed, Bulgarian passports emerge as fetishized objects. In discussing the fetishization of ID papers here, I follow Gordillo's use of the notion of 'fetish' in his analysis of Argentinean state power and indigenous peoples' views regarding ID papers. Building on Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism, Gordillo explains: 'Many people turn their document[s] into a representation of citizenship that, even though deriving its power from "the state", gains a force of its own. And the mode of signification (the ID paper) acquires its potency at the expense of what is being signified, the web of relations and rights constitutive of national forms of membership' (2006: 173). Even though the historical circumstances surrounding the acquisition of Bulgarian and Argentinean documents are different, and ethnic Macedonians, unlike Argentina's indigenous peoples, are reluctant to divulge that they have acquired citizenship documents, the parallels between the two cases are striking, and draw me to use the notion of the 'fetish' here.

Specifically, for my Macedonian interlocutors, Bulgarian passports represent EU citizenship; to use Peter Pels' definition of 'fetish', are 'substantiation[s] of the spirit of matter' (1997: 112, emphasis added; see also Pietz 1993). As fetishized objects, Bulgarian passports absorb into their materiality the values created by social, economic and political relations that Bulgarians as citizens of an EU member state enjoy in the international arena. This is to suggest that in the global context of political and economic inequalities a misperception, what Žižek (1997: 100) calls the 'fetishist misrecognition', is implied in the fetishization of Bulgarian passports: 'the property which is actually a mere "reflective determination" of an object [...] is misperceived as its direct "natural" property' (ibid.).

In particular, some Macedonian misrecognize EU citizenship rights and, by extension, direct access to socio-economic opportunities that are currently unavailable to Macedonian citizens as the intrinsic property of Bulgarian personal documents. These documents acquire their potency from the EU membership of the Bulgarian state and the Macedonian state's failure to meet its citizens' needs for partaking in the world beyond the borders of Macedonia. Bulgarian passports, in other words, upgrade some Macedonian nationals' status to that of citizens of Europe and connect them with the West (on constructions of the West in Macedonia, see Neofotistos 2008).

The power with which some ethnic Macedonians invest Bulgarian passports is intertwined with alienation from citizenship rights that, as Gordillo (2006) notes, is also in-

volved in ID paper fetishization among the Toba and the Wishi, indigenous people of the Argentinean Chaco. But while the fetishization of personal documents in Argentina is the result of a long history of indigenous peoples' alienation from state-granted citizenship rights, ethnic Macedonians have always been citizens of the Macedonian state.

Nonetheless, for my interlocutors the low standard of living and the imposition of a strict visa regime on Macedonia stand in stark contrast with the high living standard and the ability to travel freely that citizens of EU member states enjoy, thus clearly marking the separation between citizens and non-citizens of Europe. Like some Toba and Wishi, who view their alienation from ID papers as the main reason for their hardships in Argentina, some Macedonians regard their lack of EU ID papers as the primary factor that hinders their prospects for better life.

Additionally, even though they did not grow up under the socialist regime, most of the people to whom I talked, like Macedonian individuals who belong to the older generation, expressed nostalgia – what Herzeld (1997) terms 'structural nostalgia' – for the prestige that former Yugoslavia enjoyed in the international arena. Nostalgia for Yugoslavia's notable position in the hierarchy of nation-states is fuelled by Macedonia's weak position in the global socio-economic order and ongoing disputes with Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece over the existence of a Macedonian language, church and identity (for example, see Dobrković 1999, Drezov 1999, Friedman 1999, Shea 1997). In this context, some ethnic Macedonians view Bulgarian passports as tools to reclaim the prestige they enjoyed as citizens of the former Yugoslavia and invent their existence in the global arena as EU citizens.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

My study of ethnic Macedonians who instrumentalize Bulgarian claims on their Macedonian identity for their own ends is by no means exhaustive, and I hope to undertake further research on this topic in the near future. Similarly, a discussion of the implications for the Macedonian and Bulgarian states as well as of the larger theoretical implications for anthropological understandings of the state lie outside the scope of this article.

But what emerges from the discussion above is that in the aftermath of Bulgaria's accession to the EU some people of ethnic Macedonian background treat Bulgarian passports as fetishized objects, that is to say, powerful objects that hold out the promise of changing Macedonians' lives by offering them access to socio-economic opportunities already available to citizens of EU member states.

By applying for (and receiving) Bulgarian passports, some ethnic Macedonians craft new life choices for themselves outside the boundaries of the Macedonian state and

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<sup>14</sup> Efforts to promote the image of Macedonia as a modern and quintessentially European state that should be treated as an equal EU partner also involve the establishment of ties between modern Macedonians and Hunzukuts, who live in the Hindu Kush mountains of Pakistan and claim to be descendants of Alexander the Great. Such efforts need to be viewed against the background of competing Greek efforts to prove ties between modern Greeks and Kalasha, who also live in northern Pakistan and believe they are descended from Alexander the Great. For a detailed discussion of the bases of nationalist historiography promoting a European identity and a modernist project very much rooted in the East, see Neofotistos (n.d).

invent new identities as citizens of the EU in the global context of political and economic inequalities.

The case of Macedonia, therefore, helps us view identification documents as objects that neither necessarily fix nationality nor are ineluctable guarantees of belonging to the (Bulgarian) nation-state, and understand state documentation practices as practices that do not always produce determined identities and citizen-subjects.

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