

# GREEK CITIZENSHIP

A  
MYTH  
BUSTER



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This publication was written and produced as part of the project “Citizenship in practice”.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the EEA Financial Mechanism or the Fund Operator of the Active citizens fund program in Greece (Bodossaki Foundation in consortium with SolidarityNow).

The project “Citizenship in Practice” is being implemented under the Active citizens fund program, by Generation 2.0 for Rights, Equality & Diversity, and its partner, the Hellenic League for Human Rights.

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The Fund Operator for the Active citizens fund in Greece is Bodossaki Foundation in consortium with SolidarityNow.

More information: [www.activecitizensfund.gr/en/](http://www.activecitizensfund.gr/en/)

## Generation 2.0 for Rights, Equality & Diversity

[Generation 2.0 for Rights, Equality & Diversity \(Generation 2.0 RED\)](#) is an initiative launched by a group of so-called 'second generation' young people with migrant origins. Operating as an informal group as far back as 2006, its mission was focused on securing the right to citizenship for the otherwise invisible generation of children, born and/or raised in Greece from migrant backgrounds.

Generation 2.0 RED in Athens, and was officially founded when the group merged with the "Institute for Human Rights, Equality and Diversity (i-RED)", an independent research institute, combining scientific evidence with experience in the field. Today, Generation 2.0 RED is a non-profit organisation with an interdisciplinary team representing a mix of origins, pursuing a common vision of the right to equal and active citizenry in a society that respects diversity. Generation 2.0 RED follows a holistic approach, working with individuals as well as at the wider social and institutional level. Our mission focuses on individual and community empowerment and equal participation in a diverse society, aiming to promote human rights, equality and diversity and fight against racism, xenophobia and discrimination.

The organisation has been actively monitoring developments in the field of citizenship since 2006: the enactment of Law 3838/2010, and the social injustice caused by the [Council of State's Decision 460/2013](#) which considered two of the changes brought about by this law unconstitutional<sup>2</sup>; the subsequent adoption of Law 4332/2015, which at long last gave the [children of immigrants born and/or raised in Greece the right to acquire Greek citizenship](#); as well as Law 4604/2019 and recently Law 4735/2020, which brought about significant changes in the system of naturalisation. Since 2015, when 'second generation' citizenship was legally secured, Generation 2.0 RED has been continuously monitoring the implementation of the legislation and the functioning of the relevant administrative bodies. In this context, in July 2020 the organisation published the [Report on the Citizenship Directorates of the Ministry of the Interior](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the provisions concerning 1) the introduction of special procedures for the acquisition of citizenship for the children of immigrants (the 'second generation') either from birth, if their parents have resided permanently and legally in the country for at least five consecutive years, or otherwise after the successful completion of at least six years of Greek education, and 2) the introduction of the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in local elections for certain categories of legally residing third-country nationals.

## Hellenic League for Human Rights

The [Hellenic League for Human Rights](#) is an association that has been active for many years in the field of the protection of human rights (founded in 1953).

HLHR participates in the National Commission for Human Rights, in the Immigration Integration Councils of the Municipalities of Athens and Thessaloniki and in the Racist Violence Recording Network. It is a member of the International Federation for Human Rights. Since 2011, together with two other partners, it has been selected by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights as the national contact point (FRANET) for Greece in order to collect data and information on issues of fundamental rights and discrimination.

HLHR's areas of intervention include issues related to: sexism and gender-based violence, minorities, immigration and asylum, hate speech and racist violence, justice, the penitentiary system and state-church relations. It fulfils its objectives through the study of citizens' problems, the submission of proposals and legislative arrangements, advocacy, strategic litigation, raising awareness and the deepening of the public debate around human rights through the organization of lectures, conferences, campaigns, publications and other events.

Between 2008 and 2009, the organisation drafted a proposal for a new [Greek Citizenship Code](#) which formed the foundation of the 2010 legislative reforms. In 2012, HLHR launched an online campaign entitled, "[The children of immigrants living in Greece have the right to Greek citizenship](#)" and also [testified before the Council of State](#) in the case examining the constitutionality of the 2010 citizenship reforms. HLHR continues to closely monitor developments in the field of citizenship access and rights, contributing its legal expertise wherever possible towards supporting the rule of law in this field. In this context and in light of recent legislative developments, HLHR have released a statement entitled "[Citizenship in Exclusion](#)".

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## A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE PUBLICATION “GREEK CITIZENSHIP: A MYTHBUSTER”

The project “Citizenship in practice” responds for the first time to the need to evaluate the administrative process of granting citizenship in Greece, in order to contribute to the provision of equal access to this right. The project seeks to suggest and propose solutions to improve the public administration of this process. At the same time, it seeks to inform the public about the important issue of access to citizenship.

The publication “Greek Citizenship: A Mythbuster” forms part of the project “Citizenship in practice.” **Generation 2.0 for Rights, Equality & Diversity** is responsible for its creation and production, to which the **Hellenic League for Human Rights** also contributed.

This publication aims to fill the information gap and tackle the lack of meaningful dialogue on an issue that concerns us all: citizenship.

Here we will examine the “myths” and some of the basic stereotypes and misconceptions that surround migration, inclusion and citizenship, views that have often been established in the common perception as truth.

The myths presented are those that tend to be heard in public debate and the media, as well as some that emerged from a questionnaire involving 20 people from different social backgrounds.

This publication tackles each myth, using documented evidence to debunk each in turn. The data and the facts presented come from the legislation – as it is in force at the date of publication – and from the continuous monitoring, recording and publication

of issues related to Greek citizenship that are encountered in the context of this project.

**Regarding the words “citizenship” and “nationality”**, given that Greek authorities sometime use in official documentation the word citizenship for what in English would translate as nationality, we are using in this specific publication the two terms interchangeably (and we follow the Greek authorities’ usage in order not to confuse those interested in the administrative procedures). However, as an organisation we use the term citizenship.

**Regarding the legal framework**, the main sources used are the Code of Greek Citizenship (Law 3284/2004, as in force today with its amendments, mainly from 2010, 2015, 2019 and 2020) and the Code of Migration and Social Integration (Law 4251/2014, as in force today).

**Regarding the monitoring, recording and publication of the issues**, more information is available on the website [ithageneia.gr](http://ithageneia.gr).

## MYTH 01

### “CITIZENSHIP IS ONE THING, AND NATIONALITY ANOTHER”

There are two terms in Greek for citizenship which are identical in meaning and express the legal link between the individual and the state: “ithageneia” (ιθαγένεια) and “ypikootita” (υπηκοότητα). Those terms do not correspond exactly to English but can be translated as “citizenship” or “nationality”.

In Greek law and other legal texts, the official term used is “ithageneia”. Although the word “ypikootita” continues to be used, even in official documents, it is now considered obsolete. It is associated with the institution of the monarchy, and the word itself is derived etymologically from the verb “to obey”. The term “ithageneia” comes from two Greek root words “ιθύς + γένος”, which essentially mean “directly from the genus,” and for this reason many people think that you can acquire “ypikootita” but not “ithageneia”. This is completely misleading, as legal terms are not judged by their etymological origin but by their meaning. Therefore, the terms “ithageneia” (ιθαγένεια) and “ypikootita” (υπηκοότητα) have the same meaning.

## MYTH 02

### “CHILDREN OF THIRD-COUNTRY NATIONALS ACQUIRE GREEK CITIZENSHIP AUTOMATICALLY WHEN THEY ARE BORN IN GREECE”

In Greece, citizenship is not and has never been automatically granted by birth within Greek territory (*Jus soli*). As in all European countries, in Greece too, a citizen’s nationality is determined by the nationality of one or both of his/her parents (*Jus sanguinis*).

Children born in Greece to parents of another nationality do not automatically acquire Greek citizenship. They may do so only after enrolling in the first grade of primary school (which in Greece is at 6 years of age), and only if their parents meet the strict criteria of long-term legal residence in Greece.

Another way to acquire Greek citizenship for a child born in Greece, or a young person who arrived in the country at a young age, is through participation in the Greek school system. A child must successfully complete either 9 years in primary school and lower secondary school (“δημοτικό” and “γυμνάσιο”), 6 years in lower and upper secondary school, (“γυμνάσιο” and “λύκειο”) or to obtain a Greek high school diploma and a degree from a Greek University or TEI (Technological Educational Institute).

The above two categories can acquire what is known as “second generation citizenship”, which is based on the presumption of participation in the Greek education system. According to the legislature, this is the strongest criterion for integration in the country.

Thus, the children of third-country nationals **do not** acquire Greek citizenship when they are born in the country but rather, after a lengthy process.

The only children who acquire citizenship at birth, even though their parents are foreign, are the so-called “third generation”. In 2010, the legislature provided for the automatic acquisition of Greek citizenship in this case, and rightly so, concluding that the passing of three generations (grandparents, parents and children) in Greek territory is enough for this population to be considered as assimilated with those who are Greek by blood. Therefore, it is the grandchildren of immigrants who have settled in Greece that become Greek at birth, and not the children. This, in Greek, is sometimes known as the “double law of blood”.

**“THE GREEK STATE READILY HANDS OUT IDs OR PASSPORTS, AND PERFORMS MASS ‘HELLENIZATIONS’, EVEN FOR IRREGULAR IMMIGRANTS”**

The process for obtaining Greek citizenship for immigrants takes place according to specific, strict criteria which are defined by law, and can be done in two ways:

a) with an application/declaration for children and young people defined as second generation because they were born in the country and/or attended Greek school,

b) by naturalisation, i.e. the application by an adult, for those living in the country and who are:

- Citizens of EU member states or holders of residence permits as spouses of Greek citizens who have had a child together. In this instance, naturalisation can be applied for after 3 years of continuous legal residence.

- Holders of residence permits that provide a strong basis of residence status (refugee status, subsidiary protection, humanitarian reasons, long-term residency, family members of Greek citizens, second generation status, ten year residence permits). In this instance, naturalisation can be applied for after 7 years of continuous permanent residence.

- Those who hold other types of residence permits (e.g. a residence permit for dependent work, exceptional reasons, etc.). In this instance, naturalisation can be applied for after 12 years of continuous legal residence.

In addition to these criteria, the above groups of applicants must also demonstrate, through written examinations set by the Ministry of the Interior, their knowledge of the Greek language and

four thematic areas: history, geography, political institutions and culture of the country. Finally, they must meet some economic and social criteria, such as stable work, holding taxation records for all recent years of residence in the country, demonstration of family ties, etc., which are examined before a committee of three officials from the General Secretariat for Citizenship of the Ministry of the Interior.

It is worth clarifying here that the term “Hellenization” (‘ελληνοποίηση’) is inappropriate when speaking of Greek citizenship, as it is not a valid legal term. It was used in the 1990s with a negative connotation in order to refer to the acquisition of Greek citizenship by immigrants from the former USSR. In general, the term is only used to refer to a foreign phrase or word that we have appropriated in Greek, or when referring to commercial products. Its use is therefore arbitrary and derogatory in the context of referring to people acquiring citizenship, or when referring to the processes that a democratic state has set out for the acquisition of citizenship.

Therefore, the Greek state **neither** hands out passports readily, **nor** does it simultaneously grant citizenship to large groups of immigrants (mass “Hellenization” as it is sometimes known). The current legislation sets out strict criteria, as is the case in most countries of the world, and those who are interested in obtaining Greek citizenship must go through a particularly difficult and time-consuming process and face multiple obstacles and long delays. In fact, the acquisition of citizenship by naturalisation is an extremely slow, costly and arduous process: naturalisation is, without exaggeration, the most complex and “burdensome” administrative process in the Greek legal system.

## MYTH 04

“PEOPLE WHO ARE MARRIED TO A GREEK CITIZEN, OR WHO HAVE CHILDREN WHO HAVE ACQUIRED GREEK CITIZENSHIP, AUTOMATICALLY RECEIVE GREEK CITIZENSHIP AFTER A CERTAIN NUMBER OF YEARS”

Immigrants who have Greek children, or are married or in civil partnerships with a Greek citizen, must still go through the naturalisation 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 naturalisation in the context of the criteria of social integration, which is one of the essential requirements of naturalisation. And, as in most countries of the world, it is rightly seen as a positive indicator of such. This is because it makes perfect sense for the spouse of a Greek citizen or, even more so, the parent of a child who is a citizen of the country, to have an additional presumption of social integration; for it to be otherwise would be unfair and irrational.

The only difference found in the formal requirements is that the spouses of Greek citizens who have a child together can apply for naturalisation 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 positively in the judgement of the administration – and rightly so.

## MYTH 05

“THE INTRODUCTION OF WRITTEN EXAMS, INSTEAD OF ORAL INTERVIEWS, WILL MAKE THE NATURALISATION PROCESS IMPARTIAL”

The recently introduced written exams for the acquisition of the Certificate of Adequate Knowledge for Naturalisation (PEGP) can to some extent ensure that the process will be impartial and transparent. But they cannot guarantee to what extent the new system will be fair, nor to what degree they will serve the naturalisation process by demonstrating integration in Greek society, for how can this be ascertained effectively or objectively through a written test requiring a high level of knowledge? Social integration is not an encyclopaedic issue, nor should it be.

Most of the questions contained in the ‘Item Bank’ do not help to demonstrate how integrated into Greek society the examinees are. They simply require memorization of the answers. How does it show that an immigrant is integrated, for example, because s/he has learned what the most important institution of Pontian Hellenism in the 17th century was? How many Greek citizens actually know what the Fédération (a Thessaloniki based labour union in the early 1900s) was? These examinations, after all, do not secure admission to a higher education institution, but contribute towards the acquisition of citizenship.

In addition, the increased difficulty of the ‘Item Bank’ and the type of questions contained in the PEGP exams completely ignore the profile of the examinees. For example, the new written examination system excludes a large number of third-country nationals from the outset, and acts as a deterrent for many more. Older people in particular, or those who work in manual labour and probably are unfamiliar with the Greek written word, are unable to pass this new examination. It is **not** enough for the system to be impartial; it must also be fair.

## MYTH 06

### “THE STRICT ECONOMIC CRITERIA RECENTLY ADDED TO NATURALISATION REQUIREMENTS ARE EQUIVALENT TO WHAT ALREADY APPLIES TO RESIDENCE PERMITS”

In the new naturalisation system, specific evidence of economic integration is now, for the first time, a requirement. Applicants must prove adequate annual income in the previous 3, 5 or 7 years prior to the submission of their application, depending on the type of residence they have. “Adequate” is defined as an annual income based on the minimum wage, calculated at 7,500 euros and above. This new provision for demonstrating adequate income makes it much more difficult for applicants to meet the criteria for naturalisation, and completely ignores the Greek economic reality of recent years. It also undermines the purpose of naturalisation, which is granting citizenship to people who have integrated into Greek society. Thus, the introduction of economic criteria reduces the number of foreigners meeting the conditions of naturalisation in an inappropriate and unfair way.

The argument that these criteria also exist for residence permits is not borne out if one reads the Code of Migration and Social Integration. There are more than 30 categories of residence permits, for which only 3 contain strict financial criteria requirements: the long-term residency permit; the permit for financially independent persons, and the permanent residency permit for investors. Therefore, it is by no means the case that all immigrants must meet income requirements to obtain a residence permit. The permits held by the majority of the immigrant population in Greece are based on the degree of integration in the country, shown by years of residence, second generation status, a residence permit for dependent work, family ties with Greek or EU citizens, or participation in the Greek education system. In the case of a residence permit for dependent work, it is not nec-

essary to prove continuous work, but rather to hold a minimum number of pension credits over recent years.

Therefore, strict financial criteria **do not** apply to all residence permits, but only to those based on economic and business activity in the country.

## MYTH 07

### “THE PROCESS FOR OBTAINING GREEK CITIZENSHIP TAKES ABOUT A YEAR FROM THE DATE OF APPLICATION”

Indeed, the Greek Citizenship Code stipulates a total of 1 year for the naturalisation process, while for second generation citizenship it stipulates 6 months for the applications of minors and 1 year for the applications of adults. The reality, however, is very different.

According to the General Secretariat for Citizenship, in May 2021 the number of pending applications exceeded 30,000. The processing of these applications –especially in large urban centres– can occur up to 7-8 years from the date of their submission. Research in the official Gazette of Citizenship shows naturalisation decisions that have been pending for 9-10 years, while there have been recent decisions made for applications submitted in the early 1990s (no, this is not a typo!). 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 naturalisation process consists of. The latest administrative changes have further slowed down the process. Today in Attica, the processing delays in the applications for citizenship based on second generation status can reach up to 3-4 years from the day of filing the application.

In this case, then, not only are reasonable assumptions refuted, but also what the law itself stipulates. The process of acquiring Greek citizenship **is not** completed in one or two years, and may in fact take much, much longer.

## MYTH 08

**“FROM THE MOMENT THE DECISION TO GRANT CITIZENSHIP IS PUBLISHED, THE INDIVIDUAL AUTOMATICALLY ACQUIRES ALL THE RIGHTS OF A CITIZEN, AND CAN VOTE”**

In practice, the process is more complicated and time consuming than you might think. After the decision to grant citizenship is made, and the individual completes the swearing in ceremony, the new Greek citizen must embark upon the process of registration, i.e. registration in the Municipality where s/he resides. After this stage is complete, the citizen must visit the police station to be issued with a Greek identity card. It can take many months from the publishing of the decision until the citizen is called to register. This is especially the case for men, as up until recently there were long delays in the male registers in particular, resulting in many months of waiting for these applicants to be able to complete the process of becoming a Greek citizen.

Thus, a person **does not** automatically acquire all the rights of a citizen, **nor** does s/he acquire the right to vote from the moment the decision to grant citizenship is published.

## MYTH 09

**“UNDER CURRENT LEGISLATION, PEOPLE GET CITIZENSHIP EVEN WHEN ALL THEY WANT IS TO LEAVE GREECE. THEY ARE INTERESTED IN THE PASSPORT AND NOT IN GREECE”**

First of all, third-country nationals who hold a long term residency permit or a residence permit as a “family member of a Greek or European Union citizen”, have the right to immigrate to other European Union countries and stay there for work. In other words, they do not need a Greek passport, as they already have the aforementioned legal rights. In the last decade, due to the economic crisis, many immigrants with the legal right to do so left Greece in search of better job prospects – just like hundreds of thousands of Greek citizens. And we wonder, who would enter the labyrinth of acquiring Greek citizenship just to get “papers”? Especially when this is not usually necessary.

In any case, the authorities grant Greek citizenship only to those that they find to have strong ties with the country, which is judged based on very strict, formal conditions. Ultimately, from the moment a person completes the naturalisation process, **s/he receives the Greek identity card and passport and has the freedom to use them as they like, just like any Greek.**

## MYTH 10

**“TOM HANKS WENT THROUGH THE SAME PROCESS AS EVERYONE ELSE IN ORDER TO BECOME A GREEK CITIZEN”**

Tom Hanks acquired Greek citizenship through the very short process of honorary naturalisation. According to the Greek Citizenship Code, a foreigner can be naturalised as a Greek if s/he has “offered exceptional services to Greece or if their naturalisation can serve the exceptional interest of the country”. Honorary

naturalisation is issued by presidential decree, following a suitably justified proposal by the Minister of the Interior. This process does not include examinations or **any** demonstration of the economic and social integration of the foreigner.

The terms “exceptional services” and “exceptional interest” are quite vague, and can encompass a wide variety of cases. Tom Hanks is just one example; others who have been granted honorary Greek citizenship include: members of the Antetokounmpo family; the Minister of Civil Protection, Christos Stylianidis; the author Victoria Hislop, and even international businessmen. The fishermen who rescued people at sea during the catastrophic fire in Mati in 2018 were also granted honorary citizenship.

## MYTH 11

**“IT IS VERY EASY FOR A PERSON WHO HAS LIVED IN THE COUNTRY FOR DECADES TO OBTAIN GREEK CITIZENSHIP”**

The careful reading of all of the above effectively **debunks this myth. It is not at all easy** for a person who has lived in the country for decades to obtain Greek citizenship.

Depriving people of the access to citizenship, although they live, contribute, are taxed and subject to the laws of the country, is not in line with the principles of a democratic state worthy of the name, and the rule of law. According to the values of democracy and fundamental rights, a person who has lived for many years in any country should have fair and unhindered access to citizenship.

This publication aims to fill the information gap and tackle the lack of meaningful dialogue on an issue that concerns us all: **citizenship**.

Here we will examine the myths and some of the basic stereotypes and misconceptions that surround migration, inclusion and citizenship, views that have often been established in the common perception as truth. This publication tackles each myth, using documented evidence to debunk each in turn.

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“Greek Citizenship: A Mythbuster”

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