This paper investigates everyday legal practices as ways of projecting or contesting sovereignty in conflict cases marked by de facto states. De facto states are self-proclaimed entities that perform governmental functions while remaining formally unrecognized by international legal and political bodies. Such states provide health care and social security, they issue identity cards and passports, and they interact with international aid donors. They hold elections and censuses, control their borders, and enact fiscal policies. As a result, they claim internal or domestic sovereignty but are often labeled ‘pirate’ states, and their existence is usually marked by international condemnation. In turn, citizens of such states live in suspended liminality, living everyday lives that negotiate the boundary between presence and non-recognition.

Taking the case of Cyprus, the paper examines how the ambiguities of sovereignty in the island have been accommodated by the supranational European Union, which admitted the Republic of Cyprus as a member while suspending the acquis communautaire in the island’s north. The specific focus of the paper will be the EU’s attempts to integrate the Turkish Cypriot community without integrating its institutions. What one EU diplomat has called ‘engagement without recognition’ is gradually becoming the de facto strategy of supranational entities such as the EU, as well as global big business, towards such state-like entities. Using ethnographic material regarding border crossing, issuing of identity cards, and other governmental practices, the paper will analyze what it means to live in territory that is officially part of the EU but where the body of law that defines that entity is suspended. The liminality produced by that position is, in turn, contested in daily life, and the paper will show how the EU’s technocratic approach to the problem of a de facto state within its borders may in fact reinforce the (de facto) mechanisms and institutions of governmentality even while confirming non-recognition of statehood.