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'Birthplace unknown': on the symbolic value of the passport for identity-construction among naturalised citizens

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ABSTRACT

When naturalised citizens receive their passport, it is material and symbolic proof of membership in the nation-state, tying the individual to the nation and providing mobility resources. For naturalised Norwegian citizens, their birthplace appears in the passport. What might be the implications of removing this information? In 2016, the Norwegian government replaced birthplace details with 'birthplace unknown' in the passports of naturalised citizens from 31 Asian and African countries. Drawing on this case and 41 in-depth interviews with people of different citizenship-statuses, we analyse the role of the passport and birthplace information in it for naturalised citizens' identity-construction. The procedural change led to an experience of devalued citizenship in practical, emotional, and symbolic ways, by those directly affected and others, showing the precariousness of identity for naturalised citizens. We find that the passport matters for identity-construction, as a symbol of national belonging, and suggests more-than-instrumental approaches to citizenship among immigrant populations.

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KEYWORDS Naturalisation; citizenship; passport; identity; belonging

Introduction

Citizenship denotes formal membership in a nation-state. It is a legal status that provides individuals with certain rights and duties, exclusive to the citizenry, as members of the political community which constitutes the nation-state's demographic basis, while also symbolising membership in the nation (Joppke 2007). Questions about the boundaries of membership in the nation are contested (Brubaker 2010), as is the relationship between different forms of membership. Indeed, being a national (member of the nation) and being a citizen (member of the political community of the nation-state) is not necessarily the same thing, and the relationship between these forms of membership remains unresolved in most European countries

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marked by migration-related diversity (Bloemraad 2015; Brubaker 2010). The term 'nationality' typically is understood to cover both nationals and citizens, whereas in the public eye, visible minority status continues to trigger questions over national belonging (Erdal and Strømsø 2021).

Nevertheless, the passport is the key document that confirms this bond between individual citizens and the state, which today usually means the nation-state. Historically, the passport was invented by states to create a sharp boundary between citizens and non-citizens; it provided the holder a certain freedom of movement and an unconditional right to access state territory. The passport, historically, also defined which individuals were – by virtue of becoming citizens and passport holders – granted an identity as members of the national community, and who was not (Torpey 2000).

In the 'age of migration' (De Haas, Miller, and Castles 2020), acquiring citizenship in a European or North American country through naturalisation provides immigrants with basic security and increased freedom (Harpaz 2019; Joppke 2010). Becoming a citizen through naturalisation normally means acquiring a new passport. The passport might represent a crucial mobility resource by providing naturalised citizens new opportunities to travel abroad, visit family and friends, and maintain transnational connections, without fearing that they will not be able to return (Erdal, Doeland, and Tellander 2018; Leitner and Ehrkamp 2006). However, as reflected in the Henley Passport Index,¹ the strength of different passports varies significantly. The holders of passports from Europe and North America have access to, and much easier access to, most countries globally, whereas this is not the case for the holders of passports from many countries across the Global South. As such, 'citizenship in Western liberal democracies is the modern equivalent of feudal privilege' (Carens 1987, 252).

Despite the opportunities offered by citizenship in Western liberal democracies, immigrants may hesitate to naturalise. This is especially the case in countries that do not allow dual citizenship, such as Norway upon till 01.01.2020. Before this date, denunciation of original citizenship was part of the naturalisation requirements. A denunciation requirement forces prospective citizens (that are not exempted from the rule) to cut the formal and symbolic bonds to their country of origin, which also was the most common reason why individuals chose not to apply for Norwegian citizenship before 2020 (Midtbøen et al. 2020). Most immigrants in Norway who originate from countries outside Europe and North America nevertheless chose to naturalise (Pettersen 2012). This choice suggests that the advantages of naturalisation are greater for these immigrants compared to EU or North American citizens, but also that many naturalised Norwegian citizens have gone through difficult emotional processes of severing formal and symbolic ties to their country of origin.²

This article takes as its point of departure events that occurred in Norway in the summer of 2016 when the Norwegian Police Directorate changed its procedure for issuing passports, and more specifically the listing of the 'place of birth' on the identity page of passports. As of 1 July 2016, the birthplace of individuals originating from 31 countries (primarily Asian and African countries)³ were replaced with the standard formulation: 'Birthplace unknown'. This procedural change was part of a broader move to standardise Norwegian identity documents to meet international requirements for proof of identity. Norwegian passport offices now use the population register database (*Folkeregisteret*) instead of their own database of identity records. As a result of this change, birth certificates from 31 countries have been deemed uncertain and inadequate for issuing identity documents, such as Norwegian passports.

Against this backdrop, we ask: What are the practical, emotional, and symbolic consequences for those citizens whose information about their birthplace has been removed from their passports? Most of these individuals are naturalised citizens who were born abroad, but the full affected group includes children of Norwegian citizens who were born abroad; naturalised children of migrants who may have been born in Norway or abroad; and individuals adopted internationally and brought to Norway as children.

From the Norwegian government's perspective, the procedural change was motivated by a desire to secure the quality of Norwegian identity documents. For the targeted individuals, however, the change in procedure had potentially far-reaching consequences, not only in terms of international travel, but also regarding emotional and symbolic aspects of identity. The Norwegian Centre against Racism took note of the procedural change and initiated what became a heated debate in traditional and social media in the summer of 2016. In these debates, critics questioned state authorities' intentions and cast the changes within the broader context of migration, border control, and securitisation (Joppke 2016; Macklin 2014; Erdal, Doeland, and Tellander 2018).

In this article, we explore reactions to this procedural change, drawing on 41 in-depth interviews with individuals living in the larger Oslo-area. We interviewed individuals who were Norwegian-born citizens, dual citizens, naturalised citizens and individuals with permanent residence without citizenship (see Methods and data section below). The interviews provide a broad range of perspectives on the 'birthplace unknown' case, ranging from those directly affected, other naturalised foreign-born citizens who felt at-risk, as well as others concerned, e.g. the parents of adopted children or long-term residents of Norway considering naturalisation.

The article is structured as follows: we start by discussing theories of citizenship and the symbolic meaning of the passport, focusing on questions of identity, identity-construction and belonging, including an experienced

sense of national-belonging, which have received scant attention in the citizenship literature. Next, we present our methods and data in detail before we dig into the practical, emotional, and symbolic aspects of the ‘birthplace unknown’ case, as our informants experienced it. The interview material suggests that the procedural change led to frustration and insecurity, especially, but not exclusively, for those of our informants who were born in the listed 31 countries. We conclude that the procedural change raised questions about implicit and often invisible hierarchies of belonging, where the precariousness of the Norwegian identities of those in the target group of this particular procedural change was brought to attention.⁴

Theorising the passport

Citizenship is a multi-dimensional institution. It is a legal *status*, formally coupling the citizen to a nation-state. It consists of certain *rights* and *duties*, such as the right to vote in Parliamentary elections and (in some countries, and often only for men) the duty of military service. And it is a symbol of collective membership in the nation, which – at both the national and the individual level – translates into a certain form of identity (Joppke 2007). All these dimensions point to the crucial fact that citizenship is, at the same, internally inclusive and externally exclusive (Brubaker 2010). Indeed, the very invention of citizenship laws in Europe in the late 18th century also invented ‘the foreigner’ as a social category (Brubaker 1992).

The emergence of citizenship laws is closely coupled to the invention of the passport. As Torpey (2000) argues, the historical development of passport controls from the French Revolution onwards can be viewed as ‘the institutionalization of the idea of the “nation-state” as a prospectively homogenous ethnocultural unit, a project that necessarily entailed efforts to regulate people’s movements’. Importantly, the invention of the passport also made individuals dependent on states for the possession of a national *identity*. In the contemporary, globalised world, this identity – documented by the passport – determines the extent to which individuals can depart from one country and enter another. Indeed, despite ethnic, racial, and religious differences, which might suggest that some citizens are more equal than others, when travelling people are usually and formally identified by the nationality of their passport (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2017).

Still, much research in the field of citizenship studies focuses on the role of the nation-state and not what citizenship or the passport mean from the viewpoint of the individual. Indeed, ‘what ordinary people associate with citizenship is one of the biggest lacunas in the literature’, as Joppke (2007) has observed. Our contribution lies in an explicit focus on the passport document, and an actor-centred analysis of the experiences of the passport, which foregrounds the intersections of citizenship and identity. In the

citizenship literature, connections with belonging are present, although not always explicitly discussed, and at times conflated (Antonsich 2010; Brubaker 2010; Abascal 2017). While the citizenship institution formally illustrates the symbolic membership in the political community the reality is often more complex. As the literature on naturalisation demonstrates, becoming a citizen, is not necessarily the same as becoming one of 'us', or a national, in a fully-fledged sense (Birkvad 2019; Damsholt 2008; Hagelund and Reegård 2011).

In contemporary Europe, questions of membership in the nation-state are increasingly contested and politicised, as immigration remains a core area of political debate (Hansen and Weil 2001). Citizenship is the ultimate boundary of the nation-state, as a community of citizens, which also explains the increasing salience of naturalisation policies (Bauböck 2013). As Goodman (2014) notes, there is a continuum between immigration, integration and citizenship policies, all which regulate the inclusion and exclusion of foreigners in the national community.

The politics of membership in the nation-state highlights the ways in which citizenship is associated with identity, which in turn is a relational concept. It is relational in the sense that an individual's sense of belonging is conditioned by his or her peers' recognition of their legitimate belonging in the particular group, community or indeed nation in question (Antonsich 2010). In the case of citizenship and belonging, the individual's sense of identification with the nation-state can thus not be seen independently of neither the state's recognition of their right to belong, once a citizen, nor can it be seen independently of the reception and recognition of the individual's right to belong among fellow citizens (Pogonyi 2019; Simonsen 2017).

Becoming a citizen, or becoming 'one of us', is an inherently political question, while at the same time often practical, emotional, and symbolic. Within the citizenship studies literature, questions of naturalisation are most commonly analysed based on studies of policies (Aptekar 2016; Huddleston and Vink 2015), yet analyses of the reasons given for naturalisation often underscore practical issues such as mobility and a more fundamental desire for security (protection against deportation) (Abascal 2017; Nunn et al. 2016; Skulte-Ouass 2013). Indeed, despite a burgeoning literature on matters of naturalisation, including on citizenship ceremonies, seen in terms of rituals and experiences (Damsholt 2008), little attention has been given to the passport and individuals' reflections on its role.

The passport is both a symbol of the citizen's relation to the nation-state, and with fellow-citizens. Arguably, given the prevalent nation-state system, and the fact that citizenship equates membership in the political community of the nation, the passport is also a symbolic confirmation of the relationship with co-nationals, in this case – Norwegians. Yet, becoming a Norwegian citizen, does not equate becoming a Norwegian in the eyes of all Norwegians,

revealing a hierarchy of belonging between co-nationals (Skey 2010). Some citizens' national belonging is more natural and taken-for granted, others is contingent and precarious (Erdal and Strømsø 2021). This notwithstanding the fact that Norwegian nationhood is of course malleable to change and is increasingly being publicly recognised as plural, but also contested, for instance in relation to the changing roles of religion, or relationships with national minorities (such as the Sami population) or visible minorities (Erdal and Strømsø 2021). Nevertheless, citizenship and the passport remain symbols of national belonging, with roles and functions akin to those of other symbols of national belonging, not least the flag (Billig 1995) or the sentiment evoked in cheering for national teams (Fox 2006; Skey 2010). The flag as a national symbol may be hanging in the background, hardly noticed, yet implicitly omnipresent (Billig 1995). In fact, citizenship for many citizens plays a similar role as a national symbol, which is taken for granted, and implicit in its omnipresence, usually noticed when crossing the border into, or out of the national territory (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2017).

The passport document has itself received scant research attention. Notable exception are Torpey's (2000, 2018) contributions, some emergent interest in the passport in historical contexts (e.g. Yilmaz 2019), as well as studies of the role of two passports in the context of access to dual citizenship (e.g. Altan-Olcay and Balta 2020). Few studies consider the material dimensions of the passport, with the notable exceptions of Cho (2009), who analyses the role and salience in affective terms of the passport photo, and Keshavarz (2018), who considers the material, design politics of the passport. The passport's links with identity-construction processes, in practical, emotional, as well as symbolic terms, remains an issue that has largely gone under the radar within both studies of citizenship, and those of identities.

With the rise in dual citizenship globally (Bloemraad 2004; Faist 2012; Harpaz 2019; Sejersen 2008; Spiro 2016), the reality of multiple citizenships for individuals has been acknowledged. Yet, the experiences of individuals with different citizenship statuses have not been scrutinised in great detail – although a body of work on dual citizenship specifically is developing. However, when focusing on the experiences of dual citizens, the analytical focus is often confined to the experiences of a single migrant group, from the same origin country (e.g. Liberians and dual citizenship (Pailey 2011)). Arguably, the differing experiences of individuals with different citizenship statuses, in relation to questions of identity and the nation-state, including the specific role of the passport document, are in need of further documentation and analysis.

Our contribution is an identity-perspective focusing on individuals' experiences and the role of the passport document, against the backdrop of naturalisation and membership politics in contemporary Europe. We offer a complementary perspective to that of studies foregrounding the

instrumental aspects of immigrants' approach to naturalisation demands on the road to acquiring citizenship, for instance in cases where the mobility capital citizenship entails, easily can be construed as a primary driver of naturalisation (Harpaz and Mateos 2019). We thus follow Bauböck (2019) in recognising that for naturalising citizens, there may be both 'genuine links and useful passports' at play simultaneously, perhaps for some more of the former, for others, more of the latter. Alternatively, as Knott (2019) suggests – there are roles for strategy, legitimacy and identity, too.

Using the 'birthplace unknown' case in Norway as our empirical point of entry into this discussion, we examine the role of the passport in individual identity construction – specifically for naturalised citizens. We set out with an open frame to encompass different perspectives on the roles of the identity aspect of citizenship, which we organise under three headings: practical, emotional and symbolic. Extricating these various aspects of 'citizenship as identity' adds to theoretical understandings of how citizenship is conceived 'from below': on the one hand challenging top-down narrations of naturalisation as primarily about membership in a political national community, and, on the other hand, revealing the salience of the state and peer recognition of identity as a core premise for experienced membership.

Methods and data

This article draws on 41 semi-structured interviews eliciting interviewees reflections about the 'birthplace unknown' case, part of interviews about citizenship and belonging in everyday life in the greater Oslo area (see also Erdal, Doeland, and Tellander 2018).⁵ The interviewees were recruited based on their citizenship status, and the sample consists of four different categories: Norwegian-born citizens (11); dual citizens (one of which is Norwegian) (10); naturalised Norwegian citizens (10); and individuals with permanent residence in Norway who meet the naturalisation requirements, but have not (yet) chosen to apply for Norwegian citizenship (10).

The recruitment strategy aimed at uncovering connections between belonging and citizenship, through an alternative to the dominant 'majority' versus 'minority' approach. While some empirical questions require defining a 'minority', other questions are constrained by such definitions. Our approach is inspired by the need for more critical scholarship which engages with diversity on the ground (Vertovec 2007). For instance, by including only naturalised citizens, comparative insight into the similarities and differences between and within the four categories would not be possible. In the recruitment process, we also found that asking interviewees to participate, based on citizenship status, opened up different reflections. Not being interviewed as an 'immigrant', but as a naturalised or dual citizen, or, for white Norwegians with dual citizenship, who often are regarded as 'only Norwegians', allows for

more complex identity-constructions than are ordinarily foregrounded in research comparing 'minorities' to 'majorities'. Likewise, children of migrants born as Norwegian citizens to naturalised parents were in this study interviewed as 'born Norwegian citizens' rather than young adults 'of immigrant background'. As such, the sampling strategy provides a prism to explore the plural nation that is rapidly becoming an empirical reality, in many European societies characterised by migration-related diversity (Matejskova and Antonsich 2015). The novelty in perspective lies mainly in its fundamental engagement with realities on the ground, thus offering a new tool in the pursuit of avoiding the methodological trap of finding what we are looking for.

We conducted the interviews 6–7 months after the 'birthplace unknown' story broke (summer 2016), in the first months of 2017. We solicited interviewees' reactions by using a collage intended to trigger reflections and reactions. Most participants already had some associations of their own to this case: memories of conversations at the time of the change and reflections on the politics of citizenship and belonging at a more overarching level. In our analysis, we are interested in their responses and reflections and thus we draw collectively on the entire data set, while pointing out the citizenship status of the various informants when quoting from the interviews. Among our interviewees we had people with own or parental background from seven⁶ of the 31 countries directly affected.

The focus of our analysis is on the individual level and actor-oriented perspectives. The procedural change happened – so what? What were the reactions? Which perceived implications were brought to the fore – and why? Through our analysis, we unpack the different dimensions and constituent parts of reactions, responses and reflections, enabling us to connect the overarching questions of citizenship and naturalisation to identity construction processes at the individual level.

Practical, emotional and symbolic devaluation

Reacting, responding and reflecting on the 'birthplace unknown' case

The 'birthplace unknown' case was first raised by the Norwegian Center Against Racism, following a press release from the Norwegian Police Directorate. While traditional media took several days to react, social media immediately provided information about the procedural change and how the change was met. Much effort was spent considering what the procedural change would mean in practice. Would those people seeking re-issued passports for holiday trips in the summer of 2016 still be able to travel to particular countries? Would 'birthplace unknown' in a passport mean that the US visa waiver programme would not apply?

More emotional aspects quickly came to the fore, however. In blog posts, on Facebook, and later in the print media, people shared their experiences. One well-known Norwegian commentator with an immigrant background shared her memories of naturalising as a child, where the idea of ‘becoming’ a Norwegian citizen was seen as an end point to a long-term and precarious situation. Now, she suddenly felt this identity had been re-opened to questioning.

Unsurprisingly, both practical and emotional reactions also had a symbolic side, inspiring reflections on the meaning of having one’s birthplace deleted from the primary international identity document in one’s possession. The situation was confounded by the fact that Norway still had a single-citizenship policy (till 01.01.2020), requiring those naturalising to renounce any previous citizenship.

Interviewees stressed an understanding for the state’s need to control its borders and identify those entering:

‘I think it’s just hard to hold on to the right information. There are many places in the world where you don’t even know when you were born, you know. So it’s not like in Norway, that when you’re born there, then it’s documented, and that here is, well, that the information will be stored in the appropriate way. There, well, your grandfather comes and says, no, you were born in the other city . . . So I think that there isn’t really a system there’ (Lena, not a Norwegian citizen)

The interests of the Norwegian state were often understood, also as part of the international community, and with obligations towards other countries in Europe, with whom borders are shared, in prioritising to verify the identities of newcomers. This endeavour is especially important concerning those seeking asylum, and specifically for those who hail from states that do not produce internationally recognised identity papers. However, some interviewees questioned whether Norway had searched long enough for alternative solutions to this problem, given that having no birthplace listed on a passport would present significant challenges to its holder:

‘It’s not like it’s impossible to check. Yes, it would cost money, I can understand. But then, should the resources contribute here, or should our resources lead to an individual losing an identity, because the Norwegian state doesn’t have the resources to check properly. This could be a question, but then I think Norwegian authorities should make a choice, whether to spend economic resources to check whether what is claimed is correct, or whether the identity will be taken away from the person, or whether the resources ought to be spent on dialogue and training in the countries they don’t see as adhering to international standard’ (Zain, naturalized citizen).

At a more fundamental and existential level, there can be a symbolic weight to removing the birthplace from a passport:

‘It gives a kind of, it takes away a person’s pride, to say that you are somehow ‘unknown’, because then you become a kind of undocumented person, who isn’t worthy of having been born in a place (. . .) Yes, it is the fact that you are seen as an

undocumented person, where you don't have the dignity that we see in a human being. Because all people with human dignity do know where they are born, right? They know in their mind. So then, if you don't know where you're born, yes, well then you aren't quite stable, really. Then we don't know your intentions' (Lena, not a Norwegian citizen)

The sense of experiencing the procedural change as having dehumanising effects is clear in Lena's statement and it strikes at the core of what it means to be a citizen, and the right to have rights (Arendt [1951] 1976). For Lena, the 'birthplace unknown' case concerns basic human dignity and reveals how one's identity as represented in a passport holds value. Political theoretical scholarship on citizenship has long stressed the salience of citizenship as the right to have rights, and the absence of citizenship is essentially dehumanising. These are the same issues reflected in individuals' own perspectives on citizenship and the passport document here. Lena's view ties closely to Ahmet's view here, who expresses his perception of how individuals perceive the relationship of the citizen with the state:

'... so, how should Turkish authorities relate to a passport where it says 'birthplace unknown' ... it's a direct intervention into a person's identity. But that's typical of states, states live their own lives, we are a supplement, like people are the states' accessories, we have to exist so they can live their life, but that doesn't mean that they have to care about us. Now that's a very sinister portrayal of the state, but it is, it is an image of a dark and grey bureaucracy, a dark and grey bureaucracy with its own best interest in mind' (Ahmet, dual citizen)

Thus, the passport, and its relationship to questions of citizenship and identity, are more far-reaching than the limits of the national community itself. Rather, the passport is about the nation-state's power to grant the right to have rights, or alternatively, to engage in what are ultimately dehumanising practices (as reflected in the UN convention against statelessness).

Those naturalised citizens who originated from one of the 31 countries marked for 'birthplace unknown' stressed the concern for the passport as a mobility resource that allowed them to visit family as needed. Many of those 31 countries are already listed lowly on the Henley Passport Index, which ranks the travel power of passports around the world. Thus, naturalising to Norway, and obtaining its powerful passport, is an incentive for naturalisation (Leitner and Ehrkamp 2006; Mavroudi 2008; Pettersen 2012).

For many informants, the procedural change raised new concerns such as whether or not they would be able to access the visa waiver program for Norwegian citizens wanting to travel to the US. Most suspected they would be denied that waiver. Other respondents worried that the passport change could have professional implications. But most were concerned about visiting family and having open transit to their countries of origin for holidays, particularly in the Middle East.

It was widely assumed among our interviewees that ‘birthplace unknown’ would signal to street-level bureaucrats on passport control desks that the targeted groups represent problem cases. And that impression would become unpleasant and time-consuming, hampering their ability to travel swiftly for family emergencies and/or ageing parents. These potential limitations raised doubts about the future and contributed to a growing uncertainty:

‘But yes, I understand about losing the identity, right. That even if you’re born somewhere else, then you still belong here, and especially if you came to Norway as child, and . . . I told you about my own children, so they don’t have the same belonging, as I . . . They are Norwegian in the same way all other Norwegians are. But then they, that they might be born in a different country and have that culture from their parents. (. . .) If the passport says ‘birthplace unknown’ they could be in trouble. I can imagine and I can understand, you feel vulnerable’ (Sara, not a Norwegian citizen)

The uncertainty expressed by respondents was initially linked to the passport as a mobility resource, but later connected to broader types of uncertainty over questions of identity and belonging. In the remainder of the empirical analysis, we therefore dig deeper into the role of the passport and place of birth information as those factors influence identity construction for naturalised citizens. To do this, we focus on *emotional* aspects (issues of belonging and security) and *symbolic* aspects (issues of agency and representation in the state). We focus on the emotional aspects as these emerge in terms of precarious belonging and on the symbolic aspects in terms of our interviewees’ experiences of rejection. The two are closely related, yet more mutually constitutive than interchangeable.

Emotional aspects: precarious belonging and identity-construction

The emotional dimensions of the ‘birthplace unknown’ change became clear with reference to the many steps required for naturalisation and receiving the Norwegian passport: taking photographs, standing in line at the police office passport desk, and becoming a Norwegian citizen. Respondents stressed the sense of security this process engendered, but also expressed anxiety of having their newly-gained status questioned:

‘And it’s a bit like, that people feel that with citizenship there is, there is a security. And that security is somehow eroded with this case. And that in a way, well, that it wasn’t something society at large was that interested in, cared about. That, you know, can we treat people like that? And what confounded that feeling was when you saw the dialogue between the Tax authorities [who are responsible for the population register Folkeregisteret] and the Police Directorate where people who were adopted to Norway as children should be exempted from this procedural change somehow’ (Annabel, naturalized citizen)

The emotional reactions are important to understand against the backdrop of a temporal perspective that started, in many cases, decades earlier. One of our interviewees said:

'you know, after 39 years – it's been there [birthplace in Pakistan] all the time. I didn't see this coming'. (Zain, naturalized citizen)

The temporal dimensions became evident in multiple ways, depending on how long ago a person naturalised, but also depending on how long they waited for that naturalisation and what percentage of their lives they had spent in Norway prior to that moment. In Zain's case, having lived in Norway for 39 years, and having lived more than two decades as a Norwegian citizen, you sense his feeling that all of a sudden, the very ground on which he had stood is shifting. Such a change in feelings of security as a citizen connects to questions of belonging:

'it's about people, it's about human beings, about how we treat each other, how we feel at home, it is. It isn't just the law that says things. There are people saying these things. How can I feel at home, how can I feel I belong somewhere, if I can't trust people, it's so important . . . So I call, or if I talk to them [the authorities] about my passport, about becoming a citizen, and then I can't trust the people who are answering, who are caseworkers, how can I feel at home . . . ' (Mike, not a Norwegian citizen)

Thus, the feeling of being at home and identifying as a citizen in Norway was called into question with the change to 'birthplace unknown'. Contacts with Norwegian authorities were now viewed in a new light, undermining their sense of security and belonging that had been, in most cases, hard-earned and time consuming.

Many informants connected the 'birthplace unknown' case to broader concerns about racism and discrimination in Norwegian society, and, in particular, the potential for increased racial profiling by police and security authorities in Norway. The procedural change was linked to this broader landscape, partly because of the 31 countries selected, partly because there had been no reflection in the state administration as to whether or not the procedural change would constitute a discriminating measure of control at all. Reflections included those who, like Tuan, were not quite willing to accept that the Norwegian state is responsible for racism and discrimination, but felt the need to articulate the different dimensions of this challenge:

'Maybe it's going too far to say its judicial racism. It's going a little too far. Judicial racism would be when a country makes rules, constructs a system where discrimination is systematic. I don't think that's the case here' (Tuan, naturalized citizen)

Other respondents were more explicit, drawing on their own experiences with the Norwegian immigration bureaucracy, which they now viewed in the particular context of 'birthplace unknown'. Sara stressed that her experience

was from a while back, but simultaneously underscored in unequivocal terms what she took away, as a citizen, from this encounter:

'It's very much the case that ... that you feel different or that you have ... (...) when I had to apply for a residency permit, and of course it is legitimate that you have to apply, but when you contact UDI [the Norwegian Directorate for Immigration], however well you might speak Norwegian, at least back then, it was some time ago, so I felt that they, they spoke to me as if I wouldn't understand anyway. Whatever they would have told me, I wouldn't have understood. It's a bit like, well, second rate citizen' (Sara, not a Norwegian citizen)

At an emotional level, there were reactions of anger and frustration, shock and disbelief, fear and sadness. All these emotions were linked by the precariousness of belonging. If naturalising to become a Norwegian citizen is about identity, then the 'birthplace unknown' case unveils existing hierarchies of belonging that stimulated a sense of insecurity among naturalised citizens, and, for many, re-introduces a precariousness that did not exist before naturalisation. Precariousness of identity is connected to feelings of security associated with citizenship.

Symbolic aspects: rejected identities and identity-construction

For those people from the 31 marked countries, the erasure of birthplace in the passport was as much symbolic as it was literal. Several interviewees saw this decision as a rejection of their roots by the Norwegian state, a denial of their multiple identities. But more than that, some said they perceived the change as a strike on their identity – which they believed to be their country of origin *and* Norway:

'they take your background away from you, in a way. It's like when it's says that [birthplace unknown], then it's like they get rid of everything, the background ... even if it just says, even if it's just words, you know, they have a meaning ... personal in a way' (Iza, not a Norwegian citizen)

This sentiment was voiced most strongly among those who had held Norwegian citizenship the longest, and among those who had naturalised with their parents. Removing birthplace from the passport carried the implication that the holder was never truly and fully a Norwegian citizen after all. Some informants expressed feelings of deceit and worried about how the Norwegian state welcomes new citizens:

'how can you just, it's nearly like you take an eraser and erase that persons history before they came to Norway, and it's just so terribly sad that ... I understand how in a way it's hard to trust some papers from some countries, who perhaps have a history of corruption, of false documents, that kind of stuff (...) but then again, you are messing with people's identities, aren't you? You're contributing to, you ... what are you going to do to make people feel that they are accepted, welcomed,

when they say: “no, your past is just, we cannot accept it”. It’s a conflict . . . I notice I get a bit, not a bit, quite angry about, really.’ (Mike, not a Norwegian citizen)

The symbolic rejection of the birthplace translates into a sense of rejected identities – both the rooted identity in the country of origin and the newly-acquired Norwegian identity. The experience of rejection is fundamental and reinforces the idea that citizenship does matter in profoundly existential ways, especially for those who renounced their former citizenship to naturalise. As a result, many respondents expressed concerns that all citizenships in Norway are not equal:

‘we can talk about what each individual experiences in terms of belonging, citizenship, and so on . . . then you get this kind of extreme case, like with this ‘birthplace unknown’, but if you look at what is happening, how things are shaping up for the future, well, one is simply not included’ (Annabel, naturalized citizen)

Removing birthplace from passports has future implications for those Norwegian residents from the 31 listed countries – and perhaps for migrants from other countries as well. These passport holders are being confronted with questions about their identity and sense of belonging beyond the pages of the passport, and, in a practical sense, forced to acknowledge potential future difficulties with travel visas. Altogether, these concerns take on symbolic meaning, wherein the passport holders experience a sense of disillusionment about who is – and who is not – imagined as part of the future national community of Norway.

Conclusion

This study has explored the practical, emotional and symbolic aspects of specific events that took place in Norway in the summer of 2016, when the Norwegian Police Directorate changed its procedure for issuing passports and removed birthplace details from Norwegian passports for citizens with birthplaces in 31 listed countries. Drawing on interviews with individuals of various citizenship statuses, we have highlighted how the procedural change to Norwegian passports was received ‘on the ground’. Many interviewees perceived the change as discriminatory and it resulted in a sense of uncertainty. Some also viewed the removal of their birthplace from the passport as a symbolic rejection of their national membership in Norway, because a part of their identity – where they were born – was devalued, and de facto rejected from being a part of their identity as Norwegian citizens.

The case study of the ‘birthplace unknown’ procedural change demonstrates the importance of the passport as an identity document, a fact that has rarely been touched upon in the citizenship literature. To the extent that the passport has been theorised (Torpey 2000), it has been analysed primarily from the state perspective – as a way of distinguishing ‘foreigners’ from

'nationals' and as such key to the development of the nation state. Approaching the passport 'from below', we find that the identity page of the passport, which includes the holder's name, residence, birthday, and country of birth, matters to people beyond its practical functions. Based on our interview data, we find that the passport is not only important for mobility, but also for the experience of safety, as well as for whether or not individuals feel included within the nation – and by the nation-state – as who they are.

At a more fundamental level, this case reveals some profound reflections about citizenship as the basis for having rights and underscores the state's enduring power in citizen-state relationships: its power to grant the right to have rights, but also, ultimately, its power to dehumanise. The identity page of the passport – as constitutive of the passport's value as a national symbol, and thus of the passport as a symbol of national membership, is an insight from this case-study. This is not least the case for naturalised citizens, but also for other citizens who experience their national belonging as precarious or questioned, such as the children of migrants, who were citizens from birth, via their parents' previous naturalisation. For prospective citizens – immigrants who were considering naturalisation – the case revealed how even as a Norwegian citizen, national belonging may remain questioned and precarious, potentially in the long term.

Drawing on interviews with individuals with different citizenship statuses has provided reactions, responses and reflections on the 'birthplace unknown' case from contrasting vantage points. Citizenship status alone does not predicate people's reactions, yet, exploring how sense of national belonging, expressed sense of entitlement, but also being questioned as a national, experiencing precariousness in relation to one's identity, is worth interrogating. We found that naturalised citizens – whether directly affected by this procedural change or not – were hit hard by the 'birthplace unknown' case, mainly in re-opening questions of identity and national belonging, with a sense that becoming 'one of us' might remain unattainable, even after decades as a citizen.

The temporal dimensions of the 'birthplace unknown' case were striking, especially because many interviewees were long-term citizens: for decades of adulthood, or, for adoptees, since their arrival in Norway, or for born citizens with immigrant parents from their birth in Norway. This longitudinal view was therefore important, and the length of time having been a citizen aggravated the effects of uncertainty and precariousness. By contrast, for newly arrived asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their case, or awaiting appeal, this is the norm of contemporary immigration control systems, exposing individuals to waiting and liminality (Birkvad 2019). However, for long-term residents with a regularised status, citizens and non-citizens, exposure to this kind of precariousness, even relatively limited to the symbolic and emotional, rather than day-to-day practical aspects, represented a dramatic rupture.

For those who were affected personally or through family ties, the fact that this procedural change in Norway happened, led them to question whether it could be the case that they were not seen as equal citizens. This demonstrates the precariousness of identity among naturalised citizens, even after many years. Arguably, these insights into the experiences of citizens (and non-citizens), and their concrete responses, reactions and reflections about the 'birthplace unknown' case, underscore the salience of citizenship, of the passport document and the identity-page within it, and their intersections with identity as a relational construct. Exactly because of the relationality of identities and belonging, it is essential to gain further insight into how citizenship is experienced 'bottom up'. Ultimately, this sheds light on how the co-creation of belonging in the national community of citizens is a continuous process, and how the state's interventions may both contribute to, but also endanger, shared aims of equality, trust, and social cohesion.

Notes

1. <https://www.henleyglobal.com/international-visa-restrictions/>
2. Many immigrants from outside Europe and North America are allowed to keep their original citizenship when naturalising in Norway, however. This is due to the many exemptions to the renunciation rule, e.g. for individuals with citizenship in countries, that do not allow citizens to renounce their original citizenship (e.g. Iran and Morocco), or those where severe implications such as losing the right to inherit land or property would apply (e.g. Russia).
3. Burkina Faso, Burundi, Congo (DRC), Guinea, Ivory Coast, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Congo, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Uganda, Zimbabwe; Afghanistan, the Philippines, India, Iraq, Yemen, Myanmar (Burma), Pakistan, Saudi-Arabia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam; Kosovo
4. We do not engage in speculation regarding the motives, implicit or otherwise, of the Norwegian government in launching this procedural change, and thus note and take at face-value, the presented information, that the procedural change was aimed at increasing the quality-control of identity papers and supporting documentation, to the end of boosting the quality and value of Norwegian identity documents over time.
5. Governing and Experiencing Citizenship in Multicultural Scandinavia; www.prio.org/govcit
6. Afghanistan, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka; please see footnote 3 for the full list of 31 countries.

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