

Accession and the Meaning of European Citizenship

Article by Jelena Džankić

June 23, 2022

After years of stagnation, the aspirations of countries to the east and southeast of the EU to become members have been given renewed impetus by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For the populations of these prospective members, accession will also grant them European citizenship – with consequences both for them as well as for current European citizens. We spoke to political scientist Jelena Džankić about the prospects for further EU enlargement, the use and misuse of passports, and the future of citizenship.

Green European Journal: Faced with the current Russian aggression, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have all made moves to try to accelerate the prospect of EU membership. Apart from what it would mean on the level of the state or geopolitics, what does European citizenship represent to people in these countries?

Jelena Džankić: Obviously, the situation in Ukraine has had a strong impact on the discussions around future European enlargement but also on the form and substance of an enlarged EU. Security concerns have also sparked discussions around the accession of Georgia and Moldova and reinvigorated the talks of the accession of countries in the Western Balkans, which had stalled for the past decade. We have heard multiple proposals for future enlargement, so the choice of which route to take will define the future shape of both the EU and of European citizenship.

For citizens of countries in line for accession or countries that are in the process of negotiating EU membership, EU citizenship means a lot. And it probably means far more than what it means emotionally to most of those who already have it. People from Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine face far more restrictions when it comes to accessing the labour markets of other countries, opportunities to be educated, or opportunities to travel abroad. Joining the European Union would signal a major economic step forward, but also a kind of security link. It would represent something that they have desired for over 30 years, since the fall of communism: the prospect of being recognised as European. Now, the reality on the ground is a little bit different, and therefore, I sincerely doubt that this fast-track succession will materialise anytime soon.

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French President Emmanuel Macron has suggested associate membership for

some countries that are aiming to join the EU. Would this be a viable alternative?

We have countries in the Western Balkans who are already negotiating EU accession: Serbia and Montenegro. In addition, Albania and North Macedonia have been recommended for the start of accession negotiations. But there are different blockages in the process, which are becoming more visible. It is also important to mention that since 2004, the EU's experience with enlargement has not been exceptionally positive: we can see the increasing appeal of illiberal politics across the former communist member states, as well as democratic backsliding in Cyprus and Malta.

This shows the current strategies of enlargement are not working as they should. Alternatives have been suggested, such as [Macron's proposal](#). At the same time, the option of a "phased integration" has been proposed by think tanks in Brussels and in the Western Balkans. That means that countries from the region, but also Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine could be phased in, first by gaining observer status in certain EU institutions and then, as different conditions are met, gradually moving towards membership.

In my view, both the phased accession and the associate status can be seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, both options are better than the current scenario in which nothing is happening. At the same time, if a country is offered potential associate status but nothing more, this might disappoint local advocates of EU membership. It could even lead them to turn towards other political players. In Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, other actors are present, geopolitically – not only Russia but also China, Turkey, and others. With phased accession, countries may reach a certain point in the process and no longer wish to go further.

In my own opinion, rather than thinking about alternatives, there should be a discussion on a mechanism that could enhance EU enlargement, firstly by strengthening the internal democratic capacity of the European Union and, secondly, by strengthening the EU's capacity to export those values and help rebuild the institutions that motivate these countries, in a way that would be democratically sustainable. I think that this is the kind of discussion that is very much needed, because anything else – including the phased integration or the associate status – is just a pseudo-solution.

Ultimately, the decisions taken by the European institutions regarding further enlargement, and who the next set of EU citizens will be, will determine the substance of what Europe will be, as well as what kind of integration is desired for the future.

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The European Union has shown far more willingness to accept Ukrainian refugees than people fleeing other conflicts, does this tell us anything about European identity and citizenship?

At the symbolic level, we see several elements: the perceived traits of desired migrants, the geographical proximity, and the framing of the war as an attack on values. We should remember that during the conflicts in [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) and in Kosovo, in the 1990s,

refugees were also welcomed by EU member states, as were the Albanian refugees in Italy in the same decade. As to the reasons why these refugees encountered more sympathy, there is a factor that cannot be said openly: refugees from places such as Syria and Afghanistan, and Kosovo to some extent, are perceived as different by many Europeans.

In addition, Ukraine is “here” – meaning it borders some of the eastern EU countries. And when a war is that near, we are more likely to empathise with people from that part of the world. Moreover, Russia, the main aggressor towards Ukraine, has had a huge impact on many Eastern European countries, and not in a good way. Ukraine has expressed its willingness to be a part of Europe and was moving towards NATO membership but is being blocked by Putin’s Russia. For many people in Europe, freedom and democracy are considered core values. Perhaps this was perceived as an attack on those values.

More generally, what is the link between the idea of citizenship and the idea of democracy? Should citizenship always come hand in hand with voting rights? Or should there be a distinction between voting and non-voting citizens?

This is an essential question. There are different conceptions of citizenship, as each country sets its own rules about citizenship, and the rights that come with it. Some countries recognise as citizens only those who reside on their territory, and perhaps some of those who have emigrated from there to a different country. These countries might differentiate between the rights they give to the people who live and pay taxes in the country, as opposed to those who live and work in, let’s say, the United States. The people who live abroad still have their passport, and once they come back to this country, they will have all the associated rights, but not when they are resident elsewhere.

Another approach would be that of Hungary, which recognises as citizens not just those who are physically present, but also its ethnic kin. At one point, Hungary also had an investor residence programme, through which one could eventually become naturalised in the country. This system gives passports to those who live beyond the state’s borders, and then at some point these people also get the rights associated with citizenship.^[1] Countries that give passports to their ethnic kin or emigrants abroad, do it either to reinforce their links with the diaspora for the purposes of remittances or other benefits for the state, or it could be a foreign policy tool, as well as a means to strengthen certain political factions in different countries.

Among the countries that take this second approach, we see a difference in the degree of rights afforded to citizens outside the country. Italy, for example, has handed out passports to numerous descendants of Italian citizens in Argentina and other South American countries. Those people have most of the rights associated with citizenship, but some key aspects, such as voting rights, are linked to residency, or formerly to being physically present on the Italian territory or on the territory of the EU. Whereas in Hungary, non-resident citizens can vote.

If you ask me which approach to citizenship is the right one, I would go back to the idea and the ideal of citizenship as a tool that is not reduced to the mere possession of a travel document. We have to think about citizenship as something that recognises that an individual has stakes in a particular community and that they can actually contribute to the future of this community by voting and taking part in political processes in this country.

This is something that the political theorist Rainer Bauböck calls the stakeholder principle of citizenship. I think that to create a true community of citizens, you have to create a participatory community.

Should there also be certain duties attached to citizenship?

All of us are bound to contribute in some way. Traditionally, taxation is one of the main duties of citizenship. As was said in the context of the Boston Tea Party: there should be no taxation without representation. However, contemporary scholarship has argued that the aspect of the duties of citizenship is hollowing out. This is mostly related to the fact that military duty had been traditionally associated with the conception of citizenship, but as armies become professionalised, citizens no longer have the obligation to serve in the military. In addition, many of the obligations that are related to taxation are connected to residency as opposed to citizenship. Another core duty is abiding by the laws of the state.

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If every country can decide for itself who its citizens are, is there a risk of this being misused within the EU, for example, by member states that give out so-called golden passports?

In the context of the European Union, there have been “strategic uses” – but we can also call them abuses – of citizenship. For example, by countries that offer passports to ethnic kin, and especially by those whose passports can be bought. On the basis of treaties, the rules will say that each EU member state is free to decide who its citizens are. This essentially means that the European Union has very limited competences in the domain of citizenship regulation. The European Commission cannot tell its member states which people they can or cannot consider citizens. So, in 2019, the European Commission published a report on investor citizenship and residency schemes, in which it said EU member states should not grant passports to persons without a genuine link to the state.

The process is not made easier by the fact that the concept of a genuine link is highly contested. Is it the link by blood that we should see as genuine? Or would it mean residing in a given country? Nevertheless, I think that since the publication of the 2019 report, there have been significant steps in the fight against the abuse of citizenship. The former Maltese prime minister’s chief-of-staff was charged in connection to corruption in the immigrant investor programme in the country, and in Cyprus, the speaker of the parliament had to resign due to passport corruption, as Al Jazeera’s Cyprus Papers showed that persons who were considered to be a high security risk were granted the country’s passport.

In 2020, the European Commission started the infringement proceedings against member states engaged in the sale of passports. So, this is ongoing, and these infringement proceedings take a long time, so the outcome remains to be seen. In the meantime, with the start of the conflict in Ukraine, various European institutions have started different initiatives. The European Parliament has published a resolution calling on member states to immediately stop selling passports, especially to persons from Russia and Belarus, and to

withdraw passports from those who are involved with Putin's regime. In practice, the war in Ukraine has shown how dangerous these programmes can be, because countries handing out passports in exchange for investment are not just handing out their own passports, but the rights associated with being a citizen in any other member state as well.

What is your assessment of the digital forms of citizenship?

The potential of these technologies is in creating forms of digital identification. The UNHCR started a process that is related to providing displaced persons with identification documents in Africa. The idea behind the project is for everyone to have an ID in the future, so that they can access relevant services, and I think that this is where digital technologies can be helpful.

Digital technologies are also relevant when we talk about everyone's ability to choose their citizenship – because there are already projects, such as bit nations (a “Decentralised Borderless Voluntary Nation”), where each individual can essentially log in through blockchain technology, and can self-identify as whatever they wish. They can also access some of the rights of citizenship in this digital space. There have even been some blockchain marriage contracts. I certainly see some potential for these technologies to create something positive for the future.

At the same time, there are dangers of linking technology and citizenship. For example, the potential abuse of technology for the purpose of creating something that my colleagues Wessel Reijers and Liav Orgad refer to as the “perfect citizen”. This is something that we can see happening with the social credit system in China, which gives citizens a score, that is added to by “good actions” and deducted from by “bad actions”. Then, if you go to a bank to take a loan, or if you want to buy train tickets, the price is determined by how “good” you are. I see that as a model for abuse and control.

How might citizenship evolve? Is there a likelihood of moving towards more flexible or cosmopolitan arrangements?

I think that our understanding of citizenship, which is mainly based on the European experience, might need some adjustment. It might need to account for things that are happening in different parts of the world and to protect those individuals who are most vulnerable, such as citizens of small island states that are disappearing as a result of climate change who may become climate refugees. Creating a truly cosmopolitan way of living or thinking will take a long time, however. First, change is needed in the way in which people think about their environment, about their relationships with one another, and about the world in general. If we continue to classify people based on their gender, skin colour, their preferences or any other trait, I do not think that this world can become more cosmopolitan. The human mindset will have to change, and that can happen through the creation of more inclusive and pluralistic environments. I hope that this will h

[1] Editor's note: in Hungarian elections, approximately 4 per cent of votes comes from people of Hungarian origin residing in neighbouring countries who acquired Hungarian citizenship in the past decade; over 90 per cent of them support the authoritarian prime minister Viktor Orbán.



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Published June 23, 2022

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/enlargement-and-european-citizenship-moving-beyond-pseudo-solutions/>

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