



# Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia Social briefing:**  
**Ethnic Belonging vs. Citizenship in the Macedonian Context**  
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## Ethnic Belonging vs. Citizenship in the Macedonian Context

### Introduction

Conventional wisdom among citizens of the Republic of Macedonia is that if you want to participate in public life, you should better know which *community* do you belong to. While citizenship in theory implies a context and relationship of equity and equal chances, in the Macedonian context, as in other multi-ethnic and multicultural societies, there are a number of complexities with regards to the definition of citizenship and its application in practice. One particular level at which the relationships between the individual and the state, and the relationships within and in between group of individuals get particularly complicated, is the level of ethnic belonging. This has led towards what actors have called “fractured” or “fragmented” citizenship, which refers to the divisions and entrenchment of ethnic identification as a primary denominator of nationhood.<sup>1</sup>

For instance, in the Macedonian public and political debate there are three terms (citizenship, nationality and ethnicity) that are used to describe two distinct notions: the relationship between the individual and the state, and the self-identification of the individual in ethnic terms. Citizenship is used to describe the former, ethnicity is used to describe the latter, while nationality is often times, confusingly used to describe both. One consequence of this has been the emergence of a third level of belonging – the relationship between the individual and the *nation* (defined in cultural and ethnic, rather than political terms). While there is no particular problems in applying this definition to the case of (ethnic) Macedonians, who are Macedonian citizens, who self-identify as ethnic Macedonians that belong to the Macedonian nation, it is a bit more complicated with members from other ethnic groups. Hence an (ethnic)

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<sup>1</sup> For a state of the art analysis see Ljubica Spaskovska, “The Fractured ‘We’ and the Ethno-National ‘I’: The Macedonian Citizenship Framework,” *Citizenship Studies* 16, no. 3–4 (June 1, 2012): 383–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2012.683249>.

Albanian may be a Macedonian citizen, who has an ethnic Albanian identity, and identifies with the Albanian nation defined in cultural and ethnic terms. The murky notion of *nationality* has thus led to creation of an equally murky concept of a *nation* that does not correspond to the definition of the state. A possible explanation for the division between the belonging to the state and belonging to the nation in the Macedonian context revolves around the idea of cultural difference of the Macedonian context and adopts the Manichean division between “Western” or rather liberal, and “Eastern” or rather socialist concepts of citizenship and nationhood.<sup>2</sup>

The fragmentation of citizenship is inseparable from the adoption and implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) that settled the armed conflict of 2001 and empowered ethnic minorities, in particular ethnic Albanians. Recent political developments, and in particular, the signing of the Prespa Agreement to solve the name issue with Greece, may bring new impetus to the issues of citizenship and ethnicity. This paper therefore first overviews the impact of OFA, and then discusses the potential impact of the Prespa Agreement.

### **The Impact of Ohrid**

After few months of armed conflict, the Ohrid Accords of August 2001 (known as the Ohrid Framework Agreement, or OFA) brought an end to the armed conflict. OFA emerged as a sort of a “social contract” of the post-conflict

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<sup>2</sup> The Macedonian understanding of belonging and the three distinct levels of belonging (citizenship/ nationality/ ethnicity) are particularly confusing once juxtaposed against international practices, whereby citizenship equals nationality. For instance, on the main page of the passport of Macedonian citizens, the international category “Nationality”, in Macedonian is translated as “Državjanstvo”, the Macedonian term for belonging to the state (citizenship). This also extends to translation of international legal acts, such as the European Convention on Nationality. Namely, the Convention has been ratified not as a Convention on “Nationality,” but as a European Convention on *Državjanstvo* (Citizenship). The Convention itself uses the term “nationality” as a synonym for citizenship which corresponds to the international practice; however, the Macedonian translation does not use the term *nacionalnost* which is semantically closer, but sticks to “citizenship.” Additionally, in the Macedonian translation of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to nationality (Article 15), is translated as right to *državjanstvo* (citizenship). While the unusual translation can be ascribed to the cultural context (the same argument as in the previous section), it is still important to note the discrepancy of the meaning of the international term nationality and the Macedonian term *nacionalnost*. As defined with the European Convention, “nationality” means the legal bond between a person and a State and does not indicate the person’s ethnic origin” (Article 2); while according to Article 8 of the Constitution, every Macedonian citizen has freedom to express their own *nacionalna pripadnost* - national belonging (yet, in the official English version translated as national identity, which in practice means ethnic identity).

Macedonian polity that renegotiated the relationship and power balance between the ethnic groups. Its implementation has been the top priority of Macedonian governments in the period that followed, and its fulfillment has been considered an inherent aspect of the EU conditionality. In terms of the political order of the country, the OFA has redefined the framework of the state institutions, “multiculturalizing” the Macedonian normative basis and setting the grounds for the adoption of policies of equality and fair representation. Besides the Constitutional amendments and the adoption of new legal acts, this tendency has been reflected in the adoption of new political conventions and public discourse reflected in the media, the civil society and among public personae. Peaceful *co-existence* (“sozhivot”) has become a priority.

After the Amendments that were part of the adoption of the OFA, Macedonia's Constitution itself does not make a straightforward statement that the constituents of Macedonia are its citizens, but claims members of the different so-called “peoples“ (with the meaning of members of different ethnicities). The revised version of the Constitution names “the Macedonian people, as well as the citizens that live within its borders, that are part from the Albanian people, Turkish people, Vlach people, Serbian people, Roma people, Bosniac people and others” as constitutive elements of the state. This is a reformed ethnic, rather than with a civic multicultural model. Since the different “peoples” themselves are still defined as three separate categories (Macedonian, other named peoples and other, non-listed ones), the membership in these three categories is implied to be qualitatively variable.

Furthermore, by assuming exclusively the members of “peoples” and the “peoples” as collective actors in the political system, citizens who do not want to exercise their right to ethnic belonging (who do not self-identify as “members of peoples”) are not taken into consideration as constituents of the state. One question that is raised here, is, whether an individual who does not plead their ethnic identity can be considered to be equal to ethnic Macedonians or members of other ethnic communities. Another important issue is the right to dual or fluid

ethnic identification for individuals, especially for the ones who originate from mixed marriages – which community do they belong to? While the Constitution lists the “the free expression of national belonging” (in the official translation in English altered to “national identity” - both meaning “ethnic belonging/identity”) as one the fundamental values of the constitutional order, the political practice regarding this has been quite uncertain.

As argued in previous papers, political matters in post-OFA Macedonian are handled by the ethnopolitical communities, defined as collective and strictly bound actors, represented by ethnic political parties. The division of political labor in post-OFA Macedonian discourse happens along ethnic lines, and the main bearers of the communal interests are the ethnic political parties. Inter-ethnic consensus is the precondition for making important decisions in the parliament. Moreover, issues that touch upon any ethno-national topic (such as use of language, symbols), as well as important political changes, need to be discussed not only in the parliament, but also among the leaders of the main political parties of the Macedonian and Albanian political blocs outside it - sometimes the extraparlimentary so called “political dialogue” can even override official institutional solutions. This has often led to the questioning of the essence of the Macedonian democratic model – the question raised is, who is really a bearer of political legitimacy: the elusive demos (the corpus of Macedonian citizens) or the omni-present ethnos (defined with its historical and cultural functions), thereby effectively making Macedonia *ethnocracy*.

Therefore, the principle of equality of Macedonian citizenship is subservient to the equality of ethnicity. This OFA model has presupposed belonging to an ethnic community as a condition for one’s integration and political participation in the society on the same level as the majority of the citizens. In terms of the individual identification, ethnic identification has been treated as far more significant for one’s self-definition but also for their political participation than any other mode of identification - for instance, gender, race, religion, sexuality or even the global “consumerist” identification – sans

political party membership (which, nevertheless, is greatly determined in ethnic terms). Thus, the meaning of ethnicity has been loaded with a lot of political features and has made it open to use for various interests. At the same, the focus on ethnicity has resulted with a lack of debate and attempts to address other aspects of citizenship, such as gender, race or class, and the problems that stem from gender inequality, racial discrimination and poverty and labor exploitation.

### **Enter Prespa**

The Prespa Agreement signed in 2018, in addition to being aimed at solving the name issue with Greece, is also seen a sequel to the OFA and the concept of citizenship it advances. For example, as part of the constitutional amendments that are part of the implementation of the Prespa Agreement, the OFA will be included as one of the founding documents of the modern Macedonian state in the Preamble of the Constitution, on par with the Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Assembly (ASNOM) of 1944 (importantly, the revisions will erase the decisions of ASNOM but refer only to its manifesto; the decisions of ASNOM referred to the unification of the ethnic Macedonians in Macedonia, Bulgaria and Greece). With this, the post-OFA *ethnocratic* conception of the Macedonian state will be completed.

At the same time, the Prespa Agreement yet again redefines the meanings of the basic terms; this time not in terms of concepts, but in terms of content. This goes particularly for the term “Macedonian.” The term “Macedonian” itself has been already a matter of dispute between various interpretations. Within Macedonia, there has been a distinction between Macedonia in the ethnic and in the civic sense. In ethnic sense, it refers to “ethnic Macedonians” - people who ethnically identify as Macedonians (which are the people who comprise the majority of citizens of Macedonia), and who are also part of the “Macedonian diaspora” around the world; in its civic sense, “Macedonian” refers to any individual that is legally a citizen of the Republic of Macedonia (however, there have been very few instances where members of Macedonian ethnic minorities

self-identify as “Macedonians;” as argued above, ethnic identity has precedence over citizenship). At the same time, the official position of Greece has been that “Macedonians” are exclusively the ethnic Greeks who come from the Greek region of Macedonia; and that the term “Macedonian” cannot denote ethnicity nor citizenship of another country. This was one of the core aspects of the infamous “name issue” between the two countries.

With the Prespa Agreement, in addition to the change of the name of the country into “North Macedonia,” there will be a change in the international definition of the belonging of Macedonian citizens into: “Macedonian / citizen of North Macedonia.” The Agreement nevertheless acknowledges the existence Macedonian language and the right to Macedonian ethnic self-identification. Nevertheless, even the ethnic meaning of “Macedonian” gets amended. While before the Prespa Agreement, the term “Macedonian” in the ethnic sense may have been used to include people who self-identify as ethnic Macedonians, that live in Greece, Bulgaria and Albania, with the constitutional amendments the government takes a step back – now “ethnic Macedonians” are ultimately tied with the territory of the country (which is also an outcome by removing the Decisions of ASNOM from the Constitution). Furthermore, for some voices, the Prespa Amendments open the possibility of experimenting with the notion of citizenship when it comes to the description of Macedonian citizens who are not ethnic Macedonians (i.e. “Albanian/ citizen of NM;” or “Serbian/ citizen of NM”). There has been no detailed clarification by the representatives of the government on this issue. However, even if legally that is not the case, the introduction of the dual formula for the definition of the citizenship allows for complete omission of the term “Macedonian” (as argued, already, ethnic minorities rarely identified as “Macedonians” to begin with). Thus, regardless of the final version of the changes brought about the Prespa Agreement, it is clear that one of the outcomes of the Agreement will be perpetuation of the ethnocratic model, and serve to reinforce deeply heated topics on the issues of ethnic belonging and citizenship.