



Article

Acquiring Citizenship through Naturalization in Greece: A Sisyphean Struggle for Immigrants

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Abstract: The article delves into the experiences of immigrants in Greece who have been residing in the country for an extended period but face difficulties in obtaining Greek citizenship. This study is based on in-depth interviews conducted with 10 immigrants whose applications for Greek citizenship were rejected in the summer of 2022. Through these interviews, the research investigates the motivations that drive immigrants to seek citizenship and their perceptions of the new, more restrictive naturalization law in Greece. The findings offer significant insights into the personal struggles and perspectives of these individuals, providing a clearer understanding of their desires to integrate into Greek society. The participants' viewpoints reveal a complex picture of naturalization, influenced by a combination of pragmatic considerations, such as access to rights and economic opportunities, and deep emotional connections to Greek culture and society. Moreover, this research sheds light on the implications of the new citizenship law, which emphasizes economic criteria, on immigrants' aspirations for obtaining citizenship. By comprehending the participants' attitudes and aspirations, this study can contribute to the development of more inclusive approaches to future naturalization legislation in Greece. Additionally, it offers valuable insights into immigrant identity and political engagement within the country.

Keywords: immigrants; Greece; naturalization; citizenship



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1. Introduction

The construction of Greek national identity has evolved over specific historical periods, shaped by various political and social factors. To understand the contemporary Greek reception context and the issues surrounding immigration and citizenship, it is essential to examine how Greek national identity was historically configured.

The historical construction of Greek national identity has been shaped by complex processes of ethnic and cultural criteria, which have played a significant role in defining who belongs to the Greek nation and who does not (Christopoulos 2012). The establishment of the modern Greek state in 1830 was a result of the 1821–1827 revolution against Ottoman rule, which laid the foundation for a distinct Greek national identity (Christopoulos 2012). During the centuries-long Ottoman rule, the subjects were organized into ethno-religious groups known as “millets”, where belonging was primarily based on religion and culture (Christopoulos 2006). The association between ethnicity, religion, and citizenship under the “millet” system indirectly contributed to the configuration of Greek national identity as a particularistic, ethno-cultural community with romanticized historical memories (Christopoulos 2012).

Greek national identity was founded on the principles of a fixed and unchangeable common culture, language, and ancestry (Kitromilides 1990; Veremis 1990). Over time, the Greek nation incorporated the “ancient Greek glorious past” as a place of origin for the Greek “genos” (Kitromilides 1990). The Byzantine era was also integrated into the national history of Greece, linking the Eastern Orthodox religion with the Greek nation

and providing historical continuity from antiquity to the present (Triandafyllidou and Veikou 2002). As a result, Greekness became inseparably tied to common ancestry, cultural traditions, and religion (Triandafyllidou and Veikou 2002). Within this national-cultural context, immigrants often faced “otherization” through Greek nationalist discourse, and the concept of “foreigners” represented a perceived violation of the nation’s intimate space (Tzanelli 2006).

The construction of Greek national identity as a mono-culturally constituted polity had significant implications for migration policy (Christopoulos 2012). Up until the early 1990s, Greece was perceived as a relatively homogenous country in cultural and ethnic terms (Christopoulos 2012). However, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc led to a significant influx of undocumented immigrants, predominantly from Albania, crossing the northern borders and transforming Greece into a de facto country of destination (Triandafyllidou 2009). The emphasis on cultural nationalism in defining Greekness led to the construction of immigrants as ethno-culturally non-Greek (Christopoulos 2012).

The first immigration law in 1991 exemplified the Greek polity’s hesitancy towards immigration (Triandafyllidou 2009). The law highlighted the influx of “foreigners” creating social problems and attempted to prevent the entry of undocumented immigrants and expel those already in the country illegally (Triandafyllidou 2009). Additionally, legal provisions made it challenging for undocumented immigrants to regularize their status (Triandafyllidou 2009). Consequently, by 1997, there were more than 400,000 irregular immigrants in the country, while only 70,000 were regular immigrants (OECD 1999).

As far as the figures for regular migrants in Greece are concerned, the situation has changed since the early and mid-1990s. According to data provided by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, there were almost 755,000 regular migrants in Greece in August 2023 (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2023), in a total population of 10,482,487 (ELSTAT (Hellenic Statistic Authority) 2023). The majority of that population are Third Country Nationals (460,000), followed by EU citizens and ethnic Greeks (245,000) and beneficiaries of international protection (50,000). Albanians are by a wide margin the nationality with the most valid residence permits, accounting for 60% of the total (approximately 276,000), while Bulgarians and Romanians are the two largest groups among European citizens, with 77,500 and 61,000 permits, respectively (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2023).

The Greek state’s approach to immigration was also influenced by the significance it placed on “genos” in defining national belonging (Christopoulos 2009). While ethnic Greeks, such as the Pontic Greeks arriving from the former USSR in the late 1980s and early 1990s, were granted privileged access to citizenship based on an affirmation of Greek descent, non-Greek immigrants faced significant obstacles in acquiring citizenship (Voutira 2009). The Greek state provided subsidies and specific citizenship acquisition paths for Pontic Greeks, linking Greekness to common ancestry and national consciousness (Voutira 2009).

On the other hand, ethnic Greeks from Albania, often referred to as “Voreio-Epirotes”, were treated differently by the Greek state (Vullnetari 2012). The Greek state feared that providing full citizenship rights to ethnic-Greek Albanians would lead to depopulation in certain regions with a Greek minority presence (Vullnetari 2012). The “blurring” between Albanians and ethnic-Greek Albanians made it challenging for the Greek authorities to determine who qualified as legitimate ethnic Greek (King and Vullnetari 2003). As a result, while ethnic-Greek Albanians were not denied ethno-cultural belonging, their emigration from Albania was not actively encouraged (Vullnetari 2012).

Obtaining citizenship for second-generation immigrants was profoundly stringent in Greece, due to its possession of one of the most antiquated and restrictive citizenship policies among EU countries. This policy was characterized by an extreme version of *jus sanguinis* (right of blood), emphasizing the right to citizenship based on bloodline or descent (Howard 2009). Naturalization for immigrants was practically impossible due to strict requirements (Triandafyllidou 2014). In 2010, however, the Greek Citizenship Code introduced provisions to facilitate naturalization and move towards *jus solis* (right

of soil) (Christopoulos 2017). The Code granted Greek citizenship automatically if one of the parents was born and residing in the country or if an alien child was born in Greece to parents residing in the country legally and permanently for at least five consecutive years (Christopoulos 2017).

Nevertheless, the policy changes were short-lived, as a conservative government, after coming to power in 2012, amended the law to revert to previous provisions (Christopoulos 2017). The Council of State ruled against some provisions of the 2010 law, arguing that naturalization should be based on a “real bond” between the foreigner and the Greek state, invoking self-affiliation and self-identification as constituents of Greek consciousness (Christopoulos 2017). A new Immigration and Social Cohesion Code in 2014 replaced nationality acquisition for second-generation immigrants with a special permit for long-term residence (Anagnostou 2016). The code emphasized the role of education in the qualification for Greek belonging (Mavrommatis 2018).

Finally, the 2015 Greek Citizenship Code marked a shift towards recognizing both *jus sanguinis* and *jus solis*, acknowledging Greece as “*a nation of choice and consciousness*” (Ministry of Interior 2015). Children born in Greece to immigrant parents and enrolled in Greek elementary schools or those who completed most of their education in Greece could acquire Greek citizenship through a simple declaration (Anagnostou 2016). The Code increased the required school attendance to strengthen the “*substantive bond*” of second-generation immigrants with the Greek state (Christopoulos 2017). However, it excluded voting rights for immigrants, denying them political agency in shaping policy and polity (Anagnostou 2016).

The New Citizenship Code (Law 4735/2020)

Based on the provisions of the new Citizenship Code (Law 4735/2020), citizenship may be granted to a foreigner who has reached the age of majority, has lawfully resided in Greece for 7 continuous years, holds a residence permit, and has not been irrevocably convicted of several crimes or does not have a pending deportation procedure. In addition, applicants should have sufficient knowledge of the Greek language, culture, and history, and be socially and economically integrated in the country.

Specific provisions of the Code have caused significant concern among independent advisory bodies to the Greek State and civil society organizations (GNCHR 2021; AIDA 2022). The most worrying provisions identified by these entities have to do with the strict economic and social integration criteria that applicants must meet, to apply for Greek citizenship.

To better define these criteria, Ministerial Decision No 29845/16-4-2021 was published six months after the unveiling of the Law. As stated in Article 1 of the Decision, “*A foreigner who wishes to become a Greek citizen must prove that he/she has an annual income that ensures him/her an adequate standard of living (. . .)*” (Ministry of Interior 2021a). Based on the annual salary at the minimum wage, the adequate standard of living is over EUR 7500, increased by 10% for each dependent family member.

However, applicants need to prove this income level not only for the year before their application but for all years of legal residence required for the naturalization application. Depending on the type of residence permit, this means 3, 5, or 7 years. Indicatively, spouses of Greek citizens with a child must prove sufficient income for 3 years, while refugees, long-term residents, or second-generation immigrants must prove sufficient income for at least 5 years before submitting their application (Ministry of Interior 2021a). A side note should be made here, since under the previous legislation (Law 4674/2020), refugees could apply for citizenship after lawfully residing in Greece for 3 years, while the new Law has increased this period to 7 years (AIDA 2022). Regardless, the retroactive application of the new procedural and substantive regulations has been heavily criticized, and according to the Greek National Commission for Human Rights, constitutes a breach of the principle of sound administration (GNCHR 2021).

Moreover, the strict economic criteria seem to ignore the harsh economic reality of the Greek economy and the overall employment situation in the country. Since the outbreak of the crisis in 2009, the unemployment rate of immigrants is consistently higher than the unemployment rate of natives (Tramountanis 2022). Therefore, proving a sufficient level of income for 3, 5, or 7 years, without any unemployment breaks in between, is perhaps a futile exercise for a significant portion of the immigrant population. The social integration criteria have also come under criticism by both GNCHR and civil society organizations since they provide grounds for discrimination and inequality (GNCHR 2021).

While some argue that these criteria also apply to residence permits, this claim is not entirely accurate, as most immigrants in Greece hold permits based on integration factors like years of residence, family ties, or education participation, without strict financial requirements. The strict financial criteria only apply to specific permits related to economic and business activities in the country.

Another aspect that has received detailed scrutiny by civil society organizations pertains to the examination process for the Certificate of Knowledge Adequacy for Naturalization (PEGP). The question bank used for the examination contains 500 questions spread across 964 pages (Greek Forum of Migrants 2021a). A great number of topics covered in the exam are exceedingly challenging, resembling entrance exams for higher education, and promote extensive memorization rather than meaningful understanding. Moreover, the most crucial issue is that these topics are not directly related to assessing the applicants' level of integration into Greek society, thus lacking substantive relevance (Tramountanis 2023). Due to the heightened difficulty of the exams, a mere 2465 applicants participated in the 2021 examinations out of the 30,000 pending applications (Greek Forum of Migrants 2021b).

Finally, an additional facet that has drawn the attention of the Council of Europe and non-governmental organizations is the lengthy naturalization procedure that lasts an average of 1494 days, due to a considerable backlog pending since 2010 (Council of Europe (CoE) (2018)). The processing of these applications—especially in large urban centers—can occur up to 7–8 years from the date of their submission. Research in the official Gazette of Citizenship shows naturalization decisions that have been pending for 9–10 years, while there have been recent decisions made for applications submitted in the early 1990s (Generation 2.0 2023). The same goes for applications submitted through the second-generation route. Such long delays, in this case, are even more unjustified, as this process does not include the multiple stages that the naturalization process consists of. The latest administrative changes triggered by the reorganization of the General Secretariat of Citizenship have further slowed down the process (Tramountanis 2023). Therefore, in Attica, the processing delays in the applications for citizenship based on second-generation status can exceed 4 years from the day of applying (Generation 2.0 2023).

Immigrants who have Greek children, or are married or in civil partnerships with a Greek citizen, must still go through the naturalization process to acquire citizenship and must meet all the general requirements of the process (such as a certain number of continuous years of legal residence, written examinations, economic and social criteria, etc.). The family bond with a Greek citizen is only a consideration in the process of naturalization in the context of the criteria of social integration, which is one of the essential requirements of naturalization. The only difference found in the formal requirements is that spouses of Greek citizens with whom they gave children can apply for naturalization after 3 years of legal residence rather than 7 years, which is the case for other long-term residence permit holders. Therefore, the parents or spouses of Greek citizens do not directly acquire Greek citizenship due to their family ties, but the bond is considered positive in the judgment of the administration.

Summarizing the above, because of the retroactive application of adequate income for 3, 5, or 7 years, the strict social criteria, the significant backlog in naturalization applications, and the increased difficulty in the PEGP exams, a steep decline in Greek Citizenship acquisitions has been recorded since 2019. As evidenced in Table 1, from a peak of

34,814 citizenship acquisitions in 2017, this figure has dropped to almost a third (13,259) five years later. The category mostly affected is that of second generation (Birth/school attendance in Greece (Law 3838/2010, Law 4332/2015). Citizenship acquisitions for that group were dramatically reduced to a quarter, going from 25,528 in 2017 to only 6867 in 2022, mainly due to the considerable delays observed in Athens and Thessaloniki.

Table 1. Acquisitions of Greek citizenship by category, 2011–2022.

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Naturalization of co-ethnic Greeks	12,616	13,495	22,574	15,791	8563	7476	3713	2747	1017	1463	1198	1158
Naturalization of aliens	930	1149	1866	2019	1487	3624	3486	2530	1882	1817	2843	3150
Birth/school attendance in Greece (L. 3838/2010, L 4332/2015)	3103	5543	529	0	305	19,367	25,528	21,559	12,868	9099	5154	6867
Citizenship determination procedures (by birth/recognition etc.)	946	928	1917	2029	1529	1183	978	883	382	876	623	723
Unmarried/minor children of those acquiring Greek citizenship	1627	622	3337	1990	2294	1837	1096	501	585	547	777	1136
Naturalization of co-ethnic Greeks from former USSR	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	190	100	71	9	225
Total	19,222	21,737	30,223	21,829	14,178	33,487	34,814	28,410	16,834	13,873	10,604	13,259

Source: Compilation of data by the authors. [Ministry of Interior \(2021b, 2022, 2023\)](#).

The new Citizenship Code in Greece has introduced exclusionary measures that make it challenging for immigrants to obtain Greek citizenship. The strict economic criteria, along with lengthy processing times and difficult examinations, have led to a significant decline in citizenship acquisitions. The code's focus on income requirements has been criticized for potentially perpetuating discrimination and inequality.

2. Materials and Methods

In this research, the authors recruited participants for their study through their networks and the NGO "Generation 2.0" in Athens. "Generation 2.0" is an organization that focuses on promoting human rights and specifically advocating for second-generation immigrants' acquisition of citizenship in Greece. The NGO provides legal counseling and intercultural mediation services to immigrants and assists them with the often-complex process of applying for citizenship.

The participants selected for this study were individuals who had recently received negative outcomes in their citizenship applications. The decision to focus on this specific group was based on the guidance of the legal advisor at the NGO, who believed that these individuals would be willing to share their experiences through interviews. The legal advisor also mentioned that these participants were likely to express a desire to talk about their experiences because they felt disillusioned with the outcome of their applications. Additionally, they hoped that by speaking out, they could draw attention to the injustices they perceived in the citizenship application process, especially in case the situation improved for them in the future.

The research study involved a total of 10 participants, consisting of 8 women and 2 men, as detailed in Table 2. Among them, six participants were from Albania, one from

Russia, one from Ukraine, one from Turkey, and one from Armenia. The duration of their residence in Greece varied, ranging from 13 to 31 years. All names used are pseudonyms.

Table 2. Research participants.

Name and Gender	Gender, Age	Country of Origin	Years in Greece
Yildiz	F, 45	Turkey	13
Natalya	F, 38	Russia	13
Nare	F, 39	Armenia	14
Veronika	F, 48	Ukraine	20
Erjon	M, 43	Albania	23
Zana	F, 54	Albania	24
Teuta	F, 59	Albania	27
Valbona	F, 57	Albania	27
Edmond	M, 61	Albania	31
Sonila	F, 57	Albania	31

Interviews took place between June and August 2022. Interviews with Athens-based participants were conducted in coffee shops while interviews with participants living elsewhere were conducted over the telephone or through Skype. Before conducting the interviews, the participants were fully informed about the purpose of this study and the measures taken to protect their data. All participants provided their consent, both orally and in writing before the interviews were conducted. The interviews typically lasted between 55 to 60 min each and were conducted in Greek, as all participants were proficient in the language, which was a prerequisite for their participation in the citizenship examinations. An interview schedule was used, containing questions about the respondents' migration trajectory and life in Greece, reasons why the respondents would like to acquire Greek citizenship, their feelings about their application rejection, attitudes towards the Greek public administration, degree to which they feel 'safe' in Greece, their opinions about how the Greek state deals with migrants and refugees, and their views on the written examination for citizenship.

The researcher (the first author of this paper) took into account the ethical considerations involved in research with migrants, addressing issues of representation and power relations between the researcher and participants. Certain scholars have highlighted the importance of being mindful of power imbalances and avoiding speaking for participants (Nast 1994; Behar 1996; Valentine 1997; Bondi 2003; Brydon 2006). The researcher took care to disrupt their positionality and emphasized non-hierarchical interactions during the research. Reflexivity played a crucial role in acknowledging biases and considering the politics involved in knowledge production, data collection, and reporting (Rose 1997). The participants were encouraged to freely discuss their situations and were allowed to share their versions of their experiences. The primary goal of this study was to gain insight into the lived experiences of the informants regarding the citizenship application and rejection processes. By doing so, the researchers aimed to provide a counterbalance to the often-negative views and portrayals of marginalized social groups that are commonly circulated through political discourse and mainstream media.

To analyze the data collected from the interviews, the researchers followed the thematic analysis model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The transcriptions of the recorded interviews were coded for analysis. The themes that emerged were the following: emotional attachment and sense of belonging, cultural affinity, safety and security, career and professional aspirations, social integration and civic engagement, and emotional distress. By employing this thematic analysis approach, the researchers aimed to gain deeper insights into these specific aspects of the participants' experiences related to the citizenship application and rejection processes.

Research Participants

Yildiz, 45, comes from Turkey. She lives in Athens. She studied management at a university in Turkey, and business in Rome, Italy, and she is a graduate of the Department of French Language and Literature, of the University of Athens in Greece. She works in a telemarketing company in Athens. She has also contributed to published anthologies of poetry and prose. She has been living in Greece for 13 years and she has now a ten-year residence permit.

Natalya, 38, comes from Moscow, Russia. She lives in Volos, is married to a Greek, and is the mother of two children. She has a degree in teaching Russian as a foreign language from a Russian university and a degree in History, Archaeology, and Social Anthropology from the University of Thessaly. She teaches Russian in private language schools in Volos, and she also does secretarial work in her husband's business.

Nare, 39, comes from Armenia. She lives in Patras, and she is married to an Armenian. She is the mother of two children. She came to Greece 14 years ago for doctoral studies. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Athens. She works as an English teacher, enabling her to have a residence permit.

Veronika, 48, comes from Ukraine. She came to Greece as an economic migrant 20 years ago. She lives in Thessaloniki. Initially, she wanted to collect some money and go back to her home country. After about three years, she realized that she liked Greece more. In 2015, she managed to bring her daughter to Greece. She holds a degree in economics from Ukraine and a degree in Greek literature from the University of Thessaloniki. In 2016, she started a personal business. Her 5-year residence permit expired in 2020 and it was extended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Erjon, 43, comes from Albania. He lives in Thessaloniki. He came to Greece 24 years ago. He graduated from technical secondary education in Albania, and he has been working in the tourism sector in Greece since he was 22. In the last 7 years, he has been working as a chef. He has a 5-year residence permit.

Zana, 54, lives in Thessaloniki with her son. She came to Greece 24 years ago and she has a ten-year residence permit which is to expire soon. In Albania, she worked as a primary school teacher for 8 years. In Greece, she has changed several jobs, ranging from fast-food restaurant employee to housekeeper in the residence of an MP. She has also worked as an intercultural mediator in a hospital, and she has also taught Albanian at Albanian community schools voluntarily.

Teuta, 59, comes from Albania. She lives in Chalkida. She came to Greece 27 years ago. She finished secondary school in Albania and studied textile engineering for a few years without graduating. She worked in the textile industry in Albania for 8 years before coming to Greece. In Greece, she has worked as a cook in small restaurants, as a cleaner, and as a caregiver for the elderly. She has a ten-year residence permit. She is a mother of two children. Both have gone to university in Greece.

Valbona, 57, comes from Albania. She lives in Patras with her Albanian husband. She came to Greece 27 years ago. She has two children who live in the UK. She studied economics and engineering in Albania but in Greece, she worked as a cleaner. Currently, she is not working. After a ten-year residence permit, she is now entitled to a three-year permit which has not been issued yet. Her children, who have both Greek and British citizenship, help her through the Greek red tape.

Edmond, 61, comes from Albania. He lives in a village around Trikala, Thessaly with Sonila, his wife. He came to Greece 31 years ago. In Albania, he was an army officer and in Greece, he was employed as a builder. Like Valbona, he has applied for a three-year permit. Edmond and Sonila have two children who live in the Netherlands.

Sonila, 57, comes from Albania. She is Edmond's wife. She has a degree in economics from Albania. In Greece, she worked as a domestic cleaner for 32 years. Like Edmond, she has applied for a three-year permit after the expiration of her ten-year permit.

3. Results

3.1. *Reasons for Acquiring Greek Citizenship*

Interviews with immigrants reveal a diverse array of motivations for their desire to become Greek citizens. While some utilitarian motives, such as securing rights, social benefits, and economic opportunities, are evident, the reasons extend beyond mere practical considerations. Immigrants express a deep emotional attachment and a sense of belonging to Greece, driven by their experiences, cultural affinity, and long-term aspirations.

3.1.1. Emotional Attachment and Sense of Belonging

Zana passionately expresses her emotional connection to Greece, “Whenever I cross the border and go to Albania, I am happy to meet my relatives, but this joy expires within a week. I want to go back to Greece. Here are my years, here is my life”. This sentiment is shared by other immigrants such as Yildiz, Edmond, Sonila, Teuta, and Valbona who have spent significant portions of their lives in Greece, considering it their true home and wanting to formalize their relationship through citizenship.

3.1.2. Cultural Affinity

Yildiz’s love for Greek culture and rebetika music has deeply influenced her identity: “The Greek element was very strong in me as soon as I started learning the language when I was still in Turkey. I started with rebetika. . . but my interest in language and culture has not stopped, this flame has not been extinguished”. This cultural affinity creates a deeper connection to Greece and reinforces the desire for citizenship.

3.1.3. Safety and Security

Yildiz expresses apprehension about the uncertainty in Turkish-Greek relations, stating, “I don’t know what will happen to me, I may be expelled, there may be a war, a cold war, or blackmail, that is, I do not trust Turkish relations with Greece”. For her, acquiring Greek citizenship provides a sense of stability and protection in an ever-changing geopolitical landscape. Natalya also cites concerns about the situation between Russia and Ukraine, making her feel safer with Greek citizenship.

3.1.4. Career and Professional Aspirations

Nare’s aspiration to join ASEP (Supreme Council for Civil Personnel Selection) and secure a public teaching position exemplifies how citizenship can open doors to specific job opportunities. She states, “I would like to join ASEP. I have high grades and relevance in all my degrees. This way, I could find a public teaching position and I could have professional security”. Furthermore, the desire to provide a better future for their children drives immigrants such as Nare to seek citizenship, as having Greek citizenship may enhance their children’s prospects in education and employment. Teuta’s interview reveals that she missed two opportunities because she lacked Greek citizenship: to work as a cleaner at the University of Patras and to attend nursing school at the same university.

3.1.5. Social Integration and Civic Engagement

Becoming a Greek citizen is seen as a pathway to active civic participation and social integration. Immigrants like Yildiz, Sonila, Nare, Natalya, Veronika, and Zana engage in various volunteer activities, contributing positively to Greek society. Yildiz volunteers in three animal shelters and as an interpreter in a Greek-Turkish orphanage. Sonila cares for elderly people in her village, buying their medicines and helping with other chores. Nare is an active member of a charity organization in Thessaloniki. Natalya is a member of the Traditional Greek Dances group in Kalamata. Veronika volunteers to help refugees from Ukraine, and Zana is a volunteer in an Albanian cultural association. This involvement reflects their commitment to embracing Greek values and becoming valuable members of the Greek community. Political participation and active civic engagement are mentioned by Edmond and Veronika as a reason for naturalization:

I believe in democracy and I believe in the vote of the citizen. When you can vote, you understand that you also have the responsibility of that vote. But not for someone else to decide about my future, even though I currently contribute to the system and the tax system and any system that concerns people's lives in Greece at the same time I cannot participate in decisions others make on my account (Veronika).

In conclusion, the motivations for acquiring Greek citizenship among immigrants are multifaceted. While practical considerations, such as rights and opportunities, are significant factors, the emotional attachment, cultural affinity, and aspirations for a deeper connection with Greece play equally important roles. Understanding and acknowledging these motivations can help foster a sense of belonging and integration, benefiting both immigrants and Greek society as a whole.

3.2. Frustration and Emotional Distress about Citizenship Rejection

As can be seen in Table 2, the immigrants from Albania are the ones who have resided in Greece for a longer period (23–31 years). An issue that came up in the interviews was their frustration about their residence status. Not only were their citizenship applications rejected but also the Greek state renews their residence permits for limited amounts of time. In the following excerpt, Valbona expresses frustration about her residence status, as her citizenship application was rejected, and even though her residence permits undergo periodic renewals, each renewal is only granted for a limited duration. She worries about the uncertainty of her husband's job prospects after a serious work accident and the challenges of meeting the high financial criteria for citizenship.

The fact that, for example, now that we have applied for residence renewal for 3 years, again, while we have already paid the money for the citizenship. . . It's all this uncertainty that you don't know what they [the government] might do next. My husband had a serious work accident and he does not know if after this he will be able to find work again in a country that already has high unemployment rates. Now that we are older it's harder to find work to pay the bills, not to mention meeting the high financial criteria for citizenship (Valbona).

Edmond criticizes the government's use of high-income thresholds as an exclusionary measure for immigrants aspiring to acquire citizenship. He questions the state mechanism and wonders whether it aims to collect money from foreigners or genuinely help them integrate into society.

Three-year residence permit with payment of a fee of one hundred and fifty euros plus sixteen euros per permit. Well, if this thing is not a shame, after ten years of residence permit in this country, i.e., the last ten, instead of getting a permanent residence permit, we expected citizenship of course. . . Well, if it's possible, is it possible for these things to happen? How come, what are these legislators doing over there? So it's all about how to collect money from foreigners or how to help foreigners integrate into society? What is the dilemma here in this country? (Edmond).

Sonila shares her difficulties in declaring the required income for citizenship due to employers' refusal to insure her. Despite working for many years in Greece, she finds it challenging to meet the financial criteria, adding to her emotional distress.

I have worked, cleaning houses, shopping for the elderly, getting their medicines, because I have become so attached and I feel like people are my relatives and they have embraced me, I can't give them up, I have given them my life. Thirty two years! It's not my fault that I can't declare the income, I beg them on my knees to insure me and no one insures me, not even the ladies who have properties and villas (Sonila).

The Albanian immigrants express their indignation about the Greek government for the paperwork required in their everyday transactions. The administrative procedures are both costly and psychologically strenuous for the informants:

I don't have a residence permit, even though I renewed it 5 months ago. So I can't leave the country because I won't be able to re-enter. I wanted to pick up some papers from the post office and they didn't give them to me because they said my passport wasn't enough. They wanted to see a renewal sticker on it. All this situation is so stressful (Valbona).

You can't imagine what we go through... my elder daughter has Greek citizenship because she went to first grade and the younger one doesn't still. I have to go to Albania to translate the family status certificate, bring it... that is... this suffering, you can't imagine what everyday life is like for us. Aren't I the parent of both children? Are they pulling my leg? Can't I insure both my children? I mean, you hear something like that. The bank told me, we would give you the loan without a guarantor if you had Greek citizenship. I said, why, what changes? Isn't the house here? Doesn't the investment take place here in Greece? What does it mean? Do you understand? These little things that are very important to us (Erjon).

How can a minister turn our lives 30 years back with a decision? My doctor has warned me, not to stress out. I take pills for diabetes, for high blood pressure, for cholesterol. ... In the end, we will die of stress. ... (Edmond).

In the following excerpt, Zana blames the Greek state for delays and makes a comparison with other countries where members of her family have migrated:

Zana: I wish to get Greek citizenship to stop running into offices and employees who sit all day and either don't want to work or the systems don't work because of maintenance. I applied for citizenship 3 years ago 3.5 years now and I had to go twice because the system was not working.

Interviewer: Is that the main reason? Save yourself the trouble?

Zana: The suffering and this is also psychological, it is not only the suffering with the papers. We have relatives and friends everywhere who have gone everywhere and wonder "Is it possible you haven't got it yet?" And you feel bad. As if something is going through their minds. "Is something wrong?" It seems unacceptable. How is it possible to take so long? A friend of mine has been in America with her family for 12 years and in the sixth year she got citizenship there.

In the following excerpt, we see Teuta expressing similar reasons for the acquisition of citizenship, making a comparison between Greece and Italy.

Teuta: This is unfair because I've been here for 30 years and I still don't have papers. My sisters went to Italy and got married there, and they took citizenship immediately after the wedding.

Albanian immigrants' frustration and disillusionment is enhanced by the fact that their children are Greek citizens. In the following excerpt, Edmond and Sonila claim that their children make Greece proud abroad, because of their achievements. Their overarching complaint is the following: how can the Greek state treat us so badly after we have offered it so much through our children?

Both are Greek citizens, both are electrical engineers, and are in the Netherlands now. My daughter now just finished her master's degree and she has joined a big very big company now to do an internship and my son is working for a global company. My son got Greek citizenship in 2011 and he served in the Greek army, at the borders. My daughter won an award at the University of Utrecht. She won it as a Greek, not as an Albanian. Our children make Greece proud abroad

and Greece instead of helping us to give us what we are entitled to gives us this vulgar rejection.

Another complaint that is aired by both Yildiz and Edmond is the fact that the state does not fairly measure economic criteria. Both of them have invested in property in Greece. Yildiz sold her property in Turkey and bought a large piece of land in Northern Greece while Edmond sold his property in Albania and constructed a 240 square meter house in Greece. They consider it ironic for the government to claim that they do not meet the minimum required income to be entitled to citizenship. The following interview excerpt by Yildiz is characteristic:

“It’s a new citizenship law, I think it was passed in March 2020. In any case, I submitted my application in 2017, so legally this law shouldn’t have applied to me because it goes retroactively. I was in 2017; they should have responded back then. They took five years, and. . . the law is about smooth economic integration, which I have. Then, in August, a circular came out saying that the smooth integration should be from business activity for the last 5 years from the month you submitted the application. They examined my finances from 2012 to 2017, not from now, from 2017 until today, because 2017 is the official year, even though my economic integration was from 2012 to 2017. But they’re applying laws from 2020 and 2021, and they’re applying the circular. The problem is that they used the circular and not the law; this is again. . . So, besides this, there are three things. One is the retroactive aspect, which shouldn’t have happened. The other is that they rejected me based on the circular, not the law. . . and the third is financial. I’ve brought around 300,000€ in cash to Greece over time because I sold a house, bought another one, then sold another house. All of these transactions are legal, and all of these declarations were made before when I was receiving some rental income.”

The experiences of immigrants in Greece seeking citizenship and residence status reveal a complex and challenging journey. Throughout their extended periods of residence, individuals like Valbona, Edmond, Sonila, Zana, Teuta, and Yildiz encounter frustrations, emotional distress, and disillusionment with bureaucratic processes and government policies. The interviews offer valuable insights into the hurdles they face and the emotional toll it takes on their lives. These experiences highlight the urgent need for more streamlined and empathetic pathways to citizenship for long-term residents.

4. Concluding Discussion

The new naturalization system in Greece introduces a requirement for specific evidence of economic integration. Applicants must prove sufficient annual income for the previous 3, 5, or 7 years, depending on their type of residence. The income is considered adequate if it meets or exceeds the minimum wage calculated at EUR 7500. This new provision makes it harder for applicants to meet the criteria for naturalization and does not reflect the Greek economic reality of recent years. Moreover, it goes against the purpose of naturalization, which aims to grant citizenship to those who have integrated into Greek society. A common thread among the participants in this study is their active involvement in their local communities as a marker of social integration. They engage in various volunteer activities, demonstrating a strong commitment to their new home and its people. It seems that the introduction of economic criteria reduces the number of eligible foreigners unfairly.

The interviews with immigrants shed light on their motivations and emotions surrounding the acquisition of Greek citizenship. While some participants express utilitarian motives, such as securing rights, social benefits, and economic opportunities, others reveal a deeper connection to Greece and its culture. For some, becoming a Greek citizen is about feeling a sense of belonging and attachment to the country where they spent their formative years and raised their families.

One participant, Yildiz, shares her strong emotional connection to Greece, which started even before she migrated there. Her interest in the Greek language and culture

drove her desire to become a citizen. Natalya, another participant, expresses concern about her safety in her home country and believes acquiring Greek citizenship will provide her with a sense of security.

Employment prospects also play a significant role for some participants. Nare hopes that Greek citizenship will allow her to secure a teaching position through ASEP, the public sector job recruitment system. Teuta laments missing opportunities due to the lack of Greek citizenship, preventing her from working at the University of Patras and attending nursing school.

Political reasons also emerge as motivations for naturalization. Veronika stresses the importance of participating in the democratic process and having a say in decisions that affect her life. Some participants express frustration and emotional distress over their citizenship rejections, with long and uncertain residence permit renewals adding to their stress.

These findings corroborate those of previous research (Gogonas and Michail 2015) about Albanian immigrants' motivation for the acquisition of Greek citizenship. According to that study, the vast majority of the informants (130 out of 180) would like to acquire Greek citizenship. Of these, only 13 informants would like to acquire Greek citizenship out of emotive reasons, i.e., because 'they feel Greek' or 'they love Greece'. The rest (117 informants) mentioned mostly 'practical reasons'. For example, 20 informants would like to acquire Greek citizenship to avoid bureaucracy and the high cost involved in residence permit renewal—while 23 informants claim that their reason for wishing to acquire Greek citizenship would be to 'have the same rights as Greeks'.

The bureaucratic complexities of the process and the high-income threshold imposed by the government are criticized by immigrants, including Edmond and Sonila. They question why they face difficulties obtaining citizenship despite their significant contributions, especially through their successful Greek-born children.

In conclusion, the interviews with immigrants reveal a diverse range of motivations and emotions surrounding the desire to acquire Greek citizenship. While some seek practical benefits and opportunities, others yearn for a deeper sense of belonging and political participation. The frustration and disillusionment expressed by some immigrants underscore the complexity and challenges they face in navigating the citizenship process, which can be both emotionally and bureaucratically taxing.

This study's focus on the impact of the new citizenship law, which emphasizes economic criteria, is crucial in understanding how it affects immigrants' aspirations for obtaining Greek citizenship. By exploring the attitudes and motivations of immigrants in their pursuit of citizenship, this study, although small-scale, provides valuable insights into their experiences and challenges within the system. Larger studies like this will be necessary in the future, to offer a valuable foundation for crafting legislation that is both fair and responsive to the needs of the immigrant community in Greece. Such studies underscore the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences into the policy-making process to create a more equitable and inclusive society.

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