

Politics of Forced Waiting in the Belgian Asylum Regime



Cover photo:

The IBZ registration centre for International Protection applications at Pacheco44 in Brussels. On its sign, the institution is accused as *guilty* of not fulfilling its responsibility of *protection*. In the background, tents of unhoused, waiting asylum seekers are set up.

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August 18, 2025

Master in Urban Studies - Academic Year 2024-2025

Master thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Urban Studies (VUB) and Master of Science in Geography, general orientation, track 'Urban Studies' (ULB)

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my supervisors for your insights and time- Lena Imerja for your initial inspiration and encouragement, and Rene Kreichauf, for the sustained guidance that allowed me to bring this thesis into a focused whole.

I thank my friends and family for keeping me grounded, and for a lot of care and understanding.

Thank you Shardoob, my research and life partner, for keeping me secure and well, for your valuable opinions and knowledge, and for all support and much needed distraction. And of course, for waking up with me at five in the morning to go stand in the rain or biting cold and observe the Immigration Office.

Lastly, I thank all participants of my research that entrusted me their stories, experiences, desperation, and anger, across language and other difference. My work is dedicated to you, and all others enduring waiting and exhaustion in Belgium.

Abstract

This thesis examines the lived experience of waiting for asylum in Belgium through an ethnographic study of the Brussels Immigration Office and the Belgian asylum procedure. I frame this context as the asylum timescape, in which the Belgian state and waiting asylum seekers respectively employ strategies and tactics in a struggle over time and autonomy. I argue that prolonged waiting is not accidental, but represents a tool of governance within deliberate temporal bordering is exercised under a broader politics of exhaustion, that works through time, space, and the body. In this regard, I address how waiting experiences in Belgium are mediated and produced by individual vulnerability. My findings indicate that asylum seekers exercise agency in varied, constrained, and ambivalent ways, most commonly through tactical compliance and endurance. The thesis highlights these practices as forms of everyday resistance within an restrictive asylum regime determined by a paradigm of deterrence.

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Table of Content

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Literature Review: Migrant Waiting in the European Asylum Regime.....	4
The Chronopolitics of Migration Governance.....	4
Living and Feeling the Wait	5
Waiting and the Question of Agency.....	7
3. Theoretical Framework Waiting in the Asylum Timescape.....	8
Conceptual Grounds	8
State Strategies: Governance through Waiting.....	10
Migrant Tactics: Potentialities and Preclusions of Unwaiting	17
4. Methodology Reflections and Approaches	22
Case Study Analysis.....	22
The Ethics of Presence: Fieldwork, Power, and Positionality in a Contentious Context.....	23
Research Questions	25
Observation.....	26
Interviews	27
Complementary Methods.....	29
5. Context Belgium's Temporal Architectures of Asylum.....	30
The Procedure.....	30
At the Immigration Office	34
6. Results Lived Experience of Waiting at the Immigration Office.....	43
Temporal Rhythms.....	43
In the Queue: Microdynamics of Waiting.....	44
At the Gate: Encountering Institutional Power	45
Experiencing the Wait: Uncertainty, Exposure and Exhaustion.....	49
7. Results: Lived Experience of Waiting in the Procedure	56
Living with Stagnation and Uncertainty	56
Vicious Cycles of Institutional Abandonment and Structural Exclusion	58
8. Results: Attempts and Acts of Unwaiting	62
Reclaiming the Wait	62
Defiance	63
Enduring Despite	66
Tactical Adaption	68
9. Discussion: Withstanding Exhaustion	70
Bordering into Exhaustion	70
Discipline and Probation	73
Agency under Structural Constraint and Violence.....	75
10. Conclusion	78
References	80
Appendix A Interview Guide	88
Appendix B Interview Formats	89
Appendix C List of Interviews.....	90
Appendix D Codebooks	91

*My life has stopped everything is blocked
 I feel that I wasted my life
 I lost 4 years of my life
 I wasted years of my life
 And I can't get married
 I can't get long time work contracts
 I can't join to VDAB diploma
 I can't travel outside of Belgium
 I feel like in prison*

(Salem, 12.04.2025)

1. Introduction

Every workday morning, long lines form outside the Belgian Immigration Office in Brussels as people queue up to register their applications for International Protection. Years of tightening migration policy and (mis)management have overburdened asylum institutions and accumulated a backlog of almost 20,000 cases at the time of writing (CGRS 2025a). In consequence, protection applicants are subjected to disproportionally long waiting times, both at the physical place outside the Immigration Office and *within* the often obscure and arbitrary workings of a Belgian asylum bureaucracy. Facing persistent delay while confined to liminal conditions profoundly affects asylum seekers' everyday lives, bodily and emotional wellbeing, and future planning, as their spatial, temporal, social and existential mobility is restricted. Life- and migration projects of asylum seekers and the people near and far that rely on them are violently brought to a halt.

For the past four years, an ongoing reception crisis makes the wait additionally harsh, and at times unbearable, for the asylum seekers confined to cramped centres or substandard temporary accommodation, but especially for the currently over 3,000 applicants, most of them single men, that are unlawfully pushed onto Belgian streets (ECRE 2025). While representatives of the previous federal government, if not too convincingly, held onto an external narrative of capacity exhaustion and resource strain across the responsible asylum institutions, despite goodwill, the novel Flemish-nationalist led government publicly committed to asylum deterrence as official policy strategy (Amnesty International 2025a; Walpot 2025). Within days of swearing in, new prime minister De Wever announced the country's "strictest migration policy yet" (cited in ECRE 2025), and shortly after, a digital deterrence campaign personally addressing potential asylum seekers was launched (Belga 2025; van Brunnersum 2025). As Belgium further aligns with a reemergence of national fortification, the established consensus within migration studies that such deterrence is ineffective in the face of grave threat and suffering, does not seem to be of interest (Abdelaaty 2023; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan 2017; Rieght 2024).



Figure 1. Image spread within the digital deterrence campaign. Encampments of unhoused asylum seekers indicate what new arrivals must expect. The Quran Verse hints whom the campaign targets.

Source: Official WhatsApp Channel of the Immigration Office

Across the globe, (aspiring) migrants are waiting to leave, move, stay, or return- they “wait for the smuggler’s decision to take them on board; for the benevolence of an employer; for the police; for an amnesty; for a positive change in immigration regulation; for the boat that allows to reach a destination; or for death” (Albahari 2006:13). Notwithstanding, the experiential relevance and analytical potential of waiting have only been realised over the last decade, just as the social sciences more broadly have tended to dismiss it as empty or banal condition (Auyero 2012; Conlon 2014; Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021). Pertaining migration scholars now argue that established conceptions of migration, both common-sense and scholarly, as “the *movement* of people away from their usual *place* of residence to a new place of residence,” (IOM 2025:para.1, emphasis added) fail to account for the significant moments of involuntary slowdown and halt that intersperse these movements. This reflects a long-standing spatial bias within migration studies in the focus on geographical borders, routes or arrivals, where temporal considerations are usually implicit but rarely examined in their own right (Conlon 2014; Cwerner 2001; DeBacker et al. 2023; Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021; Vidal and Musset 2016a). Scholars therefore call for theorising from the margins by employing “a thoroughgoing temporal gaze” to understand whose are immobilised, under what conditions, and with which consequences (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021:1). Much is to be revealed about mobility by exploring immobility, and much is to be learned about migration trajectories by understanding their disruptions (Conlon 2014; Griffiths 2014; Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021; Vidal and Musset 2016a).

Despite the turn to temporal perspectives in the study of migration and asylum, significant empirical gaps remain. Within the ubiquity of waiting within migration projects, more obvious or high profile waiting spaces like refugee camps, detention and deportation facilities, and informal border zones (see Bellino and Gluckman 2024; Bhatia and Canning 2021; Kreichauf 2021; Meier and Donà 2021; Miranda and Silva Hernández 2022; Ogden III), have received comparatively more scholarly attention, as have what appear to be the most precarious migrant groups of refused asylum seekers awaiting deportation or living illegalised existences (see, for example Griffiths 2014, Schuster 2011; Bendixsen and Eriksen 2018). In reaction, Jacobsen (2021) has demanded a look beyond experiences, sites and institutions near geographical borders to both urban and bureaucratic contexts, in which making-wait is employed as bordering practice. Few studies have since examined politics and effects of prolonged waiting in the context of national asylum procedures and within urban arrival infrastructures, such as reception centres, in the EU (see, for example, Meier and Donà 2021; Vianelli, Gill and Hoellerer 2022) and in Belgium specifically (De Backer et al. 2023; Crine, Flamand and Raimondo 2024), but only rarely has the *physical* waiting at asylum offices been addressed. This empirical gap may reflect legitimate assumptions that routine procedural steps- such as registering an application for International Protection- will be brief and non-disruptive. This, however, is not the currently the case in Belgium and many other European asylum offices, as even here, applicants are forced to spend extended, sometimes repeated, and therefore significant time in bureaucratic waiting areas, rendering these spaces far from neutral, but in need of academic attention.

One notable empirical contribution that addressed precisely this problem and offers the most comparable case to my research of the Belgian Immigration Office is Christine Jacobsen’s 2021 ethnography of the first reception platform PADA in Marseille (see also Jacobsen and Karlson 2023). Her study combines temporal, spatial, and embodied dimensions in the analysis of the ways in which applicants are forced to recalibrate their lives to the exclusionary temporal regime of the institution. However, unlike the appointment-based access to PADA, the registration centre in Brussels still relies on in-person queuing, making the spatial experience of waiting yet more visible, physically demanding and socially complex. So, even this most closely comparable case underlines

the need to consider how asylum procedures and the experiences and challenges of waiting they produce differ across national jurisdiction (see also De Backer et al. 2023).

Positioning itself where institutional, geographical, and theoretical gaps coincide, my thesis contributes a novel case in examining asylum seeker waiting in Belgium at both the physical place of the Immigration Office and in the asylum procedure at large. Taking up the current directions and debates in the study of migrant waiting, my research studies asylum seekers' experiences and interpretations of their waiting at the Immigration Office in Brussels and within the asylum system at large. Specifically, I analyse, first, how the experience of waiting for asylum is differentiated by individual vulnerabilities, and how waiting itself contributes to the production or intensification of vulnerability. Second, my research engages with the ways asylum seekers navigate, endure, or subvert the obligation to wait, including the forms of 'unwaiting' that emerge through these practices.

To pursue these questions, I theoretically conceptualise waiting and practices of unwaiting and methodologically draw on regular participant observation at the waiting area of the Belgian Immigration Office, as well as in-depth interviews with asylum seekers at various stages of the asylum process and with NGO workers present on site. Taking seriously and reiterating the importance to consider waiting as produced at the intersection of time and space, I develop a grounded ethnography of the diverse lived realities of waiting for asylum in Belgium that sheds light onto the production and negotiation of power, vulnerability and agency (Greene 2020).

Writing from a feminist standpoint by showing how abstract policy and administrative processes translate into real suffering for those meant to be under the care of the Belgian state, my research contributes to the ongoing endeavour of theorising and politicising bodily experiences and emotions (Conlon 2011). Addressing how this is mediated by the varying resources and vulnerabilities of differentially structurally positioned waiters, responds to another feminist concern with waiting and (im)mobility as highly contingent and differentiated experiences, which, in its nuances, has remained underexplored in the waiting literature thus far (Conlon 2011), but has been demanded in order "to expose the implication of bordering practices that lead to differential precarisation" (Koshravi's 2021a: 204). Overall, by mobilising waiting as a critical lens that "offers new insights into the complex and shifting nature of processes of bordering, belonging, state power, exclusion and inclusion, and social relations in irregular migration", I enrich theoretical understandings of contemporary asylum governance (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021:2)—a task that appears all the more pressing given the current shift from rights- to deterrence-oriented migration management in Belgium and beyond.

This thesis continues with an overview on key literature and the theoretical framework of temporal governance and Unwaiting, then outlines the methodology and Belgian asylum context, before presenting and discussing the empirical findings.

2. Literature Review Migrant Waiting in the European Asylum Regime

In the following, I briefly map key insights and ongoing debates in the study of migrant waiting, which will be taken up again in the ensuing theoretical chapter. I draw predominantly on research concerning contemporary Northern and Central European asylum systems to increase the comparability and relevance of the literature to my own case.

The Chronopolitics of Migration Governance

In his pioneering contribution, Cwerner (2001) posed time as “a central variable and tool used by immigration law, policy and control” (p.10). This lay the groundwork for the strand of literature examining how “power is exercised by states and their representatives, supra national states (such as the European Union) and –increasingly in the context of neoliberal governance–by corporations” (Bhatia and Canning 2021:xvi) through the time politics (Cwerner 2004) or ‘chronopolitics’ (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021). It has since been demonstrated how contemporary exclusion- and deterrence-oriented asylum regimes increasingly employ a host of temporal technologies to govern “unruly mobility” (Vianelli et al. 2022:1015) not only in but *through* time (Tazzioli 2018). Bhatia and Canning (2021) outline how migrant time is constantly governed “by militarised interference and patrols at national and international borders” and being “bureaucratised in the everyday through surveillant forms of governance which require migrants to ‘prove’ their right to move across borders or stay within borders” (p.xvi). Migrants are classified by the length and type of stay and caught between temporal requirements, time-bound conditions for renewing permits or adjusting status. Based on the ability to comply or not, temporal punishments “involving delays, detention and return bans” or temporal rewards “such as the granting of periods of legal stay” (Vianelli et al. 2022:1015) are received. And, as Cwerner (2001) already noted, precarious conditions of illegality and deportability often arise in direct consequence of violating the temporal regimes of migration governance.

A growing number of scholars is currently engaged in studying the complex temporal architectures, “the laws, built environments, services and technologies” that structure the *duration*, *tempo* and *directionality* of asylum procedures (Jacobsen 2021:41). Concerning *duration*, scholars affirm that an asylum procedure will naturally entail periods of *some* waiting until the final case decision, and indeed, some time is necessary to ensure due process and allow applicants to recover and build a case (Crine, Flamand and Raimondo 2024; Griffiths 2014; Jacobsen 2021; Vianelli et al. 2022). But, at the same time, they have shown how overly prolonged waiting may undermine memory, intensify vulnerability, or demoralise applicants. This tension of timing asylum procedures ‘right’ underlines once more that (waiting) time represents “a factor that carries fundamental stakes and challenges” in obtaining International Protection (Crine, Flamand and Raimondo 2024:179). Departing from the same insight, Melanie Griffiths (2014) has problematised the tempo, or pace, of asylum processes, discerning that within the pertaining literature, “There are competing claims that the system is too fast and too slow: that the wheels of the system turn so slowly that people wait years for decisions, but also that decisions are rushed” (p.1994). What appears a contradiction becomes intelligible when considered in the context of the described turn towards more restrictive migration governance: A substantial number of scholars has recently denounced that both *deceleration*, expressed as repeated bureaucratic delay, slowness, and protracted waiting time, and *acceleration*, as sudden time pressure and rushed timelines, represent flexible, but deliberate temporal borders geared to restrict access to asylum (Koshravi 2021; Meier and Donà 2021; Tazzioli 2018; Vianelli et al. 2022). To illustrate, Jacobsen (2021) gives the example

of the French asylum system, where 2018 law decreased the time to apply and appeal to asylum decisions, while simultaneously extending that of maximum detention and imprisonment. Current policy discourse in many EU states poses the ambition to speed up asylum procedures to meet political and economic objectives framed as enhanced 'efficiency', but scholars that denounce dragging waiting times warn that such acceleration agendas are often partial and geared towards exclusion (Jacobsen 2021). A particularly worrying development is the very swift processing of asylum cases in the hotspot system (Tazzioli 2018) or fast track procedures in which select applicants receive decisions within mere days (Crine et al. 2024; Griffiths, Rogers and Anderson 2013; Vianelli et al. 2022). Notwithstanding this development, Jacobsen (2021) contends that overall, the "pressure for acceleration rarely matches the everyday of migration control", which remains marked by major delays at every stage, as this thesis will unpack in the Belgian context (p.45).

Beyond tempo, temporal bordering also manifests itself as continuity and circulation, so that the *directionality* of asylum procedures must be considered as well (Koshravi 2021b; Meier and Donà 2021). On paper, seeking asylum appears as a sequence of predictable events, but in practice this is rarely linear. Instead, it is marked by "multiple ruptures and back-and-forth movements, both between places and/or countries and within the administrative procedure" that produce circular experiences of seemingly endless waiting (Jacobsen 2021:43).

During this time, the lives of "irregular migrants are not simply 'put on hold' or slowed down" but "rather, their time is devalued and usurped in endless bureaucratic procedures" (Jacobsen 2021:50). Under capitalism, time emerges as a form of capital, whose unequal distribution corresponds to deeper power inequalities (Koshravi 2021b). In many empirical accounts of prolonged waiting for asylum, migrants articulate a sense of *wasted* time, but some scholars argue that contemporary asylum governance is more appropriately analysed as the systematic *stealing* of time (Bhatia and Canning 2021; Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021; Koshravi 2021b). Enforced waiting is seen as a form of systematic dispossession and material harm, as applicants are forced to spend significant amounts of time with applications, bureaucratic forms, or repetitive interviews while they forego life opportunities, and because time invested in the destination country may be thwarted by deportation (Bhatia and Canning 2021). As Bhatia and Canning (2021) write, "no matter how rich we are or what cultural capital we accumulate, we can never, ever re-accumulate time that is lost. That is a commodity that is out of human reach, and which for those most affected by bordering, is often stolen" (p.xxiv).

Living and Feeling the Wait

Beyond more geopolitical or policy analyses, another strand of literature studies the lived experience of waiting from below by (re)grounding it spatially, bodily, and emotionally. Many scholars focus here on the politico-legal liminality inherent to phases of being in-between statuses, but also more generally between "flight and so-called durable solutions- repatriation, integration or resettlement", in which rights, most importantly the access formal employment and education, and claims, are minimised (Greene 2020:735). They variously develop conceptions of temporal limbo (Griffiths 2014; Hyndman and Giles 2011; Schuster 2011); stuckedness (Crine, Flamand and Raimondo 2024; Hage 2009b); permanent temporariness (Meier and Donà 2021; Olwig 2021), suspended time (Griffiths 2014); or temporal exclusion (Bhatia and Canning 2021). Ultimately, these all convey a strong, yet also elusive sense of *temporal, spatial, social, and existential* immobility, as the ability to act in and move in an agentic, subjectively meaningful way is curtailed.

In their supplicant position, asylum seekers in wait must temporally 'recalibrate', synchronise "their bodies and life projects to the tempo, duration and directionality of complex 'temporal architectures'" (Jacobsen 2021:53). In this regard, Griffiths describes the temporal regime of asylum as producing experiences of "long, slowing time of waiting (sticky time), which can decelerate into complete stagnation (suspended time) from fast time rushing out of control (frenzied time) that tears into people's imagined time frames (temporal ruptures)", when asylum bureaucracies requires or impose immediate action (De Backer et al. 2023:1850). Being placed in a decelerated, slow "regime that seems meaningless from a societal and individual point of view" (Crine et al. 2024:175) can distort people's sense of time and can hamper the capacity of future planning and present action (Fog Olwig 2023; Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021; Meier and Donà). Many face the paradox of having both too much and too little time, experiencing "forced idleness" and boredom in a "timeless present" while life around them moves on (Griffiths 2014). (Griffiths 2014:1997). This "sense of life not waiting" often induces a feeling of intense powerlessness, lack of control, and shame (Drangsdal 2021:87). The inability to keep up with temporal norms of capitalist, progress-oriented, ever-accelerating societies and/or cultural and gendered life course expectations, also further disconnects waiters from their social environments near and far (Meier and Donà 2021). Here, however, Jacobsen and Karlsen (2021) urge caution not to uncritically reify and reinscribe gendered, heteronormative or racialised normativities, as well as well as neoliberal understanding of productivity, and argue that instead, these norms and power structures must be problematised as part of the analysis.

Confined to a specific national territory until their status is resolved, asylum seekers are stuck not only in time but in *space*. Earlier accounts of migrant waiting, having discerned and writing against the described spatial bias, developed more temporal conceptions of waiting (see Cwerner 2001; Dwyer 2009; Griffiths 2014; Hage 2009a). But as Vidal and Musset (2016b) denote, waiting is "by definition a localised experience which evokes the (enclosed, saturated or constraining) places where people are often forced to remain, with the feeling of spatial tyranny this creates" (p.2). Immobilised migrants are intendedly or incidentally kept waiting in concrete places- from borderlands, refugee camps, detention centres, and reception structures to the urban interstices and bureaucratic offices that this thesis puts into view, which are transformed by their presence and become 'waiting spaces' (Auyero 2012). So, more recent scholars have brought space back in and studied processes of spatial reappropriation, territorialisation and (re)homing, and the related social identities and transformations (see, for example, Gil Evaraert 2021; Vidal and Musset 2016b). Others have shown how the geographical, spatial, material and institutional conditions of waiting spaces, which are more often than not marked by confinement, surveillance, monotony, isolation or conversely overcrowding, significantly influence the waiting experiences (Baalbergen et al. 2025; De Backer et al. 2025). Waiting is felt and lived in the individual body, and especially when prolonged and under precarious, constrained spatial conditions and "chronic uncertainty" (Griffiths 2014:1991), has been shown "to have an adverse effect on the physical and mental health of refugees" (Baalbergen et al. 2025:p.4), as it produces suffering and vulnerability (De Backer et al. 2023; Fog Olwig 2023; Crine et al. 2024).

Prolonged wait paired with reduced opportunities also has a delaying and harmful effect on *social* mobility, especially in cases of geographical remoteness (Baalbergen et al. 2025). This leads or contributes to what Hage (2009b) frames *existential* immobility, 'stuckedness' in life itself, the sense that one is 'going nowhere' not just in space or time, but in meaning. Hage contends that people migrate in search of a place where they can move forward existentially, but when temporal, spatial, legal, and other borders obstruct this aim, they feel stuck and time feels wasted and meaningless (see also Crine et al. 2024; Koshravi 2021b).

The experience of waiting is clearly "suffused with emotions" (Greene 2020:734), and according to Hage (2009a) "That waiting is an affective mode of being hardly needs proving" (p.12). While

asylum seekers themselves often describe highly negative emotional responses, careful study has shown waiting as an affective field where people move between “anticipation, desire, hope, urgency, doubt, uncertainty, anxiety, boredom, dread, anger, [...] shame and apathy” (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021:3). In this regard, only a few scholars explicitly recognise the need for differentiation: Vidal and Musset (2016b) write that “far from everyone having the same experience of waiting, feelings about, perceptions of and attitudes to waiting vary across time and cultures” and as such any analysis of waiting “must identify and evaluate the different ways in which individuals experience waiting, if it is to avoid the pitfalls of anachronism and ethnocentrism” (p.7). Greene (2020) further specifies that existing literature has thus far only insufficiently considered “the ways that social differences, such as gender, race, class, religion and immigration status, are imbricated in migrants’ daily lived experiences of time and space” (p.734).

Waiting and the Question of Agency

Addressing the perhaps most continuous and active debate in the field, Hage (2009a) writes that waiting “emphasises a dimension of life where the problematic of our agency is foregrounded” and asks the core question “Is waiting an exercise of agency or a lack of it?” (p.2). As outlined, much literature views it as a deeply disempowering and dispossessing experience, because it expresses “the absence of choices or alternatives to the situation one is in and an inability to grab such alternatives even if they present themselves” (Hage 2009a:4). However, Jacobsen and Karlsen (2021) and others argue that “waiting as an analytical lens can lend itself to a reductive reading of migrants’ lives” when the experience of empty, wasted time is uncritically reproduced (p.9). In line with feminist and decolonial approaches, scholars in this perspective refuse a portrayal of migrants solely as victims of enforced passivity and show how notwithstanding a certain loss of agency, waiting time can hold possibilities of positive, subjectively meaningful and enriching experiences (Fog Olwig 2023; Greene 2020; Koshravi 2021b; Bendixsen and Hylland Eriksen 2020; Meier and Donà 2021; Vianelli et al. 2022). For one, Griffiths (2014) discerned that the same liminality that feels restrictive to most, can hold openings for some, when it represents “a liberating time outside of familial, religious and social expectations and controls” (p.2002). But even for the majority for whom this does not apply, turning to the micropolitics or counterpolitics of time, scholars argue that migrants “may respond to waiting in different ways” (Fog Olwig 2023:54) and it “can be a time during which people are working, studying, cultivating relations, formulating hopes and making plans” (Vianelli et al. 2022:1024). In this view, waiting periods are “active, structured and filled with routines, activities and projects – and productive, as waiting time can be transformed into capital” (De Backer et al. 2023). Such ‘unwaiting’ constitutes one focus of this thesis and is elaborated in detail in the next chapter.

3. Theoretical Framework Waiting in the Asylum Timescape

This chapter formulates the theoretical concepts through which I will read my data. First, I lay the necessary groundwork of conceptualising waiting and defining vulnerability, before approaching the politics of waiting in separate chapters on state strategies and migrant tactics.

Conceptual Grounds

Migrants and Asylum Seekers

This thesis examines waiting experiences of migrants, concretely asylum seekers currently undergoing International Protection procedures. The term *migrant* in this thesis refers to people on the move, specifically those “increasingly disenfranchised by intensified borders, including people who travel without papers/are undocumented; people who are forced to migrate due to persecution or conflict and may be seeking asylum; and those who fall under the broad umbrella of migrating for economic reasons” (Bhatia and Canning 2021:xvii). More specifically, an *asylum seeker* is defined by Amnesty International (2025b) as “a person who has left their country and is seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations in another country, but who hasn’t yet been legally recognized as a refugee and is *waiting* to receive a decision on their asylum claim”. Waiting is constitutive to the very status of asylum seeker, indicating the already described “temporary nature of a person’s relationship to a nation state and the liminality of their status” (De Backer et al. 2023:1849).

Waiting

In the introduction, I addressed the perspective of waiting as an analytical lens, now I turn to experiential and phenomenological dimensions of waiting. These have been said to be ambiguous and difficult to contain, but the theoretical aim is not to narrow but to broaden the view, and embrace the ambiguities of waiting, rather than attempting to resolve them.

“Waiting is not an absence; it is the grounds for having fascinating conversations about suffering, modernity, agency and difference.” (Jeffrey 2018:xv)

Waiting is a specific experience of time, a temporality, that is oriented towards the future but lived in the present (Auyero 2011; Bandak and Janeja 2018). According to Hage (2009a), it “indicates that we are engaged in, and have expectations from, life” (p.1). While waiting is remarkably universal modern condition, it simultaneously deeply contingent and unequal: “We all wait for futures—yet not for the same ones, nor in the same way, nor at the same tempo” (Rundell, in Hage 2009a:1). In this regard, Dwyer (2009) distinguishes *situational* waiting, as time-bound, goal-directed, mundane experience from *existential* or *chronic* waiting (Jeffrey 2008) that arises when time stretches into a more profound, open-ended, sometimes indeterminate “condition in which people endure on a day-to-day basis and for extended periods— years even— anticipating the possibility of resolution of some underlying circumstances” (Chattopadhyay and Tyner 2022:1233). As hope, meaning, and direction become eroded, waiting then is no longer a temporal experience of a particular system, but becomes an embodied condition of being characterised by a sense of being existentially *in wait* (Dwyer 2009; Hage 2009b). Chronic waiting has been analysed as a subaltern condition as it encapsulates the lived experience of contemporary marginalisation, where the most basic rights and services are hardly in reach, available only through patient waiting vis-à-vis of powerful state actors and their corporate allies (Chattopadhyay and Tyner 2022; Jeffrey

2008). This draws the attention to waiting as necessarily "*dialectical* relationship in which the logic of waiting for and to be waited for meet-a matter of power relations through the manipulation of others' time" (Koshravi 2021b). Approaching waiting as a subaltern condition furthermore reveals it as a *multiscalar* phenomenon: it can be located in the individual life and body, but extends to whole populations, for example welfare recipients (see Auyero 2011) or Racialised groups (Joshi 2023; Koshravi 2021b) and even countries and world regions (Hage 2009a; Koshravi 2021b).

Finally, Hage (2018) draws attention to the *entangled* nature of waiting. He argues that for asylum seekers, situational waiting (outside offices, for appointments, for reception spaces) and chronic waiting (for safety, justice, or uncertain futures) unfold simultaneously, and are further imbued with micro wait times (to receive news, for a returned call, for tomorrow) and with a migration-specific macro-level waiting to return home one future day. Together, all these experiences fuse into a "complex 'entanglement of waiting(s)'" within which affects circulate and are difficult to disentangle (Hage 2018:204). The entangled nature of waiting may be extended even more by acknowledging the often neglected waiting of those staying behind, families and communities left waiting for news on successful passage and progress, for remittances, for reunification, or for the return of their loved ones (Bandak and Janeja 2018; Koshravi 2021a). Waiting is never an individual action or experience but deeply *relational*.

In sum, I approach waiting as a dialectical, multiscalar, entangled, relational temporality that is future-oriented but lived in the present as and imbued with relations of power.

Strategies and Tactics in the Asylum Timescape

To refine my analysis of the temporal experiences of asylum seekers, I place it in Meier and Donà's (2021) framework of the asylum timescape that frames the asylum regime as a contested temporal field. They write, the asylum timescape represents a "key site of bordering in which states regulate, allocate and occupy temporalities [...] through administrative, economic and affective practices and experiences", but where this "temporal performance of borders is also constantly contested, de-ordered and re-claimed through disruptions of those struggling within and against the asylum regime" (p.39). And further, they argue that "while the European border regime uses temporal experiences and practices to govern the bodies of those seeking asylum, the notion of asylum timescapes allows us to read contemporary borders not only in terms of exclusion but also through power negotiations among multiple actors, spaces and temporalities" (p.43).

To make this duality of agency yet more clear, I furthermore draw on de Certeau's classic framework of strategies and tactics. Applied to waiting, temporal state strategies are the actions "the disciplinary actions imposed by those who exercise power", and migrants tactics, which mean the micropolitical practices of unwaiting enacted by those subjected to power and bordering that allow them to persevere (Greene 2020:735). Together, the asylum timescape and the strategies/tactics framework offer a lens to analyse the asylum regime and waiting itself as a site of struggle over rights and belonging, which are located firmly in the everyday and in the body.

Vulnerability

A final key concept in my analysis is vulnerability, understood as susceptibility or exposure to material, bodily, emotional, or other harm. Vulnerability is not innate to certain bodies or identities, but a product of the interplay of personal, social, and environmental factors. As such, Leboef, Brun and Marchetti (2025) call for a *situated* approach of vulnerability recognising that vulnerabilities may relate to certain ontological components but are always context contingent and fluid. Concerning migration and asylum, vulnerability discourses are mobilised in media, humanitarianism, and policy as the basis of political demands or practices that move between in-

and exclusionary objectives (Leboef et al. 2025). Given that recognised vulnerability constitutes a common selection tool for rights and services, it is apparent that great (state) power inheres in the symbolic act of labelling certain migrants in/vulnerable. Leboef et al. (2025) criticise that policy often essentialises vulnerability, relying on stereotyped characteristics detached from actual risk. Greene (2020) shows how, in hostile EUropean migration discourse, this produces gendered and racialised binaries of vulnerable “womenandchildren” at risk versus threatening, invulnerable men as risk (p.734). She concludes “fixing people in gendered categories that promote, rather than prevent, their distortion, these binaries work to erase her agency and his vulnerability” (p.734).

State Strategies: Governance through Waiting

Waiting as Discipline

One long established strategy that states pursue through the imposition of waiting is the disciplining of citizens into compliant, subordinate subjects. Foucault (1995) famously established discipline as a mechanism of power, and the imposition of waiting has been analysed as one of its many techniques. The disciplinary function of waiting arises from a politically constructed scarcity of access to goods or services in the “organised dependency relationship” between “server and client” (Schwartz 1974:814), where “The expectation for getting one’s share then temporarily serves as a substitute for the share itself” (Dobler 2020:14). In this dynamic, the state-server holds the power to control when, or if, supplicant ‘clients’ receive the awaited good or service. Critical scholars have long argued that the waiting time until then serves not only as a medium of allocation, but as a period in which waiters are disciplined into behaving according to state expectations.

In his influential ethnography of a welfare waiting room in Buenos Aires, Auyero (2012) documents how welfare recipients wait patiently through lengthy bureaucratic procedures characterised by repeated delays, extreme arbitrariness, uncertainty and disinformation, because their livelihoods depend on their outcome, the granting of the benefits they are entitled to. Waiters are required to be punctual, follow schedules, and have their documents in order, while the institution fails to deliver provisions and lacks reliability and accountability, expressing the power hierarchy and dependency between the actors. Faced with a lack of viable alternatives, recipients learn that only patient compliancy is rewarded and adjust their behaviour accordingly. Auyero (2011) emphasises, that “Different from other places where disinformation and uncertainty give birth to a bargaining process between those who know and those who do not [...], the waiting room is an area of compliance, a universe in which you ‘sit down and wait’ instead of attempting to negotiate with (or complain against) welfare authorities” (p.21). This, Auyero (2011) argues, is the disciplinary power of waiting: welfare recipients accept that “they have to act not as citizens with rightful claims but as patients of the state”, and thereby internalise and reproduce their own subordination (p.23). Confirming and extending Auyero’s analysis, Hage (2009b) has argued that in a constant state of crisis produced by neoliberalism, restraint and endurance is moralised: to ‘wait out’ patiently is seen as civilised and rational, while impatience or resistance is delegitimised by pathologising it as uncivilised. He adds that “As usual this takes on a racial, civilisational and class dimension: the ones who do not know how to wait are the ‘lower classes’, the uncivilized and racialised others” (p.8). For Hage (2009b), then, this gives rise to a new governmentality, in which the logic of compliant, patient waiting is valorised, internalised, and expressed as self-disciplining.

While it is state authorities that aim to discipline waiting populations, it is crucial to recognise that, ultimately, waiters *themselves* regulate their behaviour without being directly forced. In the context

of ongoing asylum procedures, self-disciplining entails several strategic behaviours or actions geared towards becoming the deserving 'good immigrant' (Vianelli et al. 2022). Asylum seekers are compelled to behave well and wait patiently, compliantly, for an undefined, seemingly arbitrary period, for an uncertain outcome, while accepting the own subordination and liminal, precarious conditions (Griffiths 2014). De Backer et al. (2023) thus contend, "Waiting becomes an endurance test, standing in as a proxy for refugees' deservingness and reinforcing the notion that their time is less valuable" (p.1849). This is not an abstract, but a deeply corporeal and emotional process, which puts the biopolitical meaning of the self-disciplining body into view. As Cervio and Dhers (2014) explain, patient waiting in general entails the "'subordination' of impulses and affections to the hope that 'better times are yet to come' in the future" which justifies and naturalises "the procrastination of today's wishes and necessities" (p.52). Concretely, this may mean to withstand, that is not act on, feelings of frustration, unfairness, or stress, or even bodily needs such as fatigue or pain (Auyero 2011). The authors argue further that for persons that are chronically subjected to waiting "*learning to wait* and developing patience [constitute] abilities that make possible tolerating the sum of absences from yesterday and today" (p.52). Vianelli et al. (2022) develop the disciplinary function of waiting yet further by showing how, in addition, "asylum seekers are expected to wait productively, whereby the productivity of their waiting is assessed through the neoliberal imperatives of entrepreneurship, autonomy and self-improvement" (p.1028). The authors argue that, consciously or not, the deservingness for being granted asylum is being assessed on the basis of (un)successful integration through "socio-economic independence, language ability and socio-cultural adaptation" (p.1017). They critically contend that waiting times "become probation periods in which appellants can be at the same time tested and governed, ruled through opportunity and made docile through activity and agency", which greatly intensifies the pressure already felt by asylum seekers and moves further away from a rights-based logic (p.1028). Next to self-disciplining, it remains to recognise that with that comes the disciplining of other waiters, which represents a continuation of how the recipients of state power paradoxically become its enactors. As Dobler (2020) theorises, when waiting is presented as a result of supposed scarcity, waiters perceive others as competitors, obstacles in the realisation of the own objective, which effectively isolates waiter and weakens solidarity. Grounding this in a concrete context, concentrated poverty in a New York neighbourhood, Mott (2022) finds that welfare recipients monitor one another, and judge those deemed less patient, diligent, or grateful as undeserving, reflecting a deep internalisation of neoliberal logics of deservingness.

The described exertion of state power through the self-regulation of (aspiring) citizens is powerful, but it is contingent and must be actively secured by its authorities in an ongoing process (Auyero 2011). Continued patient waiting depends on the belief in the sovereignty and legitimacy of the state and its institutions (Bourdieu 2000). Waiters must trust that waiting will eventually yield the desired outcomes, they must feel that the physical or metaphorical queue *will* move at last to accept the temporary submission of emotional and corporeal needs (Hage 2009b). As such, Bourdieu described strategic raising of hope to secure continued consent to prolonged, imposed waiting, writing that "the art of making people wait, [...] of delaying without destroying hope, of adjourning without totally disappointing [...] is an integral part of the exercise of power" (cited in De Backer et al. 2023:1848). To end this chapter, I return to Foucault's (1995) original conceptualisation of discipline to deepen the answer to the question of *why* states may attempt to discipline asylum seekers:

discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand,

it turns it into an 'aptitude', a 'capacity', which it seeks to increase on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection. If economic exploitation separates the force and the product of labour, let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination (p.138)

State authorities do not only attempt to produce the 'good asylum seeker' in the present, but also the 'good future citizen', that will be economically useful, but politically pacified.

Waiting as Bordering through Time and Space

In the following, I conceptualise bordering as the second governance logic pursued by the strategic imposition of waiting. The burgeoning field of border studies has approached borders as both a phenomenon and increasingly as an analytical lens into global circulations and hierarchies of bodies, labour, and capital (Sahraoui 2024). Although the European Union and other migration destination regions currently engage in physical rebordering, by setting up "national and regional border apparatuses on the European continent, in their very material shape of fences, ditches, dogs, and watch-towers" (Hess 2018:83), it has become "'common sense' in international border studies that state borders can no longer be [only] conceptualized as static lines or demarcations of sovereignty and nation-state power encompassing a national territory that ontologically possess an 'essence'" (p.86). Instead, borders are now theorised as socially constructed, ubiquitous, mobile, and performative (Hess 2018; Tazzioli 2018). The view thus shifts to *bordering*, the practices, processes and technologies through which border power is continuously produced and enacted "in territorial as well as in non-territorial forms [...] by the state as well as by non-state actors" across space, time, policy, and everyday life (Heins 2024:4).

Bordering takes place within an assemblage of "agents, practices, discourses, technologies, bodies, emotions, processes, and contestations" that in its totality is conceptualised as border regime (Hess 2018:95). The contemporary Western border regime has been powerfully summarised as "'colonial in its constitution, global in its reach, technologically advanced in its control, dehumanizing in its implementation, and oppressive in its essence" (Kalir, cited in Heins 2024:3). Hess (2018) emphasise the importance to see migrants and their movements not only as the object of such regimes, but as constitutive. She writes that current state (re)bordering efforts "primarily as a reaction to the movements of migration that challenge, cross, and reshape borders" and that is precisely this "'excess' of autonomy that is the target of control, regulation, and exploitation by state border agencies and policies in order to construct the border as a stable, controllable, and manageable tool for selective and differential inclusion" (p.95). In this sense, bordering, much like waiting, is a site of conflict and struggle.

Turning from the functioning of bordering to its purpose, two main logics of performative and biopolitical governance can be identified. Traditionally, bordering is viewed as a boundary-drawing technology working through the construction of barriers that protect 'us inside' by filtering and excluding 'those outside'- where "exclusion is sometimes a euphemism, as when coast guard personnel in the Mediterranean throw migrants overboard to their deaths" (Heins 2024:421). It has been argued further that the actual purpose of bordering is not the presupposed protection, but a performative exercise of state-making. Salter has argued that sovereignty "has no essence, and must continually be articulated and rearticulated in terms of 'stylized repetition of acts' of sovereignty", such as state authority at the border (cited in Hess 2018:92). Through the spectacle of power and the constant re-affirmation of (non)belonging, borders can be seen as effectively performing the nation state into being. While these functions remain, Hess (2018) argues, 'the border' pursues not only a repressive, but also a productive logic: It functions not only a barrier but

as a selective gate “producing new hierarchies of people by categorizing and processing the unchecked mobilities as different ‘migration’ categories”, which in turn define the respective experience with that border (Hess 2018:88). This production of differently legitimate classes and positions that determine access to territory and rights has been termed “differential inclusion” (Mezzadra and Neilson, cited in Hess 2018:88). In this context, Walters predicted the now manifest biopolitical border that represents “a privileged instrument in the systematic regulation of national and transnational populations- their movements, health, and security” (cited in Hess 2018:88). The Foucauldian concept of biopolitics “denotes a modern condition in which the life of individuals (their bodies) and the life of the population as a whole become the object of political strategies and interventions” which represents a fundamental “transformation in the technology of power: from the sovereign power to take life to the biopolitical power to make live” (Mavelli 2017:814). In the context of migration and asylum, this functions through a multitude of technologies- including that of making-wait.

Concerning state strategies in the border regime, the EU faces ‘control dilemma’ of reconciling “a neoliberal economic paradigm of the (preferably global) free circulation of goods, services, and capital, with the continued biopolitical desire to control the movements of people” (Hess 2018:90). In the blocs’ response, Hess (2018) observes four paradigms of fortification, humanitarianisation, externalisation and internalisation, that characterise current EU migration governance aimed at creating the perfect differentially inclusive border. In the following, I will first outline each paradigm and then show how in each, waiting is strategically employed as a bordering technology. The first bordering paradigm is the *fortification*, including digitalisation, of territorial national and EU external borders, also discussed as rebordering, through physical barriers like walls and fences; new technologies of surveillance and biometrics fuelled by a “growing military-industrial-academic complex” (p.90); intensified border patrols and policing through the agency FRONTEX but also private security providers; and legal-administrative controls, like holding of detention spaces. Secondly, and at first paradoxically, scholars have observed a *humanitarianisation* of the border where differential inclusion works through the “simultaneous deployment of rationalities/practices of care and security”, under which deservingness of support and access becomes tied to suffering (Mavelli 2017:813). According to the author, this expresses a double biopolitical governance, because it is migrant *bodies* that become the object of a politics aimed at “[enhancing] the biological and emotional well-being of host populations” (p.809) by addressing demographic needs, while simultaneously enabling citizens to construct a positive self-image of morality, care, and compassion. Such humanitarian logic has been widely critiqued as discriminatory in its functioning and depoliticising in its impact, because it conceals responsibility for said suffering and inequality (Mavelli 2017). The third bordering paradigm of *externalisation* describes the “process through which states directly or indirectly operate activities related to border control outside their sovereign territories, namely in other countries or on the high seas” (Heins 2024:4). This ‘outsourcing’ of migration control has “led to an unforeseen multiplication and diversification of actors from state to non-state, from international actors to very local ones” (Hess 2018:90). But, more relevant for the case study of this thesis, is the final paradigm of border *internalisation*, “the domestic implications of any politics aimed at making border regimes sustainable, widely accepted and even welcomed among the population ‘protected’ by those borders” (Heins 2024:3) as well as the development of “an internal regime steeped in the institution of asylum and put into practice through the Dublin/Eurodac regulations, which aims at the immobilization of migrant populations within the European territory” (Hess 2018:91). This entails an extension of border work, the micropractices of repetitively reinterpreting and enacting the border in everyday life throughout more and more state-and non-state institutions and actors (Heins 2024). As a result of

these final two paradigms, sites where bordering processes take place and are struggled over, that have been conceptualised as border zones, borderlands, or borderscapes (Hess 2018; Tazzioli 2018) have multiplied and deterritorialised, so that the border is now less spatially fixed but moved and fixed onto the migrant body (Hess 2018; Mountz 2011).

The concept of bordering remarkably coincides with the understanding of waiting as a regulation of access informed by power discrepancies as well as a symbolic display of that power (Dobler 2020; Schwartz 1974). From this view, it becomes very obvious that waiting may be analysed as *temporal* bordering (Koshravi 2021b; Vianelli et al. 2022; Meier and Donà 2021). According to Tazzioli (2018), temporal borders describe the diverse forms of control and regulation of 'unruly migration' over and through time. They "are functional to slow down and disrupt migrants' autonomous temporalities and geographies of movement, and to hasten at the same time the channels of deportation" and employed in combination with more spatialised forms of bordering, but especially when these fall short (Tazzioli 2018:4). Analysing the EU border regime through the "lens of the temporality of control" allows for and deepens the understanding of the mobile, temporary, and processual rather than static character of contemporary borders (p.1). However, while temporal borders are often deterritorialised, they are nonetheless spatial, executed and inscribed in concrete geographical places far away from territorial borders, at those borders, and inside national territories that effectively become border sites (Axelsson 2013; Borelli 2021).

Since this thesis focusses on waiting, the remainder of this chapter now zooms in on the deliberate deceleration of movements, processes, and procedures that lead to access to legal stay. Through institutionalised practices of delay and circulation, this specific temporal border functions through "a temporal and spatial stretching of waiting from pre-departure, and transit, to post-arrival and even post-deportation" (Koshravi 2021a:203). As Jacobsen and Karlsen (2021) recall, "In both research and public debate, there has been a proliferation of representations of refugees, asylum seekers and irregular migrants waiting in refugee camps, asylum reception and detention centres and at border crossings" (p.2). Mountz (2011) argues that these and more globally dispersed waiting sites where (certain) migrations are continuously interrupted, slowed down, and reversed are not isolated but structurally connected in a global system of migration control.

Returning to the outlined bordering paradigms, the prolonged, sometimes indefinite containment of migrants in refugee camps in the Global South represents a clear instance of border externalisation through waiting (Hyndman and Giles 2011). But moreover, scholars have shown this as entangled with humanitarian logics in a gendered discourse that feminises immobility as passive and deserving of empathy and aid, while constructing autonomous mobility towards Europe as masculine and threatening, thereby justifying hardening borders and restrictive asylum policies inside Europe (Greene 2020; Hyndman and Giles (2011). As such, those that do make their way to territorial, increasingly *fortified* EU borders are often faced with more waiting. As Chattopadhyay and Tyner (2022) detail, "the psycho-temporal dimensions of border crossing has important implications for migrants spending hours, days, months or years waiting for the right moment to cross, to connect with a broker, to gather the money needed for the passage - all of which entail enormous suffering for the migrant's mind and body" (p.1232). When passage is intercepted, migrants are either pushed-back, in space *and* time, or subjected to more waiting in temporary holding facilities (Tazzioli 2018; Topak 2020). Most relevant for this thesis, those who entered EU territory face internalised temporal borders, produced by law and enacted by bureaucratic border workers, among many others. Schuster (2011) has argued that the Dublin II/Eurodac system produces extended periods of waiting for some asylum seekers who 'orbit' "in limbo while

decisions are made on whether and where their applications will be examined, and whose access to asylum procedures is thus greatly delayed (p.403). But, as my research joins in to show, even within the regular procedures waiting times are again and again imposed, thus extending the liminal in-between time until a decision is made and some security and rights are obtained. For those not recognised, sometimes long waiting periods in detention and deportation facilities follow (Axelsson 2013; Kreichauf 2020), and even for those recognised, their new status may only lead into new waitings for employment, welfare, or inclusion, where bordering logics repeat. . It remains to address that on all scales, temporal bordering through waiting, like any other bordering, is not executed by an abstract government or regime, but by its street-level bureaucrats (SLBs), the staff of migration institutions such as the Immigration Office, which become powerful everyday border workers (Borelli 2021). Importantly, as Schwartz (1974) denotes, for SLBs "it would probably be more precise to say that the capacity to make others wait is a property of roles and not their incumbents" (p.844), and Borelli (2021) concretises that these "officers hold a great deal of control over their clients, based on their knowledge of proceedings and their decision-making powers" (p.579). Furthermore, she argues that SLBs are socialised into exclusionary migration governance, especially logics of (un)deservingness, which they reproduce through discretionary, biased decision making and thereby enact the border.

Waiting as Violence

Returning from (geo)politics to lived experiences of waiting, this final chapter examines imposed waiting in EU migration governance as a form of state violence. While waiting represents a productive biopolitical power that orders and disciplines, it also has been analysed as having a destructive, punitive necropolitical power.

Much has been researched on harm and violence experienced by people on the move, but the application of a temporal lens, is relatively novel, but once applied proves crucial in understanding migrant vulnerability and victimisation (Topak 2020). Recent evidence consistently links processual delay and prolonged waiting in the context of migration to deteriorating physiological and psychological health (see, for example, Bhatia 2020; Martinez 2023; Phillimore and Cheung 2021; Topak 2020). It explains the harmful impact of migration-related waiting in several, interrelated ways: First, many asylum seekers are forced to wait in border zones or inadequate reception housing marked by cramped, confined, unsanitary, geographically isolated or otherwise precarious spaces and lacking resources have been established as producing physical illness and psychological conditions, especially depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, and general distress (Martinez 2023; Topak 2020; Bhatia 2020; Crine et al. 2024; DeBacker et al. 2023; Phillimore and Cheung 2021). Second, such environments heighten risks of direct interpersonal, racialised, and gender-based violence, including that exerted by authorities and police (Topak 2020; Bhatia 2020). Thirdly, Phillimore and Cheung (2021) evidence "deleterious impacts of insecure immigration status on the health of migrants" that arise from the difficulty to access work, education, or healthcare and a chronic uncertainty about the duration or outcome of the asylum procedure, which gives rise to constant fear about the future and feelings of general disempowerment. Under this condition of 'violent uncertainty', "endpoints [of waiting] are not only uncertain and beyond the control of individuals but threaten the very survival of those who fail as they face abandonment in the form of destitution and homelessness, and/or return, at the end of processes" to unsafe countries of origin (Phillimore and Cheung 2021:2). Altogether, Bhatia (2020) concludes that prolonged, uncertain waiting in liminal time-spaces exposes asylum seekers "to cruel, dangerous and deathly situations" (p.289) which in addition to bodily harm results "in a complete loss of dignity and self-esteem and also induced a feeling of worthlessness and hopelessness" (p.286),

that tragically often leads into substance abuse and misuse, self-harm, and suicidal thought and action. The author argues further, that the “the injuries [waiters] suffer are structural and not the unintended collateral damages of otherwise benign policies and practices” and thus “need to be considered from state racism and violence paradigms” (p.278).

Here, the analysis shifts to Mbembe’s necropolitics, which “unlike the theory of biopolitics, not only refers to attacks on the body of a person but also to the political making of spaces and subjectivities in an *in-between* of life and death” (Andrésdóttir 2022:20) with the aim of “the material destruction of human bodies and populations” through systematic abandonment and precarisation (Mbembe, cited in Martinez 2023:5). Necropolitics is “a politics of death”, within which “the means of death may be direct or indirect, and includes multiplying the potential for death, and the social or political death associated with denial, expulsion, or exclusion” (Wilson et al. 2023:2). The necropolitical action of ‘letting die’ is analysed distinctly racialised forms of power and violence, that works through and towards racial hierarchies. Racism regulates the distribution of death through a logic that dehumanises and devalues certain lives to allow their abandonment into painful or deadly conditions (Bhatia 2020; Topak 2020; Wilson et al. 2023). According to Mavelli (2017), in the context of contemporary migration governance, this racism is on the contrary *biopolitical*, as it “draws on, but partially transcends, traditional accounts of racism based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, colour, gender, and alleged intractable cultural differences” but “redraws the boundary between ‘valuable’ (to be included) and ‘not valuable’ lives (to be excluded) according to the refugees’ capacity to enhance the biological and emotional well-being of host populations” (p.809). Essentially summing up the discussion thus far, Martinez (2023) conceptualises state “weaponisation of time” (p.5) as producing a ‘necrotemporality’- a condition under which undesired asylum seekers face “exposure to structural and physical violence by forcing them to live in precarious states of indeterminate waiting” (p.2). This condition echoes what Mbembe calls ‘death worlds’, harmful, unliveable spaces into which racial, migrant, undeserving Others are pushed and kept alive “but in a state of injury, in a phantomlike world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity” that slowly wears them out (cited in Bhatia 2020:280). From a temporal perspective, suffering cumulates the longer individuals remain in such abject, liminal conditions, but “harms themselves happen at a pace that is itself perhaps too slow to assign blame” (Saunders and Al-Om 2022:530). While not as immediately obvious as the abandonment of sinking boats on the high seas of the Mediterranean, the latent ‘slow violence’ of abject waiting must not disguise its deliberate imposition, while withholding care and protection, as just as much a deliberate act of necropolitical violence (Bhatia 2020; Meier and Donà 2021).

The abandonment into necrotemporality intersects with what other scholars discuss as bureaucratic violence, harm inflicted through “strategic actions and inactions” of asylum institutions and their street level bureaucrats endowed with “the state’s permission to be cruel” (Bhatia 2020:277). As Martinez (2023) points out, “often, these administrative mechanisms don’t require legislative action or enforcement to be implemented and thus remain obscured from analysis” (p.4), so that their study “[transcends] dominant conceptualizations of both violence and state power to reveal how quotidian engagements with a disaggregated assemblage of administrative actors can produce harmful outcomes” (p.3). Intentionally or not, SLBs reproduce structural racism and exclusion. As Bhatia (2020) describes “By obeying the authority, following the procedures diligently, and simply applying the laws and policies, evil practices can be converted to good and can be considered nothing more than an accomplishment of role expectations”, so that “individuals do not feel accountable for their actions and/or organizational/policy outcomes –especially when it brutalizes marginalized and surplus populations” (p.281). At the same time, the authors own

research discerns a pervasive “culture of disbelief and denial” among UK asylum bureaucrats and “demonstrates that street-level actors are committed fully to the state’s hostile policy approaches and/or are unwilling to deviate from formal procedures to alleviate the harms affecting people seeking asylum” (p.279).

Bringing this chapter to a close, attention should be brought to the underlying objectives of confining (certain) waiting asylum seekers to life under necrotemporality by framing it as part and continuation of a broader ‘politics of exhaustion’ that characterises current EU migration governance (Ansems de Vries and Welander 2021). As their movements are strategically obstructed and slowed down to the point of stagnation, asylum seekers are increasingly or completely exhausted “by repeated evictions, detention, push-backs, deportations, sub-standard living conditions, fundamental uncertainty, the continuous threat and reality of violence” and more (para.2). Exhaustion then, represents the accumulated “lived experience of physical and structural violence” under necrotemporality, but also a deliberate political strategy designed to slowly wear asylum seekers out over time (Meier and Donà 2021; Ansems de Vries and Welander 2021). According to Ansems de Vries and Welander (2021), this politics of exhaustion

consists of an array of tactics devised to render life governable and pliant, and bodies docile, with the premeditated intention to negate people’s autonomy, agency, well-being and self-efficacy, and with the ultimate aim of curbing autonomous migratory movements, influence decisions, and manage intent through the physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion of its subjects (para.3)

Throughout their migration journeys, asylum seekers on their way to the EU face conditions that produce exhaustion through temporal bordering and direct and structural violence. As this chapter has shown, this necropolitical governance does not end once the undesired have crossed the border into a country of arrival, but is extended by structured abandonment and confinement into unliveable time-spaces of waiting that systematically exposes them to harm.

Migrant Tactics: Potentialities and Preclusions of Unwaiting

The bordering, discipline and violence executed by state authorities through the imposition of waiting is not merely suffered by asylum seekers, but lived, negotiated, redefined, and sometimes resisted. Synthesising and ordering existing literature on the matter, this chapter proceeds to develop a typology of three modalities of unwaiting, the contestation and counter-temporalisation of the temporal regimes of the bureaucratic and legal systems they are subjected to (Koshravi 2021; Meier and Donà 2021). As I conceptualise it, unwaiting is an inclusive concept, comprising different agentic acts, but it is unified in the orientation towards (re)claiming time, meaning, autonomy, and dignity against imposed passivity and dependency (Koshravi 2021b). A discussion of the intimacies and politics of hope is woven throughout this chapter, as the retaining or losing of hope appears as a crucial determinant of unwaiting. While I draw on empirical evidence from the field of asylum, this typology applies to any situation of enforced waiting and works on different scales. It should also be noted that as with all attempts to classify human behaviour, the three modalities are only distinct for analytical purposes, but in actuality they alternate or overlap.

Reclaiming the Wait

Despite acknowledging how state authorities attempt to impose passivity and ‘clientify’ asylum seekers, scholars have turned attention to the ways in which they nonetheless manage to ‘make time’ (Griffiths 2014) and ‘inhabit the meanwhile’ (Everaert 2021). Even within most constrained conditions, waiting asylum seekers retain capacity to act as they “imagine, and actively work toward,

new futures" (Ramsay 2017:516). The first modality of unwaiting can thus be subsumed in the refusal to let the own (life) time be wasted by developing tactics that allow for its subjectively meaningful reappropriation. As Greene (2020) explains, this is about "the 'doing of little things'- the ordinary, the mundane, the everyday- which 'does not have the sense of a passive submission... but of an active engagement'" (Das, cited in Greene 2020:735). Reclaiming the wait entails spatial and temporal reappropriation: Vidal and Musset (2016) and Everaert (2020) describe how place-making acts, such as naming, territorialisation and homing, represent attempts to (re)assert control, predictability and agency. Most waiting asylum seekers are constantly engaged in making future plans, often both for the desired future after recognition, but also for the case of rejection (Fog Olwig 2023; Griffiths 2014). But simultaneously, it has been described how waiting asylum seekers try to keep busy by filling the waiting time 'productively', directing mind and body towards what can or has to be done in the present, rather than what might happen in an uncertain, far-away future (Kallio, Meier and Källi 2021; Meier and Donà 2021). Here, Griffiths (2014) and others point to the importance of forming routines to provide structure and 'sense' to the days and withstand and re-temporalise the 'timelessness' of prolonged waiting (see also Meier and Donà 2021). More concretely, scholars have described engagements in the seeking out of (informal) work; learning languages or pursuing education; socialising and network building (Bendixsen and Hylland Eriksen 2020; Kreichauf 2021); and communal care, including providing support and assistance to fellow waiters, sharing information, or participating in commoning projects (Chattopadhyay and Tyner 2022; Meier and Donà 2021); selfcare (Meier and Donà 2021); creative or artistic activities (Greene 2020); and starting, caring for, or 'doing' family (Greene 2020; Meier and Donà 2021). Many of these activities may simply be materially necessary for survival, but that does not negate their positive impact on the capacity to cope with waiting (Meier and Donà 2021).

To better understand how meaning making under prolonged stuckedness functions, Fog Olwig (2023) introduces the important distinction between the end and ends of waiting: Echoing the critique of methodological nationalism, she warns that focussing analyses only on the ultimate 'end' of waiting- status recognition- risks missing all the other more specific 'ends', or goals, that asylum seekers might be pursuing simultaneously and sometimes more immediately, and whose achievement may provide them with a sense of existential mobility, meaning, and agency, amidst enduring liminality (see also Meier and Donà 2021). Fog Olwig (2023) thus warns of "being blinded by powerful teleological narratives preoccupied with a final end that never comes" when interrogating asylum seeker's potentialities of unwaiting.

Notwithstanding, some scholars caution that not all migrants are equally able to use in-between-time meaningfully and productively. The responsibility to spend the waiting time usefully seems to lay with the applicants, due to either the outright structural and practical lack of state-provided opportunities and frameworks (see, for example, Jacobsen 2021), or be a matter of chance due to the varying geographic location and quality of support and opportunities between, for instance, reception centres, to which applicants are randomly assigned and then confined (Vianelli et al. 2022). To illustrate, Jacobsen's (2021) study on Marseille describes how many asylum seekers spend considerable time around the PADA office, simply because of a lack of productive activities. She points out that this time provides some information sharing and network building, and yet the passing of time here is merely a last solution in lack of alternatives and not significantly beneficial, especially not in the longterm. Next to the geographical and institutional dimension, Kreichauf (2021) also directs the attention to personal factors, writing that that "Using detention and waiting for meaning-making activities and as acts of agency and power, however, greatly depends on people's individual position and personal history. Some are dyslexic; some suffer from PTSD and

are not able to get involved with others or their procedures. My respondents' social nature and outgoing personality were certainly drivers for their establishment of social relations" (p.757). Beyond that, scholars most importantly identify structural factors such as Age, Gender, or Race as determinants of the ability to reclaim waiting time (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2023, Crine et al. 2024). Vianelli et al. (2022) voice the concern that "it is the most capable ones who have the skills needed to make the most of their time", so that "the stronger, more capable, fitter (mentally and physically), wealthier, freer, and cleverer asylum seekers with more initiative, confidence and social connections have chances to flourish" (p.1026). Crine et al. (2024) observe in particular a gender disbalance, as "it is often men who are more able to make connections with employers, free of childcare, and are socially unperturbed by joining mixed-gender language classes or employers" (Vianelli et al. 2022:1026), while women seem overall "'less busy' than men, or in any case, much less busy with activities *outside* the centre" (Crine et al. 2024:175). Although this does not necessarily determine subjective perceptions of meaningfulness, it likely impacts the ability to seize opportunities. All in all, it becomes clear that "waiting can be divisive: a resource for those able to exploit it but a cause of increased marginality for those unable to take advantage of it" (Vianelli et al. 2022:1024).

Defiance

Unwaiting by reinterpreting and meaningfully reclaiming waiting time entails, to a certain degree, an acceptance of the inalterability of the waiting condition as such. But, waiting can also be explicitly and directly refused through disruptive acts that challenge its very legitimacy and the bordering, disciplining, and violent functions it performs. Such unwaiting demands actual change, and as such it is confrontational, often public, and explicitly politicised, but also more rare and risky. It may include individual action, but its more powerful through the collective. Koshravi (2021b) contends that waiting always carries a risk of an immediate rebellion, due to the inherent dissatisfaction of waiters paired with their immediate proximity. Such rebellion might be sparked when either the individual need becomes too urgent, or once the progression of the physical or imaginary queue halts entirely, so that "waiting turns from the expectation of having into the experience of not having, and patience runs out" (Dobler 2020:14). Or in other words, contestation becomes likely when waiters understand, or at least believe, that waiting alone will not bring about the desired outcome, and therefore is in vain. Dobler's (2020) sentiment that "many revolts have had their origin in a period of waiting that finally appeared endless" echoes Dr. Martin Luther King:

"For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.'"

(Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963)

For a collective act of unwaiting to materialise, and therein becoming more powerful and less risky, solidarity must be developed among waiters (Dobler 2020; Koshravi 2021b). Here, the following factors are crucial: Firstly, solidarity develops more easily when the presence and need of others does not represent a direct threat to the own need, that is what access is just slow, but not bound by absolute scarcity (Dobler 2020). But even when that is the case, waiters must overcome the described sense of competition meant to discipline their behaviour and realised the sharedness of their situation. Secondly, Dobler (2020) writes, "solidarity becomes easier if the social forces that make us wait can be defined as a common enemy", constituted for example by "an unjust system, a dysfunctional authority or a lazy officer" (p.15), and Koshravi (2021b) adds that rebellion is particularly likely, when the waiting imposed by this enemy is perceived as unjustified and disproportional. Hage (2009b) illustrates that, by developing the described situation of the queue

that stopped to move further. He writes "People start to feel agitated. People start talking to each other not about the banal things they usually do to fill up time while waiting but about the unbearable and inhumanity of being subjected to such conditions external to themselves" (p.7). And thirdly, Dobler (2020) denotes that waiters are much more likely to feel empathy and solidarity if they already know and trust each other, and related, if they have a shared social background. Ultimately, the potential for collective resistance arises when waiters use the abundantly available time to historicise, question, and politicise their condition (Dobler 2020; Hage 2009b; Koshravi 2021b). In Sartrean terminology, this transforms the queue from 'a plurality of isolations' to a 'fused group' capable of counteraction (Dobler 2020). This may take the form of complaints, demands, and refusals to wait, or manifest as organised protests, direct action, attempts to circumvent waiting obligations, or acts of subversion that reject the imposed temporal regime (Koshravi 2021b). As Meier and Donà (2021) note, here as well, tactics of slowness and of speed emerge as important in response to actions of authorities, for instance in the deliberate delay or evasion of deportation orders, or in quick, spontaneous mobilisations.

Empirical explorations of such direct, subversive unwaiting are relatively rare, but many rights-oriented mobilisations of waiting asylum seekers can be seen as expressing a will to unwait, even if they are not self-proclaimed in this way. The 1996 *Sans Papiers* movement in France, and its continuations, can be read as a resistance to the pointless waiting for regularisation and the resulting stuckedness, which challenged the temporal control the French state imposed on them (Abdallah 2023). Similarly, a 2021 protest of unhoused asylum seekers in Marseille denied access to emergency housing under narrow, categorical definitions of vulnerability, implies the refusal to wait longer for justice and rights, but to pressure authorities towards their acknowledgement (Chappart 2021). Or, the establishment of a protest camp by Palestinian asylum seekers and local activists in Oslo did not only allow participants to give meaning to their waiting time by turning it into social time, but also represents an attempt "to recapture time, to help decide when waiting would end and the future would begin" (Bendixsen and Hylland Eriksen 2020:107). All three examples cited here reveal another aspect that is crucial to this form of unwaiting, but underexplored in the literature, namely the support and solidarity of other actors.

Despite stressing the potential and necessity of joint contestation, Dobler (2021) also recognises the difficulty of unwaiting in this way, writing that "Stopping to wait, no matter in what variant, remains a difficult step to take", because "the longer people have waited for a particular outcome, the more of the time and energy they have already invested will be lost when they abandon the wait", and the more pressure they may feel from family and others close to them (p.16). In the context of asylum governance, preclusions to subversive unwaiting have received very little scholarly attention, at least when framed in this way. In one contribution, Jacobsen and Karlsen (2023) reflect on their participatory ethnographic fieldwork, finding that "even though their "waiting" may be perceived as a "shared" experience, their socio-economic and racial positioning differently condition the affective experience of waiting and the ability to curtail boredom, display impatience, voice protest, or demand fair treatment", thus making solidarity more difficult to develop (p.11). Furthermore, in a study on a sufficiently comparable bureaucratic context, that of social assistance, Hansen (2020), observes that claimants "accept the waiting time even though they associate it with frustration, demotivation, and uncertainty" because "they believe that frontline workers have no power to reduce waiting time", because these workers routinely "deflect blame either "upwards" (toward the rules or their management) or "down wards" (toward troublesome citizens)", thus creating the impression that complaints or refusals would be pointless (p.1128).

Enduring Despite

While the already described tactics represent relatively direct attempts to regain agency by reclaiming or challenging conditions of imposed waiting, some authors have suggested endurance as a third modality of unwaiting (Auyero 2011; Karlsen 2021; Koshravi 2021b; Kreichauf 2020). This consideration is based on the acknowledgement that, realistically, opportunities for such self-directed action can be extremely constrained due to legal, material, or other external factors producing virtually non-navigable waiting situations in which more overt resistance risks serious danger (Karlsen 2021). It has thus been maintained that given the often great material, physical and psychological suffering experienced by people stuck in liminal time-spaces, the 'simple' act of enduring them day in and day, of 'waiting it out' out should be read as an exertion of great strength and agency (Hage 2009b; Karlsen 2021). As Koshravi (2021b) illustrates, this perspective is not novel, but for instance echoes the Palestinian cultural principle of *Sumud* (صمود in Arabic), best translated to steadfastness, which conveys the power in and of staying put, and therein withstanding and surviving occupation, oppression and attempts of ethnic cleansing. In the context of contemporary migration control, Kreichauf (2020) similarly demonstrates how 'surviving' the violence of detention through social relations represents an exertion of agency. Rather than passive submission, enduring prolonged waiting signals resilience and perseverance despite adversity, and "even if it does not immediately produce social transformation [...] it allows people to be something else than simply defeated by the circumstances" (Karlsen 2021:126). Or, as Hage (2009b) puts it, "a certain nobility of spirit and an assertion of one's 'freedom as a human' oozes out of the very notion of 'endurance' which comes to negate the dehumanization implied by a situation of 'stuckedness'" (p.4).

Endurance may be enabled by practices of adaption; sociality; drawing emotional coping strategies, such as daydreaming or religious prayer; certain affective attitudes, such as stubbornness and insistence; or the exercising of patience (Bandak and Janeja 2018; Koshravi 2021b). A key dimension underpinning these practices of endurance is, again, hope. Hage (2009a) writes, "waiting indicates that we are engaged in, and have expectations from, life" (p.1). In other words, those who continue to endure the wait have not yet lost hope. Hope is then not simply an emotion, but a temporal strategy: the present is endured by imagining and directing the mind towards alternative futures (Bhatia and Canning 2021). While most scholars emphasise the motivational, sustaining, live giving effect of hoping for a good future once protection has been granted, others argue that this can also come to constitute a form of 'cruel optimism', because recognition will not necessarily be an end to precarity, exclusion, or waiting, and because it negates suffering in the present (Greene 2020; Karlsen 2021). As such, not all scholars conclude endurance to be an act of resistance, and indeed its interpretation can be seen as a very much ongoing debate. Returning to the work of Hage (2009b), we see a more ambiguous stance: While the author recognises 'waiting out the crisis' as agentic practice, he nonetheless contends that it may also reflect deeply internalised domination, that prevents more direct agitation towards change. As discussed, he argues that when endurance and patience become idealised as civilised virtues, they effectively become disciplinary tools that represent submission rather than resistance. In my research, both perspectives matter, and it remains to be seen which emerges as more relevant in the case of the Belgian asylum office and procedure.

4. Methodology

Reflections and Approaches

This research seeks in-depth, nuanced understandings of realities of waiting at the Immigration Office, with a focus on how power, vulnerability and agency interplay in this waiting territory (Flick, von Kardorff and Steinke 2004). Addressing subjective experience, and centring emotion and embodiment, I work predominantly on the micro-level. The study of such contingent matters and my objective to “describe life worlds ‘from the inside out’, from the point of view of the people who participate” requires a qualitative research approach (Flick, von Kardorff and Steinke 2004:3). As such, this thesis mixes observation and interviewing, supplemented with a review of relevant literature and continued desktop research, within a case study design (Creswell and Poth 2018). Figure 2 illustrates the data collection process, described in detail in the respective chapters, and aims to illustrate that main and supplementary data collection methods were conducted simultaneously and continued to inform each other throughout the entire research process.

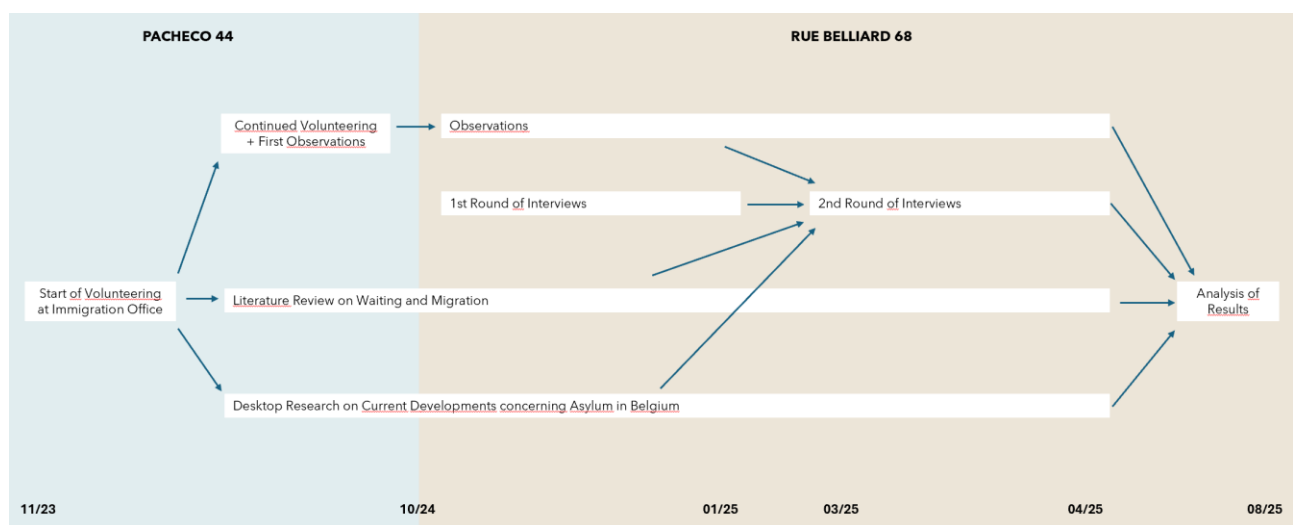


Figure 2. Visualisation of Research Process.

Case Study Analysis

Aligning with its inductive, micro-level approach, this research adopts a case study design: It explores the issue of forced waiting in the bounded case of the Belgian IO, in a limited timeframe. This aims for a context-sensitive study of *this* particular waiting space, rather than broad generalisations (Creswell and Poth 2018). This is particularly important given great national differences in asylum policy and practice, even within the European Union. The concrete case studied is the asylum registration centre (Centre d'enregistrement Protection Internationale), located in Brussels. While studying one and the same institution, this case study is multi-sited as the office changed location during my research: Until October 2024, the IO was located at Boulevard Pacheco 44, before being moved to Rue Belliard 68. At both sites, I study the institutional waiting areas *outside* the office and its surrounding urban space. The case study was selected based on the gravity of the problem of extremely prolonged waiting in contemporary Belgian migration governance, combined with the ongoing reception crisis. As the first point of contact for asylum seekers with the Belgian state, and as one of the two relevant government institutions processing asylum application, the IO is a relevant site of study which has to date not been scholarly addressed.

The Ethics of Presence: Fieldwork, Power, and Positionality in a Contentious Context

The methodology of this study changed often, and it took great flexibility and indeed a certain stubbornness to realise it. I enter this chapter with a reflection on my research process, to address critical questions of positionality and ethics at the outset, as an essential and meaningful part of my research, not a sidenote to be added at the end (Flick, von Kardorff and Steinke 2004).

When the Field Pushes Back

I first visited Pacheco on a November morning in 2023 with a small team of volunteers gathered by the NGO *Serve the City* (StC) to provide a solidarity breakfast for waiters outside the IO.



Figure 3. StC solidarity breakfast at the Pacheco IO.

An immediate, heartfelt solidarity with those put in wait here and subsequent immersion in literature on waiting motivated me to ambitiously plan fieldwork of frequent, lengthy visits and embodied research through full participation queuing from the early morning hours onwards. The first field visits brought highly interesting insights, but also stares, catcalling, and inappropriate advances by men. Diverging from the experience as a volunteer, they brought a new discomfort, as any sense of legitimacy that had cloaked me before disappeared. Around the same time, during a volunteering shift, me and other volunteers witnessed and deescalated a conflict in which one waiter attacked another with a knife. Another time, a young woman came running to me, took me by the hand and called me to stay with her. An aggressively shouting man had followed her for several blocks, and so we ran away from him together. These experiences brought the sobering realisation that Pacheco⁴⁴ was not a sufficiently safe place to spend dozens of hours of fieldwork in. Surely, what took me months to see was common knowledge to everyone forced into wait here.

Being the Other, Being in the Field

Evidently, I had missed to consider honestly my own identity, underestimating the challenges of studying a vulnerable population, while being vulnerable myself. My positionality as young, *white*, female-read person contrasts to that of most waiters there, putting me in the spotlight. The fact that asylum seekers from Ukraine are registered at another office elsewhere in the city exacerbates racial difference- usually, the only *white* people present were volunteers, NGO workers, and me. Standing out so much made me feel vulnerable and exposed, especially being a female read person in the male-dominated space that is the waiting area. I take these feeling as important sources of information, while trying to locate the difference between *feeling* uncomfortable and *being* unsafe. Speaking as a white woman, my emotions have power over racialised populations, creating a tension between not reinforcing the trope of the dangerous migrant-man, while doing justice to real risks that not only affect me, but especially migrant women here (Ahmed 2024). Beyond my

vulnerabilities, it is clear that the most salient marker of difference between me and everyone waiting at the IO was my holding of secure, EU citizenship status. Positionality matters in all ethnographic research, but here, the power imbalance created was particularly great, and difficult to transcend. This shows in starkly different relations to the Belgian state: ultimately, I research a system that generally protects me, while harming those I study, a difference which I felt many people I encountered were acutely aware of. Yet more important, I could *unwait* at any time, exiting the site whenever the conditions got too exhausting or dangerous, while waiters were much more constrained in this choice. Initial otherness, distance, and mistrust is common in cross-cultural ethnographic research, but in my case this could not be alleviated through building rapport, because I encountered new waiters as strangers each time (De Walt and De Walt 2011; Verloo 2020). I imagine, that my appearance as visible outsider, combined with the already stressful conditions and vulnerable position of waiters affected their willingness to share their experiences with me. Another major barrier here was the multitude of languages spoken within this highly diverse population, and my inability to speak to waiters in any language other than English.

Walking the Line: Contending with Risk and Receiving Help

To increase personal safety to a manageable level, I decided to limit my field presence and only visit with the solidarity breakfast. Wearing their blue vest, and standing behind the tables, instead of in the midst of waiters may have precluded some eavesdropping but kept me safer. I consciously dressed inconspicuously, and accepted that some corners of the waiting area, above all the all-male queue, were effectively foreclosed to me. Later, at Rue Belliard, I arranged field visits outside of the solidarity breakfast, as the new site felt somewhat safer. Still, I kept some distance, and moved merely up and down the women- and family queue. The most important adjustment, however, was sustained support from my life partner who began to accompany me during fieldwork, effectively becoming a co-researcher for this period. Not only did his presence make me more comfortable, it also immensely benefited the quality of my research. Being read as male allowed him to access areas that I couldn't, and eased access to male waiters. Moreover, his ability to communicate with waiters in Arabic, French, and Russian was immensely valuable for understanding interactions and approaching waiters. Unlike me, my research partner was not immediately perceived as outsider and was able to bridge the gap and put me into contact with waiters. On the whole, his contribution to my research includes presence and translation on site, and translation and transcription of two interviews conducted with native Arabic speakers.

Practicing Reciprocity in Conditions of Structural Harm?

Creswell and Poth (2018) urge researchers, "Do not 'use' participants by gathering data and leaving the site without giving back" (p.130). However, this study is incapable of bringing about practical, tangible change to their lives in the face of great structural harm. I tried to practice small actions of reciprocity in the field by offering presence and empathy. Showing that I take waiting serious often led me to become an outlet for complaint to waiters, where their experiences were validated. And, as for the grave lack of information about the workings of the IO, I tried to share as much knowledge as possible. In combination with my European appearance, wearing a StC vest or simply having the 'official' looking plastic folder with my outreach flyers in hand was enough to become the recipient of a multitude of questions- for most of which I could only guess, google, or give disappointing answers, or in the best case refer people to NGOs or other institutions. As I grew familiar with the workings of the space, I provided guidance about where to go or when doors would be expected to open. As much as I felt confusion up to hostility from some waiters upon being observed in this highly sensitive moment, I also felt great appreciation once people understood what I was there

for. I received many shy smiles, thanking, and encouragement to continue. I felt that most waiters *wanted* their experience to be studied and addressed. Still, being unable to help *more* in the face of the great suffering we often encountered, remained a difficult, and unresolved emotion to me and my research partner to negotiate, especially because waiters frequently assigned us more power to effect change than we actually possess (Pittaway, Bartolomei and Hugman 2010).

Naming, Knowing, Telling

Researching migrant waiting entails fundamental ethical and methodological tensions. In naming injustice lies the risk to essentialise and reinforce dominant conceptions of the very categories- 'Race', 'asylum seeker', 'vulnerable'- that uphold structural inequalities. Koshravi (2021a) asks:

So how to write about the victimhood of bordered people, yet avoid reproducing the image of colonial relationships between powerful white people who assumed to be able to keep black and brown migrants wait? How to write about migrants' suffering because of prolonged waiting without reducing them merely to *waiters* who *only* wait for the helping hands of the Global North (P.205)?

Waiting scholars caution against methodological nationalism, arguing that the study of waiting for asylum carries "a notion of a benevolent state as the redemptive endpoint to waiting" repeating precisely that nation state paradigm that has subjected the waiters to bordering and exclusion in the first place (Drangsdal 202:80). Others warn of essentialism through "reinforcing a logic of otherness when characterising migrants as people who occupy a distinct temporality related to their migration status" which is somehow qualitatively different from 'normal', stable, already-citizens (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021:4; Ramsay 2017). The waiting of migrants and asylum seekers should not be exceptionalised but viewed as "as emblematic of a more pervasive experience of precarity caused by contemporary configurations of neoliberal capitalism" (p.5) which "has made 'crisis' the norm in many contexts" (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021:4). Still, these tensions are not easily, perhaps not at all, resolvable. I try to address them by making them explicit, by focusing on dynamic vulnerability rather than fixed identities and by centring agency through the inquiry of unwaiting (Koshravi 2021a; O'Neill 2023; Pittaway, Bartolomei and Hugman 2010). In a field often shaped by exploitative research practice, I try my best to write in ways that speaks with, not for my participants, by placing concrete experiences within their larger stories and centring their voices by adopting participant's language and extensive direct quoting (Pittaway, Bartolomei and Hugman 2010).

Research Questions

Synthesising what I encountered on site with pertaining literature, I eventually formulated the following three guiding research questions.

1. How do asylum seekers in Belgium experience and interpret their waiting at the Immigration Office and in the asylum system at large?
2. How is the experience of waiting for asylum differentiated by individual vulnerabilities, and how does waiting itself contribute to the production or intensification of vulnerability?
3. How do asylum seekers navigate, endure, or subvert the obligation to wait, and what forms of unwaiting emerge through these practices?

Waiting, as lived experience has relevance and takes place across interlinked dimensions (Vidal and Musset 2016). In RQ 1, 'experiencing', covers bodily, emotional, social, and spatial aspects by inquiring concretely what people *do* and *feel* while waiting, how they interact, and how they relate

to the spatial environment. Auyero (2011) asks “If delays are not only suffered but also interpreted, what meanings do those who are routinely forced to wait attribute to the waiting (p.8)?” The second part of the question thus inquires what people *think* about their wait at the place and in the system. Building directly on the first, RQ 2 centres a complex, only minimally explored issue in the scholarship on waiting. Recognising the heterogeneity of waiting ‘asylum seekers’, I examine the contingency and co-creation of specific waiting experiences and differential vulnerabilities and resources, which arise from both structural positionality and momentary situatedness. Going beyond essentialised conceptions, I attempt to identify patterns of experience that respond, or link back, to more or less coherently unified groups of waiters.

While Questions 1 and 2 are explorative, RQ 3 tests the notion of Unwaiting. It critically inquires in how far the optimistically proclaimed potential for unwaiting holds true in the reality of the case at hand by asking which agentic actions are possible and relevant here, who is able to exercise them, how people themselves frame these acts, and in what ways such possibilities are precluded or denied. Put simply, I ask why people do or do not put up with the imposed waiting condition, and what this reveals about power and domination.

Observation

My overall presence in the field, at the IO, stretches over 18 months, starting in November 2023 (see Figure XY). My initial impressions and insights as a volunteer underpin my research as they informed my research questions, and as they allow me to retrace developments and draw comparisons over a long time. I began more structured observations in September 2024, witnessing the last days of Pacheco 44 as point of first registration before moving with the institution to Rue Belliard 68, and concluded them in April 2025. In total, I spent approximately 40 hours in the field. Observations have been intentionally conducted over different seasons and different weekdays, as Monday is typically much busier than the remaining days. They generally took place in the early morning hours before and during the time when the office opens at 8.30AM, but on limited occasions, I passed by both sites during times later in the day to compare conditions. Each field visit began with a flashlight observation of the objective situation, including time, weather and light conditions, major spatial changes if applicable, and the number of waiters. Then, I took quick, often abbreviated notes attempting to manage the tensions of being attentive to and in the often highly dynamic moment, while also ensuring to record it. Immediately after each visit, I added details, explanations and interpretations to these notes. I have chosen not to separate field notes and diary, because the data is more meaningful as a whole, but I have colour-coded the observations accordingly. Fieldnote excerpts will be cited as (FN_location_date) and field diary excerpts as (FD_location_date), with the locations abbreviated as P (Pacheco) and B (Belliard). To complement written notes, I produced sketches of either IO site and took photographs. While initial observations were open and considerably occupied with gaining an understanding of the workings of the IO, in time several themes naturally moved more into focus. These were interactions and conflicts, and overt expressions of emotions. I have taken care to ground my observations spatially by noting how space was organised and used, noting people’s positions, activities, and movements, which included counting individuals and tracking waiting times. Furthermore, anticipating with Cristea (2023) that especially concerning emotions and frustrations, “one overheard sentence or joke can synthesize an entire public opinion on a current matter” (p.70), my research partner and I attempted to eavesdrop in the queue, as far as this was possible. In terms of more direct communication, informal moments of conversations have been recorded in the

fieldnotes and are of value especially in so far as they entail perspectives of populations whom I have not been able to conduct full interviews with, especially women. The specific objective of the observations has been to understand the more 'objective', collective picture of the situation and dynamics at the IO, including how actors interact with each other and their environment, and what that reveals about internal logics and order at the IO.

The analysis of my fieldnotes employs the method of thematic analysis for "identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" (Nowell et al. 2017:2). Within this method, I follow a sequential inductive-deductive approach: In the first round of coding, I engage openly with my field notes, allowing patterns and themes to emerge from the data itself, while the second round approaches the data deductively, guided by my research questions and interests. In this way, I ensure analytical relevance, while remaining sensitive to unexpected findings.

Interviews

In-depth interviewing in the framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) complements the more structural thematic analysis of participant observations. IPA, as a newer, more applied strand of phenomenology tailored to qualitative research is draws from hermeneutics and idiography (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2012). It seeks "in-depth analysis of single cases and examining individual perspectives of study participants, in their unique contexts", which allows me to explore each interviewees subjective experience in its own right, before potentially carving out patterns that cut across social difference (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2012:363). Furthermore, I choose IPA for its recognition of the "double hermeneutic or dual interpretation process" the attempt to "make sense of the participants' meaning making" (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2012:362). IPA does strive for bracketing, and rather assigns an active, reflexive role to the researcher, allowing for interpretations to produce comprehensive analyses.

Interview Formats and Outreach

I conducted a total of 12 interviews, which are listed in Appendix C. They were done from October 2024 to April 2025, and can be roughly separated into a first and second round, the latter of which has been informed by first insights as illustrated in Figure 2 above. Interviews take three formats: verbal interviews have been conducted on site (n=3) or online (n=3), and written interviews (n=6) have been conducted via E-Mail or Facebook. Outreach consisted of two distinct strategies combining convenience and purposive sampling: On site, my research partner and I approached waiters directly and interviewed them while queuing. The choice of whom to interview was relatively random, arising from informal conversations or from a perceived inviting attitude, conveyed by eye contact, smiles, or greetings, and we never approached anyone that did not send such signals. On site interviews were recorded and took between 20 and 30 minutes. Secondly, potential interviewees were contacted through flyers that I regularly stuck onto walls at both IO sites. The flyers featured information about my research content, objective, and practicalities, in eight languages. Those interested could contact me via specifically created E-Mail or Facebook (@Waiting at Pacheco44) accounts. Once in contact, I tailored practicalities of the interview to each respondent. Communication usually worked through online translation, required much additional explanation, and often interviews never took place due to the difficult everyday conditions of asylum seekers. Realising interviews meant adapting to the research population and overcome cultural and language barriers. I offered participants to conduct interviews in their native language, which effectively meant that written interviews were sometimes the only option. Other interviews

were conducted via videoconference, fully recorded, and between thirty minutes and two hours in length. Two were conducted in English, as chosen by the participant, and one in Arabic. Undisputedly, translation significantly alters meaning, especially on the matter of waiting, where other languages may have multiple terms with diverging meanings (Koshravi 2021a). However, I prioritised interviewing asylum seekers in their native language, when necessary, to make interviews more comfortable or even feasible and avoid a serious language bias.

Sample

IPA benefits from a more diverse sample, while requiring the researcher “to find a defined group for whom the research problem has relevance and personal significance” (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2012:364). Here, the only criterion of inclusion was being a waiter in the process of seeking asylum in Belgium. Interviewees were deliberately not selected for any set criteria or perceived typicality of experience, but I simply interviewed persons willing to participate. While this will create certain biases based on personality type or social positionality, it also eliminates the usual selection bias and creates a certain level of randomness. In line with the IPA approach to “concentrate more on the depth, rather than breadth of the study”, the twelve interviews conducted are deemed sufficient in number. Appendix C provides an overview on relevant characteristics of interviewees. Interviewees were either just about to lodge their application or waiting for their first or second hearing. They come from different countries in Africa, West Asia, and Latin America, varied from teenage to advanced age, and identified, except for two couples, exclusively as male. This research does not seek generalisability- and yet, the outright absence of single women’s experiences represents a serious bias. Attempting to mitigate this, in the second half of the fieldwork period, outreach flyers have only been placed in the waiting area designated specifically to women, and I predominantly approached women for interviews. However, neither the more private, nor the more direct contact worked, as out of the over 40 E-Mails and Facebook text messages I received, not one has been by a woman, and no single women agreed to an interview on site. I believe that this stark difference in willingness to participate speaks volumes in itself. The consequentially limited insight on women’s experiences comes from focussed observations, short, informal conversations; accounts provided by others during other interviews; and my own experience as a woman in this particular space, to which I believe there exist commonalities that cut across the very different roles and positions.

I complement the sample with one interview with two members, policy worker Thomas Willekens and field coordinator Aurica, of Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen (VV), an NGO providing material and legal assistance to asylum seekers. I have built contact to their workers and volunteers in the field, as one of the only stable populations present. Ultimately, every asylum seeker only waits once at the IO, while representatives of VV are present there for months, five days a week, which naturally gives them a great insight into dynamics, many individual cases, and changes over time.

Interview Guide and Ethics

Interviews of all formats followed one interview guide, attached in the annex, which was slightly condensed for in-situ interviews. For written interview, this guide was sent directly to participants with the request to provide as detailed stories and descriptions as possible. Verbal interviews were semi-structured, aiming to let interviewees narrate their waiting experience and interpretation at the IO and beyond, guided by literature-based probing (Pinkster 2020). Additionally, by asking about observations, I was sometimes able to hear stories of multiple waiters and discern how interviewees understand their own experiences and construct their own identities vis-à-vis others.

As for the sensitive content of the interviews, procedural ethics were of utmost importance. I offered each participant to be interviewed by someone of the same gender, clarified the purpose of my research, assured them of anonymity and confidentiality, and made sure they had full control over the interview (Pittaway, Bartolomei and Hugman 2010). Emphasis was put on reassuring participants that the interview would not affect their asylum case negatively, or indeed as some half joking asked, positively. Based on that, I received informed consent from all participants. During the interview, I was attentive to the emotional safety of my participants, not asking too intrusive questions, so that traumatising events were only discussed when brought up by the interviewee. After the interview, I remained at reach for participants to ensure that they were able to potentially revoke consent to the usage of their data. Interviews may have been affected by memory bias, as the waiting experience of some participants dated back a certain time already, which may have led them to forget or reshape events. Furthermore, interviewing in qualitative research often faces social desirability bias. However, in my case I believe that I could considerably mitigate this from the outset, by positing myself and my research as solidary, and explicitly critical of the practices of the IO and not posing questions in a way suggesting that there exist wrong or right answers.

Applying Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Finally, for the analysis, written interviews were brought into a coherent structure, and verbal interviews were transcribed according to a modified Jefferson transcription style which sensitively records verbal, prosodic, and paralinguistic speech elements (Jefferson 2004). Whenever necessary, transcripts were translated from Arabic into English, with clarifying added comments by the translator. Working with such multilingual data is challenging, but I emphasise again that I believe it necessary to avoid bias in the sample, and to make the matter of this study researchable. Finally, all interview data was analysed in line with IPA methodology as laid out by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012). As addressed, IPA recognises and utilises the interpretative capabilities of the research, which unavoidably introduces some subjectivity. My background as young, middle-class, German woman pursuing higher education influenced what I was able to see and understand both in the field during interviewing, and how I chose to interpret that. At the same time, I also consider myself a feminist and anti-racist activist, an Urban Studies student, an empathetic and curious person, that believes in a world without borders -this too influences my interpretations. Still, I try to alleviate this by sticking close to the participants elaborations, and through extensive, cross-cultural discussion with my research partner.

Complementary Methods

VV provided me access to their recent Incident Report, a document that objectively documents all incidents at the IO's at Pacheco44 and Belliard68, that their daily present *Startpunt* volunteer team recorded between August 2023 and April 2025, which coincides precisely with my research period. The incidents include instances of police presence, inappropriate behaviour by IO employees towards asylum applicants, and other practices that have disrupted the proper functioning of the registration process. I use this report, analysed as well using Thematic Analysis and cited as (IR_VV_Date) to complement my own field observations. To the same end, I employed thorough desktop research including the continuous review of local media articles, civil society publications, and social media posts. Whenever they complement or emphasise my other results, I use pictures and personal quotes gathered from these sources. Photographs, both my own and others, that closely show persons are blurred to ensure privacy and dignity.

5. Context **Belgium's Temporal Architectures of Asylum**

This chapter critically outlines the broader structural context of asylum bureaucracy in Belgium, and provides a description of the spatial environment and the organisation of the registration centre.

The Procedure

Asylum in Numbers

Following exacerbating conflict and instability, tens of thousands of people are globally forced away from their homes on the move towards hopes of security. While “Most refugees remain near their country of origin, with 69 percent hosted in neighbouring countries” as “Low- and middle-income countries continue to host the majority of the world’s refugees”, a minority continues to make the treacherous ways towards Europe (UNHCR 2024). All across the European Union, the number of first-time asylum applications have been steadily on the rise again upon a momentary drop during the Covid-19 pandemic across the European Union (Eurostat 2025). In Belgium, 39,615 people sought international protection in 2024, which, as Belgian politicians and authorities don't tire to emphasise, represents the highest number since the 2015 peak (CGRS 2025b). While origins of asylum seekers are highly diverse, most applicants in 2024 came from Palestine, Syria, and Afghanistan, while the most recent data for June 2025 shows Eritrea, Afghanistan and Palestine as main countries of origin (CGRS 2025b; CGRS 2025a). In the past year, 34,052 decisions were taken at a protection rate of 47,2% (CGRS 2025b).



Figure 4. Annual asylum applications in Belgium, 2014-2024

Come Back Next Month: Accessing Asylum at the Immigration Office in Theory and Practice

With few exceptions of applications launched at the border, in detention facilities, or prisons, everyone that arrives in Belgium makes their way to the centralised registration centre of the Immigration Office (IO) in Brussels. The IO, operated by the Federal Public Service Interior, IBZ (*Intérieur Binnenlandse Zaken*), is responsible for the registration of asylum applications, including the execution of procedures under the Dublin regulation. The application process consists of three steps, which in practice are carried out on the same day: Firstly, applicants present themselves to *make* an application, which requires no formal administrative procedures, but principally already endorses the applicant with the legal rights of an asylum seeker. Next, the IO *registers* the application, which means establishing identity and other relevant information, identifying individual vulnerabilities, informing about rights, such as legal support and reception, and obligations, and taking biometric data (VV 2024). While normally done immediately, the registration must be completed within 3 days, or in times of high numbers, within 10 days (VV 2024). Then, the application is *lodged* directly, or at most within 30 days, which commences the international protection procedure, and allows the IO to issue an Annex 26 (first application) or an Annex 26quinquies (subsequent application), which documents the person as an applicant for international protection in Belgium (VV 2024). As indicated by the red circle, it is this first stage in the asylum process, and the institution of IBZ that this thesis focusses on.



Figure 5. The asylum procedure in Belgium

Source: 2025c..

Currently, the daily registration capacity of the IO lies at maximum 220 applications, but this is not legally fixed, and rather depends on the personnel availability at the IO and the profiles of applicants, and can therefore at times be substantially lower (VV 2024). The autumn months of last year represent a period of peak numbers, in which often more people waited outside the IO to present their applications than could, with the current staff capacity, be registered. Repeating a previous period of high numbers in 2022, the IO resorted to a system of vulnerability-based prioritisation that effectively infringes on the right to access asylum procedures (VV 2024). Priority to access the IO is given to applicants deemed more vulnerable: women and gender- or sexual minorities, families, elderly people and minors, as well disabled, and severely ill waiters, while single, able-bodied, cis-men are deemed less vulnerable (VV 2024; Amnesty International 2025a). Whoever is not judged sufficiently vulnerable on over-capacity days receives a generic paper with an invitation to present oneself anew at a specific appointment- and is sent away from the office. The appointments sometimes fall into the legal timeframe of three, or at absolute most, 10 days, but according to my own observations, confirmed by VV, are sometimes four, five, or six weeks away, thus clearly violating the legal time frame between *making* and *registering* an asylum claim. Making matters much worse, VV (2024) explains, since the invitation paper is not individualised, and “thus not considered a proof of making an asylum application by any other Belgian government institution” leaving asylum seekers effectively rightless until the appointment (p.44). VV (2024) elaborates further that “This practice is not in conformity with the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union, which states that a person needs to be considered an applicant for international protection as soon as they present this request to the relevant authorities” (p.44). This is echoed by civil society organisations and the Brussels Court of first instance, which on June 29, 2023, found the restriction to register asylum applications, and the consequences thereof, unlawful, stating that “it is inadmissible that some people were obliged to sleep outside the building for several days in a row in the hope that the next day they would be able to enter the building” (Tribunal of first Instance Brussels, cited in VV 2024:45). Notwithstanding, the practice continues, representing a flawed, unlawful solution to a problem of funding and resource shortage (VV 2024). In comparison, Thomas Willekens recalls how in 2022, when many Ukrainian refugees arrived in Belgium at a sudden, a new registration centre with many times the capacity of the IO was swiftly opened in Heyssel, Brussels. Evidently, coping with the influx of large numbers of asylum seekers is a matter of political will, not capacity (Thomas Willekens, 08.05.2025).

The Procedure continues: More Delays and Case Backlogs

Once the application is lodged, the applicant is invited to a first personal hearing at the IO, in which the basics of the asylum case are established and in which IBZ examines whether Belgium is the responsible under the Dublin regulation. The IBZ writes that “The hearing takes place the day the application is lodged or as soon as possible after the lodging of the application” (IBZ 2024:19). If Belgium is the responsible EU member state, the application is transferred to the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS), the institution in authority of granting or denying international protection, based on another in-depth interview (CGRS 2025c). As stipulated

by the binding EU Asylum Procedures Directive (Directive 2013/32/EU, 26 June 2013) and Belgian law, once received, the CGRS must decide on an asylum application within 6 months (VV 2016, CGRS 2025c). Under certain circumstances of high case load, complex cases, or dynamic developments in the country of origin, this period can be stretched to a maximum of 21 months (CGRS 2025c). The CGRS (2025c) writes that “the legal terms are indicative”, and neither the EU Directive “nor its transposition in domestic legal frameworks entail procedural consequences for the authorities’ potential failure to comply with the time limit” (AIDA 2016:4). As such, the reality seems again far from procedural standards: As published by the CGRS (2025c), “The average processing time in 2024 between the transfer of the case and the decision taken by the CGRS amounted to 318 calendar days”, while the median processing time concludes 244 days. Currently, the institution accumulated a backlog of 19,619 cases, which delays processes up to two years (Amnesty International 2025a). Already in 2022, an audit of the relevant authorities concluded “a lack of personnel at the Immigration Office and the CGRS, outdated IT systems, and significant backlogs of cases at the different authorities” as the main causes (VV 2024:47). To alleviate this, a number of measures have been tried out, with limited success. In anticipation of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, the CGRS has conducted Fast Track Procedures (FTP) since February 2024, applied to cases from the list of safe countries of origin, which are unlikely to be recognised (CGRS 2025d). In its first year, 2024, 96% of FTP applications have been rejected within these procedures concluded in under 50 days (Belga 2024).

Rightless Waiting in the Politics of Non-Reception

As of April 2025, as much as 3,000 asylum seekers are left to sleep rough in street corners, train stations, tents, and squats across Belgium (Amnesty International 2025a). Fedasil, the Federal reception agency offers 36,501 sleeping places- and a waiting list counting 2,724 applicants, with waiting times, officially, averaging between three and four months (Amnesty International 2025a). This situation has persisted for three years without change, which means that in essence, homelessness has become institutionalised into the Belgium asylum system (FEANTSA 2025).

“There is no longer a difference between the people that are homeless and the people who are requesting asylum, because basically, structurally it has been integrated that people who are requesting asylum will have to go through a period of homelessness”
(Fabienne de Level, Director of Operations, BELRefugees, cited in FEANTSA 2025)

This affects everyone: Men and women, unaccompanied minors, and families even with newborns have been left to sleep rough (Farcy 2022; FEANTSA 2025). At the same time, Fedasil employs the same discriminatory vulnerability-based regulation access, which places single male asylum seekers at the bottom of an arbitrary hierarchy of need and deservingness (Amnesty International 2025a). Just as at IO, there is no medical, scientific, or judicial procedure in place to determine vulnerability. Amnesty International (2025a) recalls that although certain groups of asylum seekers are entitled to specialised protection based on individual vulnerability, this is in no way a base to exclude other ‘non-vulnerable’ groups from the reception system. Moreover, many of the excluded men may fall into one of the categories, but if their condition is not immediately *visible*, they find it difficult to prove their deservingness. This applies especially to mental health issues, so that the current policy of non-reception “could exacerbate existing, but undetected, conditions of ‘vulnerability’” (Amnesty International 2025a:10).

Consequentially, asylum seekers judged as undeserving are pushed into utter destitution, as opportunities to realise their hopes of making a life in Belgium spiral downwards. Unhoused asylum seekers face particularly great obstacles in accessing the other material, healthcare, legal, information, and social assistance services that they are entitled to (Amnesty International 2025a). Civil society outreach seeks to mitigate that but is limited especially regarding accommodation.

Many asylum seekers resort makeshift encampments or find their way to squatted buildings, where living conditions are often precarious, but some support and stability is provided (Amnesty International 2025a). However, Thomas Willekens explains that ever since the large, community-driven camp in Park Maximilian was dismantled in late 2015, the authorities are wary of collective settlements and evict them regularly and often violently. In this way, unhoused asylum seekers are repeatedly moved around the city where they encounter incomprehension and disdain of many they are forced to share public space with. Belgium's reception crisis has become so severe that Dutch courts recently suspended Dublin returns, citing concerns over the guarantee of returnees' human rights (EMN 2025).

Under EU Reception Conditions Directives (2013, 2024) and domestic law, Belgium is obliged to provide material reception to asylum seekers, that adequately ensures their livelihood, health, and human rights (Amnesty International 2025a). In systematically denying shelter, Belgium violates both these standards and International and European Human Rights Law. Amnesty International (2025a) further points out that the specific targeting of asylum seekers that are *male* and in effect also *racialised*, breaches the principle of equality and non-discrimination, enshrined in International (ICERD, Art. 1, ICESCR, Art. 2) and European Law (CFREU, Art. 21). While rights violations occur elsewhere in the EU, the adoption and upholding of selective non-reception as official policy is unique to Belgium. The country's highest administrative court suspended non-reception as unlawful, which was blatantly ignored by the government at the time, as have the over 12,000 further court rulings calling and an accumulated total of 15.599.800€ penalty fee (Amnesty International 2025a). Belgium's highest judicial bodies and human rights institutions have raised alarm over the repeated failure to comply with court rulings, warning of a serious erosion of the rule of law (Amnesty International 2025a; Farcy 2022).

The reception system has been at capacity for multiple years, and concrete, viable solutions, such as increasing reception capacity by opening up new shelters or activating a national dispersal plan, have long been available and could have been prepared and implemented (Amnesty International 2025a). Instead, Belgian authorities have closed reception centres, understaffed the IO and the CGRS, and suspended certain procedures, i.e. Syrian cases in the present, all of which contribute to longer stays and greater strain on existing capacity (Amnesty International 2025a). This conscious denial of accommodation to asylum seekers thus represents active *unhousing*. Under the Flemish nationalist led government, conditions of asylum seekers in Belgium are about to deteriorate further, as officials worry that Belgium appears too 'generous' (ECRE 2025). Having proudly announced the 'strictest migration policy ever', one measure it foresees to cut the budget of Fedasil by 83% and to 10% of the IO and CGRS until 2029 (ECRE 2025).

"The government will for sure not solve the reception crisis. They really put all their money on the hope that there will be less asylum seekers coming to Belgium. If that does not happen, and they actually do the budget cuts that they want to do on the asylum services, then the asylum authorities will have less funds to do the same work as they do now [...] and the whole system will break down. Is that the objective of certain right-wing parties? Who knows. Because then they can make the argument that there's too much asylum seekers in Belgium, that the system cannot cope and that we should make it even more strict"
(Thomas Willekens, 08.05.2025)

Pacheco 44



At Pacheco, the IBZ Immigration Office occupied the Pacheco Tower and parts of the formerly famous Passage 44. Built in the late 60s, the modernist-brutalist 12-story tower that accommodates hundreds of IBZ employees soars imposingly and represents the impressive backdrop of the offices located at its base. The institution has separate entrances for the two asylum functions IBZ provides here: Those coming to register their asylum applications queue at Boulevard Pacheco at a building known as 'the Cube' (marked in red), while those in the next stage, the first hearing, enter around the corner from Boulevard du Jardin Botanique at Passage44 (marked in yellow).

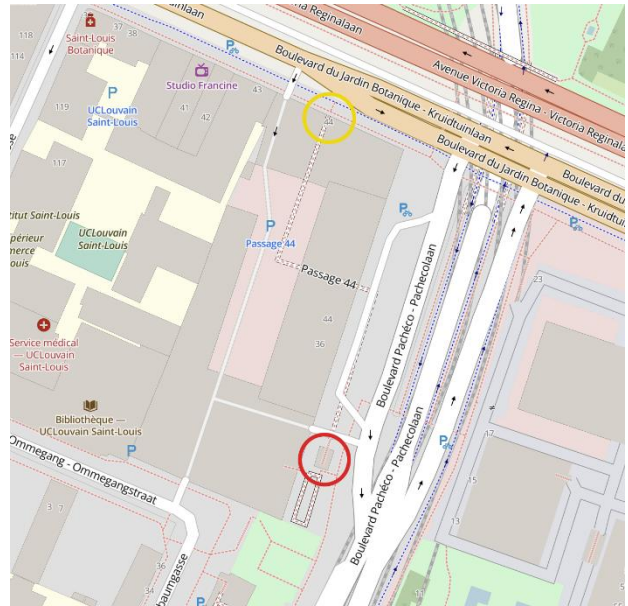


Figure 6. The two Pacheco office entrances.

The case in focus in my research is the outside waiting area of the registration centre (red circle). In the following, I zoom in on the spatial organisation and temporal rhythms of this specific space. Located in public space, it consists of the entrance at the Cube, a glassed block with a large gate from which stairs lead down into the basement of the IO, a larger concrete building next to it which formerly lead into a parking garage, a relatively broad sidewalk which provides more space for waiting, and a small park next to the waiting area.



Figure 7. Queue flow at Pacheco.

At the registration centre, queueing is organised in two separate lines: one for single, male asylum seekers and one for 'vulnerable' applicants (women, families, elderly people and minors, gender minorities, disabled, and severely ill waiters). Both queues run next to each other from the sidewalk to the gate, going around and behind the central concrete building. Half-height fences separate them, directing Single Men (red in Figure XY) to the left, and vulnerable applicants to the right (yellow). At the sidewalk, the queueing space for Men is open while the other queue is contained towards the building side. Once under the 'roof' of the building, space becomes more narrow and ordered, limited by a low wall to the left that separates the waiting area and the park, and the building wall on the right.

The spatial distinction of queuing represents the basis for the implementation of the described system of vulnerability-based prioritisation of access. When the door of the office opens at 8:30am, the general IBZ practice is to admit the entire vulnerable line first, and depending on the numbers,

admit single men until daily capacity is reached. During low pressure days, it may well be that all waiters are admitted, but during busy days, especially on Mondays after many people arrived during the weekend, it happens regularly that no men are admitted, and sometimes even families are sent away. My own observations and the VV Incidence Report show that across autumn and winter of 2024, on most days not all men were admitted, and for on average one day week, no men at all were admitted. My interviews confirm this, as three out of ten men report they needed two attempts to access the IO. On a few exceptional occasions, between 10 to 50 men were let in first, then followed by the vulnerable group (FN_P_10/24). If there is a conflict at the front of the vulnerable line, for instance because IBZ staff questions the age or health status of a waiter, some men may be let in first, but almost always their de-prioritisation applies. If there is no major conflict or interruption, admission is completed in maximum 20 minutes.

The inside waiting area represents a black box for me as a researcher as well as for media or VV, as external actors are prohibited access. It is located in the first basement of the Pacheco complex, which according to the Belgian Building Agency (2018) features "a large waiting room where all the necessary amenities are available: toilets, playroom for the children, smoking room, baggage room, dispatching and scanning system" (para.2). My interviewees have similarly described a large waiting room, but the active use of the other amenities cannot be (dis)confirmed by my research.

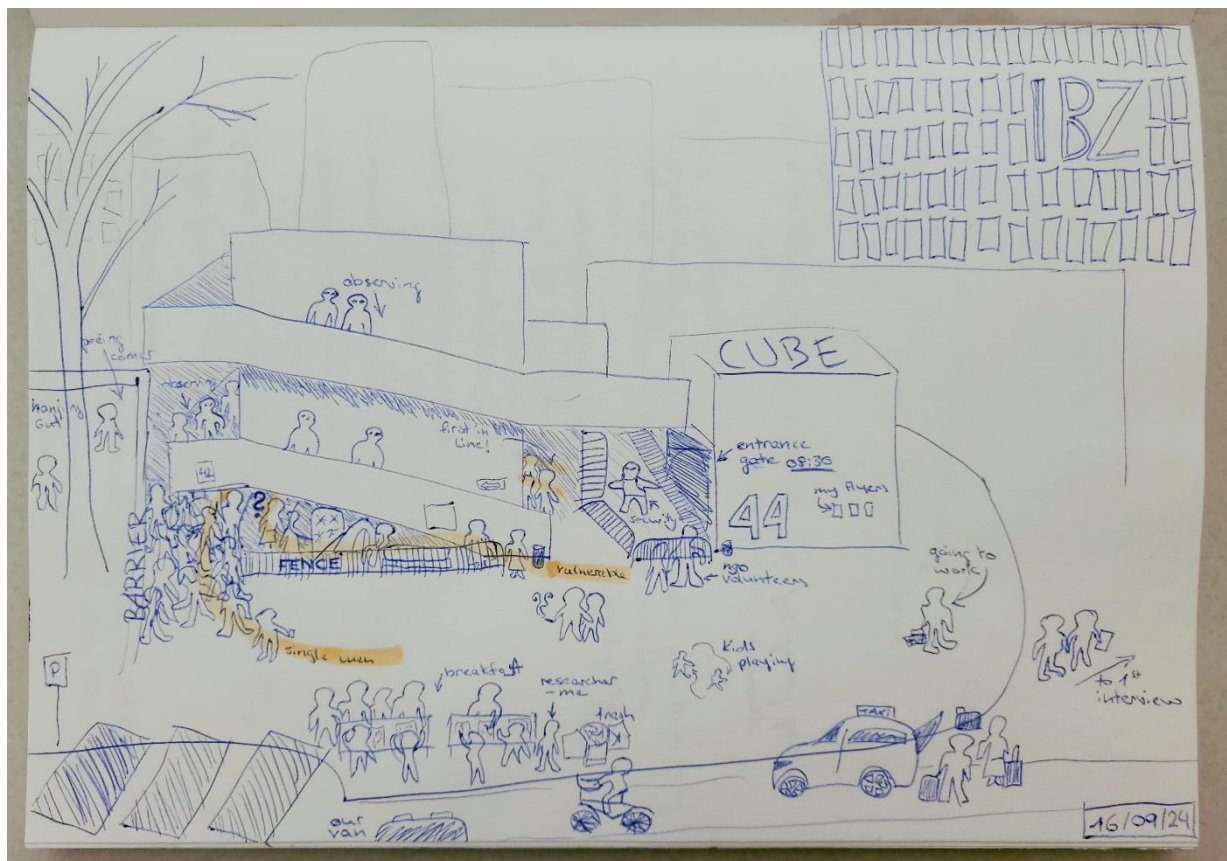


Figure 8. Sketch of the waiting area, 16.09.2024

Next to the applicants, multiple other actors are present and shape the waiting space. IBZ street-level bureaucrats are present for a very short period but naturally hold extraordinary power over the waiting procedure. In a team of four, they open the IO gate and admit waiters conducting prechecks and importantly, execute the shifting vulnerability distinction with significant discretion. They are supported by one or two security guards that are positioned next to the entrance and intervene in case of conflict. The police is also regularly called to the site, mainly by IO staff and sometimes by waiters in case of escalating conflict. Another key actor are the differentially specialised NGOs. VV is present daily for approximately one hour stretched before and during opening time to answer questions, provide legal advice and further off-site services, and monitor conditions and IBZ practice. StC volunteers provide a solidarity breakfast to waiters on Monday and

Tuesday morning from 7am. During the breakfast, tables with food and hot drinks are placed on the edge of sidewalk, while VV approaches waiters directly in the queue. Next, a relatively stable population of unhoused persons, many of them waiting or rejected asylum seekers. At the registration centre, the walkway and ramp winding around the concrete building and the space under the building's roof were, during the time of my research, lined with sleeping places of palettes, cardboard and mattresses and shielded by makeshift barriers. Finally, by-passers constitute an indirect but still relevant group of actors in the waiting space.



Figure 9. Encampments outside the IO.

The entire waiting area severely lacks information, as there is neither an IBZ employee present to provide directions and answer questions, nor clear signage to indicate the different offices and queues. Instead, as the photographs show, the Cube features outdated directions to a Covid vaccination centre and the Brussels Orientation Center for Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection, which has been closed since 2022. Other waiters, volunteers, and myself filled this void, trying as best as possible to direct and redirect applicants to the correct place. Further major spatial problems are the lack of shelter and cover from harsh weather everywhere except in two limited areas to the left of the concrete building and right in front of the entrance, of seating and of bathrooms on-site but also within walking distance.

While the focus of my research is on the registration centre, I have monitored general developments and dynamics at Passage44 as well. As interviews are conducted on appointment-basis, applicants at Passage44 supposedly do not face as much waiting here, but as the office routinely opens late, it is not uncommon to find crowds outside the door here as well. The IO entrance is next to the doorway of the vacant passage, which during most of my research also accommodated makeshift sleeping places of a large number of unhoused persons. Over time, this encampment faced increasing police pressure and repeated evictions framed by authorities as 'Clean Up' [FN_P_04/24] until the space eventually was fully evicted and fenced off in June 2024 [FN_P_07/24].

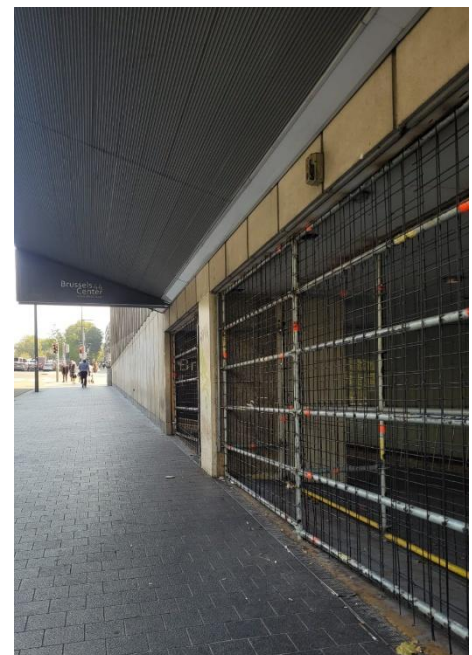


Figure 10. Passage 44, former interview entrance, after it has been fenced off.



Belliard 68

At present, the registration centre is located at Rue Belliard 68. While the organisation of the waiting procedure, such as opening times and staff presence remain generally similar to Pacheco, the spatial layout and presence of actors differ in some important aspects. Here too, the external waiting area is constituted in public space, on a one-and-a-half-meter sidewalk running between the building and a busy, four-lane street. With much less available space, the queues here are entirely contained by fences as they run along the wall of the building towards the door, the Male line from the left (red) and the vulnerable line from the right (yellow). Towards the street, the area is further contained by concrete blocks that protect from traffic. The nooks in the building provide limited, but very much used sitting space. In the space of the vulnerable queue, there is only one such nook available, directly to the right of the door, while in the Men line there are multiple. The nooks provide very limited cover from rain, but for the majority of waiters there is completely no shelter. There is also again no bathroom access, as the inside bathrooms can only be used after opening. While there are more cafes and restaurant close here than in the isolated Pacheco area, they are not open this early in the morning. One major difference in between the two locations is that at Belliard, the queue and its participants are much more visible, indeed exposed, to the also comparatively higher number of by-passers. In the queue, people stand in rows of maximally three people, except in one small space in the vulnerable queue, where the white building with the round windows is set back by a meter, thus providing somewhat more privacy in its corner.



Figure 11. Queue Flow at Belliard.

While here as well, no staff is present during the wait to provide information and guidance, there exists some signage to indicate the different queues on the door of the office and on the ground (see Figure XY) and the straight queue trajectory is a bit more intuitive compared to the winding line at Pacheco. However, as the signs are often blocked by people standing in front or on top of them and thus the overall queue confusion prevails here as well.

Even more than Pacheco, the Belliard location suffers from a lack of space, exemplifying the lack and disregard of designated infrastructure for the function of the office. Since it is located in a busier area than the previous IO, the queuing in public space creates spatial conflict with other users: More than 200 people and their accompaniments queue in this main axis of the Brussels' European Quarter in the hours leading up to the opening at 8:30am- a timing that precisely clashes with that of workers on their way to institutions, offices, or other workplaces. As space is insufficient, some waiters but in particular their accompaniments as well as VV volunteers commonly stand on and thus block the bike lane running between the street and the sidewalk, which is particularly problematic since cyclists cannot divert to the street as this would mean going against the car flow

(see Figure XY). Naturally, this not only creates a risk of accidents but also leads to friction and conflict with daily bike commuters “who either are very considerate or not at all” (Thomas Willekens, 08.05.2025). Thomas Willekens further contextualises this conflict by explaining that “there are people in line who have might have never seen a bike who don't understand the concept of a bell on a bike, so they won't move it if they hear someone ringing, which can lead to aggression of cyclists, which can lead to aggression of the applicant. So that's not helpful.”



Figure 12. Bikelane and waiting area.



Figure 14. and 14. Police at Belliard IO.

Due to this high-tension situation, the police has been more regularly present at the Belliard location, in addition to be commonly called in case of staff-waiter conflict. In autumn and winter of 2024, police vans with blue lights were often parked next to the male queue for one or two hours before the opening time, and from 7:30am or 8am, officers begin to guard the bike line, chasing away waiters, accompanying persons, VV volunteers and myself. Naturally, this police presence induces tension and draws increased attention to the waiting applicants- dynamics to which I will come back in the next chapter.



The lack of space at Belliard also affects other actors. While VV is able to continue working every morning as before, StC has had to set up its breakfast tables in reduced capacity around the corner of the building block, quite far from waiting area and especially the vulnerable queue, so that single women, for instance, must walk past the entire Men line to access StC. More importantly, the lack of space and shelter and the higher securitisation of the Belliard area entirely prohibits unhoused persons to set up camp near the IO, which one the one hand,, which one the one hand, has lasting effects for the group, as it looses symbolic visibility in front of the IO and accessibility from supportive NGOs, including the StC breakfast.

Locating the Immigration Office in its Shifting Locations

In 2018, the Immigration Office moved from the WTC-II building near the Brussels North Station to the Pacheco Tower at Boulevard Pachéco 44, where it remained until the recent move to Rue Belliard 68.

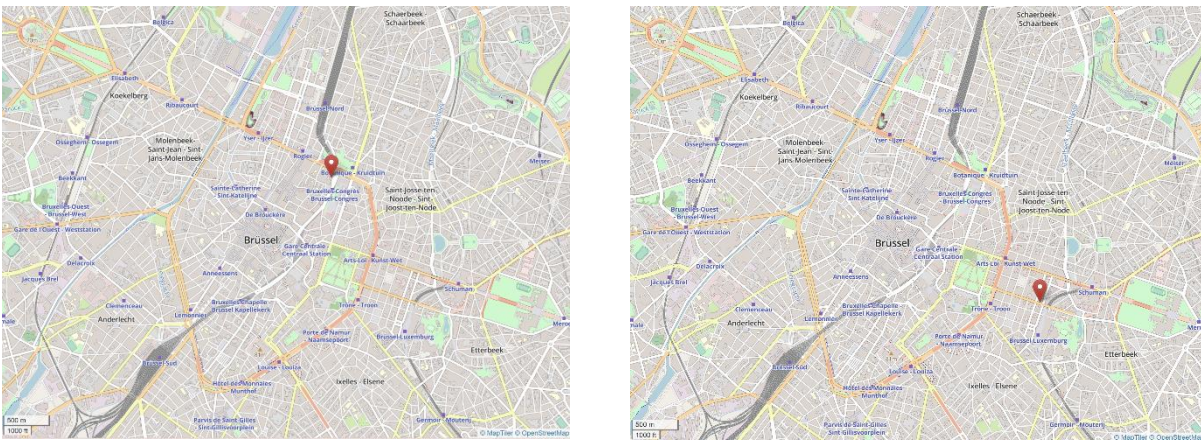
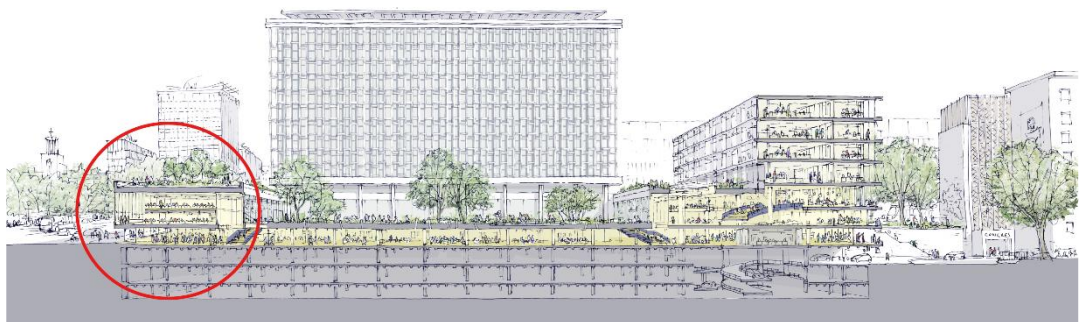


Figure 15. Location of the IOs.

The Pacheco complex is located just inside the Northern edge of the Brussels Pentagon, at the intersection of the Botanique, Notre-Dame-aux-Neiges and Martyrs neighbourhoods. On the one hand, this relatively mono-functional area is characterised by office towers and functions, and low amounts of residential and service infrastructure, which renders it relatively inactive and empty at during nighttime. On the other hand, it is an arrival and sanctuary neighbourhood for migrants who find little space elsewhere in the city (Daher 2019). Pacheco is located in proximity to the North Quarter and Maximilian Park, an important location of migrant struggle in 2015, when a collective camp of waiting asylum seekers had been set up in the park for several months, which was later evicted and dispersed (Daher 2019). Today, the area continues to be home to relatively large numbers of displaced persons, waiting, passing, and undocumented migrants in formal housing, but also squatted buildings, and ephemeral yet omnipresent makeshift sleeping places (Daher 2019). For many years, these camps are continuously evicted and displaced by police under a revanchist urban cleansing agenda (Daher 2019). The area around Pacheco is beginning to undergo change and redevelopment along logics of privatisation and gentrification. This is the context to the out-move of the IO: Passage44 including the part of the Pacheco complex that housed the registration centre has been recently purchased by KU Leuven to build a new campus and student hub (WIT architecten n.d.)

Figure 16. Plan for the KU Leuven Student Hub.



Consequently, the registration centre has moved to Rue Belliard 68 on October 24, 2024. The new location is a temporary solution meant for 16 to 18 months, while a permanent location is scouted. Thomas Willekens expresses hope for a suitable, appropriate location that does justice to the spatial requirements of the IO, but also scepticism due to notorious inadequacy. He says that "that's one of the main remarks that we [VV] have over the past three registration centres, that the location is rarely suited to the needs for registration centre, leading to tensions so that this very violent atmosphere from time to time is created by location and that it could be avoided if you would choose suited location." However, given the limited time frame and a questionable political will he doubts that a suitable solution will be provided.

The move between locations was poorly communicated to applicants and NGOs and until today, VV routinely redirect applicants arriving at the Cube to Rue Belliard. Six days after the move, on October 30, the 30 unhoused asylum seekers that had continued to inhabit the surroundings of the Cube were violently evicted. Without warning, police arrived in the early morning hours to deconstruct sleeping places and disperse people, without providing any information, lest an alternative solution offered (Carolan 2024). An activist present during the evicted critiques that "Evictions try to make these people invisible, because if you split them up from each other they are too busy trying to survive to make any noise" (cited in Carolan 2024). Following the eviction, the concrete building has been partly barricaded to prevent unhoused people from re-accessing it. In early 2025, the IBZ moved the entrance for first-time interviewees from Passage44 to the Cube, where it remains at the time of writing, August 2025. For unknown reasons, construction of the university campus supposed to be completed this year has not yet begun.



Figure 17. One last tent at the evicted Pacheco IO.



Figure 18. The barricaded ramp near the Cube.

The current location of the registration centre at Rue Belliard is located in the heart of Brussels' European quarter. Similarly monofunctional and inactive during the nighttime, this area is yet more securitised, more prestigious, and highly symbolic. Here, the IO is now located between office towers hosting international organisations, and less than ten minutes walking from the European Commission. As such, the office and the queues lining up outside its doors are much more visible here than in the more isolated Pacheco area.

6. Results

Lived Experience of Waiting at the Immigration Office

Temporal Rhythms

The first waiters arrive at the Immigration Office already the prior evening and wait the entire night, for 15 hours or more. For one, this is because many new applicants make their way to the registration centre as soon as they arrive in Belgium, so that it is a common view to see individuals and families with large bags or multiple suitcases waiting in the queue. But more importantly, this is a result of the constructed scarcity of the IO, that forces waiters to react and adapt. As multiple interviewees explained, reports of IBZ's queue organisation and the consequential systemic uncertainty of access especially of single men have circulated in personal and migrant support social media networks. Just as IBZ practices are arbitrary and shifting, the exact numbers that waiters have heard about vary, from daily intake limits of men 40, 50, or 10%, to a general cap at 300 applicants, so that overall, uncertainty prevails. Therefore, as the statement of Kinan, a newly-arrived young Syrian man who spent the night waiting outside the IO upon arriving from Greece, highlights, access of asylum registration has become subjected to a 'Chance Factor'. This notion runs through many interviews: male applicants recall their surprise or luckiness at being admitted at first try, while others mourn that they just missed their chance.

*There were only young guys first, more started coming around midnight. Others started coming around three, for example. Because they used to limit their numbers, meaning they wouldn't miss the **chance**, for example, they take 40 people today and after they give out delaying papers, they postpone.*

(Kinan, 03.04.2025)

It should be emphasised, that for single men, even strategic early arrival is no guarantee to access, as very high numbers during busy periods may mean that the entire male line, up to 300 persons, is send away with appointments beyond the legal timeframe (IR_VV_18.11.24). Depending on individual situation and assessment of 'the right time' of arrival, men arrive throughout the night, with the pace increasing in the early morning hours. At 6.30am, when most of my field visits begun, the male queue typically already counts a hundred people. At Pacheco, at this early point in time, only those at the front of the queue are really 'in line' to secure their spot, but towards the end of the queue, men are more dispersed, standing together in groups, by the side, or walking across the waiting area. Many also stand scattered in the entrance area, as line demarcations here are not very clear. At Belliard, the lines are overall more organised from the beginning, although some waiters always stand outside the fenced demarcations. At the same point in time, the vulnerable queue is usually still very short, typically counting a quarter of the male queue. As vulnerable applicants due not face as much uncertainty concerning their admission, they can afford to arrive later, but beyond this, women and families also specifically express that they feel uncomfortable and unsafe in the waiting space and therefore attempt to minimise the time spent here. When the StC breakfast is served at 7am, the male queue disperses even more as people move to wait in yet another queue for a hot tea and a sandwich or banana. After picking up breakfast, everyone gets back into line, and in the last hour before opening, both lines become more fixed and orderly, although some waiters continue to move around the waiting area while others hold their spot, and accompanying persons continue to stand next to the lines. At Rue Belliard, this is when the morning work traffic picks up and tensions with cyclists rise. At Pacheco, around 8am, the unhoused people that sleep on makeshift beds right in front of and next to the entrance gate (which is sheltered by a roof), engage in a daily rhythm of moving their mattresses and other belongings up the ramp, to clear the way for the ensuing office opening. After closing, everything is moved back and camps are set up once again. At least for some time, this allowed the camp to be tolerated and stay put.

In the Queue: Microdynamics of Waiting

Waiters spend many hours in close proximity to each other, which evokes positive and negative interactions- the queue is very much a social space. Strangers often begin chatting in friendly if mainly surface conversations, which nonetheless provide mutual support or at least momentary distraction. Most interviewees also positively recall receiving help from other waiters and sharing experiences and information regarding the asylum procedure, although some are critical of the reliability and impact of this information.

Yes it's an opportunity for information sharing but also there is a lot of just like unchecked information or like misinformation and it's very easy in such a nerve racking process to like get into your head real quick because you've heard some stuff uh (0.5) that is not verified or it's just hearsay so you can also easily be detrimental or a bit destructive but I've definitely seen some other people as well who befriended each other and got chatting more and more as the day went on so it's... it's a double edged sword
(Didier, 20.01.2025)

The optimistic view of information sharing and network building enabled by proximity does not seem to manifest in this setting. One person described making a friend in the queue with whom contact and information exchange persisted beyond the waiting situation, but across my interviewees, that is an exception. The lack of a shared language between different waiters is one crucial factor preventing more or deeper interaction, but most waiters also prefer to stick to their accompaniments or to themselves, as they are scared to talk to strange others, too exhausted, or too occupied with their own thoughts.

I met some people who were talking about their experiences and giving advice on what to say and what to do, but I didn't pay attention to what they were giving advice, because I was focused on taking my own step and experience.
(Abed, 09.04.2025)



Figure 19.
Waiting men
outside the
Pacheco IO.
Source: DW
2023.

Both my own and VV's observations document persistent wrong queuing before the IBZ staff arrives, based on confusion over the queue organisation. Every day, VV redirects men that 'illegitimately' queue in the vulnerable line, women in the all-male line, or male minors that did not realise they were entitled to prioritised access. Before VV arrives at 8am, waiters respond to the lack of direction and oversight of queueing with their own informal queue regulation. A common occurrence is the emergence of informal 'line managers' that move across the waiting area trying to direct new arrivals, order the queues and resolve in-queue arguments. This organic development is interesting because it is different people each day that independently assume this role, and because it is always middle-aged men. From the background of my own positionality, I found the sight of several men walking up and down the queues, counting and directing strange at first, but interviewee Didier gave a deeper explanation:

The lines were not good upon arrival, there were many people just standing on the bike lane, many women in the men's line etc. Our team does the necessary to redirect them and make sure the lines are in order before the opening.

(IR_VV_15.01.2025)

I don't think these guys are doing it as a form of power play because they're not aggressive doing it, actually when someone is trying to pass other people or stuff like that they're actually pleading, they're not ordering they're pleading the guys to respect the rules [...] sometimes they're sacrificing their own spots in the queue to do it, usually people try and like keep it for them but they're still losing spots while doing it

(Didier, 20.01.2025)

Regarding the gendered nature of this phenomenon, Didier explains further

We all live in patriarchy, but they come from (1.0) societies and environments where it's like if it's an older man taking this role there are more people in the queue that would be willing to actually listen to him compared to if it wasn't a guy or if it was a woman

(Didier, 20.01.2025)

But even beyond this, it seems more likely that a man feels comfortable and confident to walk up and down a line of two hundred other men observing him. A second technique of informal regulations observed on just few occasions was the implementation of a numbering system, in which waiters in the male queue note their spot number on their hands to prevent queue skipping.

Access to asylum procedures should be an ensured right, but since this is not the case, one's position in the (male) queue matters. While interviewees recall that overall, waiters are acutely aware of their spot, and that most people respect the order, some applicants unsurprisingly attempt to skip queue in the hours before opening. In some cases, the collective or the 'line managers' restrict that, friendly but strictly sending the person back to 'their' spot, but in other cases this does not work, because the skipping person is too insistent or even physically violent, so that others make way in order to avoid trouble. Two interviewees recall such situations, showing how exhaustion and fear act as social regulators:

*During the lineup, two people got into a fight until other people interfered [...] I don't know, maybe that person drank or took something and he wasn't even involved with the queue, I think he was coming with a friend, and then they fought over the spot in the queue, and then one person was more conscious and let the other person take the spot and this is how it ended, [...] He even took a **chair** that he wanted to hit him with, so he was violent and at some point the other guy just gave him the way.*

(Kinan, 03.04.2025)

*I think everyone is just too tired to genuinely fight because there was a guy who was openly disrespecting the spot and **everyone** kept telling him and people were **pleading** with him like please go back and the guy still was not doing it, but no one violently shoved him back to his face or something like that, no, everyone is just **so** exhausted everyone is afraid of I don't know losing their spots because they were unruly*

(Didier, 20.01.2025)

Such fights over the spot in the queue do happen and can escalate, but on the whole, this is not as common as may be expected given the high stakes, so that most research participants report not having experienced or witnessed major conflict with other waiters.

At the Gate: Encountering Institutional Power

Conflict, Control, and Order

When the gate to the IO opens at 8:30am, dynamics of order and authority instantly change from self- to institutional regulation. While almost all interviewees agree that the staff is overall friendly, respectful and competent, even more than expected, Didier succinctly sums up that "*they become very firm very quickly when people are not respecting the rules*". In other words, good treatment depends on good, compliant, behaviour. Enforcement and authority at the IO are directed towards an institutional demand to orderly behaviour, that is calm, patient waiting in the correct places, and exercised by IBZ through a combination of spatial control and disciplinary language, backed by security and police presence. The entrance gate becomes a key instrument of power: opening and closure is strategically used to regulate access, enforce obedience, and signal an end to admission. The strategic, flexible moving of fences and barriers further block paths of access or movement.

When present, police officers additionally guard the entrance door or the bike path. Staff assert control through verbal command or shouting to direct waiters, and intimidation and threat in case of non-compliance with directions. The most individual threat is the calling of police, if not already present, but more common is collective threat that seeks to discipline the recipient through collective pressure, as VV and interviewees confirm.

This excerpt further highlights that the institutional approach to conflict- provocation, disrespect,

A disagreement arose between an IBZ staff member and a male applicant who left the line to get coffee and tried to return to his original spot when the gates opened. IBZ staff did not believe he had been waiting there and refused to let him back in line, leading to an argument. The applicant and his friends insisted he had been there since 3am and asked the IBZ staff member to confirm this with other applicants. In reaction to this, the IBZ staff member put the applicant on the spot while screaming to all applicants waiting in line that they "they will close the doors and not let anybody in because this specific man does not want to leave", leading the situation to escalate. Eventually, the man went to the back of the line.

(FN_24.09.2024)

hostility, and even direct aggression- is often confrontational rather than de-escalatory. In some instances, dismissive, derogatory remarks were made, such as staff telling someone in Arabic, "If you don't like it here, you can go to another country" or someone else in French "I don't care about the police and I don't care about your lawyer", both times increasing anger in the applicant and ending with police intervention. There have been instances of physical aggression as well, as police officers and security guards have pushed or kicked especially the unhoused people sleeping near the entrance, but also applicants.

The pregnant woman had a wrong appointment, this is how it started, then it escalated because she insisted to enter the office and yelled at the security guard, so he pushed her from behind and she fell. Both the woman and the guard called the police, and she was picked up by an ambulance.

(FN_08.07.2024)



Figure 20. Police guarding the entrance.
Source: DW 2023.

In situations of tension or conflict, IBZ staff relies greatly on the police to control the situation either through intimidation through disproportional presence or intervention. VV recalls how in a conflict over an applicant allegedly recording the procedure inside the office, 15 police officers entered to remove a single applicant (IR_VV_04.10.2024). Another time, on a morning during which every single male applicant received appointments at least a week later, "8 police officers were present, arriving by the time the family line was finished. There were no incidents there, they were just present to intimidate the applicants upon receiving the appointments", in order to avoid justified outbursts of anger (IR_VV_16.08.2024).

It is also important to address that especially at the Pacheco site, the inadequate spatial layout of the waiting area produces conflict. Here, the queue is bound or 'closed' with a fence or barrier, which is removed once waiters are permitted to enter, but usually, people that have arrived first or very early queue directly at the gate, or, during days on which it rains heavily, applicants typically crowd near the entrance in front of the official start of the queue, because it is one of the only roofed area that provides shelter. To start admission, IBZ staff demands and enforces 'orderly' queues, meaning that everyone must be in line *behind* the fence or barrier, which creates conflict as it requires applicants that have waited for many hours to move to the back of the queue. The excerpt below, from September 9, 2024, a particularly busy Monday, illustrates such chaotic situations, as well as the general approach to enforcement. VV also records, that because of this 'clash' in which waiters and staff were screaming at each other, others were distressed, children were crying, and one minor left, telling the volunteers he "did not want to ask asylum anymore".

because of heavy rainfall, applicants were gathering under the roof outside the Pacheco entrance, not respecting the lines. IBZ staff was yelling at the applicants to go to the back of the lines (people waiting since 2am) and form a line, but they did not want to and tension among applicants increased, causing a clash with IBZ. He then closed the gate, without any applicant having entered. We went to the reception and staff said they would only reopen when police arrived. Arrival of the police made the situation more chaotic, as they had a dog that was barking very loudly to scare applicants. They started moving, forming lines, but again IBZ closed the doors due to one family refusing to move backwards into the line since they had been waiting for a long time. Eventually they reopened, everything went very slow. Moreover, those first applicants sent to the back received an appointment to come back later in the afternoon, which sparked more anger.

(IR_VV_09.09.2024)

Overall, authority as it is exerted by IBZ's Street-Level Bureaucrats, is not always rational or rule-bound but often emotional and escalatory. Moreover, and ironically, attempts to impose order often produce greater stress and chaos, in a situation that is already tense due the high stakes and accumulated pressure over hours and hours of waiting. It becomes clear that this complex system of enforcement does not merely manage but disciplines the queue.



Figure 21. The priority and non-priority queue.
Source: DW

Negotiating Vulnerability and Deservingness



Figure 22. Signage indicating prioritisation at Belliard.

Another major source of conflict at the door are negotiations over the vulnerability of waiters in the priority queue. A consistent finding across both observations and interviews is the *institutional failure to listen*, as they operate in a detached professionalism. Applicants' attempts to explain their situation are often ignored or dismissed by IBZ staff at the door, that operate in a rushed, highly contrasting temporality. While recognising pressure, many waiters perceive an outright denial of recognition and care. Vulnerability, in these moments, becomes less a question of real need than of visibility and momentary discretionary decision making depending on individual assessment and institutional capacity, further consolidating the impression of asylum access as subjected to a chance factor. This is illustrated in this statement by Ibrahim, a father of two:

If one employee is in a bad mood or fought with his wife that day, he's gonna tell you like go back home, whatever, there is no certainty.
(Salim, 17.12.2024)

Numerous cases highlight how applicants that clearly fall into the officially propelled definition of vulnerability have been rejected at the door, or only admitted after insistent advocacy of VV. Most commonly, men with clear signs of illness or disability are denied access and instructed to queue with single men, even when they present medical certificates and despite evident, acute difficulty and suffering. While the category of illness and disability indeed leaves the most room for individual interpretation, especially in the outright lack of an official (publicised) framework, the examples below illustrated not only how undisputably misguided some IBZ on-the-spot decisions are, but also how impactful their consequences can be.

IBZ refused an applicant who could barely walk with crutches and sent him to the back of the men's line. We spoke to IBZ employees, stressing that his difficulty walking and standing should allow him to stay in the vulnerable line, but they responded that disabled men are not all considered vulnerable. The applicant said that he had been waiting since 5am and did not have the strength to wait any longer and left without registering.

(IR_VV_22.01.2024)

An applicant with an amputated foot and crutches tried to enter with the vulnerable group but was told to go to the end of the single men's line. Ignored by staff, he became aggressive, accusing them of racism, and displayed his disability. As tensions rose, IBZ staff closed the gate. When the applicant tried to go under it, a staff member pushed him, causing him to fall. He banged on the gate again in distress before collapsing again. The police arrived and dragged him behind the building by his hand and feet. Later, an ambulance arrived for the applicant.

(IR_VV_22.01.2024)

An Eritrean man with a disability card and signs of torture (missing fingers and clearly mentally unwell), who addressed how important it was for him to get a doctor and decent living conditions based on his health issues, did not get in via the vulnerable people's line. Staff did not take the time to hear him out. He left extremely angry.

(FN_08.07.2024)

I also repeatedly witnessed older looking teenage boys be refused priority entry. VV coordinator Aurica confirms that 16- or 17-year-olds whose beard or height makes them appear older to the eyes of the IBZ employees so consistently find their age doubted that the NGO stopped redirecting them to the priority line (Aurica, 08.05.2025). Similarly, elderly men with walking or standing difficulties are often not accepted. As IBZ only recognises select, stereotypical, highly visible forms of vulnerability- being a family, a woman, or in a wheelchair- for vulnerable men, claiming vulnerability becomes a risk: if rejected from the priority queue, they are sent to the very back of the regular queue, often losing the chance of entry that day. Thus, some refrain from even trying to claim their status. While these cases speak of a misapplication of the established vulnerability categorisation, it is in itself flexible and redefined when required. For instance, Thomas Willekens recalls how in 2020, another high-pressure period, the age limit to constitute vulnerability was institutionally lowered to 15 for boys (Thomas Willekens, 08.05.2025). Of course, their real exposure to harm did not change overnight in the same way. Past autumn, there have been multiple days where families that verbally confirmed that they have a place to sleep lost their priority status. While this approach represents an interesting shift in focus from essential to situational vulnerability, it also underlines the arbitrariness of IBZ's classifying power. Ultimately, the notion of vulnerability follows an exclusionary, as it serves as a justification of the exclusion of certain applicants, in order to evade responsibility regarding the institution's failure to accommodate all arrivals. This is further exemplified in the bureaucratic rigidity of with which procedures are enacted, which sometimes forbids providing support and protection to genuinely vulnerable applicants. Without common sense or compassion towards potentially difficult situations of applicants, IBZ enforces the office closing time, usually after a very short window of time of 15-20 minutes after opening strictly. For example, a pregnant woman with no shelter was refused entry for arriving just one minute after official closing time (IR_VV_05.09.2023). In another case, a mother fleeing domestic abuse and seeking independent protection was told she required her husband's permission to proceed, because she came through family reunification. This illustrates how the pressure, institutional culture, or emotional desensitisation lead IBZ to withhold care

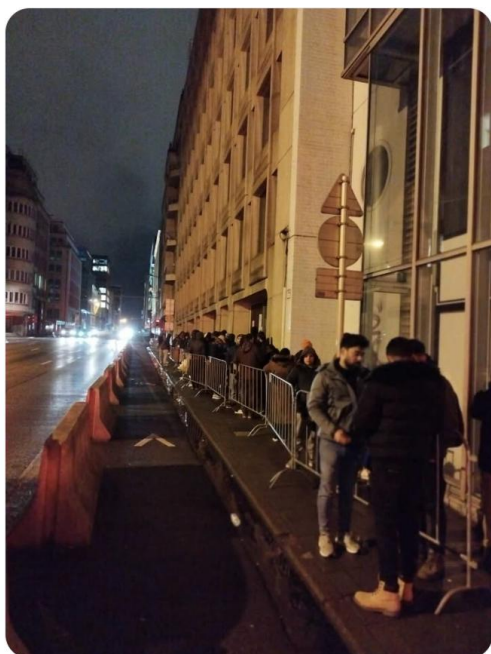
Experiencing the Wait: Uncertainty, Exposure and Exhaustion

Waiting at the Immigration Office is not merely about the passage of time. It is a profoundly embodied and emotional experience, shaped by environmental, spatial and social conditions. While the waiting obligation as such and even the duration are often anticipated, it is the *conditions* at the IO that come as a shock and make the wait difficult to endure. Most interviewees described the experience as deeply uncomfortable, due to the exposure to precarious environmental conditions, and psychological stress and anxiety over uncertain access and outcomes.

Waiting Bodies

Medical problems, bodily exhaustion, and mental distress are prevalent in the queue. In part, this is because some applicants already arrive in destitute condition, as they have only just arrived in Belgium after long journeys, live unhoused, or come straight from the hospital. Men that arrive the evening before opening usually spend the night with little or no sleep, and many individuals and families that arrive a few hours before opening leave their homes across Belgium in the middle of the night. Even those that wait only a few hours outside describe the morning as physically difficult to endure. As previously described, the physical setting of the IO waiting area is marked by environmental precarity and inadequate infrastructure. While two interviewees find the Belliard waiting area acceptable and functional, most interviewees at both sites express surprise, indeed shock, about the physical conditions they are exposed to. Especially in colder months, applicants wait in the dark and harsh weather conditions, with almost no shelter from wind, rain, and snow. Those able to adapt by arriving as late as possible or strategic preparation. Two parents interviewed on a snowy morning in December, that were waiting for the second time, learned from their first waiting experience and brought an umbrella and a blanket for their children. During their entire wait, their two children sat on the ground, completely covered by the blanket as if in a tent. Their father angrily explains that he accepts the waiting but does not understand why they must bring the children to this initial step. Other waiters stay as close to the walls as possible, wrap themselves

Figure 23. Image and message received via Facebook, 20.12.2024



Rain, cold and asylum in Belgium

in scarfs, are hugging to keep each other warmer, or warm their hands holding StC teacups Onur remembers, *"it was so cold that I was stomping my feet on the ground the whole time to warm them up"* (Onur, 25.01.2025). Waiters further critique the uncared-for state of the waiting area and overall unhygienic conditions at Pacheco. One applicant states that *"its normal to to see trash everything garbage... I did not expect this of an institution like this"* (Samuel, 30.12.2024). Indeed, trash piles across the waiting area, as the two small bins are always overflowing and traces of waiting- cardboard, empty paper cups or energy drink cans, food wrappings, cigarette buds-remain each day. Additionally, as Onur remarks, *"The waiting area smelled like a toilet"* (Onur, 25.01.2025), a consequence of the lack of bathroom facilities on or near the site, which effectively constitutes the adjacent park and some dark corners as outdoor bathrooms, at least for those male applicants that overcome the sense of shame and humiliation that this brings. Ironically, this human reaction to structural inadequacy is policed.

They followed a man who was washing his face near the Cube, claiming that he peed there, and telling him that that is not allowed. We tried to explain to the police that there are absolutely no public toilets around but they said they must manage it themselves.

(IR_VV_09.04.2025)

At Belliard the offices' central, symbolic location and the garbage bags fixed to the fences here- but not Pacheco-ensure a slightly better standard of cleaning and upkeep, but here as well, the lack of bathrooms leads to public urinating around the corner of the male queue and waiting traces remain. Naturally, the lack of cleanliness also prevents waiters further from sitting on the ground in a waiting area that already fails to provide seating for exhausted waiters. And so, people stand for hours, yawning, leaning against fences or each other with eyes closed despite chaos or rainfall, or walking up and down, stretching and jumping to manage stiffness and fatigue. Many, especially women and children, spend hours without access to a bathroom. Luis and Carolina recall that they tried to explain to their children that there is no bathroom, but that it was difficult to make them understand, so that they were pleading the entire wait. Another time, a single woman my age came to ask me for a bathroom.



Figure 24. Standing among traces of waiting.

She shows me bag with pads, and looked extremely uncomfortable, in pain almost. I show her the closest café on maps, but since it almost opening time, she doesn't want to go there.

(IR_WV_09.04.2025)

Once inside the office, multiple hours of waiting follow in which exhaustion shifts from physical to psychological. Multiple interviewees describe the inside waiting area, several large, seated rooms, as comparatively better but still uncomfortable, due to, in contrast, too warm temperature and a lack of air and daylight. Didier describes the waiting room as a sterile, controlled environment, akin to an airport, that expresses a regard of basic functionality over care and a sense of institutional coldness. To him, the space creates an oppressive atmosphere and induces additional anxiety as it provides neither distraction from thinking about the procedure nor any sense of being welcomed.

*On the inside, I mean it's not very comforting it's... it's quite raw and very how do you say that... very bland, you know, there's nothing really to bring **comfort** to people while they're inside. It really creates a huge sense of **gravity** to what you're going through. I feel, you know, the space should bring comfort to people, just try and make it a bit warmer... just give it a bit more of a sense of we're going to take care of you and not you're in this very heavy very serious administrative process **be worried** ((laughs)) [...]*

*There's a point where your body really cannot take it **any more** like you start feeling weird, at some point he [a befriended fellow waiter] was telling me yea I'm feeling weird like you're a bit dizzy, you're you're hazy, and you really just want to leave this place but you can't, so you remind yourself okay I'm almost done now.*

(Didier, 20.01.2025)

As Didier's quote hints, faced with difficult conditions, waiters at the IO constantly engage in strategic emotional and bodily self-management. In order to endure the wait, applicants engage in multiple activities to pass the time and distract themselves: they try to sleep, chat with others, look at their phones, eat and drink cay, smoke, pray or walk around. Through these seemingly mundane acts, waiters force themselves to endure- to keep standing, to control bodily urges as well as affects of frustration or anger, and to remain in place, instead of just withdrawing from the situation. They are caught in a constant internal negotiation between exhaustion and suffering in the *here*, and the objective of registration *then*.

The described conditions make the wait much more difficult to endure than necessary. In my interviews, multiple interviewees explained that they could not remember details of the morning

of their registration, because they were too tired to notice. The lack of both basic and caring provisions represents the backdrop to the waiting experience, and in combination with the already described perceived staff disregard, creates a strong sense of abandonment. This impact of this, however, is unequal in complex ways. While everyone experiences discomfort, for some, the harsh conditions lead to medical emergencies. Ambulances had to be called for an old man who could hardly stand and almost fainted, and a young woman and a boy who collapsed from exhaustion in the queue.

Vulnerability, Insecurity, and Harm

In addition to harsh environmental conditions, the waiting space outside the IO is marked by a persistent exposure to insecurity and harm. Shaped by the intersection of temporal and physical conditions, and individual vulnerability, it is important to analytically distinguish here experiences of disgust and discomfort, insecurity and fear; and concretely experienced harm. A general atmosphere of insecurity looms over the waiting area,

as streets are dark and empty in the early morning hours. Seasonal shifts in light matter, as especially in the winter months, daylight only arrives once most admissions have finished. While Belliard has better streetlighting, Pacheco has few lampposts which turn off already around 7. During the night, the presence of very few waiters and no other people on the street may increase fears, while in the last one or two hours before opening, overcrowding of up to 500 waiters cramped in too narrow spaces can have the same effect. Depending on the day and the time, the atmosphere at the IO waiting area can vary between tired and quiet, and extremely chaotic, but it is always tense. Most waiters seem hyperaware of their surroundings, vigilant, and nervous, while at the same avoiding bringing attention to themselves. Against this backdrop, one major source of perceived insecurity is the proximity to so many unfamiliar Others, people from different countries, speaking different languages, or with visibly different social backgrounds. Fear and distrust arise from the unknown, from the difficulty to assess and predict the behaviour of others. In his careful, polite words, Kinan furthermore implies the possibility of finding people with a violent or criminal past in the queue.



Figure 25. Belliard in the early morning.

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"No, no I don't feel safe here, not at all. Its so dark and there is so many different people, not to say that anyone is bad, but its just so many people and you don't know. We just try to stay here and wait."

(Carolina, 13.12.2024)

These people also you don't know them all, you don't know how they came, what they came for, or what they were running from. There were a lot of people, I don't know how to say, but I didn't feel good around them. On the street, anything can happen to you. Its an empty place and there is only us, so you don't know what could happen, dangerous situations could happen at any moment, so you are constantly stressed and afraid. I think it's safer when there are guards or, for example, cameras

(Kinan, 30.04.2025)

At Pacheco, it was additionally the presence of encampments of unhoused persons and the unclean conditions that induce disgust, discomfort and moral shock in some applicants. Interestingly, multiple interviewees attribute physical deterioration exclusively to the behaviour of waiters or to the presence of unhoused persons in the space, rather than institutional or municipal neglect of the space. While Qasim feels that "most refugees are not committed to cleanliness" (Qasim, 21.06.2025), Onur evokes images of urban decline, as he describes a moral shock:

I felt like I was in an American movie, I was just shocked by what was happening around me. While waiting there, an African person sleeping on wooden pallets woke up, stood up, urinated, and then lay back down as if nothing had happened. It was the first time I had ever seen something like that in my life, and I found it very strange.

(Onur, 25.01.2025)

Throughout my observations, I witnessed many similar situations of, for instance, families that arrived in expensive cars half an hour before admission, being visibly shocked and extremely uncomfortable waiting immediately next to unhoused persons sitting on the ground or their mattresses. These instances underline the stark differences in positionality and previous experience and exposure of applicants forced to wait outside the IO, which creates distinct experiences of discomfort in the waiting space. While the severity of discomfort stemming from *being* the unhoused person is arguably greater than that arising from the encounter *with* them, no experience should be dismissed. Other waiters show compassion to the plight of those forced to sleep outside the IO, but nonetheless feel uncomfortable sharing the space with them.

Beyond these general aspects, certain groups face heightened, specific risks. Outside the IO, women and perceived gender- and sexual minority applicants navigate a numerically and symbolically male-dominated space. While some numerical disbalance exists, with the male queue usually twice as long as the vulnerable one, which is half made up by women, the greater difference manifests in the way different actors act and move in the space. Once they arrive, most women and families immediately enter the queue and remain in their spot, many turn away from the crowds and face only each other, clearly trying to engage and attract attention as little as possible. Men, on the other hand, typically move more freely across the space, up until an hour before opening time, stand in big groups on the entrance or by the StC breakfast table, which effectively limits women's comfortable movement. StC reacts to this by serving drinks or food to women, families, and children in priority, allowing them to skip the queue and effectively implementing the same vulnerability distinction as IBZ. At Pacheco, male domination of the waiting space was comparatively more marked, because of the presence of unhoused persons as another seemingly all-male group, and in general other men lingering around the space, but not queueing. Sometimes, individual or small groups of men would stand firmly in the very middle of the waiting area or on higher up, on the ramp of the concrete building, and observe everything and everyone in the waiting area- for no apparent reason. Individual men may intensely stare at waiters, walk behind StC tables to talk to volunteers, or scream across the area. Some men present around the waiting area were visibly intoxicated, which seemed to increase the sense unpredictable risk even more, especially to applicants with limited or no life exposure to substances. In this context, fights break out within men hanging around in the waiting area, or between them and applicants. They are often loud but brief, they can escalate, as in the situation recorded below.

*Two young guys are fighting, apparently started over a lighter, but not important, escalated very quickly, one tried to hit the other with a stick, a lot of screaming
people got in between, including volunteers who also got pushed
fight moved a lot around, had all the attention from other waiters and volunteers
most people look very scared and worried, especially families and children
fight moved to the street, interrupting car traffic, honking
a few times people managed to separate them, then it escalates again
they fall to the floor, kicking, one pulls a knife, but also puts it back in pocket, overall it appears maybe thrice
one volunteer calls the police, in the end she has to call a second time and they arrive maybe 20 minutes later when fight is already over, and they leave quite quickly again*

(FN_P_22.10.2024)

Altogether, these social dynamics create a great sense of intimidation to all waiters, but especially those in the vulnerable queue. Multiple men that we had conversations with on site (whose partners did not want to engage), told my research partner that they were worried about their wives or

daughters being inappropriately touched in the tight queue. Queer applicants in the vulnerable report hearing many comments that made them feel unsafe and stressed. Roya, who accompanied her boyfriend when he waited to register at Belliard and was thus forced to wait with him in the all male line says *"It was not good, i did not feel safe because there were so many men I really didn't feel safe"*, without giving more details, but saying to me *"you know, you can understand"* (Reza& Roya, 03.04.2025). Despite continued effort, my research does not provide deeper results for the specific, gendered experiences of women and other non-male waiters, because everyone I approached was too uncomfortable to speak to me, which was not the case with men approached in the same space. While most single women and families arrive late, some also arrive already during the night, and their experiences are difficult to image as positive or unproblematic.

One final source of insecurity at the IO is the presence and behaviour of police. Waiters have different relations to the police, and while some demand increased police presence on site to improve security, for others their presence signals the opposite. On the one hand, their 'preventive' presence during admission, before any incident has occurred, signals the presence of an actual threat in the queue to some waiters. On the other hand, disproportionately many waiters here hold previous distrust towards the police, so that their presence represents risk more than protection. Moreover, as for their unresolved, precarious legal status, asylum seekers are naturally particularly wary around police interaction. For instance, VV records that *"Police presence made an Algerian mother and child very afraid that they would be detained"* (IR_VV_06.05.2024). In particular, the use of barking police dogs is intended and succeeds in instilling intimidation and fear in waiting applicants, especially among children and waiters with previous trauma.

While this chapter has focused on experiences of insecurity of vulnerable, non-male waiters, it is crucial to address that my research shows that because of the interlinked problems of non-reception and deprioritisation, men that are forced to spend extended waiting time outside the IO and face concrete harm here. Multiple men recall the presence of pickpockets, and one overnight waiter recounts that *"my phone and my hat have been stolen when I was sleeping"* (Salem, 12.04.2025). Another unhoused man says that in the nights he spent outside the IO, he faced racist violence, as he was *"exposed to all kind of tortured by the hooligans at night are without empathy"* (Malik, 04.11.2024). Kinan furthermore points out that during the night, drug use and violent fights are common, and demands increased security, in the forms of guards, more police presence, or camera surveillance. Across gender or other difference, applicants respond to this lack and the risk that the wait implies by bringing accompaniment, friends or partners, to wait together with them.

Visibility and Shame

The negative impact of the conditions and practices IO go beyond the detrimental physical impact, as many applicants find them not only difficult, but interpret them as degrading and dehumanising. Because the external waiting area is constituted in public space, waiters feel exposed to the gaze of passing others, which induces emotional suffering in the form of shame, an affective experience echoed across interviews. While I cannot provide reflections by women, several men I interviewed suffer greatly from a perceived loss of dignity, brought about by the powerless supplicant position as such, but exacerbated by the fact of being left to wait in an unclean, dark, or rainy environment while surveilled by police. For fathers accustomed to a protective role within the family, the obligation to expose family members to such conditions induces particularly deep shame. One interviewee also highlights the particular importance of dignity in Islam. Aptly, the applicants cited below perceive that such precarious condition would not be found at a bureaucratic institution serving Belgian citizens. Their powerful accounts highlight different aspects of the organization of the IO that are felt as dehumanising by the applicants. They speak for themselves in shock, anger, and a demand for humanity for all, not only those meeting vulnerability criteria.

His friend was sick and fell down while he was waiting and then they emphasised with him, they had empathy, so they took him to the hospital and then he made the fingerprint in the hospital, but he said like why do I have to fall right here for them to respect me as a human and take me like .. like it's about dignity and it's about feeling. Why should I have to faint here for them to do that?

[...]

He is really angry... his problem, he says, is not the safety here, he feels safe, his problem is the dignity.

(Salim, 17.12.2024)

The waiting areas outside the office had iron bars next to them to keep us in the required queue. I don't think it's appropriate to have them at all, as they attract the attention of passers-by, suggesting to them that the place is not an asylum office in a European country, but rather a resemblance to a government office in a third-world country (the country I came from).

(Qasim, 21.06.2025)

I had just arrived, very tired from the journey I was on, because I don't know if you have an idea about the journey one takes to get here. It was very difficult, and I was very sleepy and hungry. When I came, there was no one, there was no line, so I slept a bit at the door. I found blankets that other people who were there the day before me left, it was very cold. I was very sleepy and hungry, a lot of things, it was very cold. There was nothing, excuse me, even if I wanted to use the bathroom, for example, there was no place near you or anything. It was very difficult, now I remember, it was very difficult. People were passing by and looking at me. I mean, what did I come to? I didn't expect this, frankly. I didn't expect this, you were not prepared.

(Kinan, 30.04.2025)

In this dynamic, not only the condition but the location of the waiting space matters. While the Pacheco waiting area is geographically and spatially slightly more private, the queues at Belliard building unfold in plain view at a highly symbolic location. In a political reading of the space, social scientist Didier, argues that the queue becomes a spectacle in the European quarter. While my research partner and I brainstormed whether this visibility of precarity to policy makers could have a potential positive impact, Didier rejected this, arguing that rather than care, it more likely provokes privileged discomfort and misinterpretation, which may on the contrary, carry a disciplining effect and a deep sense of shame.

*Symbolically it's in front of the Belgian perm rep, so you're like 'oh they're **seeing** it', but then you have homeless people in the streets everywhere at the eyes of everyone but I think **most** people, they don't want to admit it, but they'd rather see those people hidden because it makes people **uncomfortable**.*

(Didier, 20.01.2025)

Navigating Uncertainty between Anxiety, Hope, and Disappointment

Uncertainty and arbitrariness emerge as consistent, emotionally draining aspects of waiting at the IO. All participants emphasise that the unpredictability of admission, absence of transparent information, and arbitrary shifts in procedure are a constant source of stress and anxiety. This applies most to single men, for whom *"the threat of it being a day where they don't take men cause I've been told that this this happened"* looms (Didier, 20.01.2025). Waiters describe waiting under uncertainty as *"extremely stressful extremely frustrating"* (Salem, 12.04.2025), as *"just nerve wrecking, it's nerve wrecking"* (Didier, 20.01.2025) and making them *"feel nervous and lost"* (Abed, 09.04.2025). In the queue, waiters pace up and down, smoke, or nervously check the passing of time on their phones. To Didier, it is the combination of uncertainty, many hours of waiting, and little positive distraction that gives way to overthinking and anxiety, not only over the registration but the entire asylum procedure to come. While a sense of powerlessness and subjection vis-à-vis an arbitrary institution is prevalent, for some waiters, a contrary sense of their capacity to influence the outcome at the IO negatively through misbehaviour further increased tension and anxiety.

Normally, some uncertainty is relieved as waiters move in the proceedings of the IO, with the two most important junctures being the admission and the eventual granting of the Annex26. However, when the proceedings slow down or get stuck, self-control becomes more difficult. Didier

describes how the office opened two hours late, without any explanation provided, the queue increasingly became increasingly restless. His description conveys that while IO may fail its responsibility without consequences, waiters are under an unrealistic expectation of docility, notwithstanding extremely challenging physical and emotional conditions.

The centre is opening two hours late, you have these people that have been queuing, some since eleven pm, the police is creating a greater sense of dread and anxiety, obviously people are going to get restless but because of the setup you have the people that are going to work they're like 'oh look at how unruly they are' and it's like suddenly you-you know it creates a narrative of the... the scary migrant that can't even contain himself when he's queuing get help from the state.

(Didier, 20.01.2025)

For most waiters, uncertainty is alleviated or at least shifted through admission, with progressing at least one of many more steps, but especially single men have to negotiate rejection. Reactions are varied but always emotionally charged, often releasing pressure accumulated over hours. Many applicants became visibly distressed, expressing anger or breaking down over the wasting of their time, the perspective of having to undergo the waiting anew, the complete staff disregard of their situation, and the general powerlessness they feel. When appointment papers are given out, some applicants neatly fold them and place them into folders, while others rip and crumble the papers immediately, as this is not their first morning waiting in vain. Often, after the doors are closed, many refused applicants linger around the entrance, caught between resignation and hope. In these situations, no staff member is present anymore, so there exists no possibility to argue for one's vulnerability-based admission or to formerly complain. Instead, fellow waiters, VV, and during my fieldwork me and my research partner represent the only outlet. One rejected applicant told us he came early from another Belgian city but did not have money to buy another train ticket to come again the following day. He considered spending the night in the Central Station. For others, every delay to their registration means a delay to obtain reception- or at least a spot on the waiting list.

The single men at the front of the queue watch families go in with increasing desperation and tension. They also look really freezing. Their eyes track each person, like they are calculating their own chances. At 8:45, the priority line is fully in, two late-arriving families are still admitted. They closed the door, unclear if for good. Men start complaining towards security, then a staff member comes out, signals that no more people will be let in and hands appointment papers. The guards chase people away, but everyone just moves until the end of the fence. One man crumples his appointment slip in anger- we talk to him and he shows us the appointment is set for over three weeks later. Others join and start to complain to Shardoob in Arabic: They speak of sleeping in the streets and have been waiting since last night, some for the 3rd (!) day in a row, and each time they spent the entire night outside. Offended, another man gesticulates towards the door, yelling "If you dont want us just send us back to Gaza, don't make us wait and treat us like this", and more quietly tells Shardoob "maybe we should just go back", before walking away. More men ask us for help, mostly unclear with what exactly, just with the general situation. It's chaotic. VV is encircled by people, trying to explain to as many as possible that these appointments are not binding. People stand in groups, trying to understand what to do. Slowly, some start leaving.

(FN_13.12.2024)

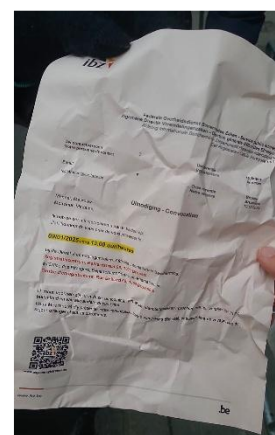


Figure 26. A crumpled up paper giving an appointment three weeks away.



Figure 27. Waiting men, before their admission was rejected.

7. Results

Lived Experience of Waiting in the Procedure

Living with Stagnation and Uncertainty

Following registration, uncertainty and arbitrariness continue as applicants await their first and second interviews. Many participants perceive interview scheduling and the entire procedure “shrouded in mystery” (Didier, 20.01.2025) and again bound to a chance factor, as some receive IBZ interview appointments within days, while others must wait months. While those with short waiting times consider themselves ‘lucky’, others interpret their long waiting times as unfair and sometimes discriminatory based on ethnicity or Race, which cannot be (dis)confirmed but subjectively introduces additional suffering and anger in the applicant. In addition to already long waiting times, many participants report that their first hearing was postponed by multiple months, without any explanation or accountability on the side of IBZ.

The interview was after three months, then they told me to come in November and then when I was there in November they told me to come to February. They just gave me a piece of paper just told me to come in February... I seek my asylum on uh July 18 since then I haven't done any interview.

[...]

*Even if they let you inside you to wait for like three hours four hours and... at the end you don't do your interview ... just let you go outside ... its very **annoying***

(Samuel, 30.12.2024)

The same thing happened to my friend, whose appointment was on Thursday, but they postponed him. At the registration, they gave the appointment about four months later, meaning today. Then, when the day came, they delayed him back about four months later.

(Kinan, 03.04.2025)

Such spontaneous delay is experienced as extremely frustrating, as practical and emotional preparation for the interview appointment and the time spent waiting at the interview office seem to have been in vain. This seemingly utter disregard of applicants time also painfully conveys the power discrepancy between an all-powerful bureaucracy and suppliant asylum seekers that must accept any condition imposed by IBZ. Interviewees describe being repeatedly postponed as highly demoralising, because the slight optimism that comes with the expectation of finally proceeding is taken away as they are instead being sent back in time. Unreliable timelines and an arbitrary exercise of power also erodes trust in the IBZ, as applicants even begin to expect the cancellation of their interviews based on their own and friends previous experience. This decreases hope for a positive future in Belgium, as the proceeding of one's asylum case seems increasingly uncertain and unpredictable. All applicants describe living with this uncertainty as intensely stressful. The excerpts below illustrate forcefully how for some, their upcoming interview appointment becomes life-defining and time structuring- even if it is still months of waiting away. As pressure builds with every passing day, time becomes a countdown leading up to the interview, which makes it difficult to focus and find rest or joy in the present. Multiple applicants explicitly relate their emotional suffering to the length of the waiting period, knowing full well that after the first interview, yet another wait is to follow.

He has so much mental stress... he couldn't sleep all night because of the stress... you wait so long for this appointment and you don't know what will happen, so you worry and you think about it everyday.

(Reza& Roya, 03.04.2025)

I'm wasting time here in Belgium until I know what my fate will be. Its taking too long to know what is even my destiny.

(Kinan, 03.04.2025) 56

*It hijacks your life, I mean since I first got the registration I've done nothing but think about that and like you cannot enjoy nice moments anymore because in your mind it's like 'why am I having fun right now? I have this life defining thing happening in a few months why am I relaxed right now?' **Every day** is defined by you getting closer to that and you just stop enjoying life in a way, it really just defines your life and now every day just becomes an **interval** in between the interviews it's not individual days anymore, and your weeks also become just intervals between you meeting your lawyer to prepare for this thing.*

I've already been waiting four months so it's four months of huge anxiety building. I've spent so much time waiting and brewing this in my head, going over all the worst possible things that could happen, just months imagining every possible way they could say no to me and this thing not working.

(Didier, 20.01.2025)

While most participants were still waiting for, as they call it, the 'small' interview, those that are in the next stage of waiting for the 'big' interview at the CGRS also report exorbitant delays. Salem, for example, registered his application in 2021, had the IBZ hearing one year late in summer of 2022, and since then, has been waiting to receive an appointment at the CGRS. Struggling to understand the reasons of his delay, he perceives it as extremely unfair.

Beyond the difficulty to endure and navigate everyday life under sustained uncertainty, most applicants experience waiting as a systematic reduction of agency, as Didier's elaboration compellingly illustrates.

*It takes away a sense of **control** over your own life because when you're waiting it means that there's nothing that you can **do**, you're waiting for another **instance** that has **agency over you**, so for example now with this whole process I really feel like I have lost control over my own life and it's very frustrating in terms of how you feel about having agency over your own actions and where you want to go*

(Didier, 20.01.2025)

To some waiters, especially those accustomed to holding high-status or -responsibility positions, reduced agency and the dependency on the Belgian state feels like a loss of dignity, a source of suffering in its own. But for most, it is the perceived stuckedness in procedures that are slow or even stagnating, as life outside their asylum case rushes on. The clashing temporal experience of being forced to wait and thereby unable to attend to important life opportunities or responsibilities creates a piercing sense of reduced agency, sometimes utter powerlessness, and induces deep suffering. For almost every interviewee, forced waiting disrupted their envisioned, desired life course by precluding them from pursuing plans, but their nature varies greatly.

*My life has stopped everything is blocked
I feel that I wasted my life
I lost 4 years of my life
I wasted years of my life
And I can't get married
I can't get long time work contracts
I can't join to VDAB diploma
I can't travel outside of Belgium
I feel like in prison*

(Salem, 12.04.2025)

To Salem, life has been put on hold by entangled waiting, as his unresolved status precludes full inclusion into the labour market or international travel. At 39 years, he envisions to be married and in secure work, but finds these ambitions impossible to actively reach. His experience echoes across many interviews. Others too frame their curtailed mobility and reduced autonomy as imprisonment, as they mourn being unable to visit friends and family for months and sometimes years. The notion of waiting as time wasted in consequence of 'blocks'- structural

barriers- also repeats across many interviews, especially regarding employment. Didier, for instance, describes being "stuck out of employment" as he is caught in rigid bureaucratic rules barring him from formal work for the official four months- despite having already lived in Belgium for 3 years. Angrily, he recalls having to decline high-profile job offers:

When you evolve in those circles of like international relations it's so career driven, so you're wasting opportunities, this experience, these contacts that you could have had, you're completely wasting it. You need to accumulate these names on your CV to fight in the Brussels job jungle and by having these contracts taken away from you it's like... future employers don't care about you telling them 'oh I was I was accepted by these two organisations and they just couldn't hire me', no, for them it's not on your CV, so I feel like this has seriously hurt at least for now my professional career

(Didier, 20.01.2025)

Others struggling with the inability to work relate it further to a sense of social exclusion, as their lack of income prevents them from participating and integrating in local society.

Salem's and Didier's accounts mainly reflect personal loss and struggle. For two other participants, Abed and Ibrahim, the contrasting temporality of dragging waiting and rushing life, extends to families whose waiting is deeply entangled with theirs. Both are fathers from Gaza, Palestine, who are seeking asylum in Belgium to pave the way for family reunification. Fundamentally different to the other participants, their wait in Belgium is not only about their own futures, but about the survival of their wives and children that remain in Gaza, under daily death risk induced by genocidal warfare and exacerbating famine. In this context, *every day counts*, as it can bring irreversible loss of life. Abed's and Ibrahim's asylum claims constitute the necessary first step toward family reunification, yet the prolonged and uncertain procedure represents an impossible contrast, under which uncertainty, time pressure, powerlessness, and loss take on entirely new meaning and depth.

The things that are pending in my life because of waiting are the lives of my family under bombardment in Gaza, and that is what scares me about losing them or losing one of them. Anxiety and fear have not left me since my arrival. Fear of the future. Fear for my children and my wife in Gaza under bombardment. Fear of the uncertainty surrounding my future and that of my family.

(Abed 09.04.2025)

*In Gaza, he has a wife and 4 kids. Every day in the morning he is afraid to open the phone because he doesn't want to get bad news. He says he feels pain because he's **here** and at the same time he's worried about his children and wife back home and is afraid to even open the news.*

(Ibrahim 17.12.2024)

The two fathers physically arrived in Belgium, but their minds remain in Gaza. Their experience is a disturbing, alarming reminder that delays in the asylum process can carry life-and-death consequences, even beyond national borders. At the end of the interview, Ibrahim tells us that the day before, the wife of an asylum-seeking friend was killed in Gaza, while the husband was waiting in Belgium to bring her to safety under already commenced family reunifications procedures, before he quietly returns to his spot in the queue and smokes cigarette after cigarette.

Vicious Cycles of Institutional Abandonment and Structural Exclusion

Among the participants of my research, 5 out of 12 applicants experienced unhousing, ranging in duration from a few days up to five months. Beyond their own, they tell many stories of friends that endured months or even years of unhousing in consequence of Belgium's systematic non-reception of single male asylum seekers. Their experiences tell of viscous cycles of exclusion and great physical and psychological suffering. The unhoused asylum seekers I spoke to all expressed shock and disbelief at the outright institutional abandonment they encountered upon their arrival in Belgium. Kinan, a 22-year-old Syrian man, that lived several months unhoused in Brussels narrates his experience at and beyond the IO follows:

We gave the fingerprints and after that they told us 'now go and manage, you figure it out yourselves' which is very wrong, because where will one go? Waiting for accommodation has been the worst experience.

[...]

I chose Belgium because I saw that Belgium is a civilised and good country that has a lot... I mean, it respects people, and for me, I came here to study. I had an idea about Belgium that it is a country that respects us and helps us, and they even call it 'the country of refugees' or something like that, the capital of refugees, there are many people from different religions and different sects who are respected. But when I came here, I was shocked. I didn't know this would happen. I didn't know this would happen. I didn't know this would happen.

(Kinan, 03.04.2025)

After he was "thrown on the street" by IBZ employees,, Kinan immediately registered on the Fedasil waiting list, but four months later, he had not received any response.

Non-reception, or as it is better captured, the active *unhousing* of newly arriving single male asylum seekers directly exposes them to numerous harms that over time lead into complete exhaustion. Most interviewees were too hurt or ashamed to address details of their unhousing experience- and we did not ask for any- but they all emphasise that finding shelter, food, and security was extremely difficult, in particular during the cold winter months. In December, upon being sent away without registration from the IO into yet another night outside, one young man angrily exclaimed towards my research partner in Arabic "Do they want me to die?" Unhousing carries physical dangers through the exposure to cold, unhygienic and unhealthy conditions, risk of theft and fights on the street or squats, or even physically violent racist assault on the street. Even access to food and clean water is limited, so that many of the unhoused applicants outside the IO relied on the provisions by the StC breakfast not only for sustenance, but to access water for washing and cleaning (FN_P_24.09.2024). In consequence of these conditions, unhoused waiting has a profoundly debilitating effect on applicants' psychological state. Malik, who slept 45 days outside the Pacheco IO, says he couldn't "keep [his] head clean" during this time, while others speak of 'damage' and 'destruction':

These four months are destruction of the individual. Since I was left on the street, I developed a psychological disorder, it was so shocking and I couldn't handle it, it made me mentally unwell. I couldn't understand how they could do this to me. I even asked them to see a psychiatrist.

(Kinan, 03.04.2025)

*...emotionally it was like you know **damage** because... actually I spend all the three nights [of unhousing] without getting sleep because I have to take care of my stuff and everything... you know I don't... I was not feeling alright [voice breaking]*

(Samuel, 30.12.2024)

Their accounts reflect different origins of suffering: For Samuel, it was in particular the conditions accompanying unhousing, the lack of safety that did not allow him to find sleep, that induced a damaging effect on his mental health. While Malik describes this as well, for him and especially for Kinan, it is precisely the sense of being neglected and disregarded by their country of destination which induces great psychological suffering. They emphasise that they are willing to put up with long waiting times and "to abide by any conditions given to Him\Her by the government of their asylum's process" (Malik, 04.11.2024), had they merely be provided accommodation. Both are shocked, disillusioned, and disappointed by the stark discrepancy between their expectations of Belgium as a country of secured humanity and human rights, as opposed to their countries of origin, and the reality of institutional abandonment they faced upon arrival in Belgium.

I mean, how? How am I going to live? I mean, I came here to Belgium because I'm escaping injustice, but I came to injustice. This is burning me.

(Kinan, 03.04.2025)

Pushed into unhousing, they feel dehumanised by lack of care and respect shown towards them by IBZ and Fedasil. Malik poignantly accuses the Belgian authorities of failing its legal obligation of providing reception to anyone seeking International Protection, but locates accountability with his individual case workers and the IBZ asylum bureaucrats. He accuses them of deliberate inaction, neglect, and lack of empathy towards him and others, despite witnessing them sleep rough under terrible conditions right outside the office. It seems to be his impression, that the individual employees act against institutional policy.

The Belgian authority fundamentally violated my human right by seeing me take refuge on the street of Brussels for 45 days with a valid certificate called Annex26. It should be condemnable by the usage of the International law that favours a shelter right to any individual in other countries by the government of the countries where these individuals seek after an asylum.

[...]

Staffs saw me many times sleeping on without a roof, being beaten by rains at night and exposed to all kind of tortured by the hooligans at night are without empathy. The lack of resolution by the government staffs who had my case, is surely to be consider an expression of their nonchalant attitude.

(Malik, 04.11.2024)

In addition to being abandoned into unhousing, many asylum seekers in this position are structurally disabled from resolving their housing need independently. While some interviewees that were not provided accommodation had the necessary financial resources available to rent housing privately, and others could draw on personal contacts able to host them, this is not the case for many asylum seekers in Belgium. For this group, little other option remains than to wait out the unhousing, hoping that reception capacity will open up, because they are structurally prevented from accessing employment. In theory, asylum seekers are eligible to work within four months, but this depends on the registration at an official address: Without an address, private or from the reception system, applicants could not legally work- but without work, they could not afford private accommodation to make up for the shortcoming of the reception system. Thus, unhoused asylum seekers are trapped in vicious cycles of exclusion.

First, I need to get into the camp to have an address to be able to work, and then I need to work for a bit in order to rent an apartment. Everything is paused until I get an address from the camp. At least if we were given work we could manage, but without accommodation and work, how can we manage?

(Kinan, 03.04.2025)

Against this background of highly limit scopes of action, Kinan and others point to a vulnerability to criminalisation. Pleading in desperation, he addresses the authorities directly:

They must understand that these young guys who are coming here and you tell them to go out on the street and wait for the camp, its possible that some of these guys don't have anyone here to support them, anyone here to help them, so its possible that some of them will go astray, they take the wrong path. They could go the wrong way, head into the direction of crime.

If you want to reduce crime, then you should inquire about these young men that you are leaving alone in the streets, what will they do, how will they eat, how will they find shelter?

(Kinan, 03.04.2025)

He adds, while not involved in any criminal activity, he fears unintentional criminalisation due to a lack of knowledge about local laws, which for asylum seekers with unresolved status may have particularly impactful consequences, when it affects their case decisions- another vicious cycle of exclusion. Disillusioned by the duration and conditions of waiting for asylum in Belgium, especially those applicants undergoing unhousing, but also those facing extreme delays, express their regret of choosing to come here, and say they would not recommend it to friends at home planning to seek asylum. Samuel, for instance, says he would not encourage any male friends to come here, due to the effective requirement of homelessness. For many, the self-blame of having taken a

'wrong decision' regarding the destination of their often strenuous migration projects, represents an additional source of emotional suffering. Dejected, Kinan compares his experience to that of friends seeking asylum in other EU countries, that not only received accommodation, but were also able to progress within their procedures, while he continues to wait for even his first hearing.

From the first day, they got houses, they were assigned to houses and were assigned to permanent camps from the start. Some people started completing half of their court cases, some people started studying, and some people started getting temporary cards.

(Kinan, 03.04.2025)



Figure 28. A demand for help at the now fenced off Passage 44.

In addition to personal networks, the negative experiences and consequential warnings about the conditions of asylum in Belgium have also begun to spread on social media. One conversation partner outside the IO showed me a Facebook post circulating in Arabic community support groups of asylum seekers, which named Belgium 'the graveyard of refugees'.

8. Results

Attempts and Acts of Unwaiting

The results presented thus far show experiences of waiting outside the IO and in the procedure as differentiated, but overwhelmingly negative. And yet, emancipatory practices or acts of unwaiting are limited and rarely radical. To explain this contradiction, this chapter details attempts of unwaiting, as well as their individual and structural constraints.

Reclaiming the Wait

Asked about coping strategies within the many months of waiting with the asylum procedure, half of the applicants interviewed name activities which in the literature have been linked to a positive potential of reclaiming waiting time as meaningful. These include studying one of Belgium's official languages, spending time socialising with friends or engaging with hobbies. Multiple interviewees also actively help friends in their asylum procedures by accompanying them to their registration or hearing, or sharing information about the procedures in conversations or online, but this is rarely described as a source of personal fulfilment. In general, the listed activities allow for momentary distraction that can alleviate pressure and anxiety associated over uncertain futures, but the sense of meaning or reclaimed agency provided by them should not be overstated.

While most interviewees explicitly express a desire, intention, and attempts to spend their waiting time meaningfully, as opposed to dwelling in a temporality that feels empty and wasted, they feel severely limited in their options of meaningful time use, as they are blocked from key spheres of formal work and education towards which they are crucially orientated. Across interviews, meaningfulness is constructed as progress on an imagined life course trajectory, so as activities that allow waiters to move towards a better, desired future rather than finding momentary meaning or purpose in the present. Against this background, some applicants take up language study to "*feel that you are doing something*" (Kinan, 03.04.2025), but it does not restore a sense of control or agency as it represents making use of the *only* available option, without choice, while pursuits actually deemed meaningful are firmly out of reach. As such, the account of Kinan and most other waiters I spoke to speak of endurance, rather than of positive, meaningful experience.

For me, in order not to waste my time here, I know that my appointment is long, and so I tried to do something to make use of this waiting time. Now I'm studying the language of the country here, so in a word, you try your best to benefit from this waiting that's going on.

(Kinan, 03.04.2025)

One participant's experience of satisfaction and fulfilment stands out as an exception to the described pattern. Onur, a young Turkish man that holds a university degree, and is materially secure, and speaks multiple languages, had been in Belgium for almost a year and was waiting for the CGRS interview at the time of the interview. Objectively, he seems comparatively resourceful and well-embedded in Belgium, where he lives with friends in a rented apartment and has a large, stable social support network. Onur describes a packed weekly routine: he attends meetings and events of a religious organisation to which he is member on at least three fixed days and organises reading circles once a week, he volunteers with children's after-school clubs, teaches Turkish on weekends while himself attending a French course and taking an online theology course. Beyond these pursuits framed as productive, he pursues leisure activities like hiking, reading, and listening to music. Waiting time allows Onur to invest in self-improvement, preventing feelings of stuckedness as he focusses on concrete ends such as completing his online studies; and social contribution, allowing him to feel useful and valued. He consciously focuses on the present,

avoiding both the past in his country of origin, from which he is politically and socially estranged, and a speculative future. Beyond reclaiming the wait meaningfully, his attempt “to fill the days as much as possible” by creating a busy, structured everyday lets him avoid being “alone with [his] thoughts” and the anxieties over an uncertain future. He explains, that he has had much experience of waiting throughout his lifetime, and that keeping busy has proven the best way to sustain them.

No time is ever wasted; we can think of this waiting period as a gift.

(Onur, 25.01.2025)

Onur's narrative and generalising remarks carry a moralising undertone. He presents his active engagement as an expression of personal worth and integration, positioning himself as deserving community member and future citizen in contrast to other asylum seekers whom he describes as uneducated, disorderly and entitled. It must be noted, that intra-group stigmatisation tied to productivity-related understandings of deservingness surface in other interviews as well. In particular, productive ‘usefulness’ through work is named by others as well to constitute a legitimate criterion of deservingness to remain. It appears that to many applicants, meaningful time use is not only a coping mechanism but also a strategic positioning, affirming the analysis of Vianelli et al. (2021) of waiting as a period of probation- not only from the perspective of authorities, but also internalised by applicants themselves. However, the capacity for meaningful time use is not equally given. For unhoused applicants, the priority is securing physiological and safety needs- survival-, which may leave little capacity for study, creativity, or sustained social engagement.

.... You know during that time I-I don't ... I don't think so that I tried to be somewhat productive because you know I couldn't focus at that time

(Samuel, 30.12.2024)

Going beyond these clear structural differences, individual difference matters as well in determining differential capability to reclaim waiting time. Objectively, participant Didier has a similar profile of resources to Onur: he too is young and healthy, materially secure, well educated, and supported by a stable social network. Still, he struggles to focus positively on the present and find joy in everyday life. He engages hobbies similar to Onur's, but describes them more as timepass, because his focus lies with the resolution of his asylum status and engaging in formal work- both of which were out of reach to him, which created frustration and a strong sense of stuckness. Taken together, these accounts show that some applicants are exceptionally able to transform waiting into a period of purposeful activity and self-development, but for most, structural barriers and material insecurity make a positive reclaiming of the wait difficult. The majority of my interviewees explicitly refute the idea of waiting as holding any positive potential.

Defiance

While the reclamation of waiting time predominantly concerns the procedural dimension of waiting, the more defiant practices of Unwaiting, aimed at fundamentally refusing, reducing or avoiding the waiting obligation observed and reported mainly unfold in the concrete waiting space outside the Immigration Office. As will be shown, such acts of Unwaiting are overall limited and rarely successful, because they are directly and indirectly prevented and sanctioned. Disruptive unwaiting depends on the critical politicisation of the waiting condition, and the structures and actors that impose it, through which the waiting obligation loses legitimacy and acceptance. Across interviews and observations, a remarkable division appears in this regard: Waiters either explicitly criticise the waiting imposed on them, or accept it as normal. Indeed, the normalisation of waiting, in both place and system, can be concluded to constitute one major preclusion to defiant

Unwaiting. Three dynamics, habituation, expectation and rationalisation, surfaced during interviews and explain this. Many applicants have been chronically exposed to waiting in and beyond bureaucracy during their lifetimes and learned to accept waiting as a resented, but inherent and unavoidable part of life, in the case of two separate interviewees from Gaza even of daily life. All interviewees confirm a subjectively great exposure to waiting, ranging from situational waiting in food lines or within Visa processes to more existential waiting for rights, freedom, a better future. For most, especially their migration journeys featured many phases of slowdown and interception, of being involuntarily stuck in closed camps in countries enroute.

Yes I had to wait a lot in my life. Waiting and long lines are part of our lives in Gaza.

(Abed, 09.04.2025)

In general, throughout my life I have been waiting. I have waited for my rights, I have waited for my freedoms, I have waited for my right to work and to live a decent life. I have waited for my right to get what I deserve. I wait and wait and wait for everything.

(Qasim, 21.06.2025)

In Lebanon there was a lot of waiting, even in Syria before. We used to wait in the queue to get bread. We would wait a long time, we went to the bakery in the evening to wait until the morning for the bread to come out of the oven, or sometimes for the gas. We also used to wait even in government offices, like when my passport came out. I was young, but the war made us older. I went with my uncle, we also waited for a very, very long time, even though we paid for the fast one [express passport].

(Kinan, 03.04.2025)

Building on this preconditioned habituation, many applicants expect and rationalise their waiting in Belgium. As Yonas explains, “waiting makes sense to me as a refugee, because I understand that the asylum application process takes time” (Yonas, 30.10.2024). Beyond this necessary time of an asylum procedure, waiters rationalise the delays in the Belgian asylum system as official narratives that obscure political choices behind scarcity by attributing delays to an inability to cope with a too high influx of asylum seekers are widely circulated. So, multiple interviewees explain their long at the IO with the (too) high number of waiters that puts the institution and its employees under pressure. It appears that the powerful overburden narrative has been internalised not only by parts of local society, but by many arriving asylum seekers as well. Peer socialisation plays an important role in this internalisation and acceptance of waiting:

*At first I was you know I was starting to... to feel **frustrated** but uh all my friends told me this is just this is a normal scene in here ... I tried you know*

(Samuel, 30.12.2024)

As noted, not all applicants normalise waiting in this way. For example, Ibrahim draws a clear distinction between ‘normal’, predictable waiting under appropriate, dignified conditions, and waiting as it unfolds outside the IO. Many others share this sentiment and are seen or report complaining to each other “the whole time” about the duration and especially the conditions of their wait (Didier, 20.01.2025). While such mutual complaining shows that another part of the waiting population does *not* accept their wait as appropriate or legitimate- the precursor to Unwaiting- it does often not amount to anything more and represents coping through emotional venting more than a reclamation of agency. Complaints over the waiting imposition as such addressed directly at IBZ staff are rare. On the one hand, IBZ prevents this effectively by not having any staff present in the waiting area until the office opening- there simply is no one with authority to whom complaints could be directed towards. But more importantly, beyond their different interpretations of the wait, both groups are united in the impression of complaint as futile in the face of a rigid, powerful bureaucracy, within which even staff members are not perceived to hold sufficient power to effect fundamental change.

I want to clarify one idea, in the case of if I filed a complaint or something, that I don't think it will give a result, they will just say that we have to many people and are pressured.

(Kinan, 03.04.2025)

The only situation in which unrest increases sharply is when the workings of the office delay, or when doors are closed without all waiters having been admitted. This suggests that even those that normalise the wait only except it to a certain threshold, and only so long as their hope of progressing remains intact. Moments where this hope comes falling down represent the only instances in which, for a few minutes, a sense of the 'rebellion' is tangible- but, again, no IBZ employee is present to witness it as they have already vanished into the office, with doors securely shut. Instead, it is mainly the workers of VV that absorb some of the frustration- and enable another, more covert practice of Unwaiting, as they inform rejected applicants that the appointments they were given are not binding. The refusal to comply with the timelines IBZ, unlawfully, attempts to impose on them and instead stubbornly come back again the next morning constitutes a form of defiant Unwaiting. While it does not eliminate the waiting obligation as such, it reduces it by days or weeks, and more importantly, represents a practice of temporal agency, within which waiters themselves decide *when* they will queue again. However, not all waiters receive the information to disregard their appointment, as VV cannot provide it to dozens of infuriated waiters at once, and as not all waiters are part of social networks in which this information is also circulated. In effect, research participant Reza, for example, waited two entire months for a non-binding appointment, a time during which he underwent much stress and emotional suffering. Multiple other defiant tactics are employed by applicants to reduce their waiting time: As reviewed earlier, some attempt to skip queue to secure a better spot in line and increase their chance of admission. Some single men also 'illegitimately' queue in the vulnerable line, hoping to gain faster entry, but this is usually unsuccessful, and on the contrary, leads to being sent back to the very back of the male queue. Finally, some applicants react to the prioritisation system by simulating vulnerability. As described, there are regular conflicts between waiters and staff over the validity of age and health status, and it is indeed imaginable that some waiters attempt to gain access in this way. At least the possibility of this seems to be on the mind of some interviewees that told me, half-jokingly, that they considered to simulate illness or find a girlfriend to benefit of prioritised treatment not only at the IO but also concerning accommodation: Beyond such imaginations, Didier recounts a concrete instance of tactical use of vulnerability.

A group of three guys apparently had snuck in the registration centre pretending to be from a family just be able to get in and then at first the staff was like 'please come clean so that we can make this easier for everyone' ... but the guys still didn't show themselves so then another member of staff came in being much firmer and he was like 'look if you don't denounce yourself I'm going to expel everyone that's in this room that I've expelled seven hundred people in the past two weeks it doesn't make a difference to me so either you reveal yourself or everyone here is out'

(Didier, 20.01.2025)

Just as in queue conflicts, such tactics aiming to undermine the prioritisation system are met with a strict, and effective, response, the threat of collective punishment as a disciplinary tool. Didier recalls further that all other waiters reacted extremely tense and angry, pressuring the three men to disclose themselves. In this way, IBZ aims to limit group solidarity and prevent future attempts to defy their prioritisation system by making clear that such efforts will be unsuccessful.

Altogether, it becomes clear, that both overt contestation, such as complaining, and covert contestation, as in the attempted subversion of the vulnerability prioritisation, is difficult, rare, and sanctioned by both IBZ employees and fellow waiters. The only practice successful in slightly reducing the total waiting time is non-compliance with the appointment system, because this does not involve direct confrontation with IBZ authority. My research shows no acts of subversive collective Unwaiting, neither in place nor in the system. On the one hand, it seems that the

circumstance that the waiters outside the IO are stranger and unfamiliar to each other as well as the scarcity constructed by IBZ that renders them competitors over access, hampers the development of group solidarity. Then, particularly among those living on the streets the physical and emotional exhaustion drains the energy and focus needed for organised resistance. On the other hand, the specific liminal position of asylum applicants, which makes the risk of challenging state authority extraordinarily high, must be considered. Most persons I spoke to have invested significant material, physical, and emotional resources to reach Belgium, and their own and sometimes their families' livelihoods depend on a successful outcome of their protection claim. They are painfully aware that any conflict with the police or criminalisation can have immediate negative consequences for their cases. This adds another dimension to the understanding of waiting as a period of probation: Asylum applicants must display 'good', law-abiding behaviour in order to be deserving of protection. In this regard, the strategic employment of police presence in particular on high pressure days where a large numbers of applicants will be rejected represents a deliberate disciplining strategy exerted by IBZ. For this reason, even those who politicise their condition often refrain from acting on it and choose to comply with arbitrary, unfair, harmful, and sometimes unlawful practices. As Onur succinctly states:

I don't have the luxury of complaining

(Onur, 25.01.2025)

Enduring Despite

Endurance, is by far the most common response to waiting, described im- or explicitly in every interview. While positive reclamation enables people to live subjectively meaningful and content *in* their waiting time, endurance describes an affective attitude of living *through* the wait with the aim of sustaining oneself. As procedures drag on, applicants endure being stuck in an externally imposed temporality that feels, to the majority, void of real meaning, the anxiety over the own future and sometimes the security of family, and in some cases unliveable conditions. Across place and system, applicants describe similar tactical actions, behaviours, and factors that enable the resilience to withstand the physically and emotionally challenging conditions of their wait. An underlying condition that helps many applicants to endure is the already described normalisation of waiting, brought about by habituation, rationalisation, and expectation. Those participants that accepted their waiting condition as normal seemed to struggle significantly less to wait it out than those that criticised the condition in its core. However, this attitude is mediated by housing as an important factor, as waiters that were able to accept their waiting condition all had housing, either private or within the reception system. For these applicants, a sense prevails that an asylum procedure will necessarily be accompanied by long waiting periods, which are uncomfortable and large empty of inherent value, but which must merely be waited out. Beyond this, normalisation is limited, as for example being rejected at the door or the problematic conditions of the wait, in both dimensions, are seen as completely and shockingly inappropriate, and thus much more difficult to endure because interpreted as wrong, unfair, and dehumanising.

Moving to more active practices of coping and reliance, some applicants have described tactical adaptations aimed at least improving unalterable waiting conditions. Outside the IO, those waiters that have the means can be seen to dress appropriate to the weather, bring blankets, umbrellas, food, or even chairs to withstand the wait better. Moreover, as described, many are accompanied by friends or family, which provides not only an improved sense of security, but also crucial emotional support. As many applicants complain, this is only possible in the outside area of the IO, as no accompanying persons are allowed in the inside waiting rooms, not even in case of evident physical or psychological support needs.

In the system, one participant reports that he requested and was able to move camp within Belgium which allowed him to be closer to his friends and improved the emotional strain of prolonged waiting greatly. Social Support in general plays a major role in enabling endurance. At the IO, waiters chat with their accompaniments or other waiters and provide each other reassurance that everything will go well. Others draw on emotional support from their spouse, Roya for example remembers that on the day of Reza's registration "because he had to wait so long... [smilingly] he sent me messages **all the time**" (Reza& Roya, 03.04.2025). Even more than in the concrete waiting place, social support is crucial in withstanding the many months of waiting during procedures, as it provides much needed distraction or reassurance in difficult moments.

*People are here to try and make me think of something else or try to lift me up, even my roommates like in November it was extremely difficult for me and I don't know how I would have done it if I was living by **myself** because I was crushed by the whole thing... so I definitely feel like I have a lot of support and I'm incredibly thankful for that because I can't even imagine those who have no one here... it must be devastating.*

(Didier, 20.01.2025)

Next to emotional support, multiple participants received critical material support from friends. For instance, Samuel recalls that upon being left to sleep on the streets of Brussels for three days after arrival, "I met a friend of mine, someone who used to be a friend of mine, and he took me in his house" (Samuel, 30.12.2024). He acknowledges that compared to many other people that he met here that had spent many months unhoused, being taken in by a friend was the key change that made his wait bearable. Furthermore, waiters also develop and employ personal coping strategies. Despite the discussed constraints of spending time meaningfully, most try to keep as busy as possible to distract themselves from boredom or anxious overthinking. They pursue personal interests, spend time with friends, or simply pass hours and hours on social media or playing video games. Finally, some waiters cope through directing their mind from a difficult present to a positive future. Practices like intentionally calming one's mind from worries and fears and decidedly focussing on positive imagination represent powerful tactics that allows to endure momentary hardship. Three waiters also report faith and prayer as a key resource in which they find reassurance, hope and comfort. Another waiter shifts the locus of hope from external forces, whether divine power or a benevolent asylum institution, to the own resilience and power within:

*But you **must** believe in yourself and endure it, I personally don't believe it makes sense to be bitter.*

(Yonas, 30.10.2024)

As the literature suggests, hope proves a critical sustaining force, that consciously or unconsciously utilised. For instance, for the two participants cited below, feelings of anxiety as they were waiting outside the IO were accompanied and mediated by a sense of cautious hope, as the queueing to register their protection applications felt like a first, active step towards a long-awaited better future. This initial optimism attached to the registration of one's asylum application is common but can be lost if people are worn down by dragging procedures and repeated delay. The interview with Qasim, for example, took place several weeks after his registration, within which he experienced a period of unhousing and general institutional abandonment. He ends the interview by contending

There was a little optimism that I had decided to take a step that would grant me many rights and freedoms and that they would help me to obtain an independent and better life and that it was the end of years of injustice, suffering and oppression

(Qasim, 21.06.2025)

I was dreaming about getting papers... I felt tired but I was looking forward for a new start in my life.

(Salem, 12.04.2025)

that he has no hope or expectations for a positive future in and even beyond Belgium. And yet, Qasim remains in Belgium and continues waiting. This draws attention to the important result that among the participant of my research, not hope is the main force sustaining endurance, but the lack of viable alternative options. As it is impossible to return to the country of origin and as applicants are immobilised under the Dublin system, most conclude that they must 'live with their decision'. In a resigned acceptance, asylum applicants wait out stagnating procedures and continued unhousing, hoping that their situation will improve soon.

This is what happened to me: I came here and got my fingerprints, and I can't leave anymore. There's no way I can get out of here. As a Syrian, I do regret coming to Belgium, but I cannot keep regretting, khalas, I cannot think too much about it, one has to live with his decisions.

(Kinan, 03.04.2025)

*The Belgian state, or any other state that welcomes asylum seekers, just has this huge piece of bread in their hands and they know that all you want is that piece of bread so you **will** put up with anything*

(Didier, 20.01.2025)

You are a refugee here, even if they say 10 hours, you will wait because you have nowhere else to go.

(Onur, 25.01.2025)

Statements such as Onur's additionally show a significant acceptance of the submission that is perceived to be inherent in the supplicant position of asylum seeker, while Didier's account is more critical. Nonetheless, for both, endurance seems the only real option under structural constraint.

And yet, turning to the story of Malik, shows that there are also limits to endurance. Directly harmed by Belgium's exclusionary non-reception policy, this applicant endured 45 days of sleeping rough outside the Pacheco IO in September and October, cold, wet months in Brussels. But eventually, exhaustion prevailed as his already destitute health condition deteriorated rapidly and he realised that he would realistically not receive housing any time soon, while the nights were getting progressively colder. In consequence, Malik concluded that his persistence in Belgium was unsustainable. His decision to leave for another European country, where he was immediately admitted to a first shelter, represents an act of *unwaiting Belgium*, an agentic refusal of undignified waiting. For Malik, the only way to survive dangerous and unhealthy waiting conditions was to abandon his wait, and his protection procedure, entirely. While this represents an exceptional exertion of autonomy in this highly constrained context, it comes at a great risk of being subjected to Dublin procedures and eventually returned to Belgium. In this case, his agentic Unwaiting would paradoxically prolong the total wait until the far-away objective of receiving an asylum decision. However, a sliver of hope remains, as European courts continue to suspend Dublin retransfers for asylum seekers- like Malik- that face acute unhousing in Belgium (EMN 2025).

Tactical Adaption

My research reveals two additional tactics aimed at reducing waiting time that fall outside the original typology of Unwaiting. These are first, the temporal tactic of strategic early arrival, and secondly, the tactical performance of deservingness. Both these acts are adaptations to the functioning and expectations of the Immigration Office rather than contestations thereof, but they nonetheless include agentic action on the part of applicants.

Firstly, strategic early arrival constitutes a subtle, non-confrontational yet effective form of temporal agency within the restrictive organisation of the Immigration Office. By arriving hours before the official opening, applicants proactively influence their place in the queue and their chances of being admitted that day. While it does not challenge the temporal structure imposed by IBZ, early

arrival can carry a sense of reclaiming the passive temporality it imposes. Time becomes a strategically managed resource, as some applicants choose more waiting now over potentially increased future waiting, which provides a sense of actively influencing the overall experience. A second, much more ambiguous adaptive practice that takes shape at the IO is applicants' performance of deservingness through tactical compliance. Based on both previous life experience of waiting, especially at bureaucratic institutions and in the context of migration, peer socialisation, and an implicit and explicit demand by IBZ, most applicants outside the IO understand that they are expected to "*shut up and wait*" (Didier, 20.01.2025). This sense deepens as waiters observe how complaints or outwards expressions of emotions like frustration or anger are met with conflict and sanctions. As such, many appear to conclude that the best way to 'get through' the wait as fast and smoothly as possible is to comply with institutional rules and behavioural expectations of orderly, calm, patient waiting. In consequence, even under the described sometimes extreme physical and emotional discomfort, the overwhelming majority of waiters remains still and compliant. This involves emotion management, which manifests here as the active negation and regulation of actually felt emotions and behavioural impulses, especially in interactions with office gatekeepers, to avoid any appearance of 'unruliness' (Hochschild 1979). Hochschild's (1979) distinction of *surface* and *deep* acting elucidates this further. Applicants that detest the waiting condition engage in surface acting, a conscious, controlled performance of patience and docility, by suppressing visible signs of anger or other sanctioned affects, or at most directing them to fellow waiters- but not towards IBZ staff, while still feeling the negative emotions internally. Those applicants, however, that normalise and rationalise the waiting condition practice deep acting where the calmness or patience displayed is, at least partially, aligned with their internal state, which makes the otherwise challenging waiting condition easier to endure. As Hage (2009b) theorised, applicants engaged in deep acting may moralise their own 'heroic' display of patience as a virtue linked to a problematic construction of 'civilised' behaviour, which 'unruly' waiters fail to display. This perspective emerges from one interview, in which the participant links a perceived inability of others to wait patiently to their socio-cultural backgrounds. On the whole, though, this interpretation remains an exception. To most waiters, patience merely represents a tactic that may shorten the waiting time on a given day or help avoid negative consequences.

9. Discussion Withstanding Exhaustion

This chapter interprets the empirical findings through the lens of the theoretical framework, situating the described lived experiences of waiting within broader dynamics of power and resistance, and reflecting on the political functions and consequences of waiting in the Belgian asylum regime.

Bordering into Exhaustion

The deceleration of asylum procedures in Belgium is not an accidental byproduct of strained bureaucracy but a deliberate outcome of political choices to under-resource the asylum institutions of IBZ and the CGRS (Amnesty International 2025a; Walpot 2025). For asylum seekers, the time from arrival until the eventual resolution of a case is deliberately stretched: some asylum seekers wait days, weeks or in Reza's case as much as two months merely to register their applications. Months may then pass until the so-called 'small' hearing, and years before the decisive 'big' hearing. Several participants expressed disbelief and frustration at having spent over half a year in Belgium without completing even their first interview, a result of repeated deferrals. This represents a clear strategy of temporal bordering, exerted against the 'unruly mobility' of undesired migrants. In reaction to their "'excess' of autonomy" that defied territorial border control, the border too is moved inside Belgian national territory (Hess 2018:95). Among many other organisations and actors, the internalised border is enacted within Belgium's temporal architectures of asylum-including the Immigration Office and the asylum procedure that have been the matter of study in my research.

The Immigration Office as a Border Site

The temporal bordering that characterises the Belgian asylum regime is enacted in concrete places and institutions that effectively become border sites by asylum bureaucrats that become border workers. For most asylum seekers, the Immigration Office is the first point of contact with the Belgian state, where state power is demonstrated and enacted through the regulation of access, the imposition of waiting time, and the discretionary decision-making. As such, it represents the continuation of the genealogy of border waiting spaces that applicants respectively traversed enroute. Access to the asylum procedure is a fundamental right, which is however routinely violated at the IO as an artificial scarcity causes the introduction of arbitrary, informal daily capacity limits. In consequence, access to the physical place of the registration centre, and thus to the asylum procedure, becomes restricted and subject to a chance factor. This mirrors global bordering practices, such as the emerging 'metering' in the US-context, in which access to request asylum is unlawfully restricted through daily caps on admission under the guise of retaining 'operational capacity' (Martinez 2023:6).

While the IO represents an internalised border, it is worth pointing out that it partly mirrors the territorial border and draws on strikingly similar bordering techniques. The doorstep inside the IO becomes a border crossing, a spatial line or entry point to pass, that is selectively and flexibly fortified by fences and barriers, or simply and definitively made inaccessible when doors are closed for the day. Furthermore, this border crossing is controlled and guarded by police and private security actors. The door of the IO becomes a literal selective gate at which differential in- or exclusion is discretionarily determined based on the number of applicants on a given day and the recognition of individual deservingness. In the priority-based queue management of the IBZ, deservingness is achieved in result of three entangled factors: Firstly, the length of waiting time, expressed as the spot in the queue; secondly, compliant behaviour, as the next subchapter on

discipline unpacks further, and thirdly and most crucially, recognised vulnerability. In this context, it should be noted that “The European Court of Human Rights generally recognizes asylum seekers as members of ‘a particularly underprivileged and vulnerable population group’ - *independent* of gender, age, health or any other status (Amnesty International 2025a:9). However, described in the results, the IBZ mobilises a narrow and essentialist yet flexible construction of vulnerability to biopolitically sort applicants into a hierarchy of deservingness and access. Vulnerability is framed as innate to certain positionalities and must be immediately, unambiguously visible to the street-level bureaucrats of the IBZ, so that women, families, or wheelchair users are most consistently judged deserving, while male minors and elderly, sick, or injured men often find their vulnerability questioned, and single men theirs principally negated. This border work is carried out by the street-level bureaucrats of IBZ imbued with the gatekeeping power of judging ad-hoc whose suffering “can be made the object of a politics of compassion” (Mavelli 2017:816). On the basis of this research, it cannot be assessed how IBZ SLBs interpret their implementation of differential inclusion. That being said, it appears that in line with institutional instructions, suffering is recognised on a categorical rather than situational basis, as IBZ gatekeepers very rarely depart from official practice to alleviate acute situational vulnerability. Absolved of accountability, they thus enact the state permission of not only ‘cruel’, but frequently illegal exclusion, as they block applicants from the right to access asylum procedures, hand out unlawful appointments days and weeks away, or spontaneously postpone interview appointments, thereby imposing additional, renewed waiting (Bhatia 2020).

The temporal bordering of the IO expresses Bourdieu’s principal insight that “The ability to make people wait is a fundamental feature of the exercise of power, exposing the uneven value that is accorded to different people’s time in society (Vianelli et al. 2022:1016). For asylum seekers, the devaluation and disregard for their time is acutely felt as a form of subordination to an all-powerful, but opaque, arbitrary, and unfair bureaucracy. With great anger and frustration, they describe waiting for hours, only to be turned away at the gate or even have their long-awaited appointment deferred without any empathy or accountability on the side of IBZ. As Crine et al. (2024) write, “In the Belgian asylum system, these politics of time take on a particular dimension because they always seem to escape the control of the asylum seekers: they seem not entitled to control either the duration or the temporal sequences of a procedure of which they are nevertheless the main subject” (p.163).

Vulnerability and Exhaustion as Lived Experience of Temporal Bordering

I have described how within the Belgian asylum regime, delay and waiting are strategically imposed on asylum seekers to slow down access to asylum. Yet, to fully grasp the politics of temporal bordering and waiting requires attention to its lived experience. Concerning both the wait at the IO and within the procedure, one principal insight of my research is that it is not merely the length, but the *quality* of the waiting faced by asylum seekers in Belgium that defines subjective experience and bearability thereof. This quality is differentially constituted at the intersection of the *duration* of the wait, the concrete conditions within which it takes place, and individual *positionality and situatedness*. Several personal factors appeared in my research as particular constitutive of individual waiting experience. These include gender; health; religion; the availability of financial resources; housing status; local cultural capital, especially concerning language; social capital; knowledge about the asylum system and access to information, for example through migrant support networks; previous life exposure to waiting; and dependent waiting, i.e. whether people other than the applicants depend directly on the outcome of their wait. Waiting experiences of asylum seekers in Belgium are extremely differentiated, and each asylum applicant I spoke with faced their very personal waiting-related challenges, ranging from missing out professional

opportunities, over protracted unhousing or medical suffering, to daily fear for family members left behind under the threat of death.

And yet, one motif emerges that strikingly unifies their otherwise very different experiences: Waiting asylum seekers both in the queue outside the Immigration Office or stuck at a later stage of dragging or even stagnating procedures describe a pervasive and overwhelming sense of exhaustion. In the physical as well as the procedural waiting space, waiting effectively emerges as an endurance test as applicants face exposure to waiting conditions that are difficult to bear and produce exhaustion (De Backer et al. 2023). At the Immigration Office, exhaustion is immediate and visible. Applicants endure harsh conditions in an exposed, poorly equipped waiting area, often without sleep and under pre-existing medical conditions. Insecurity further prevents rest, as fear and discomfort keep waiters hypervigilant. Some waiters come already exhausted, some are worn down during the wait, but once at the entrance gate, all waiters are to some extent exhausted. Inside, hours of further waiting shift exhaustion from physical to psychological strain, leaving many drained as they sit with hours of anxiety. In Belgium, access to the asylum procedure is premeditated by the endurance of these conditions, which not every applicant is able to withstand, as acutely vulnerable applicants cannot wait until the opening time or collapse in the queue. During the procedure, the exposure fundamental uncertainty over unpredictable timelines and futures creates constant stress, anxiety and sleep problems. For many, persistent delay and postponed appointments wears down hope. Over time, many describe an existential exhaustion as a strong sense of stuckness and loss of agency erode not only mental wellbeing but also the ability to plan, focus, or find meaning or joy in the present. Some applicants are additionally worn down by prolonged material deprivation and exposure to difficult or even unliveable reception or housing conditions.

Within both place and procedure, the duration functions as a vector of exhaustion and vulnerability, with harms typically compounding the longer applicants are forced to remain in conditions of uncertainty and deprivation. From this perspective, one clear, contingent pattern emerges among the general diversity of waiting experiences. Within the limited, non-representative sample of my research, in particular the interconnected factors of gender and unhousing produce specific, determine disproportionately greater forms of vulnerability, exhaustion, and suffering. As the IBZ propels a stereotyped, harmful, and discriminatory discourse of single migrant men as strong and self-sufficient and thus inherently invulnerable, or at least less vulnerable, the border is moved onto the male migrant body, which is denied compassion, access, and care. As my research confirms, this construction does not necessarily correspond to real, situational vulnerability at the point it is applied, but even so, those single men who are not recognised as already vulnerable are in turn rendered vulnerable precisely through the wait.

As they are compelled to wait disproportionately longer, overnight and sometimes repeatedly at the IO, single men's total exposure to potential material, physical and psychological harm of the queue multiplies. Drawing on the stereotype of the strong, capable, self-sufficient man, single male asylum seekers then face institutional abandonment, most importantly structural unhousing, throughout their long asylum procedures and are expected to be able to cope on their own. Among the participants of my research, the capacity to do so is mediated by financial or social resources, that for some may prevent or shorten the worst case of case of actually being out on the street. For those that lack these resources, being left without basic support and protection means they must indeed be self-reliant and mentally and physically strong- forced to live up to the stereotype. In this regard, my research aligns with other scholarship in suggesting that many male asylum seekers have internalised gendered expectations, experiencing strong pressure to succeed and not fail despite the difficulties they face (Saroléa, Raimondo and Crine 2022; Schuster 2011). Among my participants, success is framed predominantly in terms of the long-term objective of receiving

recognition in Belgium, and the short-term goal of financial autonomy through employment. For most, this is linked not only to the own livelihood but to that of dependent family in the home country or abroad, an important reminder that while Belgium reduces these applicants to a status of 'single man', this often does not describe these men deeply enmeshed in familial responsibility appropriately. The men I interviewed strive for independence and refute dependency on the Belgian state, the merely expect first reception and the right to access work. However, interlocked structural exclusion denies them for a minimum of four months, but in cases of unhousing for much longer, the very means to obtain the expected self-sufficiency. As such, participants feel vulnerablised not only by the discriminatory withholding of care, but by vicious cycles of exclusion. In effect, unhoused asylum seekers remain stuck in the necrotemporality of waiting that participants of my research describe as dehumanising and physically and psychologically damaging and destructive. From here, vicious cycles continue as street exhaustion and survival may produce drug abuse, fighting, or criminality in some unhoused asylum seekers, therein confirming the very stereotypes that justified their neglect and justifying further exclusion.

In Belgium, waiting "imposed by bordering practices [carries] consequences of destabilising of lives and bodies" of asylum seekers (Koshravi 2021a:203). The exhaustion experienced by asylum seekers in Belgium constitutes a deliberate form of necropolitical violence, whereby life is slowly worn down through prolonged exposure to uncertainty, abandonment and deprivation. Unhousing, in particular, exposes single men to conditions that place them at direct risk of illness, injury, and even death. Reports of violence and even two known tragic deaths in overcrowded squats since the onset of the non-reception policy tragically confirm this (Clapson 2023; The Brussels Times 2022), as does research by Lafaut et al. (2019) which finds a higher risk of both natural and externally induced death among male undocumented migrants compared to male Belgians. Legally different, unhoused male asylum seekers live in de facto the same living conditions as undocumented migrants, as both groups are similarly abandoned by the Belgian state. It becomes clear, that the punitive logic that has long defined the treatment of illegalised is being extended even to those with a legal right to presence in Belgium during their asylum procedures (Vandevoordt 2020).

The analysis of exhaustion as the lived experience of temporal bordering begs the question, where bordering ends and violence begins. The Belgian approach of rendering access to asylum as difficult as possible, even under use of illegal measures such as non-reception and delayed registration appointments, renders certain bodies disposable and their exhaustion and even death acceptable in the enforcement of racialised hierarchies of mobility. It thus represents a *politics* of exhaustion that is best understood as a bordering strategy that relies on necropower. In this context, the selective inclusion of vulnerable 'womenandchildren' allows illegal, punitive exclusion of in particular racialised, male Others to be masked as humanitarian concern, in order to prevent more public outcry. At its core, the strategic imposition of abject waiting pursues punitive and deterrent logics. It aims at pushing the undesired asylum seekers to leave voluntarily and deter future arrivals (Schuster 2011). And indeed, my research confirms that this policy at least partly works, as participants expressed intentions to or did in fact leave Belgium, or discouraged others from coming.

Discipline and Probation

While exhaustion exposes how forced waiting functions as a necropolitical, destructive exertion of power and control, this chapter turns to its biopolitical, productive counterpart of disciplining power that operates simultaneously in the same waiting spaces of the IO and the asylum procedure. Under necrotemporality, waiting represents an endurance test, but it furthermore

operates as a period of probation in which asylum seekers are most prove their deservingness by becoming or at least performing the 'good asylum seeker' (Vianelli et al. 2022). In the Belgian asylum regime, the 'good asylum seeker' label is first and foremost assigned based on Race, as became painfully clear in the fundamentally different approach to Ukrainian refugees in need, for whom registration and reception capacity was made available at an instance (Walpot 2025), and secondly based on essentialised vulnerability, in particular of 'womenandchildren' (Greene 2020). However, beyond these static factors, becoming the 'good asylum seeker' is a matter of behaviour as well. As Schuster (2011) summarises

EU MS expect them to cross the external borders of the EU furnished with authoritative documentary evidence of their ages, of where they have lived, of the persecutions that they have suffered, to make themselves known to the authorities, to wait patiently, surviving without recourse to public funds, without being visible, to accept whatever decision is made about their future and to go where they are told, including back to [their country of origin]. They are emphatically not expected to make choices or decisions, but instead to present themselves as passive victims, grateful for being whatever minimal tolerance they are shown (p.16).

At the Immigration Office, to be 'good' means fulfilling obligations of punctuality and preparedness- while the bureaucracy rules with arbitrariness- and demonstrate patience by waiting orderly and calmly. This specifically entails following IBZ orders, even if perceived as arbitrary or unfair, without complaint or contestation. Those who fail to assume this role, or who dare to resist, are cast as disruptive, unruly, and undeserving, and their exclusion is justified. In the procedure too, asylum applicants are expected to accept whichever delay or unreliability they encounter, and endure and suffer quietly as they wait out whichever conditions are imposed on them, even if it is unhousing during wintertime. Additionally, asylum applicants must abide Belgian law, and some have also internalised the expectation of productivity and economic usefulness, which participant's sometimes explicitly linked to their chance of recognition. On the whole, the asylum seekers studied in this research were acutely aware that the authorities expected compliance of them, and that their behaviour in the queue at the Immigration Office as well as within the procedures at large could affect their access to asylum. By and large, they act accordingly through self-regulation and self-discipline, instead of contesting the state's disciplinary power. As detailed in the results, a multitude of factors underlies and explains this, which can be broadly categorised into preclusions and sanctions.

Preclusions take many forms. Waiting scholars have shown a loss of hope as a strong predictor for defiant Unwaiting, but asylum seekers at the outset of their procedure still hold much hope for a positive outcome, and are thus more willing to continue to wait patiently (Dobler 2020; Hage 2009b). On the other hand, in the given case, it is remarkable, that even participants that express a loss of hope *still* continue waiting. This indicates the more important preclusion of a perceived lack of alternatives under livelihood need: My research participants have invested too much to arrive to Belgium, and too much is at stake to risk jeopardising their own and sometimes their family's future (Dobler 2020). In Didier's metaphor, the Belgian state holds a piece of bread, and those arriving to seek protection are so hungry that they *will* put up with any condition. This sense of dependency is reinforced by fear as applicants face the possibility of rejection, under conditions of detainability (De Genova 2021; Saunders and Al-Om 2022) and deportability (Machinya 2021). As such, police presence at the IO is a highly effective instrument to enforce discipline.

Confrontational contestation is further prevented by its perceived futility. For many waiters, this impression has been learned in previous life interaction with bureaucracies. But moreover, IBZ SLBs are either physically absent in crucial moments, or perceived as lacking real power within a seemingly rigid institution (Hansen 2020). Collective protest seems additionally hampered as applicants are rendered competitors over artificially scarce access and mutual mistrust undermines solidarity (Dobler 2020).

Thus, rather than becoming a “fused group”, the waiting population at the IO remains a “serie” of individuals focussed on their own case (Sartre, cited in Hage 2009?:7).

Meanwhile, public visibility of asylum seekers particular at the Belliard site emerges as an instrument of surveillance that encourages self-regulation, while framing them as a problem to be managed, policed, or hidden. Finally, exhaustion itself compounds these preclusions, as after hours of waiting, applicants lack capacity to contest directions and orders. When defiance nevertheless occurs, it is immediately and effectively sanctioned by other waiters as well as IBZ, through individual or collective threat or exclusion from admission. As such, the defiant waiters and witnessing applicants are taught that contestation is in vain. Through these combined mechanisms of preclusion and sanction, open contestation feels largely futile or even foreclosed to the participants of my research.

As they experience “the effect of power”, the looming threat of sudden exclusion instils docility through uncertainty in waiting asylum seekers (Bourdieu, cited in Auyero 2012:5). In this sense, the Belgian asylum regime illustrates Auyero’s (2012) insight that such “waiting experiences persuade the destitute of the need to be patient, thus conveying the implicit state request to be compliant clients” (p.5). The aim of this strategy lies not only in the production of a docile body of asylum seekers, but of potential future citizens that will be economically useful, but politically pacified, and subordinated to state power. And yet, as the next and final chapter unpacks, despite his emphasis on state power and structural constraint, Auyero (2012) attests that the patient-model “should not be read as a demonstration of the (presumably perennial) passivity” of waiters (p.25).

Agency under Structural Constraint and Violence

Having discussed the imposition of waiting as a strategic act of exhaustion and discipline, I once more turn to the question of agency within this highly constrained context.

Tactical Compliance: Performing the ‘Good Asylum Seeker’

Disciplinary power seeks to produce subjects that internalise submission and docility. Among the participants of my research, some express an attitude of normalisation and acceptance of waiting that indicates the internalisation of their supplicant position and thus such genuine submission. However, the majority of asylum seekers I met during my research interpret their wait in Belgium as deeply dehumanising and unjustified. The photograph to the right, taken at the Pacheco IO, illustrates this non-acceptance through symbolic contestation: The Immigration Office sign promises ‘*International Protection*’, yet someone underlined ‘*Protection*’ and added ‘*Coupable!*’ (*guilty!*), accusing the Belgian asylum authorities of failing those it is obliged to safeguard. Behind the Cube, the tents of unhoused asylum seekers embody this failure: instead of shelter, people are left in destitution.



Figure 29. Expression of anger at the Cube.

As argued in the results, in practice most asylum seekers resort to a tactical performance of compliance. Given their constrained position and the described pressure within the asylum regime, I argue that this does not represent true internalised submission but an agentic practice. Agency captures “one’s capacity to reflect on everyday conditions and act to change one’s circumstances”, and in the context of the asylum regime is best understood as the “control asylum seekers and refugees have– or feel they have– when encountering structural barriers” (Ramachandran and Vathi 2022:1104). During both the physical and procedural wait, applicants actively perform the role of the docile, grateful, patiently waiting asylum seeker to maximise their chances of admission and smooth procedures. Waiting asylum seekers fulfil expectations and follow rules not because they accept them as legitimate, but because they make the conscious choice that playing along is the best available option to achieve the desired outcome, and as such their behaviour is purposeful, strategic, and indeed agentic.

Often, this pragmatic view has been learned over many years of waiting. While it may indeed succeed in reducing waiting time, its position within the unwaiting framework is ambiguous. On a spectrum from internalised submission to emancipatory Unwaiting, tactical compliance sits somewhere in between. The performance of patience navigates the order of the system to reduce waiting time and harm, but through that, it legitimates and reproduces that same system, including its moral order of deservingness and the expectation of the obedient ‘good asylum seeker’.

Endurance: Being ‘Still Here’

Tactical Compliance takes place within a larger effort of waiting asylum seekers to *withstand* exhaustion and survive within structures of neglect and violence. If tactical compliance demonstrates agency through patience, endurance demonstrates it through persistence. Endurance refers to the everyday practices through which asylum seekers withstand exhaustion and dehumanisation. Within their individual situatedness and capacity, the asylum seekers I spoke with all mobilise a range of efforts to endure the physical and non-physical conditions of their wait. Even if choices are limited, they act within their scope to improve the conditions of their forced wait.

Endurance requires significant strength and resources. Mutual support networks proved crucial here, so that the ability to draw on the help of others represents a crucial determinant of the capacity to endure. Crucially, endurance describes an affective attitude to forced waiting, but for many waiters it also entails a very material daily struggle, which for those that like Malik do not dispose of the resources to withstand may very well lead to withdrawal.

In addition to material aspects, endurance is a matter of emotional strength. Other research with waiting asylum seekers suggests, that a breaking with linear temporality and positive reorientation towards the present alleviate suffering and allow for the construction of meaningful life (Fog Olwig 2023; Kallio et al. 2021). Different to that, the participants of my research feel confined to a precarious present, but at the same time to find or create meaning or relief in the here and now, as they are firmly oriented to the future endpoint of their waiting(s) and opportunities and plans currently out of reach. Most do not attempt to reinterpret their wait as positive but are upset and angry about their situations. This temporality makes endurance of the now additionally difficult. Many waiters I spoke to feel dehumanised and ashamed upon their unwelcoming treatment in Belgium, and it takes a particular reassertion of self-value and dignity to stubbornly withstand that. Endurance, being barely able to wait out and make do, as the only viable option to negotiate the wait, is generally not consciously perceived or interpreted as empowering by participants themselves. However, from an analytical perspective, their endurance in Belgium is very much an expression of stubborn agency, because it resists the state’s strategies of deterrence and exhaustion. My research thus confirms the Saunders and Al-Om’s (2022) argument that under

necropolitical abandonment, “action taken by asylum seekers and their supporters to enable them to survive and to navigate the system cease to be ‘only’ survival strategies and can become a form of Everyday Resistance to Slow Violence” (p.538). The authors recall that the meaning of everyday resistance practices which are not explicitly recognised as such neither by the enactors nor those in power has been the matter of much debate, but contend that “what matters is whether or not power relations of some kind (or, as is our focus, forms of violence) are in fact challenged through such acts” (p.539). Thus, within an asylum regime that aims to exhaust, remove and deter, the very act of persisting under prolonged, profound uncertainty and politico-legal liminality - of *being still here* and withstanding the wait represents resistance and emancipatory Unwaiting (Koshravi 2012b; Saunders and Al-Om 2022). In particular for single, unhoused men, if the state strategy is the necropolitical destruction of bodies, survival expresses resistance. Notwithstanding a perceived lack of alternatives, the endurance of my research participants speaks of a rejection of their attempted dehumanisation and insistence on their humanity and human rights. Despite suffering in the present, they remain oriented towards a better future of “not-yet fulfilled promises”, which according to Koshravi (2021a) constitutes “pre-eminently a political act by which migrants claim their right to potentialities that make prospects for a better future possible” (p.206). This must also be read within the larger lifeworld of the asylum seekers I spoke to, which all already endured previous violence and exhaustion in the context of wars, borders, or other precarity, and nonetheless insist on the right to a better future (Koshravi 2021b).

Both tactical compliance and endurance are tactics that allow asylum seekers to navigate the structural violence of waiting. The former represents a pragmatic and effective exertion of agency *within* the state expectation, and despite individual benefit ultimately reinforces its probationary logic. Withstanding the wait through focussing on bearability in the everyday, too, risks reinforcing the state logic of waiting as an endurance *test*, but as argued, nonetheless carries a distinctly resistant and emancipatory meaning. Both are forms of constrained agency, whose ambivalence highlights the serious structural barriers and violence asylum seekers in Belgium face as well as their active struggle to act asserting dignity and presence in conditions meant to deny both.

10. Conclusion

My thesis provides an ethnographic, bottom-up interrogation of lived experiences of forced waiting within the Belgian asylum timescape. The long queues outside the Brussels Immigration Office and the negotiation and production of vulnerability as it plays out in this waiting space constitute a physical materialisation an asylum system deliberately plunged into crisis. From my analysis, I conclude that prolonged waiting within the asylum regime is not incidental but reflects a bordering strategy that works through time, space, and the body, as it aims to discipline asylum seekers biopolitically and exhausts them necropolitically. This serves the ultimate objective of deterrence and the disempowerment and of the movements, bodies, and resistances of undesired asylum seekers, according to a racialised and gendered logic of deservingness, that aims to enshrine hierarchies of power.

Setting the focus on potentials and preclusions of Unwaiting, I specifically examined and emphasised negotiations of agency within this highly constrained setting. It has been shown that although the Belgian politics of exhaustion succeed in “wounding, stigmatising, and marginalising asylum seekers”, they nonetheless mobilise tactics to withstand state power and violence (Saunders and Al-Om 2022:536). It has been shown that direct contestation is systematically precluded and overall rare. One exceptional, successful practice of defiance, if non-confrontational, is expressed in the common non-compliance with IBZ’s unlawful appointment system. But on the whole, under structural constraint and violence, asylum seekers exercise agency mainly through tactical compliance endurance, which sustain persistence and survival but also risk reinforcing the very logics of power they resist. No acts of subversive, collective Unwaiting have been documented, but one major contribution of my work lies precisely in casting light onto limitations of such Unwaiting. Indeed, the orientation towards survival and bearability that enables endurance simultaneously prevents more emancipatory forms of Unwaiting that demand and mobilise for more fundamental, systemic change. Studies on migrant resistance in general and Unwaiting in particular often focus on mutual aid or explicit politicised public action- protests, occupations, hunger strikes, and more (Koshravi 2021b; Saunders and Al-Om 2022; Bendixsen and Hylland Eriksen 2020). Such migrant activism naturally exists in Belgium as well, although increasingly repressed since the 2015 encampment in Park Maximilian, but has not come up across my limited sample (Daher 2019; Nagi, Beeckmans and d’Auria 2024; Vandevoordt 2020). However, as my sample of participants is broad in terms of social background, I believe the absence of subversive Unwaiting is expressive of the general constraint that prevents subversion on a larger scale.

Given the precarious legal and material conditions under which most asylum seekers I met throughout my research wait and live, subversive, outwardly politicised action should not be the standard to which their capacity for agency and resistance is measured- pushes for political change must come from elsewhere in Belgian society. In addition, given that many waiters do not internalise their own submission but are highly critical of the asylum regime, it can reasonably be expected that they will engage in more overtly politicised mobilisation once their status is more secure. In the meantime, I argue that it is important to see small, everyday acts of endurance as active, political acts and devote more academic interest to such everyday resistance of the majority. In this regard, however, Karling (2021) importantly notes that acknowledging the agentic, political meanings of waiting out the crisis, should not result in over-romanticising or normalising this precarious way of being, as this directs responsibility away from political actors onto the individual migrant. Much rather, the study of endurance under difficulty should draw attention to structural conditions that produce crisis- not only for asylum seekers but also the multitude of other subaltern

populations for whom basic livelihood is tied to the ability to perform patience and compliancy (Auyero 2012; Chattopadhyay and Tyner 2022; Ramsay 2017).

The analysis presented here underlines the value, indeed the need, to assign serious academic attention to the study of politics and experiences of waiting, and temporal perspectives on migration, vulnerability, and violence more generally. From the content of my research, in particular two directions for future research emerge, that have merely been touched upon here. Firstly, other studies on migrant waiting consistently find experiences, interpretations, challenges and resistances thereof to be greatly contingent and differentiated by gender (Greene 2020; Ramachandran and Vathi 2022). My research confirms this, but is unable to provide clear and personal insight into experiences of non-male asylum seekers in Belgium, which would be crucial to complete the picture on the discipline and violence of waiting exerted here. Secondly, remaining within the Belgian context, it appears interesting to examine the interplay of waiting and vulnerability in non-state humanitarian organisations such as Serve the City and Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, who employ their own constructions of vulnerability, with implied exclusionary effects.

Concrete and viable policy solutions to the great suffering induced in asylum seekers waiting in precarious conditions within ever-delayed procedures have long been known and available, and were swiftly implemented for Ukrainian refugees, demonstrating that dignified reception is entirely possible when desired (Amnesty International 2025a). But so long as the Belgium government partakes in an EU-wide race to the bottom concerning migrant rights to pursue a deterrence paradigm, the ongoing crisis of humanity will only strategically exacerbate, as not even sustained legal condemnation has been able to force the upholding of international law and responsibility (FEANTSA 2025). It is remarkable that the government under De Wever, presenting himself as “proponent of law-and-order policies”, will continue, and likely extend, the contempt for the rule of law, as asylum seeker’s rights are routinely violated (van Brunnersum 2025:2). The implications hereof reach beyond the field of asylum:

“Foreigners’ rights are the touchstone for the rest of politics. They [the government] try something in the domain of immigration law to see if it sticks and then apply it in other laws. As they think that people are less likely to resist when it comes to the rights of migrants”
(Lawyer Jean Marc Picard, cited in Amnesty International, 2025a).

For now, it seems to be in the hands of solidary alliances between asylum seekers, law makers, and civil society to provide the short-term care that the Belgian state withdraws, while pressuring for the long-term change it refuses.

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Part 1 - Collecting relevant sociodemographic characteristics of Interviewee

- 1.1 Age?
- 1.2 Gender?
- 1.3 Country of Origin?
- 1.4 Time spent in Belgium?
- 1.5 When have you left your country of Origin?
- 1.6 Housing situation (where do you live?)
- 1.7 Where did you find our flyer? (Pacheco 44 / Rue Belliard 68)

Part 2 - Pacheco44

Individual Experience

- 2.1 How long have you waited at Belliard/Pacheco (depending on where YOU waited)? At what time did you arrive?
 - Was this the first time waiting here?
 - Did you come alone or together with others?
 - How long did you wait *outside* and *inside*?
 - Did you feel like the amount of time you waited here today was appropriate? Did you expect it, or was it surprising?
- 2.2 How did you perceive the physical place of Belliard/Pacheco44?
 - What do you think about the outside waiting area? (e.g., regarding lighting, trash...)
 - What do you think about the inside waiting area?
 - Was there something about the place that surprised you?
- 2.3 Did you face any problems while waiting here today?
 - If yes: What happened, and how did you react?
- 2.4 How did you feel waiting here today?
 - Physically? (e.g., temperature, bathroom access)
 - Emotionally / Mentally? (e.g., stressed, frustrated, anxious, hopeless, or hopeful)
 - Did you meet anyone while waiting?

Observations

- 2.5 How did you perceive the overall atmosphere at Belliard/Pacheco?
 - Did you witness any conflicts or fights?
 - Did you at any time feel worried or scared?
- 2.6 Did you hear people complain about the waiting?
 - If yes: how did other waiters and employees react?
 - Do you feel it is worth trying to complain?
- 2.7 How did you perceive the employees?
 - Did you interact with any employees directly? How was the interaction?
 - Did you observe any conflicts between asylum seekers and staff?

Gendered Experiences

- 2.8 Do you feel that your experience of waiting at Belliard/Pacheco is different from that of others (e.g., men vs. women, families, etc.)? If so, how?
 - Were there any specific problems you faced that you think are related to gender or family status (e.g., safety, bathroom access, treatment by employees)?
- 2.9 Do you feel that your experience in Belgium overall is different because of your gender and/or family situation?

Part 3 - Waiting in Life

- 3.1 Looking back at your life, do you feel that you've had to wait a lot in different situations?

- Has waiting been a constant or defining part of your life, particularly connected to migration?

3.2 Do you feel that you currently have to wait a lot?

- Are there things in your life that are “on hold” because of waiting (for papers, decisions, stability)?
 - Work or education?
 - Healthcare
 - Family Planning

Part 4 - Coping with Waiting

4.1 How do you personally cope with long waiting times (mentally and physically)?

- What activities do you do while waiting to pass the time?
- Do you use this time ‘productively’ (e.g., talking to others, reading, praying), or does it feel wasted?
- Have you developed any (mental) strategies to deal with the stress or frustration of waiting?

4.2 Do you see a potential in waiting situations for anything good, like acts of solidarity (information sharing etc)?

Part 5 - Conclusion

5.1 How could waiting at Belliard/Pacheco44 be organised better? What would you change?

5.2 Is there anything that you would still like to say about your experience at Belliard/Pacheco44, or about waiting in general?

5.3 Following your experiences until here, would recommend coming to Belgium for asylum to others, friends or strangers?

Appendix B Interview Formats

Format	Advantages	Disadvantages
In-Situ	• ‘In the moment’ experience > no memory bias • Heightened trust and better understanding as for personal contact • Direct access to interviewees • Interviewees can directly refer (point) to aspects of the waiting territory	• Early stage in the asylum process • Busy, potentially stressful environment • Time pressure
Online	• Calm, professional setting allows deeper engagement • Personal conversation increases trust • Clear motivation of interviewee to participate	• Potential memory bias
Written	• Ability to conduct interview in native language • Higher anonymity of interviewee and researcher	• Impossibility of follow-up questions • Possibility of misunderstanding of questions • Altered meanings after translation • Potential memory bias

Appendix C List of Interviews

Site	Format	Pseudonym	Nationality (Language)	Gender	Housing	Stay in BE	Description / Stage
Pacheco	online	Samuel	Eritrea (English)	Male	Insecure Housing	6m	Waiting for 1 st interview (delay)
Pacheco	written	Yonas	Eritrea (Tigrinya)	Male	Secure Housing	1,5m	Registered application, waiting for 1 st interview
Pacheco	written	Malik	African (English)	Male	Unhoused	1,5m	Registered application, but left Belgium upon prolonged homelessness
Belliard	in-situ	Ibrahim	Palestine (Arabic)	Male	Housing	2w	Waiting to register application
Belliard	in-situ	Luis & Carolina	Venezuela (English)	Female & Male	Secure Housing	3y	Waiting to register application
Belliard	online	Didier	Central African Republic (English)	Male	Secure Housing	3y	Registered application, waiting for 1 st interview
Pacheco	written	Onur	Turkiye (English)	Male	Insecure Housing	11m	Waiting for 2 nd interview
Pacheco/ Belliard	in-situ	Reza & Roya	Iran (Farsi & English)	Male & Female	Secure Housing	5m & 6y	Waiting at cube for Reza to give 1 st interview
Pacheco	online	Kinan	Syrian (Arabic)	Male	Unhoused	3m	Waiting for 1 st interview (delayed)
Pacheco	written	Salem	Libya (English)	Male	Secure Housing	4y	Waiting for 2 nd interview
Pacheco	written	Abed	Palestine (English)	Male	Insecure Housing	4m	Waiting for 1 st interview
Belliard	written	Qasim	Yemen (English)	Male		1w	Waiting for 1 st interview

Housing situation is categorised into secure, insecure (centre, stay with friends), and unhoused (no reception, and no regular place to sleep).

Appendix D Codebooks

Theme	Subthemes	Exemplary Quotes	Description
Environmental Precarity	Exposure to Harsh Weather Inadequate Infrastructure Hygiene Conflicts over Space Overcrowding	People sitting on floor in blankets, hugging to keep each other warm, its very visibly cold (below zero degrees) Man asking me for bathroom, but there is none- no option but to pee on street and make people uncomfortable Very dangerous bike lane, people are standing on the bike line, but there is just not much space, and bikes cannot go onto street The men line is very crowded, people want to be as near to the entrance as possible	The tangible discomforts and physical challenges people face while queuing, in consequence of the nature of the physical place and environmental conditions.
Navigating a Fraught Asylum System	Lack of Information Administrative Uncertainty Early Arrival Repeated Waiting Patience Self-Distracted & Timepass Preparation Strategic Planning Complaints and Critique	People asking us so many questions, everyone needs some information, why is there no official person? Doors closed, windows dark - either they already let everyone in and closed early, or they were closed entirely, unclear for people at 7am, already many people, maybe 50-100 Paper given 3 days in a row, each time they spend the whole night Most people standing still, calm talking, looking at phone, eating, drinking cay, smoking, brought blankets; clutching onto folders Palestinian man asks if he can volunteer with us (to increase his asylum chances because the government will be pleased) "If you dont want us just send us back to gaza, don't make us wait and treat us like this, maybe we should just go back"	How applicants engage with dysfunctional procedures at the IO and in the asylum system, marked by a grave lack of information, repeated delays and rejections, and unpredictability.
Order and Authority over Space	Queuing Practices Prioritised Access Closing Doors Fencing Collective Punishment Police as Ordering Power Informal Line Managers Observed from Above Public Perception Homeless Camping	Couple gets sent to priority queue Staff signals that no men will be let in, some staff goes inside, while others hand waiting men appointment papers Door closed, only half of ppl inside, others have to leave again They close again, putting red fence around entry (first time acc to Noor) ? Police telling us to keep the sidewalk free, several times Few men walking up and down line, counting, a bit strange, also standing observing everyone One man from very up observing everyone People try to pass on their bikes or walking on their way to work, visibly uncomfortable; much trash everywhere Layout of the place changed!! Metal net fence, no more ppl sleeping here; Much more unhoused people,, station full again and self build structures	How space is shared, organised and regulated by various actors, reflecting power dynamics and differential access.
Sociality and Solidarity	Encounters of Strangers Mutual Support NGO Support	People chatting, asking each other where they're from Men helps to give food to the waiters The ngo workers are encircled by people complaining and asking for help	The social dynamics between waiters and supportive, encouraging engagement between different actors.
Conflicts	Waiter-Waiter Conflicts Waiter-Authority Conflicts Authority-Researcher C. Physical Fights	Two people discussing about their spot in line She had wrong appointment or something, this is how it started, then it escalated "you cannot do your work here" they fall to the floor, kicking, one pulls a knife	Conflicts between different actors sharing and present in the waiting space.
Vulnerability and Suffering	Diverse Waiting Population Hygiene Insecurity Intimidation Male-Dominated Space Fear of Police Precarity of Homelessness Visible Medical Need Gendered and Family-Based Vulnerability Exclusion of Men Age-based Exclusion Children and Youth	another fancier family with several children, reminder of how many different kinds of people meet in the interstitial space Young man washing his hands and face in corner with our water Man told employees that he was worried about his wife being touched by men due to line being tight; Accompaniment Strange man intensely stares at people Big crowd of only men around the breakfast table 2 police vans, some people look nervously at them Unhoused ppl queuing for 2 nd time for food and drinks Man in ambulance rushed away with blue lights Woman comes asking for toilet, she showed us bag with pads, and looked extremely uncomfortable They're sending many Men away again Man with old father send away from family line 2 children under the blanket, completely covered like a tent	Specific risks, exclusion, and suffering experienced by individuals or groups due to social identity or status.

Affective and Bodily Responses	Tense Atmosphere Disorientation & Confusion Fear and Insecurity Shame& Dehumanisation Desperation Stress Fatigue Anger Humour Boredom Bodily Discomfort	nervous looks, pacing Chaos after doors are closed, police yelling about stupid bike lane most people looking very scared and worried, especially families and children, they try to move away or into corners People complain about very bad treatment by the staff and Belgium, no empathy or humanity Keeping on waiting after doors have been closed Men looking increasingly stressed as they are watching others pass Leaning with eyes closed, despite chaos; yawning One man rips appointment paper apart same man makes joke when he saw solidarity breakfast that "Belgium is good for refugees apparently" Some seem engaged, distracted, some seem extremely bored People standing around, observing, walking up and down, stretching and jumping	How waiters experience the waiting time and place affectively and bodily.
Researcher Experience	Discomfort and Insecurity Outsider Familiarity Appreciation Friendly Encounters	Man walks slowly behind table, gives me creepy look I feel watched, like people watch where I go and what I do Friendly, elderly homeless man who's always here arrives at table and greets volunteers People thanking me/us for interest and documentation Group joking in Arabic with me and Shardoob	The experience of the researcher in the field during observations.

Theme	Subthemes	Exemplary Quotes	Description
Inadequate Spatial Infrastructure	Inaccessibility Unhygienic Conditions Unsafe Spatial Setting Exposure to Harsh Weather	An old lady was not able to descent from the stairs Hygiene conditions are deteriorating rapidly. A biker hit someone from Serve the City On two occasions it was very rainy during the morning shift and there was a lot of chaos	The problems stemming from the physical place and environment of the Immigration Office's waiting area, in which applicants basic needs are routinely not met.
Ineffective Queuing System	Lack of Information Arbitrary Practices and Procedures Wrong Queuing Crowding and Queue Chaos In-Queue Arguments Unlawful Appointment System Overnight Waiting Repeated Waiting Attempts to Improvement	Our team is redirecting people to the vulnerable/family line on a daily basis After the second queue of single men was allowed to enter, IBZ staff let the late arrivals wait again for about 30 minutes Some women were in the line for single men A lot of applicants were cramped at the beginning of the single men line arguments started with people who refused to give up their spot in front. Because of the people yelling at each other, there were many kids crying and even one minor that we met, left the line and did not want to ask asylum anymore Around 300 people received appointments beyond the legal timeframe of 10 working days. Some of the men that had been waiting since yesterday Many applicants who are given later appointments continue to return to Belliard the next mornings we were informed by a policy worker about a new 'experiment' by IBZ where they will try, for a month, to let in a part of applicants around 7-7:15, so that there's less traffic	This theme details the systematic dysfunction and harm caused by disorganised, untransparent, and inconsistently applied queueing and appointment practices at the Immigration Office, and the queueing tactics applicants must develop in reaction.
IBZ Malpractice and Harm	Dismissal of Medical Vulnerability Exclusion of Male Minors Shortened Opening Times Denial of Support and Care Evasion of Responsibility Denial of necessary accompaniment Threat of Collective Punishment Administrative Indifference Hostile and Discriminatory Behaviour Conflict as Institutional Response	IBZ staff did not accept an applicant, who could barely walk with crutches, from the vulnerable line, and sent him to the back; He was on dialysis. However, when he showed up at passage around 9, it was clear that he had not been able to enter at Pacheco; an Eritrean man with a disability card and signs of torture (missing fingers and clearly mentally unwell) did not get in via the vulnerable people's line. A minor was told to go to the men's line, because the IBZ staff member thought he was an adult Door was only open for 10 minutes, between 8:26 and 8:36 Two 18-year-olds who had been sleeping on the street for five days, one with a medical condition, were given appointments for the following day but had no shelter for the night IBZ relies on us to guide applicants to the reception door woman was not allowed to accompany her disabled brother – the man was not physically capable of walking down the stairs alone IBZ staff member put the applicant on the spot while screaming to all applicants waiting in line that they "could not enter for now because this specific man does not want to leave" Applicant in wheelchair could not access building and was sent to one of the doors, but she was not assisted by any staff of IBZ and was barely given indications or instructions. She asked for help, but no one cared The IBZ staff told him (in Arabic) "if you don't like it here, you can go to another country" When an IBZ member said "je m'en fous de la police et je m'en fous de ton avocat" (I don't care about the police and I don't care about your lawyer), the applicant got angry as he felt it was disrespectful. The situation escalated a lot. IBZ staff was not trying to deescalate. The police were called.	Covers harmful or negligent actions by IBZ employees that hamper access to registration and/or contribute to or increase applicants general destitution.
Control, Order and Authority	Physical Policing of Space IBZ Hierarchies Threats and Intimidation Surveillance and Visibility IBZ reliance on police Disproportional Police Presence Police Use of Force Lack of Police Knowledge	Police officers blocked the way to the front of the lines and did not let us pass the fences to reach people waiting in the front The staff said only the ones without shelter were allowed, so I told him about that lady, and he said he was going to ask the supervisor one of the IBZ officers told the families in line multiple times saying that if "he came downstairs and saw that not all of them were requesting asylum, they would all be kicked out". They called the police because the applicant allegedly was recording inside the building and got aggressive. About 12 to 15 police officers came to pick him up On the same day, a police officer reportedly used his baton to force an applicant to leave the area Our coordinator tried to explain to the police that the man is vulnerable, therefore he can enter with the other line, but police responded that there is no line for the vulnerable and they pushed her as well	How security actors (IBZ staff, private guards, police) act and interact to discipline the waiting population in ways that prioritise control and exclusion over care.
Precarity and Homelessness	Encampments in waiting area Increasing unhousing Exclusion from Reception	They started building a barriere at Passage to separate the sleeping place from the entrance People start sleeping at passage. It increases by day Two 18-year-olds who had been sleeping on the street for five days, one with a medical condition, were given appointments for the following day but had no shelter for the night. Although they met	Tracks the presence and adverse conditions of unhoused persons at the Immigration Office, including demolitions of informal camps,

	Vulnerable Families Without Shelter Violent Evictions	Fedasil's vulnerability criteria, Petit Château refused to accommodate them because they had not yet applied for asylum. families without shelter allowed to enter through passage he started to kick people who're sleeping there and telling them to wake up and leave	as well as general reports of unhousing.
Medical Destitution in the Queue	Physical Exhaustion Mental Health and Emotional Distress Queueing despite medical conditions Need for Ambulance	there was a man in the single men's line who could hardly stand and was about to faint. We met him during the exact moment the gate opened, and he asked for an ambulance; Our team met a man with a mental disability/severe autism in the line. He was unsure whether he was meant to be there. He had an annexe but the interview date was crossed. A man accompanying him said that he kept missing the interview because he does not understand what to do; there was an incident with a mother and her autistic child: the child was too afraid to go into the registration centre and went into a crisis where she was hurting herself and others around her At Pacheco, there was an older man who said he had left the hospital early in the morning to ask for asylum On Monday and Friday, our team had to call the ambulance for people (a young woman and a minor boy) who got severely unwell in the queue.	Denotes the apparent ubiquity of physical and psychological conditions among applicants.
Intersectional and Gendered Vulnerability	Gender-Based Vulnerability Queer & LGBTQ Applicants Exclusion of Male Minors Exclusion of Single Men Inappropriate Treatment of Disabled Applicants	a married couple had an appointment in Passage but were kicked out - husband said this was because IBZ requested the woman to remove her hijab and she refused - the husband recorded the whole scene to which they got kicked out A coordinator met five people identifying as part of LGBTQ, they were in the family line early in the morning. They told her that they were very stressed as they heard many comments from the people in the queue We are noticing that male unaccompanied minors who look a bit older are sent to the single men's line by IBZ staff therefore we decided not to redirect them but tell them to identify themselves to the staff as unaccompanied minors. On Wednesday 16/8 (after a long weekend, almost 500 applicants) - every single man received appointments for next week People in wheelchairs still require to be carried over the step by bystanders.	Specific risks, exclusion, and suffering experienced by individuals or groups due to social identity or status.
Civil Society Mediation and Support	VWV Advocacy and Emergency Response Inter-NGO Coordination VWV-IBZ Relations Volunteers at Risk Inhibited NGO work	On Monday, a volunteer saw an old man who was visibly unwell and struggling to stand up. He had to hold onto the barriers for support. The situation was dismissed by IBZ staff. A volunteer asked if the man could sit on a nearby bench but this was also refused, so the volunteer kept assisting the man; We asked IBZ to get him in the first group, so we have enough time to look for a solution for reception for him this afternoon. They agreed.; They followed a man who was washing his face near the Cube, claiming that he peed there, and telling him that that is not allowed. We tried to explain to the police that there are absolutely no public toilets around but they said they must manage it themselves. On Wednesday we met people from three different organizations (Merhaba, Rainbow and the Hub). Merhaba gave us their flyers to refer applicants to them The relation to IBZ continues to be positive; They kicked out the people who were sleeping in front of the door, and the IBZ officer started to remove their stuff and luggage and throw them away. He was shouting and told us to stop filming him Our coordinator tried to explain to the police that the man is vulnerable, therefore he can enter with the other line, but police responded that there is no line for the vulnerable and they pushed her as well On Tuesday, we brought vulnerable people without a place to stay for the night to the reception since they were either not allowed in or they were a few minutes too late. This included a pregnant 22-year-old woman. The lady who was sitting at the reception that day, denied them entry. This is concerning since we have an agreement with IBZ that we can take them in if they are vulnerable people without a shelter for that night.	IBZ reliance on the work of NGOs, especially VWV, to identify, support, and advocate for vulnerable applicants, and the risks and obstructions of NGO work.