

ARSENIY KUMANKOV

**CITIZENSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
RIGHTS AND DUTIES**

ARSENIY KUMANKOV

**Citizenship in the 21st Century:
Rights and Duties**

Belgrade, 2025

Book Series SQUARE

Edited by:

Srđan Đurović, Jelena Vasiljević

Title:

Citizenship in the 21st Century: Rights and Duties

Author:

Arseniy Kumankov

Publishers:

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade
Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS
Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe

Proofreader:

Lucy Stevens

Cover design:

Nikola Stevanović

Typesetting:

Sonja Nikolić, Tijana Baltić

Place and year of publication:

Belgrade, 2025

ISBN:

978-86-6190-012-9

Replicate:

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

Production run:

50 copies



This publication was created within the Regional Fellowship Program, implemented by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, in partnership with the Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS and the Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe, with the support of the Open Society Foundation Western Balkans, Erste Foundation, and Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

The views expressed in the text represent the views of the authors.

Citizenship in the 21st Century: Rights and Duties

Introduction

The 21st century is transforming traditional notions of social and political engagement, reshaping how individuals relate to states, societies, and the global community. However, in political and everyday practice, citizenship is still predominantly understood in traditional terms — frequently tied to notions of birth, origin, and national belonging — despite the more dynamic and pluralistic approaches found in contemporary scholarship. At the same time, the concept of citizenship has significantly broadened in recent decades, expanding beyond legal and national frameworks to include forms such as biological citizenship (Petryna 2002), ecological citizenship (Dobson 2003), and cultural or post-national citizenship (Soysal 1994). These shifts reflect the increasingly diverse ways individuals claim rights and recognition in globalized contexts. Moreover, while the scholarship on citizenship and citizens' political responsibilities in

developed democratic states is extensive (see: Kleingeld 2011, Lawford-Smith 2019, Macedo et al. 2005, Stilz 2009, Tuck 2024), much less attention has been paid to the normative challenges of citizenship in countries undergoing democratic backsliding or in authoritarian regimes (Weiss, Koesel, Bunce 2020), particularly regarding the duties of citizens and their accountability for state wrongdoing. This is especially striking given that most contemporary states are not democracies. In this essay, I would like to address how both the practical aspects of citizenship and the responsibilities of citizens are changing in today's complex global landscape. My aim is not to critique the entire field of citizenship studies but rather to point out the disconnect between progressive academic thought and persistent traditional political practices.

Citizenship, Mobility and Rights

The conventional understanding of citizenship centers on the notion that citizenship is embedded in the very framework of an individual's identity, functioning as a defining characteristic that endows rights and obligations by virtue of one's affiliation with a particular state. Thus, citizenship is a defining and fundamental characteristic of a person. The status of a citizen is typically acquired by birth. This property, which is not chosen but randomly assigned to us, serves as a crucial factor of our identity. Citizenship often replaces ethnicity, another significant political category of modernity. This is particularly evident to anybody who has found themselves in a foreign country. In that context, one's identity is hardly discernible; a person is a representative of the country whose passport they own, especially when interacting with government agencies. Other "natural" and "normal" characteristics include appearance, gender, and sexuality. However, nowadays it seems much easier to change these traits than citizenship.

Numerous thinkers, ranging from Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, through Renaissance thinkers and the political philosophy of modernity to many prominent contemporary political theorists and philosophers (such as Hannah Arendt, John Rawls, Alasdair

MacIntyre, and Philipp Pettit), have emphasized the importance of active participation in the political life as a means of ensuring personal accomplishment and government accountability (Arendt 1998, Aristotle 1998, Bodin 1955, Cicero 1999, Kant 1996, Machiavelli 1996, MacIntyre 2007, Pettit 1997, Plato 1991, Rawls 1999, Rousseau 1968). The assumptions here are that (in democratic societies) a person can fully realize themselves only as a citizen and that citizens are morally and politically responsible for the actions of their government, including its wrongdoings and participation in unjust activities, such as wars or human rights violations. While more modern and nuanced theoretical approaches to defining citizenship exist, their discussion exceeds the scope of this essay. In interactions with the state, we are rarely or never seen as fluid agents with a complex set of identities and statuses.

Nevertheless, I find this bureaucratic consensus increasingly out of touch with contemporary realities. The 21st century has introduced new economic, environmental, and technological dynamics that require a rethinking of how we define citizenship. Economically, global market shifts have increased labor mobility, turning regions like Southeast Europe into reliable sources of qualified personnel. While diaspora and transnational citizenship have been extensively studied (Bauböck 2005; Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004), it is still important to emphasize how individuals who have left — or were born abroad to families from these regions — continue to influence local political, economic, and cultural life. Family ties, emotional bonds, and a sense of responsibility keep many such individuals actively engaged with their “historical homeland.” Though citizens of other states, they return to visit relatives, conduct business, or take part in scientific and cultural exchanges. Others offer financial support to families, activists, or political organizations. In these ways, they remain deeply involved in local processes, despite not being locals anymore by passport.

Another crucial economic issue is the unequal distribution of global income and wealth, which translates into inequality of power and, consequently, the feeling of being unable to influ-

ence political processes in one's own state. While local low- and middle-class citizens may have no ability to influence the government, foreign businesses and celebrities may possess significant power and opportunities. This grants these actors more agency, which the traditional notion of citizenship frequently overlooks.

Ecological issues relate to how citizens respond to the environmental and climate crisis. This might not be particularly relevant to Europe right now, but there are already regions globally from which people migrate because of climate change, such as specific islands in the Pacific Ocean and parts of Mexico. The reason for their migration is structural and global, not something that they or their government were responsible for. They left and are unlikely to return home. Should these people be named nomads or refugees?

There may exist groups of eco activists engaged in environmental stewardship or advocating for policies that facilitate green transitions. However, this is complicated by limited resources and infrastructural underdevelopment in certain regions (such as Southeast Europe). The desires of local elites to use resources for personal enrichment are also worth keeping in mind. A typical example involves an international company, rather than a local enterprise, that corrupts local officials into coordinating projects whose implementation is potentially harmful to the environment. This illustrates the potentially significant consequences of the involvement of international agents. Moreover, ecological concerns, like economic challenges, are global in nature and cannot be solved by citizens of a single state, even the most engaged and responsible ones.

The digital challenges relate to how technology reshapes civic participation, community building, and information access, while also complicating democratic processes through challenges such as misinformation and digital surveillance. An essential aspect of this problem is again the infrastructure base. On a practical level, we should consider the possible dependence of certain regions on global leaders (the US, the EU, China, and Russia).

This implies that a country may import technologies to support political regimes or law enforcement practices, establish authoritarian rule, oppress the opposition, or control the population. Interestingly, these technologies may be developed in “exemplary” and “decent” democratic societies. An example is the Finnish company Nokia, which has been developing systems that can access phone calls. It is not surprising that secret services in various countries — including authoritarian regimes — have expressed interest in such systems.

Beyond these three groups of problems, other realities have been challenging the traditional notion of citizenship — especially the idea that individuals are passively tied to the nations of their birth. One of the most serious challenges is the high level of global mobility. People move for various reasons, sometimes by choice, but increasingly due to urgent threats including war, persecution, hunger, or environmental disasters. Displaced individuals often face the risk of exclusion within rigid legal and bureaucratic systems that prioritize birthright citizenship. While citizens by birth enjoy protection and privileges, migrants and refugees frequently encounter major barriers to integration, even when they bring valuable skills and experience. Many are forced to live in precarious conditions, unable to fully participate in the host society due to restrictive policies (Carens 2013). As a result, their influence on host countries is much lower than it potentially could be, and so is their level of life.

To summarize, citizenship today should be perceived as a phenomenon affected not only by local political interests or traditions, but also by numerous global or international phenomena (Kymlicka 1995, Tan 2017). Major global challenges like climate change, economic instability, and digitalization transcend national borders, requiring collective action and responsibility. Citizens in one country can be directly affected by the policies of other states, especially in interconnected areas like trade, environmental policy, global security, and ecological policies. Therefore, the meaning of citizenship is expanding beyond national borders.

While scholarly work has long challenged rigid, birth-based understandings of citizenship — for instance, through debates around transnationalism or cosmopolitanism — political institutions and practices have mostly remained resistant to these ideas. In the majority of states, citizenship policies continue to be shaped by nation-centered, exclusionary narratives that treat foreigners, migrants, and even second-generation residents as fundamentally the “other.” This disjuncture calls for renewed normative reflection: not on whether citizenship can be imagined differently in theory, but on why political systems continue to rely on restrictive frameworks, and how these frameworks respond to contemporary realities such as migration or displacement. As more countries integrate refugees and migrants, a more flexible, practical approach to citizenship becomes essential — not only to avoid nationalist clashes, but also to ensure that human potential is not wasted due to bureaucratic exclusion or nationalist gatekeeping.

Responsibilities and duties

I would now like to address the ethical-political layer of citizenship. The moral aspects of citizenship, especially in the context of government wrongdoing, as well as questions of political guilt and responsibility, are most commonly discussed with reference to Hannah Arendt. In analyzing the attitude of German citizens toward the horrors of Nazism and World War II, Arendt insisted on distinguishing between individual guilt and collective responsibility. For Arendt, responsibility was understood as a function of political membership. We bear political responsibility for the actions of our political community simply by virtue of being its members. We are responsible for what has been done in the name of our people and our state. This responsibility has a timeless dimension — descendants are obligated to answer for the deeds of their ancestors. Moreover, it is not linked to our own actions. Responsibility is imposed even for what we have not done ourselves, for decisions and actions we did not approve of.

For all its moral weight, this is a traditional statist narrative, echoing earlier conceptions of citizenship. While it may have

positive effects — such as encouraging ethical policy through awareness of past injustices — it rests on two problematic assumptions: that all citizens bear political responsibility for their state, and that non-citizens are excluded from such responsibility. This view ties individuals to political communities by default, treating membership as essential and elevating values like the state, government, and patriotism. These values, while not inherently negative, are easily exploited to justify injustice in the name of loyalty or law. I argue that viewing individuals primarily as citizens of a particular state or members of a political group is outdated. A more effective approach to addressing responsibility and preventing political harm lies in fostering individual moral agency — encouraging people to see themselves not through the lens of origin or status, but as capable, responsible, and engaged individuals.

Arendt's idea of responsibility linked to membership expresses a traditional, modern view of the state and a person's place in the world, which is defined by citizenship. In this framework, moral virtues and obligations take on a statist interpretation. As a citizen, you cannot renounce your people's past. But alongside this, to restore your civic completeness, there arises the idea of serving the homeland, for which sometimes one must sacrifice one's life. Yet the true root of morality is love and respect for a person as such, regardless of their nationality or kinship ties, or respect for the place, regardless of your nationality.

It thus follows that solidarity should not be constrained by state borders or limited to fellow citizens. On the contrary, empathy toward those traditionally labeled as foreigners, outsiders, or even enemies should be considered the norm. This feeling is based on understanding oneself as part of a larger human community, rather than on a mystical unity of blood, national pride, or sympathy for people whose passport bears the same insignia as one's own.

My responsibility for a particular event, political practice, or social structure should not necessarily be linked to my citizenship and place of birth, as Arendt suggests, which is confined to

membership in a political community. It is far more productive to relate it to participation in the effort to build a more just and safer world, to empathy for the suffering of people whose language I do not understand. In other words, readiness to engage in solving problems of a given society should be considered a decisive factor in determining whether a person belongs or does not belong to that society. In political theory, approaches that could be used to support this view may be found in Iris Marion Young's writings, though there are also many other important authors, such as Michael Walzer, who asserted the duty to resist an unjust Vietnam War to prevent injustice against the Vietnamese — not Americans.

Iris Young approached the discussion of responsibility by addressing the problem of structural injustice. Structural injustice arises when many people participate in a social practice governed by certain institutional norms, allowing participants to derive benefits for themselves at the expense of the oppression (most likely unconscious) of others. Importantly, in cases of structural injustice, there is no specific person or group directly guilty of the injustice. These are usually historically established relations in which millions of people participate. As an example of structural injustice, Young pointed to the often-unrecognized connection between residents of developed countries and workers in sweatshops. Many of us buy clothes from mass-market brands. They are relatively cheap and convenient. However, we rarely think about the tailors who sew them, about their working conditions, or about why these clothes are so affordable. According to Young, we thus become complicit in structural injustice: by following the rules and not breaking the law, we benefit at the expense of workers in Asia toiling in dire conditions for meager wages.

I propose we use Young's idea of the necessity to think about justice for people we are not directly connected to and for whose misfortunes we bear no direct responsibility. This concept may be applied in the context of an outsider, a foreigner, who participates in the life and challenges of the host community. By birth-right, a foreigner is not considered the cause of the problems or

the person responsible for solving the problems. The traditional approach in political theory does not confer on them the obligation or even the right to address the issues of the country that hosts them. However, they may have a sense of responsibility sufficient enough to take on the commitment of participation and attend to what happens within their country of residence. Moreover, their willingness to contribute to solving a problem, their engagement, and the resources at their disposal may even enhance the efficiency of their contribution.

I would like to conclude on this note. I proposed that the traditional understanding of citizenship has become outdated. It fails, in my belief, to capture the multitude of problems in society, and rather perpetuates traditional practices that create problems. Numerous groups possess greater influence over a country's domestic affairs than the country's citizens. Consequently, citizens today may feel excluded from political life, perceive themselves as powerless and voiceless, as well as passive recipients of rights granted by birth rather than active participants in shaping their government or society. The economic, ecological, technological, or political challenges we face today should be approached with a focus on who should actually be responsible for actions and change. In my opinion, it is not citizens in a formal sense, but rather individuals who are willing to take responsibility and be engaged. That in itself has nothing to do with passports or citizenship.

References:

Arendt H. *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Aristotle. *Politics*. Hackett Publishing Company, 1998.

Bauböck R. *Expansive Citizenship: Voting Beyond Territory and Membership* // *PS: Political Science and Politics*. 2005. Vol. 38, No. 4. Pp. 683-687.

Bodin J. *Six Books of the Commonwealth*. Basil Blackwell, 1955.

Carens J. H. *The Ethics of Immigration*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

Cicero. *On the Republic*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Dobson A. *Citizenship and the Environment*. Oxford UP, 2003

Kant I. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Kleingeld P. *Kant and cosmopolitanism: the philosophical ideal of world citizenship*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Kymlicka W. *Multicultural Citizenship*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

Lawford-Smith H. *Not in Their Name: Are Citizens Culpable for Their States' Actions?* Oxford University Press, 2019.

Levitt P., Glick-Schiller N. *Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society* // *International Migration Review*. 2004. Vol. 38, No. 3. P. 1002-1039.

Macedo S. et al. *Democracy at risk: How political choices undermine citizen participation, and what we can do about it*. Brookings Institution Press, 2005.

Machiavelli N. *Discourses on Livy*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

MacIntyre A. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

Margalit A. *The Decent Society*. Harvard University Press, 1996.

Petryna A. *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl*. Princeton UP, 2002.

Pettit P. *Republicanism: a theory of freedom and government*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

Plato. *The Republic*. Basic Books, 1991.

Rawls J. *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press, 1999.

Rousseau J-J. *The Social Contract*. Penguin Books, 1968.

Soysal Y. N. *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe*. The University of Chicago Press, 1994

Stilz A. *Liberal Loyalty: Freedom, Obligation, and the State*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

Tan K.-C. *Cosmopolitan Citizenship* // *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship*, A. Shachar, R. Bauböck, I. Bloemraad, M. Vink (eds.). Oxford University Press, 2017. P. 694–713.

Tuck R. *Active and Passive Citizens: A Defense of Majoritarian Democracy*. Princeton University Press, 2024.

Weiss J., Koesel K., Bunce V. *Citizens and the State in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparing China and Russia*. Oxford UP, 2020.

