

## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# “Legalizing Oneself”: Citizenship, Waiting, and Fake Fakeness in Northern Cyprus

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## ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the anthropological scholarship on citizenship and unrecognized states by analyzing how people grapple with the convoluted legal landscape of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). I present four life histories to describe the diverse citizenship constellations among the TRNC's (de facto) citizens and its (de facto) migrants and refugees—and the shades in between. The article integrates and develops three conceptual strands: (a) the idea of “citizenship as claim” and the assertion of a legal standing, (b) reflections on the subjectivity of waiting, and (c) the notion of a “state in drag” and the inversion of fakeness and realness. I make a twofold argument. First, the peculiar constellation of a de facto state affords unusual possibilities for—even necessitates—enactments of citizenship beyond the strictures of law, which then challenge notions of real and fake states. Second, contingent enactments of citizenship comprise an inherent precarity; they instill an enduring sense of abeyance. Depending on one's citizenship constellation, this may vary from a yearning for formal recognition to a life with major constraints on welfare and mobility.

## 1 | Introduction

“Our state is not a sufficient state,” Kerem said intently.<sup>1</sup> “These documents could be questioned because they were issued by a questionable state.” He pointed to his identity card, passport, driving license, and other identity-related documents, which he had lined up on the table for me to see. We were sitting along one of the many picturesque alleys in the walled city of Famagusta, a major town in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). The ivy that had clambered along the brick wall alongside our terrace sheltered us from the bright autumn sun, and a small herd of cats kept crawling across our laps to have a go at the bites on the table. This necessitated us to continually help each other by holding a cat, preventing a cup from falling over, and catching identity papers as they got displaced. The need for collaborative jockeying to keep things in place provided an apt metaphor. The

reason Kerem considered the TRNC inadequate was that no other country than Turkey accepted it as a sovereign state. And because of that, the documents in front of us were also insufficient. “The problem is recognition. Because the TRNC is not recognized, we are trying to legalize ourselves. When you are born in the TRNC, you get a birth certificate, but then your parents go to Turkey to legalize it. We have to do that to legalize our formal procedures. When we get married. When we get a passport.”

But all this did not mean that the TRNC was useless, Kerem underlined. Despite the difficulties of living in an unrecognized state, he said, “I am happy that the TRNC exists in Cyprus. Like it or not, it is a way of representing the Turkish Cypriots. There are Turks living in Cyprus at the end of the day. Whether you recognize it or not, it exists here, and we are living in it. So, the TRNC is necessary. To show that we exist.”

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Yet, to document that existence, the TRNC fell short. The reflexive verb that Kerem used—“legalizing ourselves”—sheds an evocative light on citizenship. It highlights the insufficiency of the state’s legal apparatus and people’s active pursuance of legal status to plug the holes left by the state. It debunks the idea that citizenship is simply imparted to a people by the state. Instead, it emphasizes that citizenship comes into being, at least in part, through their own practices.

The citizenship of unrecognized states raises a variety of conceptual, empirical, and moral questions. If the state itself lacks a recognized legal basis, what legal status does it assign to the people under its rule? How do people navigate the resulting uncertainties? And does a person’s right to citizenship supersede the dynamics of state recognition? A small but insightful literature has reflected on citizenship in unrecognized (or not fully recognized) states, like Abkhazia (Ganohariti 2024), Transnistria (Bobick 2017), Western Sahara (Wilson 2016), and opposition-ruled Syria (Sosnowski 2020). These authors draw attention to the blurry lines between legality and illegality, and the murky self-referential underpinnings of state sovereignty. Readers familiar with the literature will know that Yael Navaro’s work (then Navaro-Yashin 2007, 2012) on the “make-believe papers” of Turkish-Cypriots is an obvious point of departure for a study of the TRNC. My work expands the focus from Turkish Cypriots to the multicultural society that Northern Cyprus increasingly is. I will thus attend to the diverse groups of people that have come to and through Northern Cyprus. This raises new boundary questions of rendering people in or out, and it reveals the diverse implications of the unresolved legal status of the TRNC state, depending on one’s citizenship configuration and life trajectory.

In this article, I draw on Veena Das’s conception of citizenship as a contingent claim (Das 2011), which I then combine with anthropological scholarship on waiting (Crapanzano 1985) and on realness and fakeness (Bryant 2021). The context of an unrecognized state adds a layer of complexity to the idea of citizenship as a claim, because the state on which these claims are made is itself in question. This casts doubt on the foundation of law, its place in the international legal order, and the existence of a national community of citizens. Questions of who is in and out, what is legal or not, what is real and what is fake thus assume a more fundamental character (Bryant 2021), and the legal constellation of endless deferral yields an enduring condition of yearning and waiting (Crapanzano 1985).

In short, this article explores the diverse manifestations of legal identity among both the *de facto* citizens and the *de facto* migrants of the TRNC—and the shades in between. It makes a twofold argument. First, I show that the convoluted legal landscape of a *de facto* state opens space for (and in fact requires) people to enact citizenship claims beyond the formal trappings of law. Such claim-making embroils norms and documents in a way that challenges notions of real and fake states. Second, these contingent enactments of citizenship are inherently precarious and thus yield an enduring sense of abeyance. The life consequences of such abeyance vary from a yearning for formal recognition to a life with major constraints on welfare and mobility.

The article is organized around the life trajectories of four people who have lived in the TRNC for many years but have diverse cit-

izenship constellations. All are affected by the unresolved status of the TRNC and the need to engage in creative workarounds to grapple with the island’s convoluted legal landscape—but in very different ways and with dramatically different consequences. My analysis is based on five research visits to Northern Cyprus of one to two weeks each. Alongside observations and a range of informal encounters, I conducted 35 in-depth interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. Of these, 28 were life-history interviews, with Turkish-English translation by my Turkish-Cypriot colleague Oğuz Haksever, where needed. In addition, I draw on the life experiences, observations, and interviews conducted by my colleague Emmanuel Achiri (who was a migrant in the TRNC for many years), with whom I worked closely throughout this study. We consciously reached out to people with diverse backgrounds and citizenship constellations and subsequently used snowball sampling within the respective community networks.

## 2 | A Landscape of Contested Legality

There is not one “state of exception” on Cyprus, Costas Constantinou (2008) argues, but four interconnected ones: a republic suspending key constitutional clauses (Republic of Cyprus, RoC), a self-declared state (TRNC), the UN-controlled buffer zone that separates these two (the Green Line), and remnants of empire (the United Kingdom’s Sovereign Base Areas). The TRNC should not—at least not in the first instance—be understood as a secessionist state of an ethno-territorial minority. Rather, it comprises a contested sovereign fragment of the postcolonial Cypriot state, a permanent interim administration of the Turkish-Cypriot community that claims legitimacy through the Cypriot constitution but is held up by the military deterrence and economic intubation of its mighty guardian-neighbor, Turkey.

Cyprus became independent in 1960, subject to the condition of constitutional power-sharing between the Greek-Cypriot majority and Turkish-Cypriot minority (which lived interspersed across the island), with Greece, Turkey, and the United Kingdom as designated guarantors. A decade of escalating communal violence eventually culminated in a Greek-sponsored coup, which then prompted a Turkish military invasion in 1974. This caused comprehensive displacement and an unmixing of the island, with the Greek-Cypriots in the South and Turkish-Cypriots in the North. The RoC became a truncated republic that persistently violated its own constitutional power-sharing provisions. The occupied North unilaterally proclaimed itself the Turkish-Cypriot half of a federal state to come. In 1983, when no such arrangement materialized, it declared itself an independent republic: the TRNC. It continues to be subject to military control, political interference, and economic dependence from Turkey—also the only country to recognize it as a state. To the rest of the world, the Turkish-Cypriot assertion of sovereign statehood is a contested (or even illegal) claim, rather than a recognized status.

## 3 | Contingent Articulations of Citizenship

In conceptual terms, I posit that we need to do three interconnected things to understand citizenship dynamics in a context where the foundation of law is subject to competing

interpretations. First, we need to consider citizenship as a contingent claim that materializes through human acts—much in line with Das (2011). Second, we need to conceptualize the plight of the TRNC's inhabitants as aspirational citizens, who experience a protracted sense of being stuck, a state of indefinite waiting—a perspective that resonates with Vincent Crapanzano (1985). And third, we need to acknowledge that contestation over the very foundation of law has profound implications for a legally codified concept like citizenship, because this ultimately unmoors notions of realness and fakeness—an insight I adopt from Rebecca Bryant (2021).

I take my first set of cues from Das's (2011) work on the relationships between life, law, and exception. She adopts a constitutive reading of law, where law becomes manifest through its amalgamation with social custom. Marginalized communities internalize norms about state duties and promises, and they assume a standing (or *haq*) to claim rights through their everyday practices and their enduring presence in a particular location. Das proposes to trace law “in the everyday practices of promising” (Das 2011, 322). Seen in this light, citizenship—as a bundle of rights—is not merely a documented legal status but rather a “moral claim” that comes into effect through what people do (324). Much in line with Kerem's notion of “legalizing oneself,” it requires people to maneuver and make their claims in creative ways.

Das's ethnography is situated in a squatter colony in Noida, on the outskirts of Delhi. Most of the colony's inhabitants do not have land titles and are therefore not endowed with formal residence-related rights to public services like water or electricity. Yet, they manage to broker access to services by claiming their standing as rights-bearing citizens. They acquire communal water taps with recourse to public health imperatives, such as mitigating cholera. Some residents get electricity meters installed utilizing the state's dismay over illegal electricity tapping, which then has legalizing knock-on effects: if a state department issues an invoice to this person at this address, that person must be a legal subject and there must be a residency. Periodic drives to verify the population of food ration beneficiaries yield arrangements where expired and forged ration cards are taken in, while new cards are issued. Some of these cards carry the puzzling phrase “This is not a ration card,” yet they do, in effect, establish the right to rations. The state thus “undoes its own legal standing in the most quotidian manners” (Das 2011, 328). The complex agency through which urban squatters incrementally make assertions to claim their position as rights-bearing subjects shows, Das posits, that citizenship is ultimately premised on the minutiae of everyday life itself.

The conceptualization of citizenship as a contingent claim simultaneously highlights the precarious lives of citizen-claimants. Attempted claims can be denied; successful claims can be undone. This becomes particularly acute for people whose right to be in a country is at all uncertain. This is most obvious for asylum-seekers and other migrants who navigate often labyrinthine state administrations to claim a documented status through legal and/or transgressive means and thus avoid deportation (Cabot 2019; Castañeda 2019). But deportability is not simply the condition of people with the wrong kind of documents purportedly being out of place. Rather, it is a deliberate product of state citizenship regimes, a practice that has imperial antecedents

(Cooper 2014) and contemporary manifestations. Citizens can retrospectively be rendered refugees (Zelnick 2021) or they can be construed as permanently deportable, as Sarah Smith and Heide Castañeda (2021) show in their work on the Chuukese community in Guam. This community holds a form of imperial citizenship that leaves them in permanent limbo: neither regular citizens (nor on the path to it) nor migrants. They are “nonimmigrants” in the United States: never illegal yet always deportable.

The perspective of citizenship as contingent claims-making highlights the human capacity for creative maneuvering, as Das (2011) and others (Reddy 2015; Sriraman 2018) show. Julie Chu (2024) observes that Chinese citizens who suffer state malpractices and abuse are able to effectively project legal norms and summon state promises through aesthetic and performative interventions—for example, by staging a show in the courtroom or by mocking government claims with hashtags and images that go viral on social media. Even the most marginal people can produce themselves as legal subjects through different forms of protest, a phenomenon that Engin Isin (2008) has coined “acts of citizenship.” These ideas open theoretical space to consider how people may present themselves as citizens beyond the state-sanctioned strictures of the law. That does not mean that this is always possible, that it always works, or that those doing it survive unscathed. Nor does it suggest that legal norms and documents are irrelevant or that citizenship is simply up for grabs. But it *does* provide an analytical angle to explore how people exploit the cracks in the system to claim aspects of citizenship. That is a helpful conceptual vantage point in a context like the TRNC, where legal, political, and moral contradictions abound.

The context of an unrecognized state adds a new layer of complexity to the literature on citizenship-as-claim. After all, the state onto which rights are projected is *also* a contingent claim rather than the manifestation of a secure status. The assertive practices of people who seek to claim their standing as citizens are thus nested within the assertive practices of a government that itself seeks to claim its standing as a state. As a result, claims on the state are inherently incomplete. It is not only squatters without land deeds that seek to secure their entitlements, to return to Das's (2011) observations in Noida; the lives of people higher up the social ladder who have formal state-endorsed land documents (alongside university diplomas, government jobs, bank accounts, and passports) are also premised on contingent claims, because the legal endorsement of the state itself remains contested. There is thus always an element of uncertainty and anticipation—something could change, possibly for the worse. And of aspiration—something *ought* to change, for the better.

That brings us to the second point. The life stories related to me in Northern Cyprus resonated with the anthropological literature on waiting, as developed by Crapanzano (1985), Ghassan Hage (2009), and Stef Jansen (2014). Crapanzano describes the feeling of social entrapment and stagnation among South Africa's white community during the final years of Apartheid. They preserve themselves with closely monitored social norms and an expansive repertoire of myths to legitimize a system that has become increasingly difficult to maintain and justify. In effect, they “are caught in the peculiar, the paralytic, time of waiting.” (Crapanzano 1985, 42). Waiting, he elaborates, is not simply

idling. Rather: “[One] is always waiting for something. It is an anticipation of something to come—something that is not on hand but will, perhaps, be on hand in the future. It is marked by contingency—the perhaps—and all the anxiety that comes with the experience of contingency. It is a passive activity” (44). Furthermore, waiting engenders social comportment. It can be longing or dread, depending on what is anticipated, but in either form it has an element of moral self-conduct: “We become disciplined, hardened, stoical” (45).

Waiting has both temporal and spatial dimensions. Chu (2006) describes the yearning for migration among rural communities in China’s Fujian province. Against a background of differentiated mobility, people who do not migrate experience a sense of displacement due to changes that take place in a community marked by migration. Chu uses the term *emplacement* to denote the combined dynamic of dwelling and movement that transforms people’s lives. Hage (2009) develops cognate ideas on the self-disciplinary dimension of waiting in his reflections on existential mobility and stuckedness among white working-class Australians. The broadly felt frustration of “not moving well enough” gains a heroic slant, he observes (2009, 99). The ability to endure becomes a celebrated quality. This observation resonates with the dynamics of racism and anti-immigration politics in Australia, Hage explains: both “mobility envy” toward those who have greater mobility and moral rejection of those who are seen to “jump the queue.” Immigrants and asylum-seekers may be stuck in a difficult plight, so the reasoning goes, but we all are. What distinguishes “them” is their inability hold out and wait their turn.

Hage (2009, 104) concludes that waiting comprises a “deeper form of governmentality” of mustering self-control and endurance, even during protracted crisis (for a related line of argument in the Argentinian context, see Auyero 2011). This governmentality of indefinite waiting becomes particularly profound, Jansen (2014) adds, when the sense of “pattering in place,” or “not going anywhere” derives from fundamental deficiencies of the state, as was the case in post-Dayton Bosnia and Hercegovina. Holding out or “waiting for a normal life” became a permanent condition for people in Dobrinja, an outlying neighborhood of apartment complexes on the fringes of Sarajevo. As Jansen describes, people were yearning for “a past that had a future” (2014, S82), a future that was now definitively out of reach. Even if the “Road into Europe” was projected as the way forward through public campaigns around ascension to the European Union, people shared a deep skepticism about such promises. The projection of that “road” merely deepened the experience of not getting there rather than offering a venue for pursuing a better future.

The pervasive sense of being stuck—of waiting for a proper state to come—captures many aspects of everyday life in Northern Cyprus. Navaro-Yashin (2003) engages with this feeling of life being on hold in the TRNC. She centers her analysis around the notion of a dead zone, spawned by the claim that “life is dead” in Northern Cyprus. My interlocutors did not recognize themselves in the latter claim, however. Some were, in fact, offended. Their agentic capacity clearly had not deceased. But the sense of being stuck was widely shared. Like Crapanzano’s interlocutors, TRNC citizens inhabit a state that they know is unsustainable in its present form, but they are simultaneously determined to claim their place as a political community that

deserves recognition. In stark contrast to the dominance of white South Africans during Apartheid, the inhabitants of the TRNC do so from a marginalized position. Much like the Sarajevans in Jansen’s work, the yearning of the plight of TRNC inhabitants is tied to the foundational deficiencies and uncertainties of the state itself. One can make successful claims on the state, gain multiple citizenships, and advance in life, but a fundamental unresolvedness remains. People, therefore, yearn for a life where endless workarounds, back-ups, and bargaining will not be necessary, where entitlements and legal documents can simply be real—and held up with pride—rather than always having to worry about their veracity being called into question.

My third conceptual premise pertains to this question of veracity. If the citizenship of marginalized communities is a claim that must be asserted in an incremental manner, there appears to be an imperative to “fake it ’til you make it”: by performing oneself as citizen there is scope to become accredited as such (Hildebrandt and Peter 2019). In fact, in the context of the TRNC, this dictum arguably does not merely apply to individual subjects but to the “make-believe state” at large (Navaro-Yashin 2012). Such notions of a recognized state like the RoC being real and an unrecognized entity like the TRNC being fake deserve closer scrutiny.

In fact, we need to turn the notion of make-believe on its head, Rebecca Bryant and Mete Hatay (2020) argue. Turkish-Cypriots routinely depict the TRNC as fake, as a poor replica of a state, which then contrasts with the RoC being real. But the more fundamental point is that the constellation of fragmented sovereignty continually produces a “double inversion”: it turns the real into fake and the fake into real. Bryant (2021) uses the amusing example of Burger King, which used to operate under the name Burger City in the North to avoid hurting Greek-Cypriot sentiments and incurring reputational damage. After all, if a real hamburger chain started operating in a fake country, that would make such a country seem more normal and thus less fake. Yet, this disguise of a fake name was itself fake, because these restaurants really were Burger King. Similarly, Bryant underlines, RoC bureaucrats routinely require Turkish Cypriots to hand over TRNC documents or to interact with TRNC institutions, despite the official line that these are illegal. And it polices the Green Line between the North and the South as if it were a border, despite vehemently claiming that it is no such thing. In other words, the RoC authorities’ depiction of the TRNC being fake is itself fake, because they know—and through their actions they show—that it really exists. Bryant (2021, 75) concludes that the TRNC performs as a state in drag. As a parody of statehood, it not only depicts the fake (the self-declared state) as real. In doing so, it also questions the realness of its others (supposedly genuine states).

In sum, to avoid getting stuck on problematic binaries of state/not-a-state, legal/illegal, real/fake, I will treat the legal status of the TRNC’s inhabitants as contingent articulations of citizenship. As will become clear below, the life stories of the people that I describe are dramatically different in terms of welfare, nationality, mobility, and the legal robustness of their paperwork. But they are all citizens in waiting to some degree, in the sense that their fundamental rights remain uncertain, incomplete, or contingent—pending a resolution of the legal contradictions that underpin the self-declared state of the TRNC. They have devised creative ways of asserting what Das (2011) calls

a legal standing, even if this standing lacks a firm foundation in the law. Such a contingent standing may then afford a next assertion, and gradually, flimsy entitlements start to grow stronger legal roots. The context of an unrecognized state adds a layer of uncertainty, because the soil into which these roots grow—the foundation of law—is itself in question. Even formal legal entitlements and documents could be branded as fake. However, given the convoluted legal landscape that cuts across both the TRNC and the RoC, the supposed fake and the supposed real are intricately connected. What is depicted as fake or illegal affects the supposed real and legal and vice versa.

#### 4 | The Workarounds of a Mickey Mouse State

Most so-called original Turkish Cypriots (the half of the TRNC population that is of “pure” Cypriot ancestry) have a citizenship configuration that circumvents the murky status of the TRNC (Hatay 2017). Alongside a TRNC passport (if they have one at all), many have an EU passport (through their inherited citizenship of the RoC) or a Turkish passport, or both, and it is not uncommon to have a third or fourth passport—for example, from the United Kingdom, either because of family history or personal life trajectories. People with such citizenship constellations may use their TRNC papers for some purposes, but the documents from the RoC or another recognized state are what secures key parts of their welfare and mobility.

For Adam, the TRNC state and its documents were a source of frustration, embarrassment, and even the subject of mockery. I went to meet him in his coffeehouse. He spoke a working-class Northern England rust belt-type of English—a twang he appeared to take pride in. As the child of a mixed English-Cypriot marriage, he held both a British and RoC passport. He used to have a TRNC one, but he hadn’t bothered renewing it in years. He presented himself as a self-made man for whom the state was first and foremost a nuisance. He was facing endless hassles with basic services, like ordering supplies, because no online system would recognize his address or the country he lived in. Shipping orders via Turkey was possible, but “it takes f\*\*\*ing ages,” and it often meant paying double taxes, so he often used a workaround by putting his address (north of the Green Line), but then added the original RoC postcode (i.e., the coding system south of the Green Line) and had the UN bring it across. “It [his address] is Cyprus, I am not lying, it is the correct postcode, but there is a hole there.”

Like so many Cypriots, he used different citizenships for different purposes. He submitted his British passport to register for a university degree because it lowered the bar of being accepted, but he used his Turkish citizenship for a different degree because it lowered the costs of enrolment. Similarly, he used his Turkish documents for a routine leisure visit to Turkey, but he was also a political activist, and for visits to Turkey that could be deemed sensitive, he would travel on his British passport, even if that meant paying for a visa.

He was a passport-carrying citizen of the RoC, a recognized EU member state, but could that be fully trusted? “You are never quite sure. I don’t feel anyone protects me. I have my [RoC] birth certificate now. Internationally, it can’t be taken away... No one

can deny that my parents and grandparents were Cypriot. Nobody can deny my [RoC] citizenship. But they might limit my rights.”

Living under Turkish occupation—“And it really is under occupation,” he emphasized—left Turkish Cypriots with a persistent identity problem. Political interference from the Erdogan government, with its authoritarian populism, its corruption, and its conservative stance on Islam, became ever more pervasive. “I really have scares if we continue on this path. It will have huge effects on our identity.” Turkish-Cypriots were always stuck in between. “Turkey doesn’t care about my identity, and the RoC does not accept my identity as a Cypriot.” His supposed state, the TRNC, was a source of shame for Adam. “People have to see that this state was born dead.” TRNC institutions were an endless source of sarcastic jokes. Among friends, they would refer to the TRNC as a “Mickey Mouse state.”

Such mockery incited anger among the older Turkish-Cypriots I encountered. Despite the evident shortcomings of the TRNC, they remembered the violence of the 1960s and 1970s, when they were desperate for a safe space and for a state that would protect the Turkish-Cypriot community. When the TRNC was declared in 1983, an elderly Turkish-Cypriot woman told me: “we were very happy. We said: ‘we will finally have a state, an independent state.’ At the time, we all thought that the world would recognize us, that we will become part of the international community. But”—she gave a conceding smile—“it was like a fish bone that stuck in our throat. And that bone is still there today.”

Like Adam, the majority of “original” Turkish Cypriots today rely on a citizenship constellation that spans several states, including the RoC, to secure their welfare and their international mobility. This constellation pivots on the claims-making practices that Das (2011) describes. By successfully claiming a status in the RoC, they make use of legal contradictions and overlaps. Some of their claims are legally transgressive or at least ambivalent, but they enable them to live a comfortable and modern European life. And yet, they echo Crapanzano’s (1985) observations in Apartheid South Africa. There is a yearning, a waiting for something, anything, to happen. This unresolved existential question runs deeper than parcel delivery postcodes and university entrance requirements. Neither of the two states that keep the TRNC in check—Turkey and the RoC—fully appreciates Turkish-Cypriots. The lack of recognized status for the Turkish Cypriots as a political community remains an affront to their self-image and a source of fundamental uncertainty.

#### 5 | Conditional Fragments of Citizenship

If citizenship is a contingent claim, this claim is particularly tenuous for so-called mixed families in Northern Cyprus. In contrast to Castañeda’s (2019) use of the term, *mixed families* here does not refer to some members having a legal status while others do not. Rather, it denotes a mixing of Cypriotness and Turkishness: that is, families that include “original” Cypriots and Turks who migrated to Cyprus after the 1974 Turkish invasion (or their offspring), who all have full citizenship status in the TRNC but face problems with the South. The RoC continues to nominally treat Turkish Cypriots living in what it calls the “occupied areas” (i.e., the TRNC) as its citizens, who thus have

access to an EU passport (like Adam). In sharp contrast, it treats anyone associated with post-1974 Turkish immigration as an enemy settler. While there have indeed been Ankara-sponsored relocation schemes, many people of Turkish origin who arrived over the past half-century were not part of such demographic engineering (Demetriou 2018; Hatay 2017). Nevertheless, Turkish cultural influences are often frowned upon in Northern Cyprus; in the South, this entire community faces a hostile bureaucracy.

Deniz has a Turkish father who came to Northern Cyprus as a tourist in the late 1970s, fell in love, married, and stayed. “In our discriminatory way of saying,” Deniz explained, “my mum is an original Cypriot. We use this term... For Cypriots, I am not an original Cypriot, because my father is not.” Deniz lived in Kyrenia on the Northern coast and was in a relationship with a Greek-Cypriot man who lived in the South. For many years now, they lived together on the weekends, and during the week, they had their own family, friends, and work, in the North and South, respectively.

Because of his father, Deniz was unable to get RoC citizenship, but because of his mother, he was issued an RoC birth certificate, which included a personal number. “So, I am in the system as a Cypriot. I have an ID *number*, but no ID.” Even after many years of trying, RoC administrators refused to give him an RoC passport. “Every time I go, they say ‘please come in three months.’” He used his Turkish passport to study in Western Europe and to travel, which he and his partner loved to do. To cross to the South, he used his TRNC ID card—backed up by a copy of his mother’s RoC ID card, just in case a new officer at the checkpoint gave him trouble.

People with a Cypriot parent are legally entitled to apply for a range of RoC identity documents. Their passport applications are typically not formally rejected but endlessly deferred, through delaying tactics with procedural obstacles and bureaucratic loopholes (Hatay 2017). The RoC government’s refusal of such citizenship applications was a bargaining chip, Deniz explained. “They are like, ‘if you will give me Varosha [a valuable beach resort occupied by Turkey in 1974], I will give you the citizenships.’ So, I am kind of a part of the plan.” He chortled. “I am laughing now. But it’s really affecting me in a psychological way... Because they make me feel that I don’t belong... I was born here. I am living here. The way that I talk is Cypriot. I mean, I *am* Cypriot!”

The TRNC recognizing him as a citizen offered him no solace. “Because it is a fake country... So, I am fighting for my [RoC] citizenship all this time. I am calling lawyers, meeting people. I even wrote to a politician... I ask myself why I am doing all this fighting?... It is my right. I have been fighting for my right for citizenship and now I have to change my route? No. It is my right, and I am going to fight for it.”

Although his boyfriend could cross to the North without difficulty, they usually spent their weekends in the South. “Because we can go eat at Wagamama,” he smiled. “There are more things to do, and we can go to the shops.” It was also because they had a dog in his partner’s house, and live animals were barred from crossing under Green Line regulations. Deniz laughed again. “Even *he* has a European [animal] passport! Because he is in the

South!” Because Deniz only had a Turkish passport, the question was always whether he would get a visa when they traveled abroad. Marrying an RoC citizen would normally unlock access to RoC citizenship, but as a gay couple, they could not get married in Cyprus. They could marry in another European country and return, but that raised several complications. They could also get a registered partnership in the RoC (unlike in the TRNC). “But if we do that, we will be all over the news. It is not considered normal. They [the RoC] are supposed to apply European Union laws, but in the end... their mentality is so similar [to Turkish Cypriots]. Unfortunately, we are not so welcome on both sides.” Because of that mentality, it was not certain that they would be granted a registered partnership. “They don’t accept our way of having a relationship. You must prove to them that you are living together and show photos and stuff. And then you have to wait six years, and then if you tick all the boxes, you will get citizenship. You know, it is already my right. I don’t have to do all these things to get my citizenship.”

Deniz’s life story evinces both the potency and the limitations of citizenship as claims-making. He lives a life that defies the Green Line dividing the island. By using his mother’s documents as a presplit Cypriot citizen, he becomes a subject of the state (a legal person with an ID number) despite a hostile RoC bureaucracy. Yet, his enacted claim to citizenship faces major constraints, because of his Turkish father and his homosexual relationship: his rights and mobility are curtailed, and he experiences the fragment of RoC citizenship that he has as an insult to his self-representation as a Cypriot. He is, in short, a citizen in waiting—waiting for a passport application that is endlessly deferred. And more fundamentally, waiting for a more queer-accepting society. Waiting for a Cyprus where Cypriots of recent Turkish ancestry have an adequate form of citizenship. But unlike the young professional Sarajevans that Jansen (2014) describes, Deniz is not pattering in place. His is a more active, agentic, and angry kind of waiting, where he persists in challenging the division of Cyprus (with a love relationship that defies the Green Line) and the reticence of the RoC bureaucracy (by persevering with his citizenship application in the RoC).

## 6 | Deportability and Stuckedness

Deniz’s plight hinges on his mother being Cypriot and his father Turkish. Defne’s parents both came from Turkey after 1974, but she was born and bred in Northern Cyprus and only has TRNC citizenship. Given the peculiar case of Northern Cyprus, as both part of and separate from Turkey, Ankara issues passports to Turkish Cypriots as a travel document, even if they are not (and do not become) Turkish citizens. Turkey was very opportunistic in how it treated people like her, Defne argued. When it was convenient to them to treat her as a citizen, the authorities would insist she was Turkish; when it was not convenient, they would insist she was a foreigner. She studied in Turkey and became active in public protests for women’s rights and in relation to the Kurdish question. This had dramatic implications: she was arrested and imprisoned. Her mother was disallowed to visit her in prison, they said, because Defne was a foreigner. Defne said: “So, I wrote a petition to say, ‘Ok, if I am a foreigner, inform my embassy and send me back to my country.’” They rejected it. When they finally released her, she said: “They told me, ‘You

cannot go abroad.’ But abroad means I cannot go home. Cyprus is my own country.”

In sync with Smith and Castañeda’s (2021) conceptualization of the Chuukese community as “nonimmigrants”—neither citizens nor migrants, legally present on US soil but nonetheless deportable—Defne faced the plight of simultaneously being in and out. After being released from prison, she continued her activism and got imprisoned again, this time under harsher conditions. There were several court cases. “Again, there was conflict, because one judge said, ‘She cannot go abroad,’ and the other said, ‘She cannot stay in Turkey.’ So, I was stuck on the airport.” She smiled at the absurdity of this contradiction. The latter opinion prevailed. She was extradited and barred from reentering Turkey. But in a subsequent court hearing, she was required to present herself. Unable to travel to Turkey, she did not turn up, which caused the judge to issue an arrest warrant.

Since then, Defne has been stuck in Northern Cyprus. “I am like a stateless person. I cannot go to the South, because the South does not accept me.” As a child of two Turkish parents, the RoC considers her a hostile colonist, who will not be given identity documents and who is prohibited from crossing the Green Line. “Neither can I go to another country, because the only way to travel is via Turkey and that is forbidden for me.” Moreover, no country would be prepared to put a visa in her unrecognized TRNC passport. “So, I am stuck in the Northern part of Cyprus. . . . There are so many violations of my rights. About travel, about access to health, about education.” She looked at me to sum up her predicament. “I am stuck between two crises. One: the Cyprus crisis. If there is an agreement between South and North, I can be free, as a member of the Cyprus republic. And two: the Kurdish problem. This is also impossible to solve in Turkey.”

Defne lives in a modern apartment. She is educated and has a meaningful job. Yet, being unable to cross the boundaries of the TRNC, this territory resembles an open-air prison to her. Defne’s plight of “not going anywhere” is arguably cruder and more literal than the socioeconomic stagnation and existential mobility envy that Hage (2009) and Jansen (2014) encountered in Australian and Bosnian suburbs. It comprises a coercive restraint to a small territory, locked in by the RoC that considers her an enemy settler and Turkey, to whom she is neither a migrant nor a citizen but nonetheless a deportable criminal. She is a TRNC citizen, but this citizenship has no international status. She is stuck in a state that is itself stuck, waiting—indefinitely—for a resolution of the Cyprus conflict. The deeper governmentality of waiting that Hage discusses is therefore double-layered in Northern Cyprus. On a personal level, Defne is enduring the stuckedness, while reluctantly fashioning oneself as a good citizen of a state-to-come. On a polity level, that state-to-come stubbornly holds out as a self-declared republic, while fashioning itself as best as possible like a “real” state—that is, like a state that resembles the prevalent norms and forms of statehood.

## 7 | The Fake Fakeness of a “Person of Concern” Status

Bryant’s (2021) notion of the TRNC as a “state in drag” engenders a double inversion, where the fake is presented as real, but by

the same stroke, the supposed referents of what is real are also called into question. Poignantly, RoC officials will vehemently insist that the TRNC is an illegal entity and that all its claims to legality (its laws, its documents) must be treated with contempt, but at the same time, they require TRNC paperwork to keep their own border and citizenship regime in place. In other words, their claim that the TRNC is fake is itself fake, Bryant argues, because they treat it as real when it suits them. Such a double inversion—preemptively turning a real thing into a fake thing to avoid direct engagement with an unrecognized state—also occurs in the international refugee response in Northern Cyprus. Rather than issuing a Refugee Status Determination, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issues so-called Person of Concern certificates in the TRNC via a civil society proxy. Given that this document has no legal status and lacks an anchor point in TRNC law, this yields the peculiarity of a *de facto* status within a *de facto* state—a highly precarious legal identity constellation.

Unlike most unrecognized states, the TRNC is a destination country for large numbers of migrants, including students, labor migrants, and refugees (Demetriou 2018). This raises a different set of citizenship-related issues because the unresolved legal status of the TRNC has implications for those who migrate to it, as illustrated by Rishad’s life trajectory. He grew up in a Middle Eastern country that he does not want me to name. When the violence of the civil war drew closer to his town, he sought an escape and applied for a university education abroad. He had never heard of the TRNC, but it was attractive because there were no visa requirements, and the fees were considerably lower than elsewhere in Europe. After he arrived, he worked in cafes to pay his fees, but he could not keep up and dropped out. With time, his visa expired, and so did his passport—in the absence of an embassy in the TRNC, he could not renew it. As an unrecognized state, the TRNC hosts no embassies apart from the Turkish one. He ended up being homeless until the day the police arrested him for overstaying his visa. He was produced in court, and the judge ruled that he would be deported. Rishad said that he could not go back, that he was a refugee, but his plea fell on deaf ears, and he was put in a cell with criminals to await his deportation. “I was with people who had committed murder, people who claimed to be mafia.” Given the complications of sending someone to a country undergoing war and administrative breakdown, he could have ended up in prison indefinitely. Thankfully, he was able to call a friend, who contacted the Refugee Rights Association (RRA).

The RRA works like a proxy for UNHCR, which does not operate in the North as it would be seen as a form of implied endorsement of the TRNC (my work with Emmanuel Achiri offers a more detailed discussion, Achiri and Klem 2024). The RRA thus implements a mandate that is really UNHCR’s but it does so in a different guise. In that role, it provides a small number of people a document that designates them as a “Person of Concern.” This term originates from UNHCR reports and appeals of the early 1990s, when the organization sought to recalibrate its mandate beyond the narrow strictures of the refugee population as defined by the 1951 refugee convention. Persons of concern is an umbrella term for the combined population to whom UNHCR claims a responsibility: refugees, asylum-seekers, returnees, internally displaced people, and stateless people. In the

TRNC context, however, it is used as a residual classification to *eschew* using any of these formal categories. Through Person of Concern certificates, UNHCR assigns an unofficial refugee-like status. They are refugees who cannot be called that due to the complications around the TRNC status question.

UNHCR officials explained that they provide this certificate to people who fulfill three conditions: their plight resembles that of a refugee, they want to stay in the TRNC, and they have not arrived on a boat from Turkey (people from the latter group are routinely deported to Turkey, which UNHCR finds acceptable as a safe third country). When the RRA provided this document to Rishad, it facilitated his release from prison. The TRNC government condoned his continued presence on their soil, despite the expiration of his visa, and it granted access to rudimentary services, such as health and primary education.

Person of Concern certificates carry the UNHCR logo, they are signed by the UNHCR representative, they specify basic biodata from the person concerned, and they call on the authorities to protect the holder “from forcible return to a country where this person would face threats to his or her life or freedom.” The TRNC authorities usually heed the call stated in this letter, but the letter itself has no legal status. If the person holding it were to have to appear in court (e.g., for a non-visa-related offense), the letter would not have any legal force. Moreover, TRNC law does not mention any notion of a refugee, asylum, or asylum-seeker, and as an unrecognized state, the TRNC cannot officially ratify international refugee law (whether it would if it could is up for discussion).

Both the RRA and the designation of a Person of Concern are thus what Bryant (2021) calls a double inversion. The RRA enacts refugee law the way Burger City sells hamburgers. It implements a mandate that really is UNHCR’s, and it can only do so with legal and financial backup from UNHCR, but it presents itself as a civil society organization. By extension, UNHCR (a perfectly legal UN entity) invents make-believe documents with an ambiguous legal status to circumvent the problem of operating in a *de facto* state (the TRNC). In Bryant’s words, it fakes fakeness. The consequences of this fake fakeness are, of course, very real. Rishad was stuck between having a citizenship from his country of origin (which he could not visit) and a placeholder legal status in the TRNC, which only provided informal protection against deportation. Like Defne, he could not leave the small territory of the TRNC. A Person of Concern is no identity document and cannot be used to cross borders (or the Green Line). For people with a Person of Concern certificate, Rishad explained, “nothing is ever certain.”

## 8 | Conclusion

To understand the complications around citizenship in the contested legal-political landscape of the TRNC, we must consider citizenship not merely as a formal documented status, but as a product of claims-making acts (Das 2011; Isin 2008). North Cypriot inhabitants assert their entitlements with reference to national and international legal norms, but they need to engage in myriad workarounds to navigate legal ambiguities and contradictions. These claims-making practices operate on a

broad spectrum. Adam games the postal service and university entry requirements. Deniz makes strategic use of ID cards and birth certificates to cross the Green Line and maintain a love relationship. Rishad asserts refugee rights within the cracks of international refugee law to avert deportation to an active war zone.

Notions of “real” and “fake” become embroiled through these claims-making practices. There is an overarching sense of real states (like the RoC) and make-believe ones (like the TRNC) that inhabitants of Cyprus are acutely aware of. Yet, these normative labels become unsettled through the continual interactions between these entities. In line with Bryant (2021), external actors “fake fakeness” when they engage with the TRNC to avoid legitimizing it. Rishad’s Person of Concern letter is a disturbing example: this document is given to a refugee to determine that person’s status by an internationally mandated UN body (UNHCR), but it is designed to *not* be a Refugee Status Determination. Similarly, Defne suffers Turkey’s Janus-faced treatment of the TRNC as an entity that is simultaneously incorporated into Turkey and a state standing apart from it. Akin to the “nonimmigrants” described by Smith and Castañeda (2021), she is simultaneously a national subject and a foreigner (and neither) for Turkish law enforcement.

The four life histories that I have described evince a potency to claim entitlements between and across disparate bodies of law, but this ability is steeped in precarity. Adam has a robust suite of passports but worries that his rights could be curtailed. Deniz, Defne, and Rishad have more profound concerns. Deniz is confronted by a hostile bureaucracy in the RoC that denies him fundamental rights, yielding absurdities like issuing an ID number but no ID card. Both Defne and Rishad experience a legal constellation that resembles *de facto* statelessness.

Notwithstanding the inventive maneuvering, questions of citizenship in the TRNC are ultimately clouded in a sense of yearning, of being stuck. While people are able to make citizenship claims, they also experience a stifling subjectivity premised on indefinite waiting (Hage 2009). For Adam, this is manifest in a fundamental sense of injustice and abeyance pivoting on the nonrecognition of Turkish Cypriots as (part of) a national community—even if he has managed to address the practical challenges stemming from this. Deniz suffers from the combined denial of his rights of nationality and sexuality. Refusing to give up, he finds himself waiting for a RoC bureaucracy that piles delay on delay. Defne is free in the sense that she no longer lives in a Turkish prison cell, but she is trapped within the confines of the TRNC. Rishad is similarly stuck in a peculiar loophole of international refugee law, surviving day by day with a two-layered legal anomaly: a *de facto* status within a state that is itself *de facto*.

These insights from Northern Cyprus help deepen and integrate the three conceptual strands of scholarship underpinning this article. In line with Das (2011) and Isin (2008), citizenship can be seen as a contested claim on the state, but in this context, the state is itself a contested claim. Its inhabitants maneuver to establish their legal “standing,” in Das’s words, but they do so toward a state that itself struggles to establish its legal “standing.” In resonance with Crapanzano (1985), the people I have described

experience an enduring condition of waiting, but this waiting does not stem from the crumbling moral justification of a well-established state but the reverse: the uncertainties of living in a state that lacks a firm establishment, but appeals to widely held international norms and morals to justify itself. In sync with Bryant (2021), the TRNC unsettles conceptions of realness and fakeness, and this adds a new layer to the governmentality of waiting (Crapanzano 1985; Hage 2009; Jansen 2014). Both the TRNC state and its inhabitants can be seen as compliant subjects that do their utmost to fit in with the prevalent order. At the same time, they arguably engage in assertive forms of drag performance, thus challenging the norms of that order. There is both (submissive) mimicry and (subversive) mockery. In a similar vein, these observations add a new dimension to Das's notion of legal standing as a situated performance. This is not only about local communities gaming the state's system to claim a standing and thus secure their entitlements. The state is in on the game, and it uses the practices of its citizens to claim a legal standing of sorts in the international arena. Its subjects, in turn, are aware of the state's agenda and use this to their benefit in making claims on the TRNC state, while simultaneously claiming a legal standing with its rival (the RoC), its guardian (Turkey), or its international audience (other states).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The names Adam, Deniz, Defne, Kerem, and Rishad are pseudonyms.

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