

*The Journey of Gard and Theodore,  
A Story of Seeking Asylum in Switzerland in 2023*



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## prologue

I grew up in Reconvilier, a small village in the Bernese Jura mountains, where patriotism has been strongly anchored and its inherent narrow-mindedness is rarely criticised. Next to its few houses with fenced gardens lies a facility housing refugees and asylum seekers, a so-called “integration centre”. Throughout my teenage years, I witnessed a silent clash of two different worlds. The residents of the integration centre were hidden behind an opaque and impenetrable tissue of clichés and prejudices. Only a few trains a day offer them a chance to reach the city as well as the seemingly only opportunity to integrate into a new social, cultural, and economic structure. “They are profiting from the system, they come here to do nothing”, was repeated throughout my daily train journeys, only a few seats away from a group of people speaking a different language.

I remember a frustrated incomprehension echoing in my mind - how do you expect them to participate, if you don't even give them the framework to try?

Today, I live in the anxiety of a crumbling world that threatens to change forever. In the years to come, climate change will drastically increase the number of people without any other choice but to flee their homes. The World Bank estimates there will be over 216 million internal climate migrants by 2050.<sup>1</sup> Yet, until now climate refugees have not been addressed in the Swiss Convention on the Status of Refugees of 1951 and climate is not considered as a valid reason to seek refuge.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the number of asylum seekers in Switzerland are not diminishing. In 2022, it has increased by 64,2% since the previous year, raising the total to 24'511 applications for asylum in Switzerland that year, of which only 4'816 were accepted.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this work is to take a small step into a field that I feel is being kept at a distance. Guided by the words of Gard and Theodore,\* two Burundian asylum seekers whom I had the privilege of meeting, I aimed to understand their journey through the Swiss physical and social structures, established to “process” those who have left behind their entire network of life.

\*To protect the individual's privacy, the names 'Gard' and 'Theodore' will be used in place of the real names.

**journey to the center**  
*navigating the mills of bureaucracy*

“My name is Gard, I’m 28 years old. I come from Burundi, from Bujumbura, in the Bwiza district. There, I worked as a hotel receptionist in a hotel/resto/bar. I did this job for 2 years. I liked it, it opened my mind a lot. Before that, I studied social sciences in the international relations department. Other than that, I’m passionate about singing. I like cooking, I like preparing meat. I like reading, at least when it’s a good title. I like politics. When I was studying social sciences, we had courses of a political nature, and that created a certain passion for politics. I’m single, not married.”

*Gard*

“My name is Theodore, and I come from Burundi. I used to work at the post office there. When I left home, I didn’t have Switzerland in mind. But when I arrived in Zurich, my smuggler told me that my journey ended there. At least for the amount I had been able to pay.”

*Theodore*

“I had to take advantage of the fact that Serbia was granting a «free visa» to Burundians at that time. So, I told myself, since there is already this arrest warrant, I have to get away. So, I left to my friends’ place to prepare my trip. I then flew from Burundi via Ethiopia and Turkey to Serbia, where I spent almost a month. Then I had to leave Serbia, because my Visa was expiring. A group of other Burundians and I had to go to Bosnia, then Croatia, Slovenia, Italy, Milan, and then Zurich, Switzerland.

But we made our way clandestinely, from Serbia to Switzerland. We crossed rivers, we walked for many days and hours. We took trains without documents. We always avoided the police.” G

DALL·E, prompt: "exhausted - late and clandestine train journey, somewhere just before the Swiss border"



“We had paid but we had no papers. My friend told me the police were coming. I said: we are dead. If they catch us here, they will take us back to Slovenia. It was so cold there. The police came in and started to check. But before they got to our seats, they turned around. Me, I experienced a miracle. The Arabs had already fled to the bathroom [Gard laughs]. That’s what they do. They lock themselves in, you knock, you knock, they don’t open. Me, I pretended to be asleep.” G

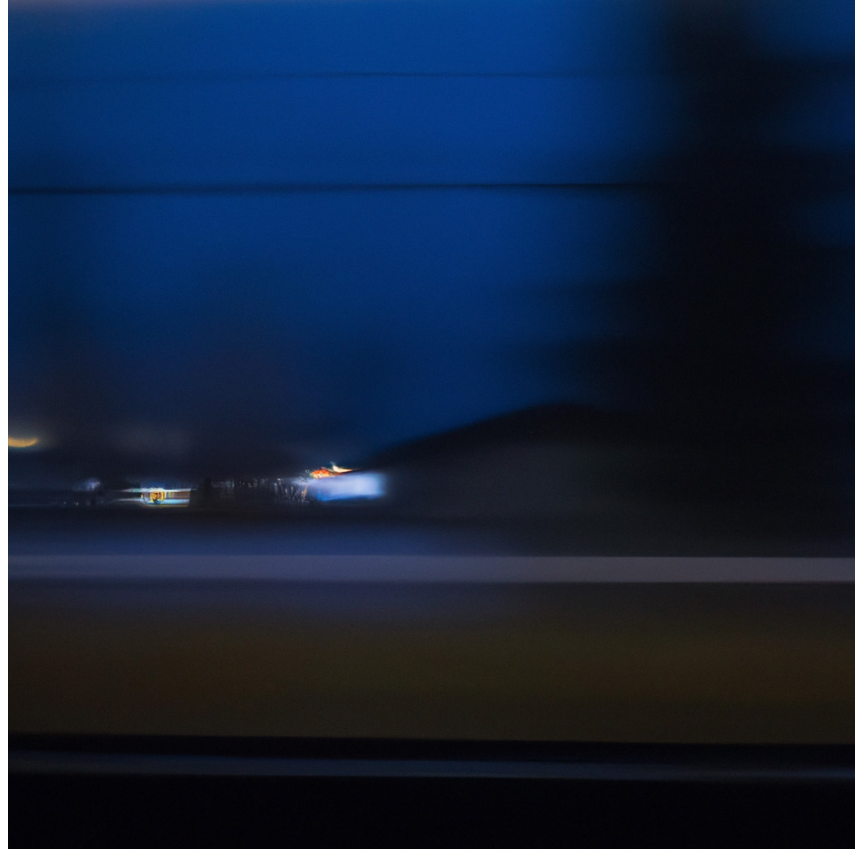
DALL·E, prompt: “exhausted - late and clandestine train journey, somewhere just before the Swiss border”





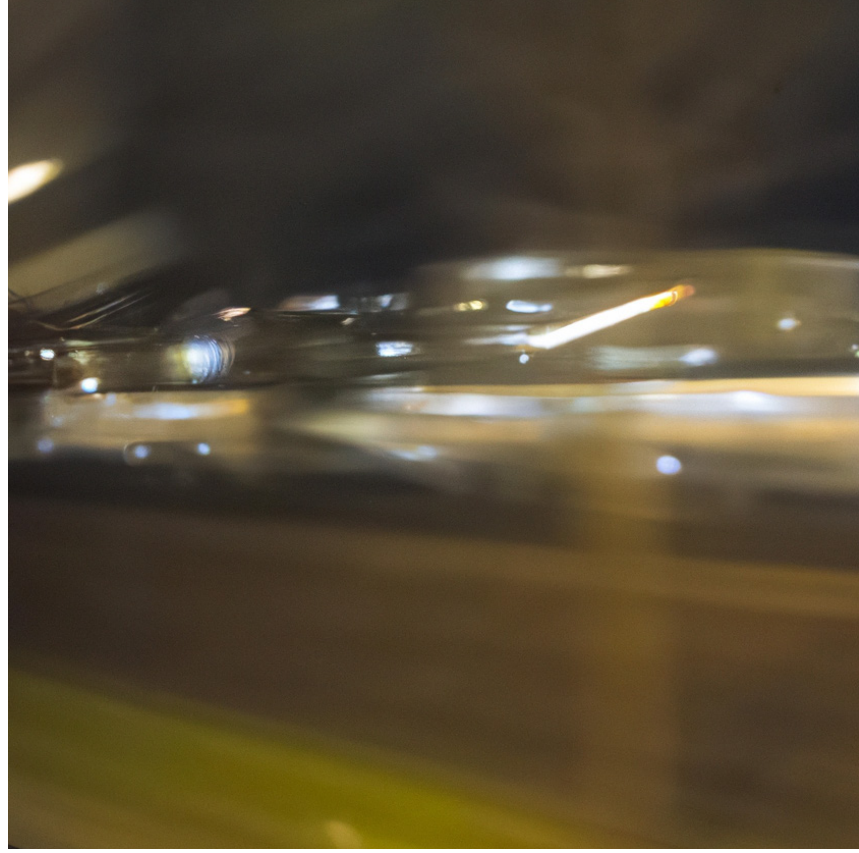


DALL.E, prompt: "exhausted - late and clandestine train journey, at some point we crossed the Swiss border"





DALL.E, prompt: "exhausted - late and clandestine train journey, at some point we crossed the Swiss border"



“I was relieved when I stepped on the ground in Zurich.  
And then, we started to look for the police [Gard laughs].” G



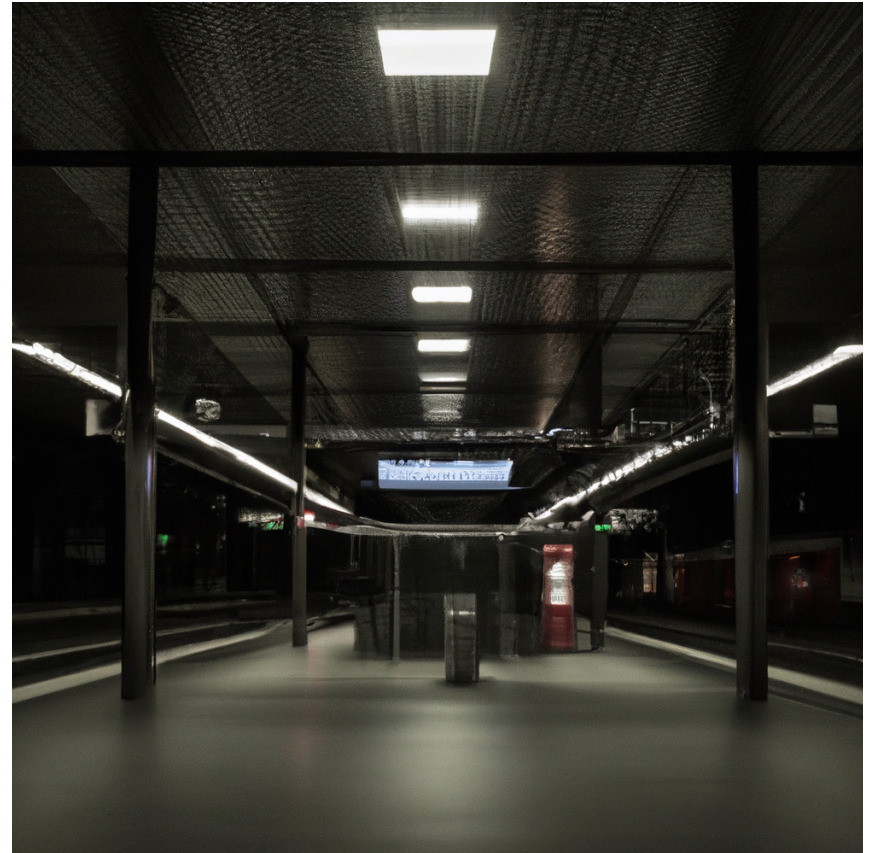
DALL·E, prompt: “lost, errand in the train station of Zürich by night”



DALL·E, prompt: "lost, errand in the train station of Zürich by night"



“We didn’t find the police.” G



DALL·E, prompt: “lost, errand in the train station of Zürich by night”



DALL·E, prompt: "lost, errand in the train station of Zürich by night, with only my small blue backpack"





DALL·E, prompt: "rainy, foggy night in the empty streets of Zürich, walking not knowing what to look for"





DALL·E, prompt: "rainy, foggy night in the empty streets of Zürich, walking not knowing what to look for"





“We walked around Zurich until a man pointed out a place. In the cold, it was raining too. *Bundesasylzentrum Zürich, Duttweilerstrasse 11, 8005 Zürich*. Then we took a cab. For 20CHF, so we could reach the centre.” G

23 November 2022, 2am



DALL·E, prompt: “uncertain - cab trip through Zürich, by night”

“They welcomed us well.” G

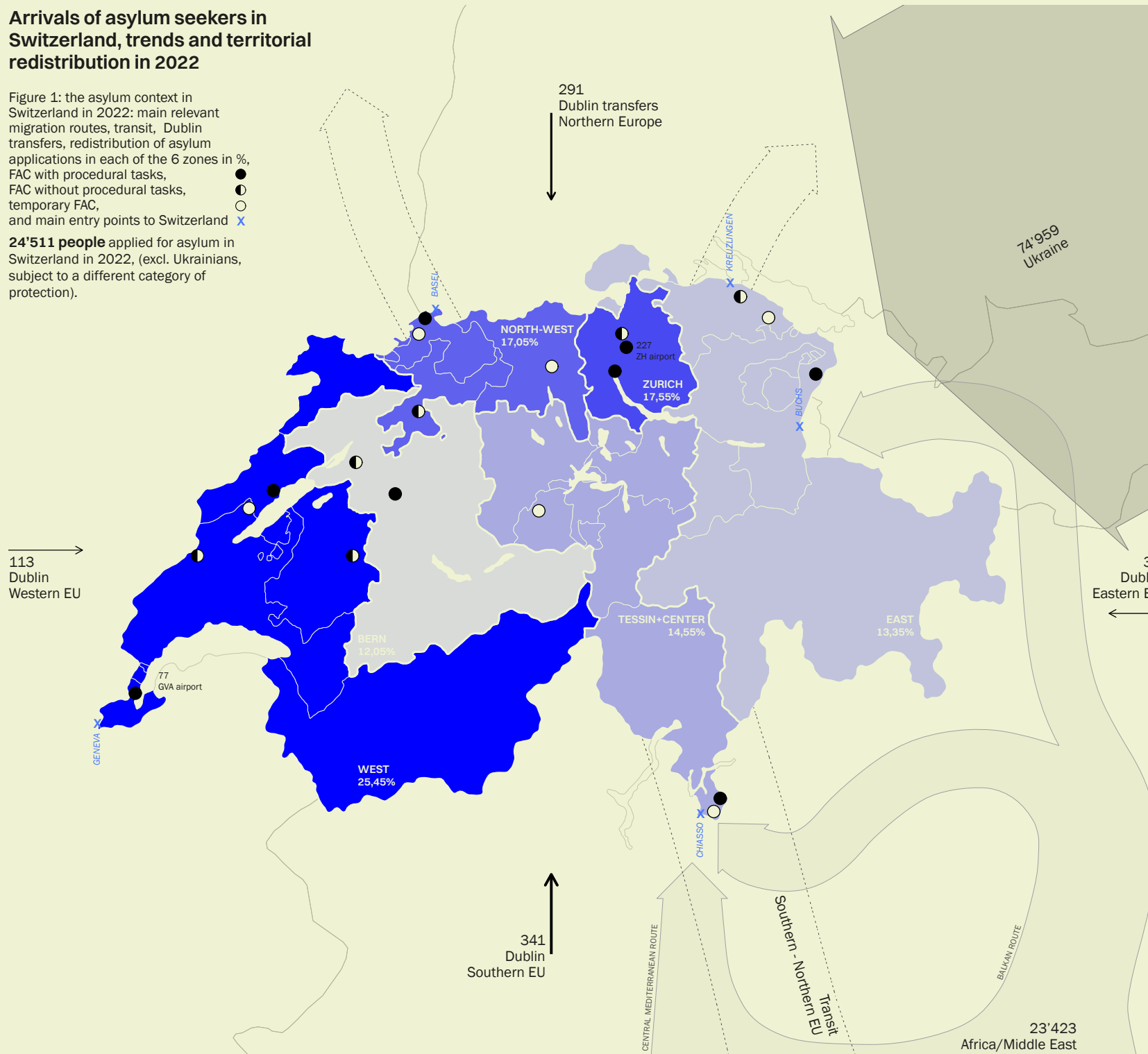
“The centre was saturated.” G

DALL·E, prompt: “night sleeping at a crowded centre for asylum seekers, Switzerland”



# Arrivals of asylum seekers in Switzerland, trends and territorial redistribution in 2022

Figure 1: the asylum context in Switzerland in 2022: main relevant migration routes, transit, Dublin transfers, redistribution of asylum applications in each of the 6 zones in %, FAC with procedural tasks, FAC without procedural tasks, temporary FAC, and main entry points to Switzerland X  
**24'511 people** applied for asylum in Switzerland in 2022, (excl. Ukrainians, subject to a different category of protection).



Switzerland holds considerable importance in migration routes, as a landlocked nation surrounded by EU countries. 2.4% of the overall number of asylum applications submitted across Europe in 2022, were issued in Switzerland. Most people intercepted at the southern and eastern borders do not apply for asylum in Switzerland, their ultimate goal is Germany or France.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the sheer quantity of people in transit allows us to question the thoroughness of the Swiss border control: “Die Schweiz wird zum Schlupfloch für Flüchtlinge nach Deutschland,” headlines the FOCUS newspaper, as nearly 10'000 illegal entries into Germany via the Swiss border are counted in 2022.<sup>4</sup>

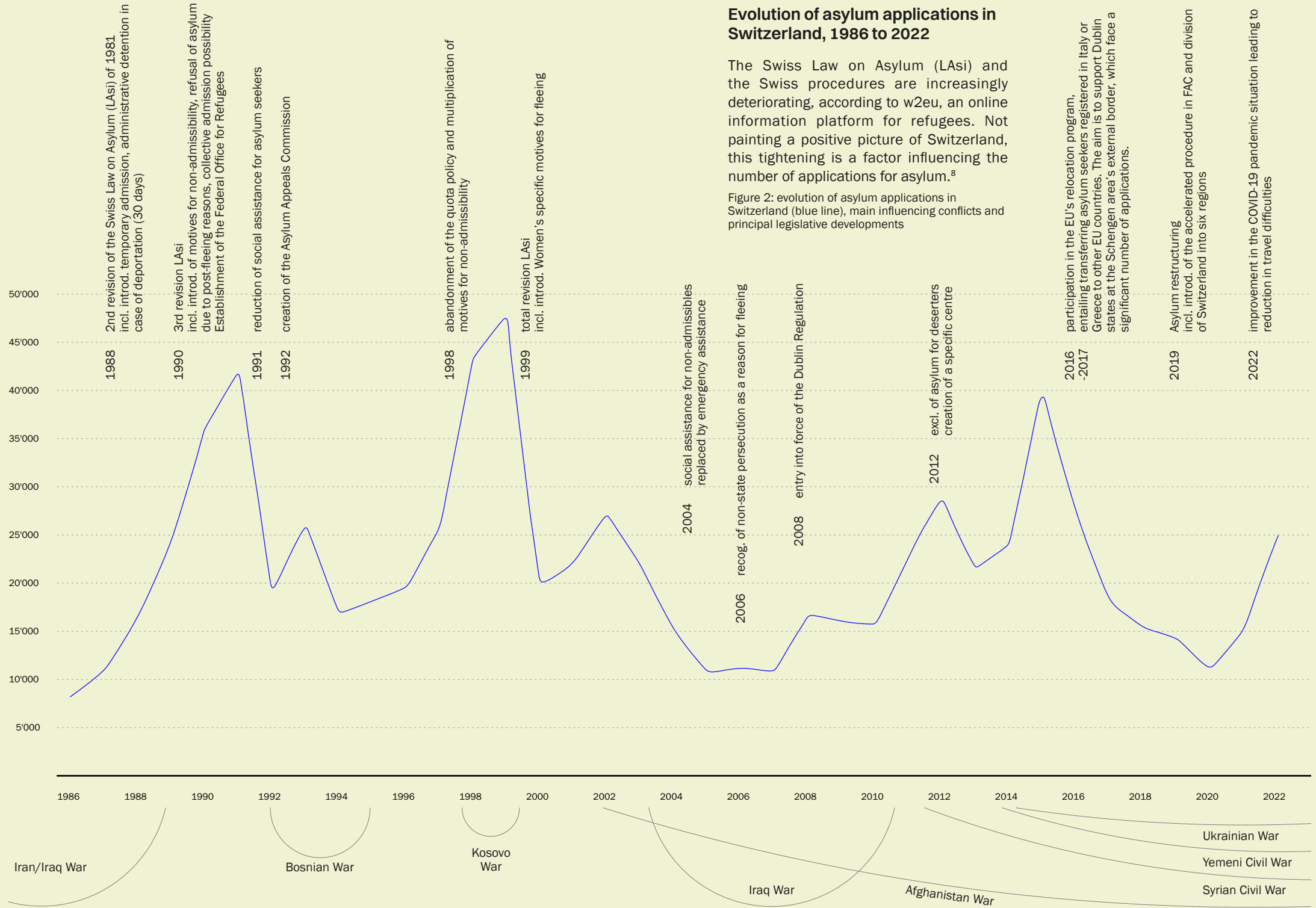
Switzerland, with 2.8 asylum seekers per 1'000 inhabitants, currently serves more as a transit nation rather than a final destination.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, the Swiss procedural system is still heavily overwhelmed, according to Marco Rizzelli, Head of Accommodation and Occupancy at the Swiss Red Cross (SRC) in Bern.<sup>5</sup>

Since March 2019, asylum procedures in Switzerland have been conducted in the Federal asylum centres (FAC) of six distinct regions, through a roughly balanced redistribution of applications based on the regional population. FAC with procedural tasks accommodate applicants and issue decisions, while FAC without procedural tasks house people waiting for deportation. Additionally, there is one specific centre accommodating applicants deemed dangerous to public safety and the proper functioning of other centres.<sup>6</sup> Marco Rizzelli stresses the urgent need for new centres.<sup>5</sup> The nature of the centres is also questioned. Even though modifications have been made to the former facilities, which predominantly prioritised security around their premises in a unilateral manner, the current restrictions on liberties and rigid requirements still raise human rights concerns, according to a 2021 Swiss Refugee Council (SFH) report.<sup>7</sup>

## Evolution of asylum applications in Switzerland, 1986 to 2022

The Swiss Law on Asylum (LAsi) and the Swiss procedures are increasingly deteriorating, according to w2eu, an online information platform for refugees. Not painting a positive picture of Switzerland, this tightening is a factor influencing the number of applications for asylum.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 2: evolution of asylum applications in Switzerland (blue line), main influencing conflicts and principal legislative developments



## Asylum procedure in Switzerland and Dublin Regulation

Once the asylum application has been submitted, the applicant receives an N permit authorizing him or her to remain in Switzerland for the duration of the procedure. Handled by the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM), the procedure begins in a FAC with procedural tasks. During the preparatory phase, the motives for asylum are not raised. Applicants' fingerprints are checked, and they are mostly questioned about their identity, place of origin, route taken, and possible family members in Europe or Switzerland. The goal is to identify prior procedures, family ties, or illegal residence in another member state of the Dublin Regulation.<sup>9</sup>

The Dublin Regulation determines which member state is accountable for examining a specific asylum application. It aims to prevent multiple applications in different countries. The procedure follows reciprocity, requiring Switzerland to admit and process an asylum seeker who happens to be under Swiss responsibility, if they apply in another Dublin member state, and vice versa.<sup>10</sup>

However, the lack of harmonized procedures and protection policies within the Schengen-Dublin area is a significant concern, reports the "Vivre Ensemble" association. In 2019, Afghan asylum seekers had a 6% chance of getting protection in Bulgaria, 24% in Belgium, and 91% in Switzerland.<sup>11</sup> In addition to inadequate asylum evaluation, poor living conditions in some EU countries can lead to human rights violations, including involvement in criminal activities, prostitution, racism, and extreme poverty. Countries like Greece, Italy, Croatia, Hungary, and Bulgaria are often challenged legally for their treatment of asylum seekers. Nevertheless, the SEM frequently rejects asylum requests based on the Dublin Regulation, often without consideration for the conditions in the receiving countries or the well-being of asylum seekers.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 3: member states of the Dublin Regulation III, as depicted in blue

If no other Dublin state is involved, Switzerland initiates a national asylum procedure to evaluate the applicant's right to asylum. Under the Swiss Law on Asylum (LAsi), based on the Geneva Refugee Convention, the status of refugee in Switzerland is defined as such:

"Refugees are persons who are exposed to serious disadvantages in their home country on account of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. This status is therefore only applicable to persons who face current or impending severe disadvantages, experience targeted persecution for the aforementioned reasons, lack protection from their own country, and/or are unable to find refuge in their own country".<sup>13</sup>

Despite the clarity this definition might inspire, numerous obstacles still impede a fair judgment. Although initially promising, the accelerated procedure is one of them. The SFH raised apprehensions about the substantial portion of asylum applications subjected to this process. It soon became evident that a significant volume of asylum requests, which merited thorough assessment, were being processed too hastily, resulting in unsatisfactory outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

### Asylum application in one of the Federal Asylum Centres (FAC)

Preparatory phase, 10 to 21 days

- ▼
- Entry and verification of personal details
- ▼
- Access to independent legal counseling and assignment of a legal representative
- ▼
- Are there indications that another state is responsible?

▼  
yes

▼  
no

#### Dublin procedure

in the FAC  
up to 140 days

- ▼
- Take-back or take-charge request to responsible Dublin state
- ▼

Is the request accepted?

▼ yes

▼ no

→

Decision to not materially examine an application  
within ~3 days after accept.

Possibility to appeal to the Federal Administrative Tribunal  
within 5 working days

Transfer to responsible Dublin state

#### Accelerated procedure

in the FAC  
up to 100 days

- ▼
- Interview concerning the asylum seeker's grounds for claiming asylum (legal representative is present)
- ▼

Are the facts established sufficiently?

▼ yes

▼ no

→

Draft decision  
within ~6 days after intv.

Position of the legal representative  
within 24 hours

Decision on the asylum application  
within ~8 days after intv.

Possibility to appeal to the Federal Administrative Tribunal  
within 7 working days

Expulsion or transfer to a canton and integration measures

#### Extended procedure

in one of the cantons  
up to 1 year

- ▼
- Allocation into the extended procedure
- ▼

Access to legal counseling for decisive steps

Further clarification (e.g. additional interview, medical examination)

Decision on the asylum application  
within ~2 months

Possibility to appeal to the Federal Administrative Court  
within 30 days

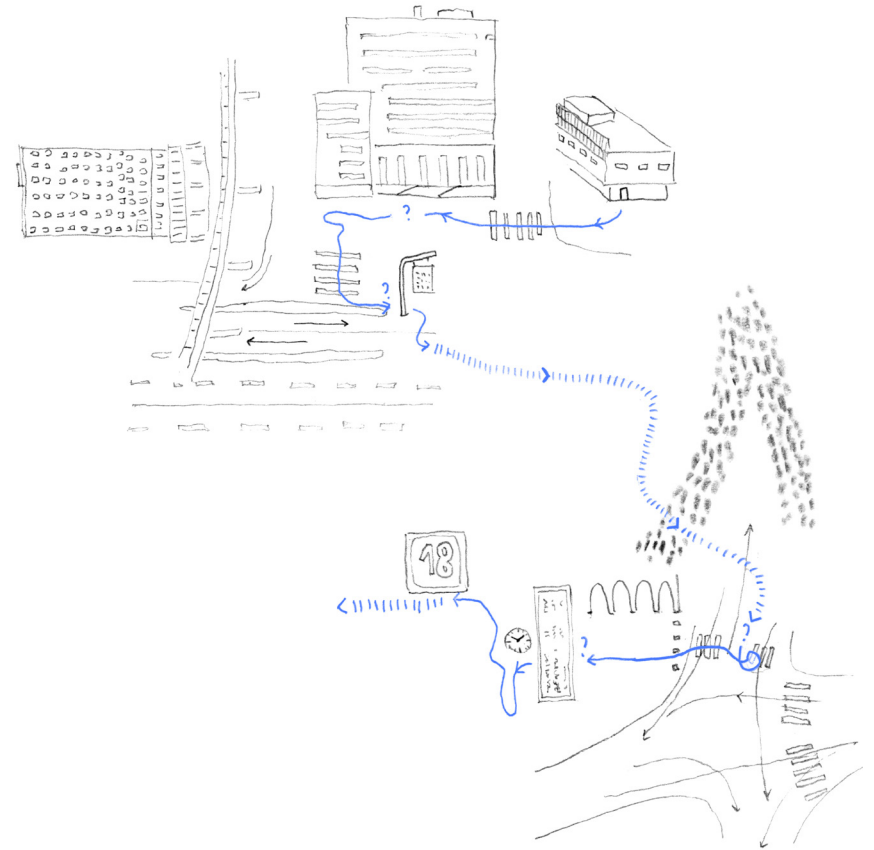
Expulsion or transfer to a canton and integration measures

Figure 4: Swiss Asylum procedure diagram with deadlines and appeal periods

“They checked us in. We slept for 2 or 3 hours on cots, on the floor of a large hall. Then in the morning we were woken up, given tea, breakfast, and an address: *Bundesasylzentrum Bern, Morillonstrasse 75, 3007 Bern.*”

We were given a ticket and then told to leave. We had luck, some passers-by were friendly enough to point us in the direction of the train station. We didn't have internet connection or even a mobile phone. What are you expected to do.” T

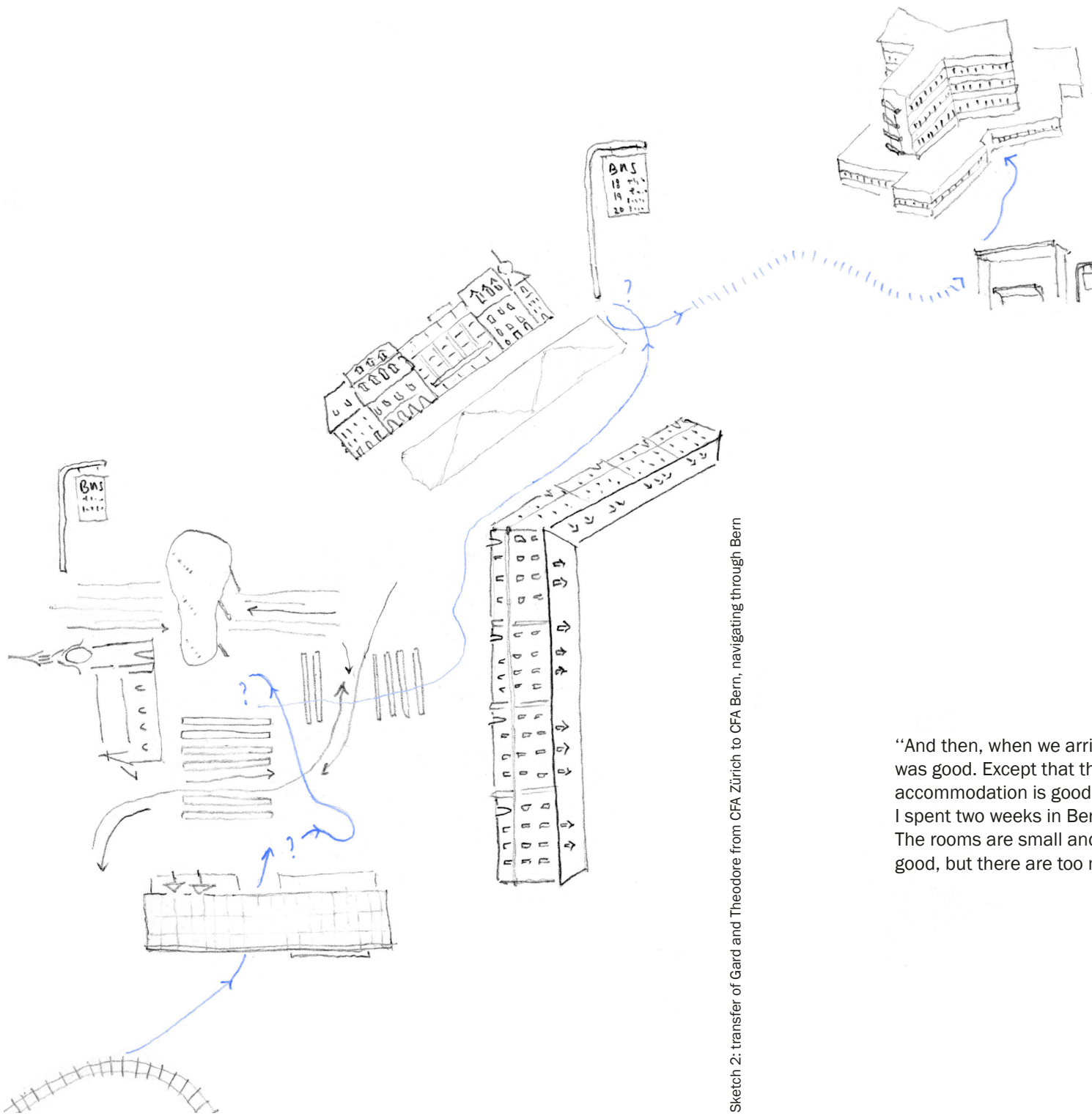
Sketch 1: transfer of Gard and Theodore from FAC Zürich to FAC Bern, navigating Zürich ÖV



DALL·E, prompt: "train journey, I'm not sure where between Zürich and Bern"





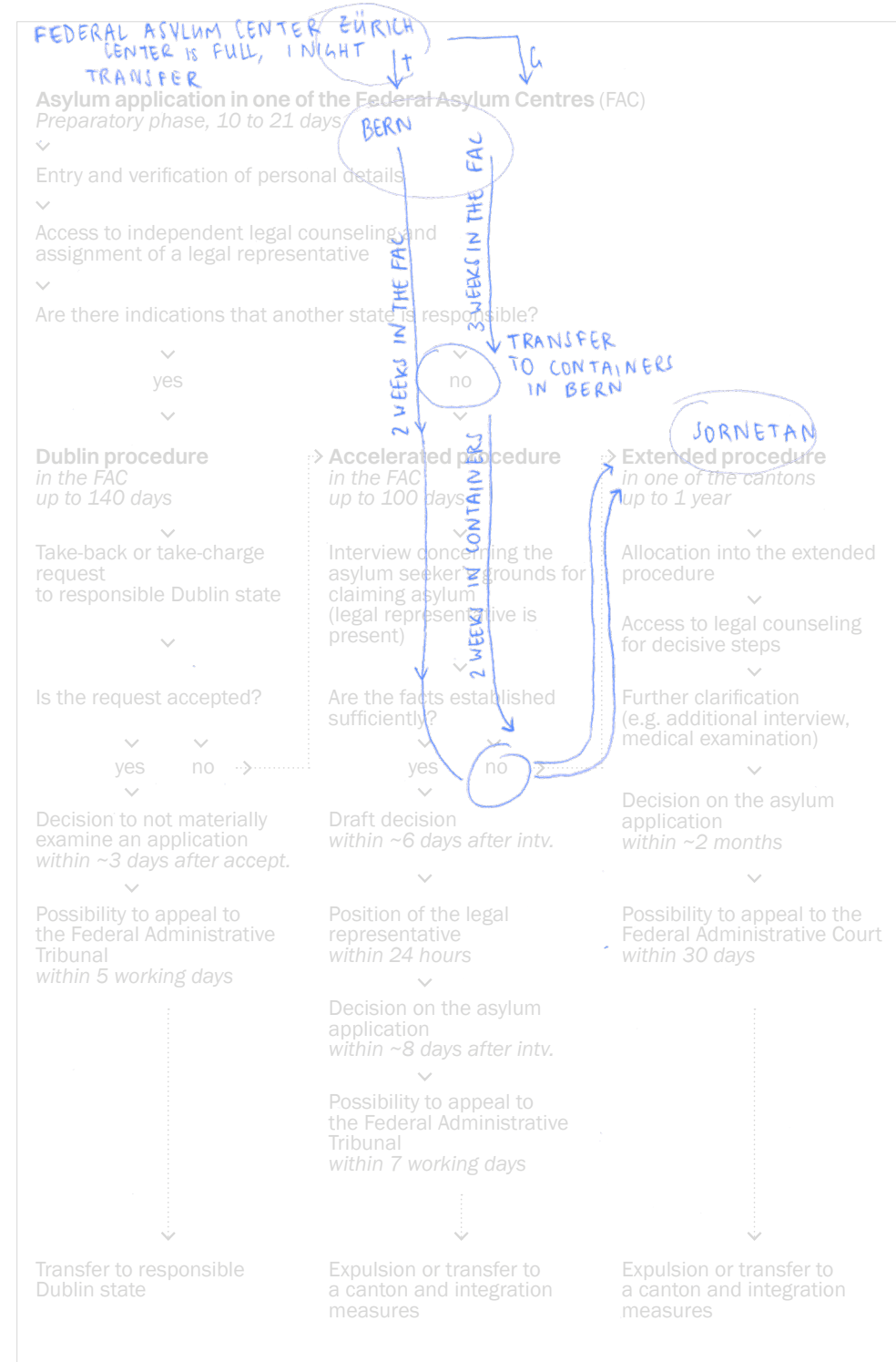


Sketch 2: transfer of Gard and Theodore from CFA Zürich to CFA Bern, navigating through Bern

“And then, when we arrived at the centre in Bern, the welcome there was good. Except that the centre was also saturated. Otherwise, the accommodation is good. It’s just too crowded. We ate well, we slept well. I spent two weeks in Bern. There are several dormitories with bunk beds. The rooms are small and crowded. But we dealt with it. The infrastructure is good, but there are too many people.” T

“I met Gard in Zurich. We travelled together to Bern. I was transferred to Sornetan after two weeks. He was transferred to another place in Bern. It wasn't good there; they were sleeping in containers. That's why he was also transferred to Sornetan later on. This container thing, it is not good. It's said that there, the toilets were outside.” T

Comparison of Figure 4, on Swiss Asylum procedure with Gard and Theodore's progress through the process



“Eventually, I was transferred from the containers place in Bern to Sornetan. I thought maybe, with a bit of luck, I’d end up in the french speaking region. I was given a ticket and a “map”. Here, it’s “maps” only [Gard laughs]. As I didn’t know the bus schedule, I arrived in Reconvilier or Tavannes, I don’t remember, and had to spend a lot of time there, in the cold with no warm clothes. When I got to Sornetan, I fell ill.

I had planned everything when I left Burundi, but I lost my clothes and ended up with just my little blue backpack. From Serbia to Slovenia, we had to throw the rest away because it was too heavy, too hard to carry. Sometimes the police arrived, you’d hide, you can’t run with the bag, so you leave it. You no longer have a choice, or at least you don’t try.” G

DALL·E, prompt: “waiting for the bus in the cold, at a train station in Bernese Jura”

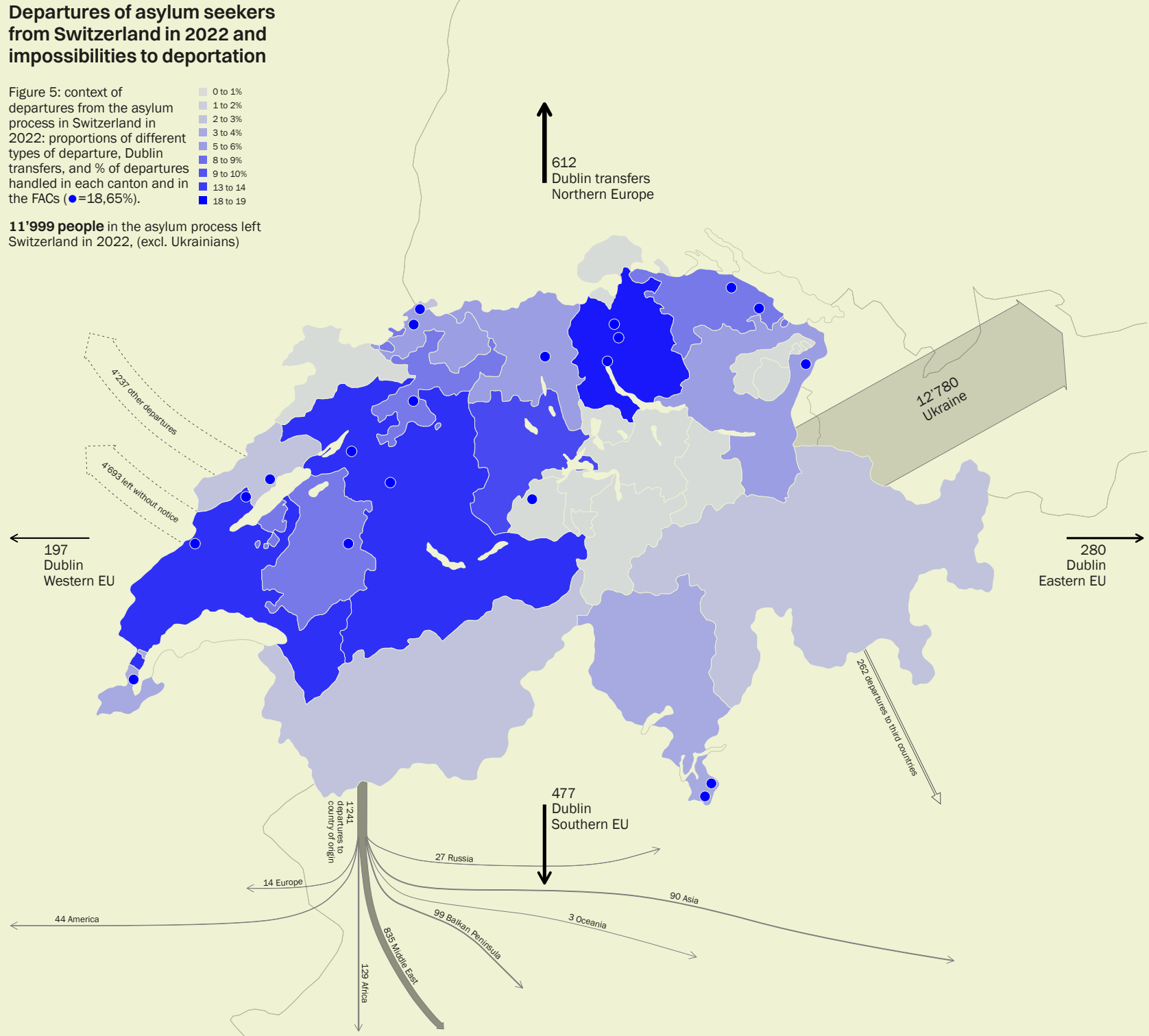


# Departures of asylum seekers from Switzerland in 2022 and impossibilities to deportation

Figure 5: context of departures from the asylum process in Switzerland in 2022: proportions of different types of departure, Dublin transfers, and % of departures handled in each canton and in the FACs (●=18,65%).

- 0 to 1%
- 1 to 2%
- 2 to 3%
- 3 to 4%
- 5 to 6%
- 8 to 9%
- 9 to 10%
- 13 to 14
- 18 to 19

**11'999 people** in the asylum process left Switzerland in 2022, (excl. Ukrainians)



Switzerland's geographical position leads to significant asylum seekers being retransferred to other Dublin states. Since the introduction of the Dublin Regulation, Switzerland has handed over considerably more people (35'561) than it has had to take back itself (10'196).<sup>3</sup> Marco Rizzelli addresses the case of Burundian asylum seekers, whom he claims are mostly being retransferred. As they mainly enter Europe through a one-month Serbian visa, they are often caught along the Balkan route once their visa has expired.<sup>5</sup> Subsequent asylum requests in Switzerland are often rejected due to non-admissibility and sent back to what exile aid organizations constantly denounce as Europe's "asylum lottery".<sup>11</sup>

The non-admissibility decision may also be taken if the person has previously stayed in a third or a safe third country, if their country of origin is considered safe, or if the request is considered manifestly unfounded. Persons, who have received an enforceable expulsion decision after their asylum application is denied due to non-admissibility or through the regular process and lack any other grounds for an extended stay, are required to leave Switzerland.<sup>15</sup>

In 2022, departures from Switzerland have risen by 71,3% over the previous year.<sup>3</sup> Aided by federal assistance, the cantons are entrusted with carrying out the deportations. Individuals pending in the deportation execution process are considered to be residing irregularly if they fail to comply with departure obligations. They possess a departure deadline attestation, called a "white paper", endorsed periodically by cantonal migration authorities. Sometimes, especially due to travel document obstacles, identification challenges, or uncooperative home countries, deportation is unfeasible, leading to years of limbo in the same status.<sup>16</sup> Stuck in return centres, these people are excluded from social assistance and are not allowed to work. On request, they can benefit from emergency aid, which rarely consists of cash but is delivered in

the form of vouchers or in kind, such as trays of pre-prepared food.<sup>17</sup> According to Marco Rizzelli, numerous individuals facing this scenario rapidly fall into depression or addiction.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, it is crucial to stress that the denial of an asylum application doesn't negate the person's potential need for protection. Frequently, hasty judgments occur under the authority of officials whose power of assessment is significant. Appeals are time-sensitive, particularly in accelerated and Dublin cases (7 and 5 days). Many are granted protection or even refugee status, following a review, after presenting new evidence, or through a new asylum application, which is possible after 5 years.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, if legal reasons hinder the execution of the deportation, non-admissibility or negative decisions can be combined with provisional admission. Indeed, a provisional admission, or an F permit, mainly applies to "individuals not recognized as having individual persecution reasons but whose deportation would lead to concrete danger."<sup>16</sup> This situation would contravene

Switzerland's international non-refoulement obligations, a cornerstone of the Geneva Convention. This principle prohibits the extradition, expulsion, or return of a person to a country where they would be at risk of torture, inhumane or degrading treatment, and/or where their life or freedom would be threatened.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, provisional admission for refugees can be allocated. The provisional admission for refugees, or F permit for refugees, results from motives for exclusion from refugee status in the Swiss asylum law, notably desertion or refusal to serve, as well as subjective reasons following fleeing. The first signifies that refusing to serve or desertion leading to harm excludes individuals from refugee status. The second implies that unless the reasons were evident prior to departure or stem naturally from previous convictions, individuals are ineligible for refugee status if their claims rely on post-departure behaviour.<sup>16</sup> In conclusion, the F permit for refugees applies to individuals with recognized individual refugee status but denied asylum, frequently due to post-fleeing reasons.

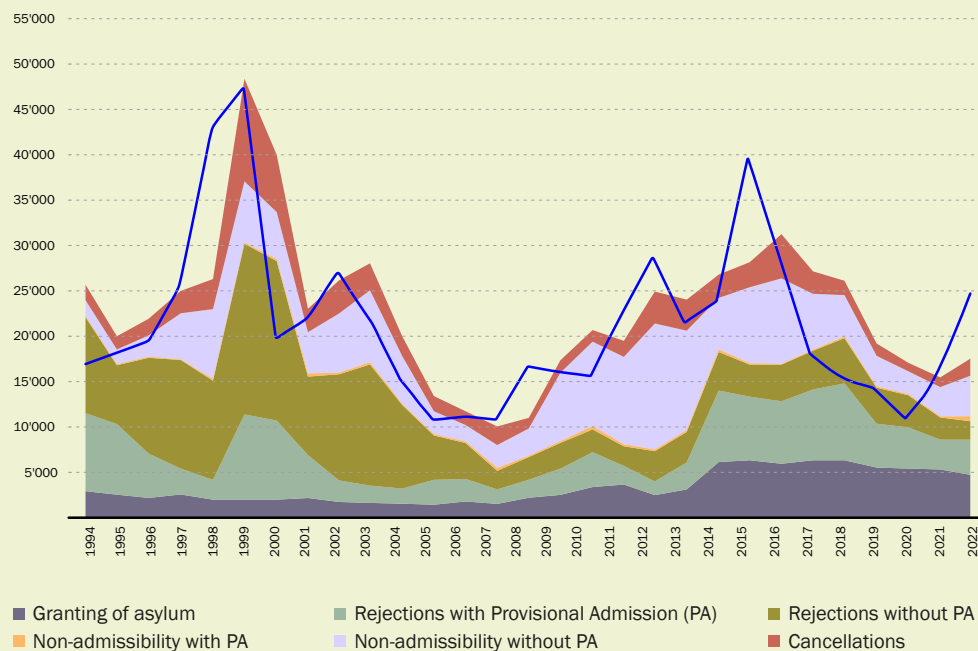


Figure 6: proportions of different decisions made by the SEM per year, alongside the evolution of asylum applications in Switzerland (blue line)

### Swiss asylum sector and distribution of responsibilities among cantons

It is commonly argued that asylum seekers are taking advantage of the system, based on the percentage of positive asylum decisions provided by the SEM. Yet, this figure does not cover all cases where Switzerland acknowledges a protection need and is misleadingly calculated. Provisional admissions and non-admissibility decisions are categorized as negatives. Nevertheless, provisional admissions often involve people fleeing war or violence, recognized by Switzerland as needing protection, and non-admissibility decisions are only formal and do not necessarily address protection needs. Therefore, considering provisional admissions as protection decisions and excluding non-admissibility decisions from the total, recognition of protection needs far surpasses the asylum approval count.<sup>15</sup>

The widespread presence of the asylum topic in media and politics, coupled with a lack of comprehension, sometimes creates the misconception that Switzerland is inundated with refugees. Yet, the total amount of people in Switzerland's asylum sector, including asylum applicants, recognized refugees, and those in various stages, amounts to just 1.6% of the country's population.<sup>18</sup>

The diagram on the top right indicates the small proportion that individuals within the asylum process represent in each canton. Indeed, as the central coordinating body, the Confederation distributes the people processed by the FAC throughout the cantons, while the FACs handle registrations, preparatory phases of the asylum procedure, ongoing Dublin and accelerated procedures, and decisions in general. Apart from individuals who have received non-admissibility or negative decisions coupled with deportation orders, the Confederation also allocates to the Cantons the individuals who have been

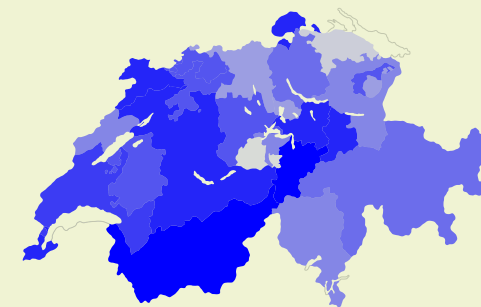


Figure 7: number of individuals in the asylum process in Switzerland by canton per 1000 inhabitants, as of December 31, 2022

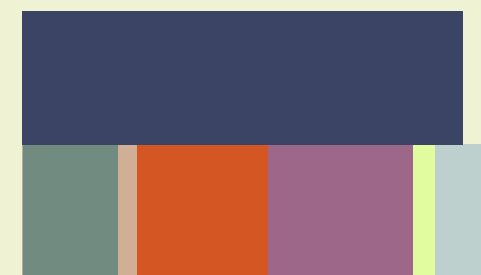
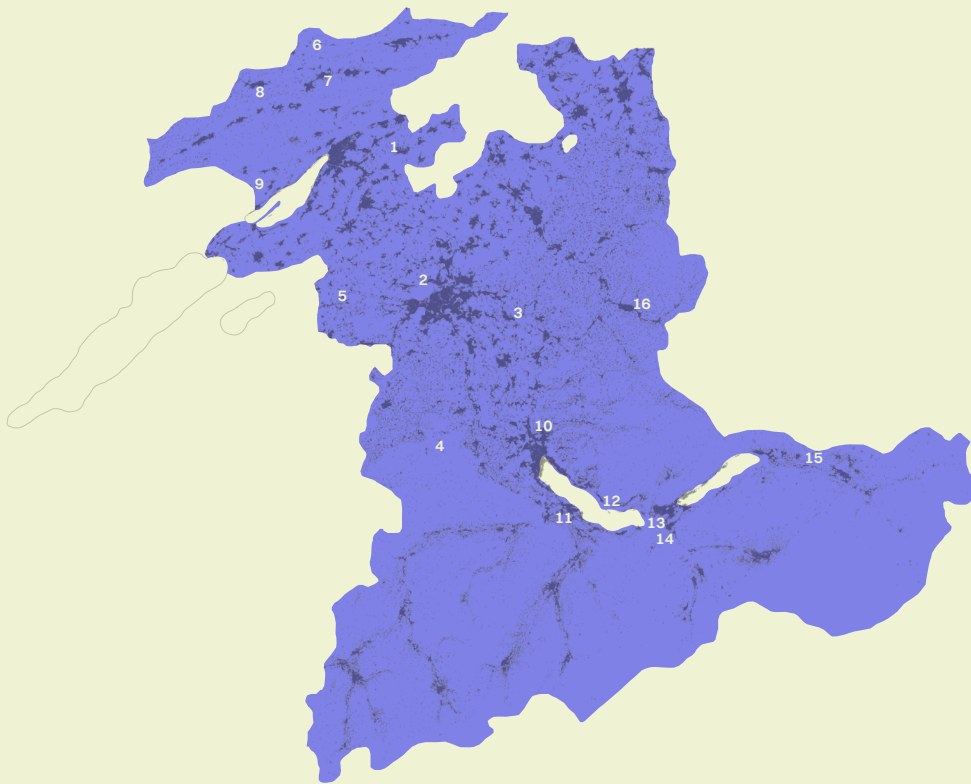


Figure 8: people in the asylum sector in Switzerland, per status, as of December 31, 2022

assigned provisional admissions, as well as people undergoing extended procedures or directed towards integration measures after their asylum applications are approved. Subsequently, the cantons are responsible for providing accommodation in either return or integration centres, as well as the appropriate support. People entitled to provisional protection, or S permits, are also assigned to the cantons, but fall into a different category and are not mixed with the others; they are directed to other types of facilities.



## Integration Centres in Bern

The management of the centres varies significantly between different cantons. In the canton of Bern, the return centres are managed by the Organization for Refugee Services (ORS), mandated by the canton. Whereas the Swiss Red Cross (SRC) is mandated to manage centres known as integration centres.

In addition to housing asylum seekers, individuals with provisional admission, and those granted refugee status, the SRC supports them through social assistance and integration efforts. On-site, SRC staff address questions, promote language integration, and assist those whose status allows them to seek employment and housing.

As explained in an interview with Marco Rizzelli, the SEM decides on the “objects,” or structures intended for use as integration centres.<sup>5</sup> The SEM takes charge of furnishing

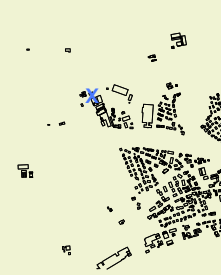
the centres. According to Alexandre Dien, manager of the Sornetan centre from the SRC, the quality of life ultimately always depends on the number of beds. He adds, “Generally, the canton fills up to capacity first and then reflects afterwards.”<sup>19</sup>

There are 16 integration centres in canton Bern. These are typically repurposed buildings that were at risk of falling into disuse due to a lack of potential buyers. The lack of interest often stems from a poor location. All 16 centres in Bern are situated within rural landscapes, with certain centres being notably distant from urban areas, and in some cases, even from the nearest village. This appears far from the urban areas, neighbourhoods, or dynamic hubs that serve as stepping stones for newcomers to a country towards settlement and integration, as described by Doug Saunders in his book “Arrival City.”<sup>20</sup> Whether the rural context is conducive to the process of integration, is a question we must raise.

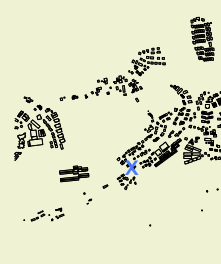
Figure 9: map of the 16 different Integration Centres in Bern, as of December 31, 2022



1 Büren, Büren an der Aare



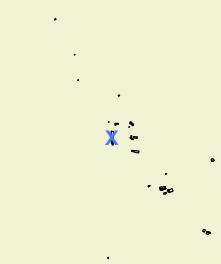
2 Kirchlindach, Herrenschwanden



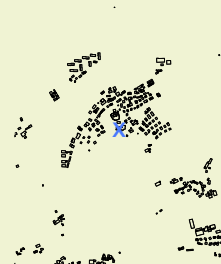
3 Worb, Enggistein



4 Riggisberg, Gurnigelbad



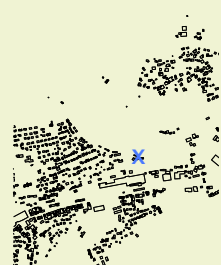
5 Mühleberg



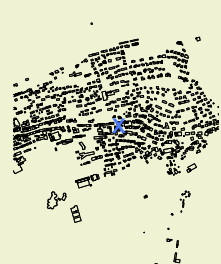
6 Sornetan



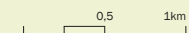
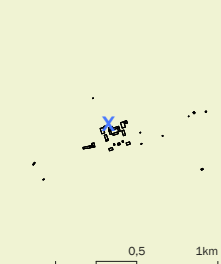
7 Reconvilier



8 Tramelan



9 Prêles



“I now have an N permit, which expires this summer. I don’t know if they’ll renew it, but I’d prefer them to change it, maybe to F or B. But first I know I have to go through the big interview. I don’t know when that will be.

I’m waiting for the day when I’ll get an appointment.” G

“I try to keep myself distracted, but I spend a lot of time in bed, watching preaching.” T

## **journey to the interview**

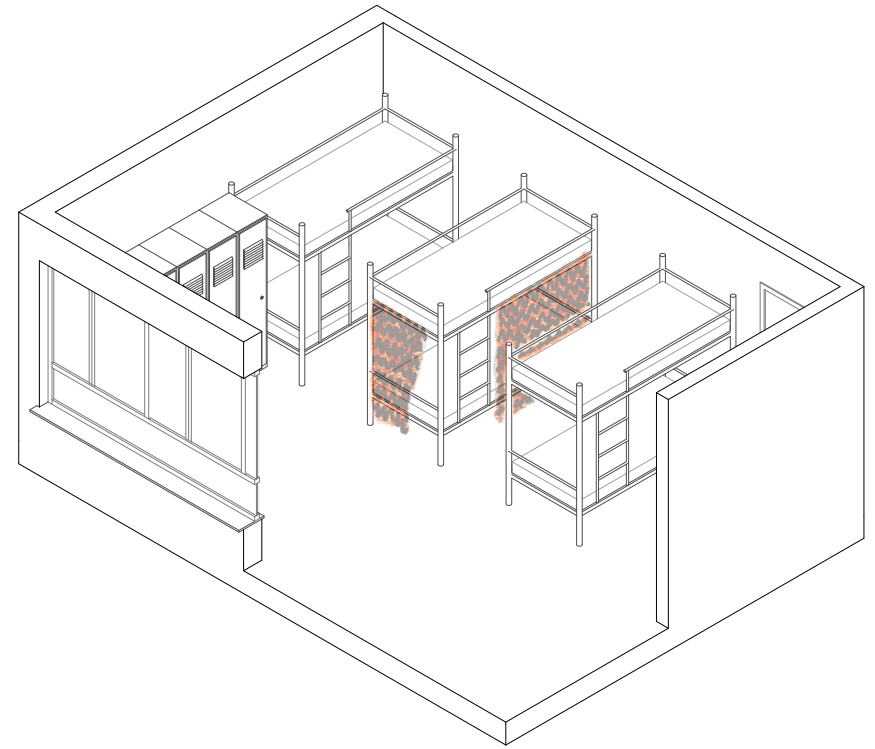
*living in uncertainty*

DALL·E, prompt: "bunk bed, Swiss centre for asylum seekers - I was lucky to get the bottom bed, I could hang a colourful fabric for a bit of privacy"



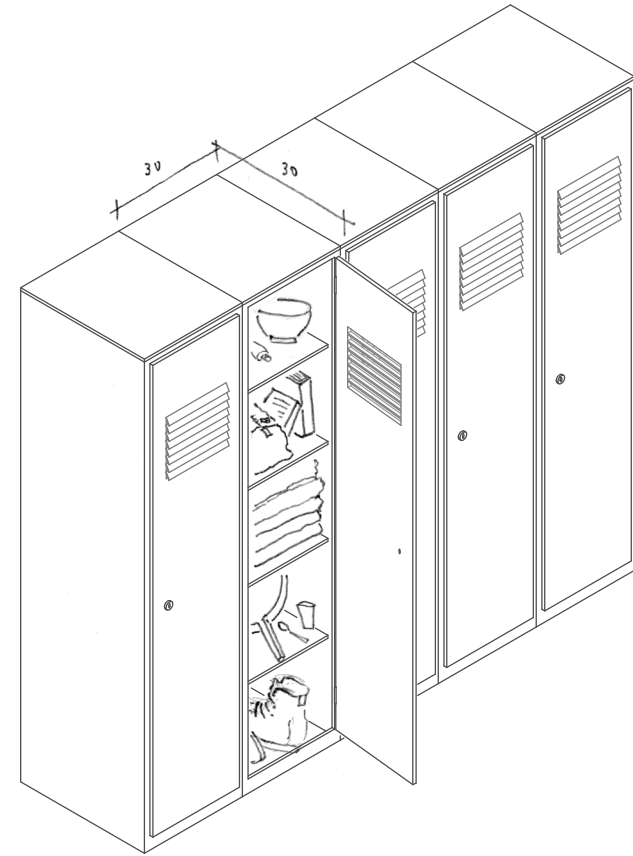


“I am in a room of 6, Gard is in a room of 14. People often chat while sitting on the floor in the room. There’s no living room here. Neither of us have any privacy.” T

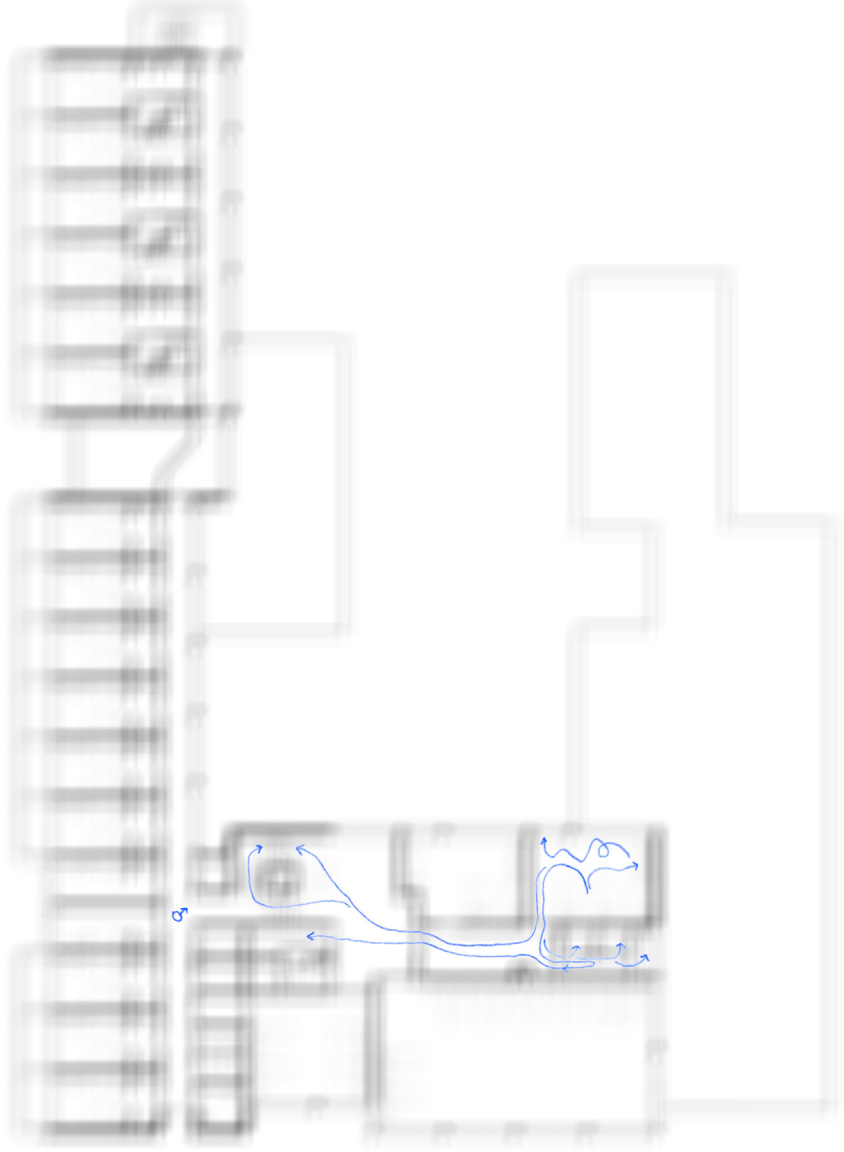


Plan 1: Axonometry drawing of Theodore's room in the Integration Centre of Sornetan

“I don’t have much stuff. But even for this little, we don’t really have room. Especially since if you want some kitchen utensils, you have to put them in the bedroom closet. The kitchen cupboard is too small.” T



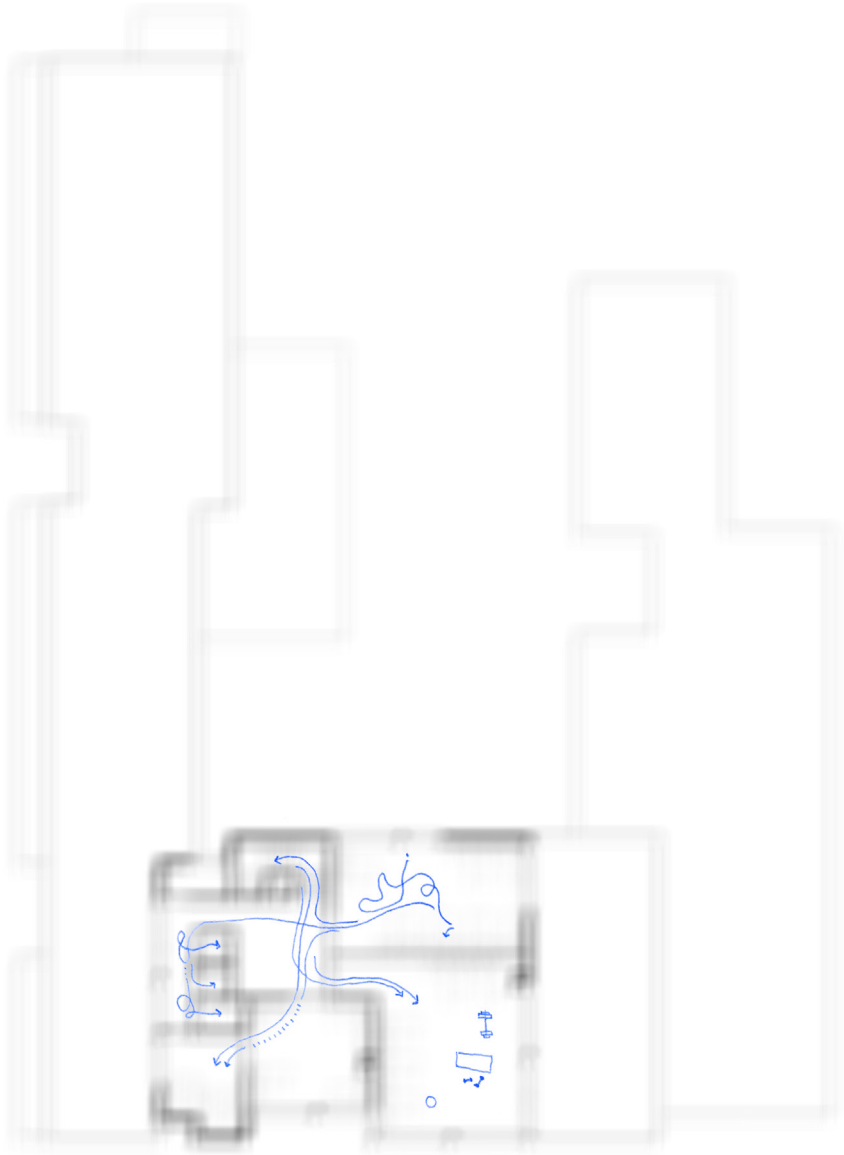
Plan 2: Axonometry drawing of Theodore's bedroom closet and belongings



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Plan 3: 1st floor plan of the Sornetan Integration Centre

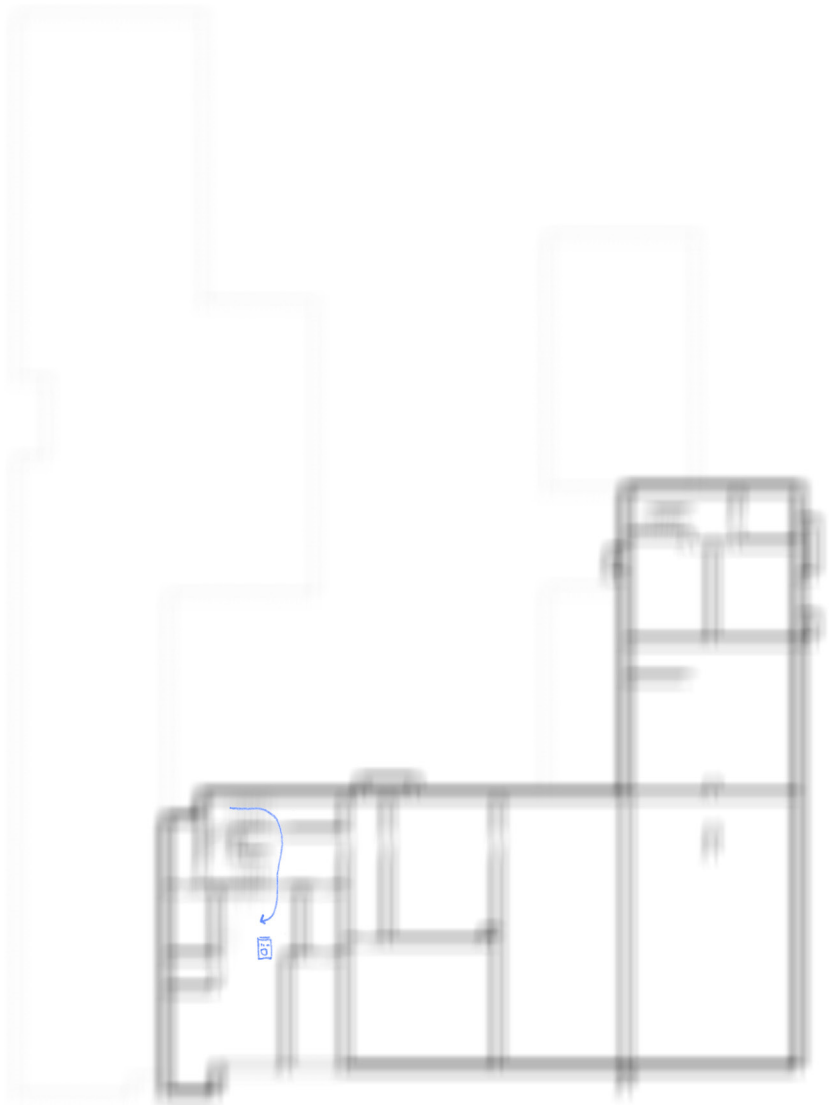
“Another thing is the toilets, the showers, it’s all too small. It’s not enough. You always find that it’s jammed, you have to wait. It would be nice to have a toilet in the rooms. Now we have to go downstairs. Families are a bit better accommodated.” 7



*blurred for confidentiality reasons*

Plan 4: 2nd floor plan of the Somerset Integration Centre

“There’s an empty bed in my dormitory, and 13 are occupied. It’s a lot. And we may soon be even more. Above me is an empty bed. I tell myself, I hope no one comes here. In addition, now that the centre is a little less saturated, they [SRC staff] have provided us with some sports equipment, and that is really good.” G

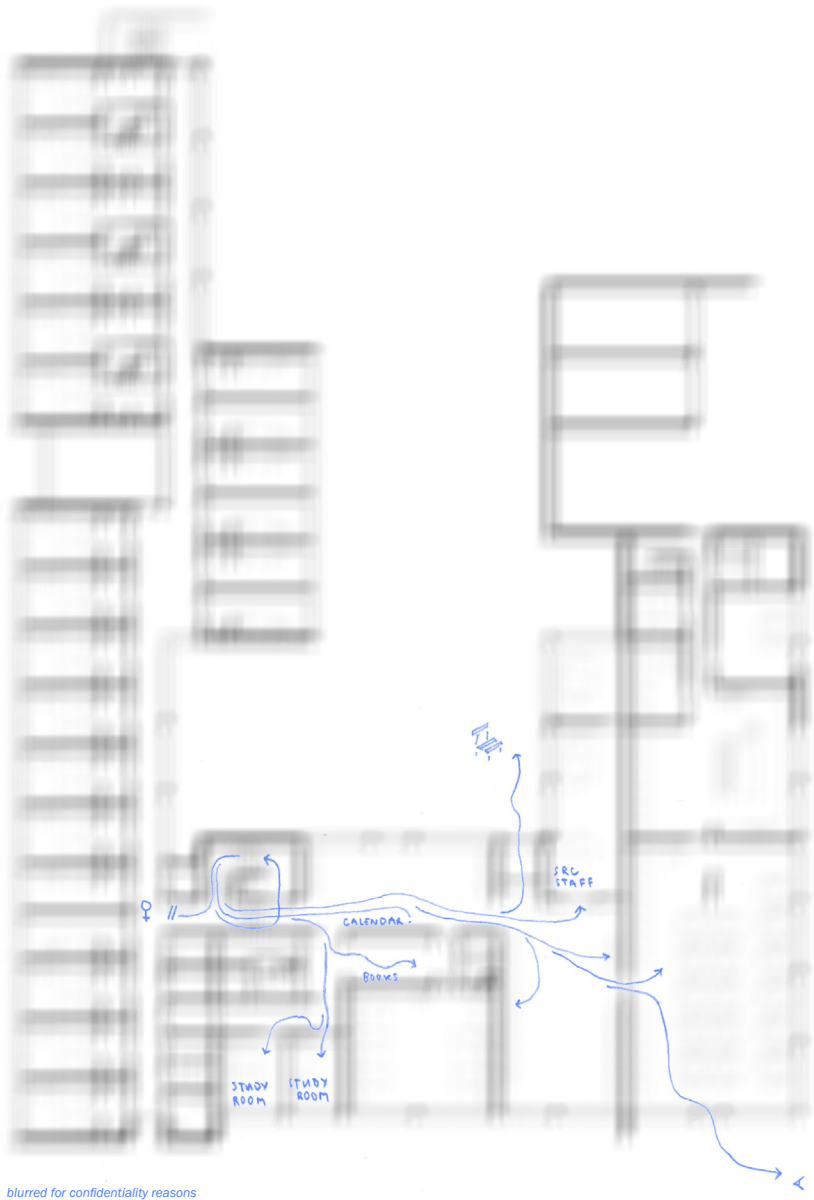


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Plan 5: basement floor plan of the Sornetan Integration Centre

“There aren’t enough washing machines either.” T

“But what I like at the centre is that we have to clean, and we take turns, and that’s good. Sometimes you don’t do anything, but if you’re cleaning in the morning and evening, it’s a pastime, it takes your mind off things.” G



blurred for confidentiality reasons

Plan 6: ground floor plan of the Somerset Integration Centre

“I mostly stay in my room. If I’m fed up, I go downstairs and sit with others. We play “rudo”. That’s what we do to entertain ourselves. But the dining room is too small. We need more space in general. And space to sit.” T

DALL.E, prompt: "crowded dining room at a Swiss centre for asylum seekers, especially because it's the only space to sit and chat"



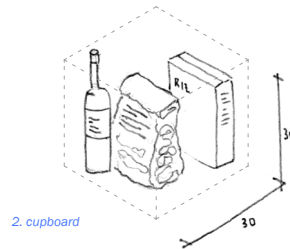
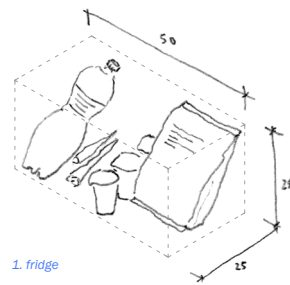
“Also the kitchen, it’s too small. Sometimes, you have to wait a long time before you can finally cook yourself a meal.” T

DALL·E, prompt: “blend of smells, crowded kitchen at a Swiss centre for asylum seekers - everybody cook their own stuff”

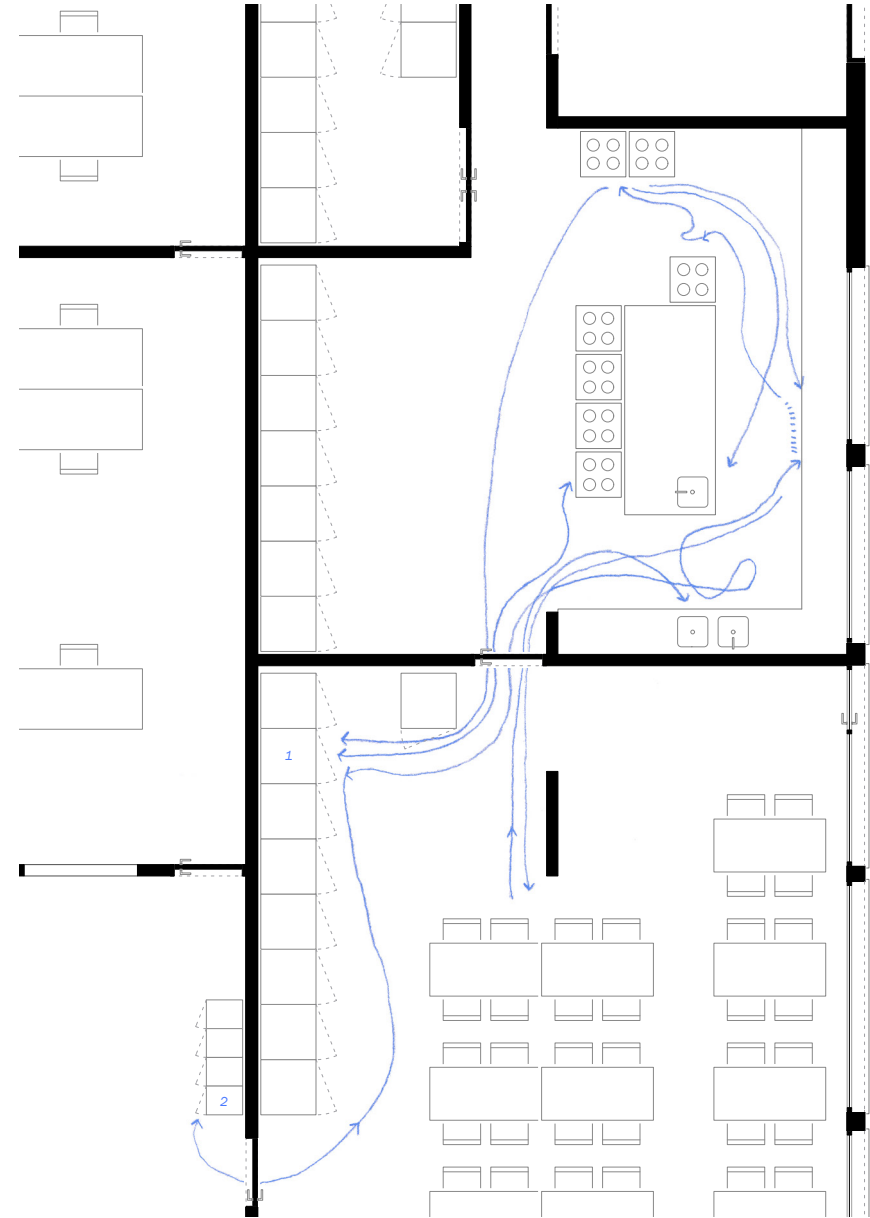




“I prefer to cook for myself, because we have different tastes and food choices. It’s also easier to manage your own things, as our storage space is very limited. Now that there’s Ramadan, the kitchen is a little freer. But after Ramadan, it’s going to get really hectic.” G



Plan 7 and 8: kitchen plan of the Sornetan Integration Centre and Axonometries of a kitchen cupboard and fridge compartment



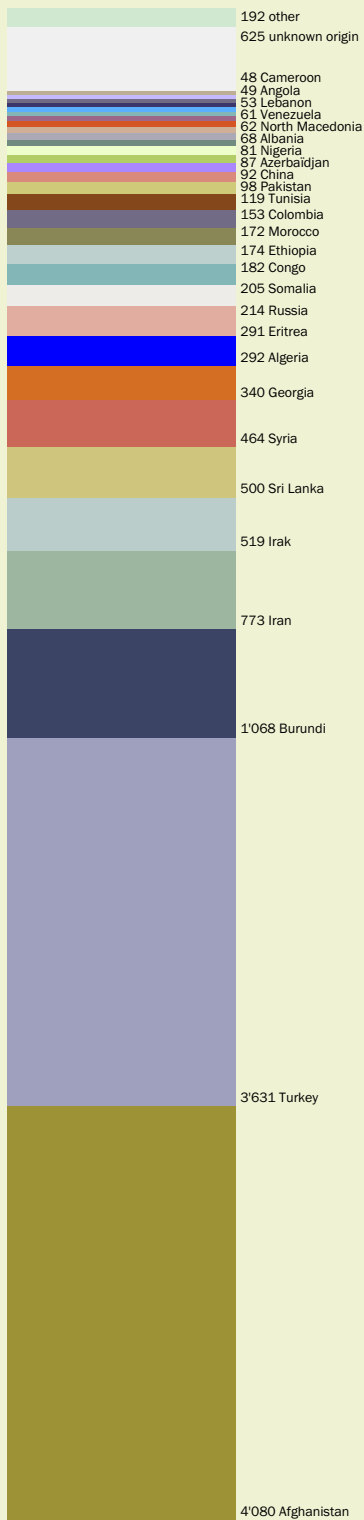
“La cuisine, c’est le nerf de la guerre.” G  
“The kitchen, is a boiling point of tensions.”

DALL·E, prompt: “blend of smells, crowded kitchen at a swiss center for asylum seekers - everybody cook their own stuff”



“We end up with people from different cultures, and we don’t speak the same language. Communication is very difficult. We don’t have the same habits. Of course, you could also find yourself with Burundians and not have the same habits, but communication is at least possible. If you’re with a Turk or an Afghan, how are you supposed to communicate.” *T*

Figure 10: countries of origin of people in the Swiss asylum process, as of December 31, 2022



## Diversity and diverging rights in integration centers

Integration centres foster a wide variety of personalities, often with the sole commonality of having experienced the suffering of a migratory journey. Diverse life paths, origins, nationalities, cultures, beliefs, age groups, marital statuses, passions, professions, and notably, differing types of permits – a significant mix of people are converged in the same space with barely enough room to live.

According to Alexandre Dien, the blending of individuals with various assigned statuses is a source of misunderstanding and frustration for residents, which can lead to tensions within the centre. Since Sornetan is still a relatively new centre, it consists of 90% asylum seekers, 5% provisionally admitted individuals and 5% refugees. As the centre ages, the proportions evolve towards a third of each.<sup>19</sup> From there on, if differences in legal status lead to tension, it is also because the resulting rights are vastly distinct. The almost only common feature lies in mandatory education for children.<sup>17</sup>

N permit represents the status of an ongoing asylum seeker, this permit authorises him or her to remain in Switzerland for the duration of the procedure. Further steps depend on the verdict.

F permit entails provisional admission. It can be lifted upon changing circumstances in the home country, although most individuals stay long-term. Application for a B permit is feasible after 5 years.

F permit for refugees also represents a provisional admission, although it affords greater flexibility. Applying for a B permit is possible after 5 years.

B permit is granted to recognized refugees with asylum. After 10 years, or 5 in cases of “exceptional” integration, applying for a settlement permit (C) is possible. The latter enables naturalization.

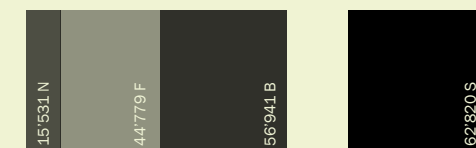
For comparison, S permit, as a collective temporary humanitarian admission, offers greater flexibility. Valid for one year, the S permit is extendable. After five years, a B permit is allocated, followed by a C after 10 years.<sup>17</sup>

The topics of employment and family reunification are highly criticized by NGOs. If holders of N permits can ask for work authorization after 3 to 6 months, they are in reality rarely allowed to. Furthermore, authorized individuals face hindered prospects due to employers’ negative perception of provisional and refugee statuses, compounded by diploma recognition issues. Inability to meet needs or engage in society leads to a profound sense of uselessness. This exacerbates the tough conditions – limited social assistance, around 20% lower on average than for Swiss citizens provides the bare minimum to uphold one’s dignity.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, while

the primary desire of most people seeking refuge is to reunite with their families, the criteria and procedures are becoming increasingly stringent, according to SFH.<sup>22</sup> This often represents a considerable obstacle to integration.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, historian and migration expert Francesca Falk is optimistic about the potential impact of the S status, offering significantly greater opportunities. She envisions it as a possible model for broader change, stating, “If Status S proves effective, it might pave the way for an overall improvement in the living conditions of asylum-seekers in Switzerland.”<sup>23</sup>

Figure 11: N, F, B and S permits, December 31, 2022



	work	social assistance	family reunification (nuclear)	foreign travel	freedom of settlement choice	school	apprenticeship	naturalisation
N	no	limited	no	no	constr.	yes	no	no
white paper	no	emergency help	no	no	no	yes	no	no
F	yes	limited	cond., after 3 years	no	constr.	yes	yes	no
F for refugees	yes	standard rate	cond., after 3 years	yes, excl. origin country	constr.	yes	yes	no
B	yes	standard rate	yes	yes, excl. origin country	constr.	yes	yes	no
S	yes	standard rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
C	yes	standard rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes, after 10 years

## Heterotopia

The residents of the integration centres are predominantly single people, and the majority are men. There are often a few families and couples who have just had a child. According to Alexandre Dien,<sup>19</sup> children act as a bonding force in the centres - everyone ends up looking after them in their own way. He also emphasises the benefits of proximity between residents. Communities of support are forged within the centres, and a sense of complicity and sharing is established between individuals. Some people, for instance, always cook and eat together. Furthermore, as refugees and asylum seekers are generally there for a relatively long period, relationships are developed over the long run.

Nevertheless, the manager of the centre insists the atmosphere is definitely not consistently positive and optimistic. The experience of waiting, dealing with uncertainty, feeling homesick for one's home country and facing the issues and debts left that have been there, the experience of coping with the post-traumatic stress that many endure, the experience of feeling of useless and worthless due to the ban on

working adding to communication barriers, lack of privacy and several other factors all pose great challenges to cohabitation and coexistence.

Integration centres are thus a unique 'magma'. Their nature is intriguing. A personal experience was revealing to me:

I explain to Jamie how to make a fire starter, at a workshop organized by volunteers, in the Sornetan parish hall. Her big eyes are curious, and her hands are eager. She is eight years old. Her older brother, Dennis, is nine, and they welcomed a little brother, Loane, just three weeks ago. Jamie says, "But they're not here; they're at home." She must have seen the dismay on my face because, as I imagine that part of her family must have stayed in their home country, she adds, "Home, right there!" pointing out the window with her finger, to the integration centre.

Despite not aligning with our Swiss or European preconceived notion of a home, integration centres are perceived as such by their residents. Regardless of the definition of 'temporary,' and despite nobody choosing to be there, integration centres are experienced as homes.

Integration centres somehow challenge our understanding of social norms, in a manner reminiscent of Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias. As "(...) kinds of places that are outside all places despite being effectively locatable,"<sup>26</sup> heterotopias are places outside the habitual space, they are 'other' places where social rules, norms and meanings are called into question. While Foucault qualifies prisons and cemeteries as heterotopias,<sup>26</sup> integration centres, which are often situated on the margins of society and have their own rules, codes, and rituals, can probably be considered as such. These spaces represent a different reality for asylum seekers and refugees, a sort of world within worlds, with their own regulations and practices that diverge from both the host society and their own. How integration centres challenge the social expectations and norms of the wider society, makes them both complex and ambiguous, just like Foucault's heterotopias.

One characteristic of a heterotopia is that it serves a function. The function of an integration centre is to provide a way out of it. The function of an integration centre is to act as a first step for those deprived of any familiar landscapes to gradually develop a network of people, infrastructures, and places that supports their daily lives. Just as heterotopias, despite symbolizing otherness and forming a discontinuity with the ordinary spatial system,<sup>26</sup> integration centres are nonetheless very much in relation to their surrounding spaces. Integration centres constitute the gateway to the spaces that surround them.

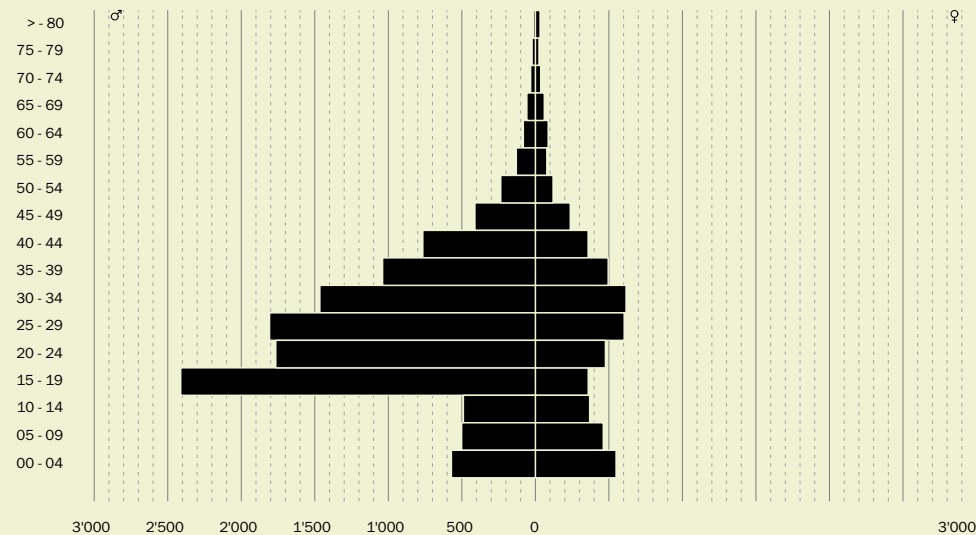


Figure 12: asylum seekers by gender and age group, as of December 31, 2022

## The exit doors of integration centres

Residents of integration centres holding an N permit undergo an extended procedure. Lasting up to a year, the extended procedure involves, among other things, access to legal representation as well as attendance at one or more interviews. Just as with the interview of an accelerated procedure, the interview within the extended process, essentially an interrogation, plays a critical role in determining the outcome of the asylum request. This phase, often requiring the collection of additional clarifications or supplementary information, presents a significant challenge for applicants due to its crucial and demanding nature. As their reasons for seeking asylum come under scrutiny, applicants undergo an assessment of the credibility of their account, for which gathering formal evidence is generally strenuous, if not impossible.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, applicants often continue to grapple with profound traumas stemming from their experiences. Frequently through a translator, officials from the SEM evaluate the applicant's ability to present a narrative that comes across as coherent, logical, and plausible from their perspective. Depending on the verdict, asylum seekers will either be sent to a return centre within a month or two or given the opportunity to remain in their centre for integration measures.<sup>24</sup>

Aimed at residents holding F permits, F for refugees, and B permits, integration measures aim to build a solid foundation for individuals to integrate sustainably and manage their lives in Switzerland autonomously. Thus, upon fulfilling certain criteria, individuals can leave the integration centre. One of the initial challenges is language. In the Canton of Bern, acquiring a minimum A1 level in either French or German is required. Language courses are offered within or around the centres. With assistance, individuals will then be able to seek employment. Once they secure a stable job position of at least

60%, they can begin searching for housing. However, it's important to note that all financial assistance is discontinued once a work contract is signed, regardless of the percentage. According to Alexandre Dien, this transition can be precarious. He suggests it is often better to stay at the centre for as long as possible.<sup>19</sup>

Based on his experience as a manager at integration centres, residents typically stay for an average of one year, with a minimum duration of six months. Nevertheless, certain people extend their stay to 2 to 3 years, exhausting all possible avenues of appeal. Furthermore, it is important to note that 90% of provisionally admitted individuals are estimated to stay long-term without permanent status, hindering proper integration. Provisional admission is exclusive to Switzerland; other EU countries offer improved integration through specialized protection statuses.<sup>25</sup>

### The integration centre in Sornetan and its relation to the village

The integration centre in Sornetan is housed in a former Protestant church formation centre. Originally designed as a 65-bed lodging facility with seminar rooms and a refectory, the establishment was repurposed by the SEM in autumn 2022 into a facility with a capacity of 200 people. In the spring of 2023, the capacity was reduced to 150 people. Since then, Alexandre Dien has described the centre as "luxurious," with sad irony.

Indeed, the SRC staff were able to free at least five rooms, allowing space for a playroom for children, a classroom, a study room with two desks and four chairs, a sewing room, and even a fitness room in a former room of ten beds. Furthermore, the slightly reduced capacity enables the Red Cross team to develop a broader awareness of the different dynamics between residents, and more importantly, to get to know who they are. Having a more comprehensive perspective and considering diverse

affinities allows, among others, a better allocation of people in rooms.

However, the manager of the centre underlines the unusual character of the place. None of this equipment nor flexibility is to be found in an ordinary centre.<sup>19</sup>

Despite considering the Sornetan establishment as a model to draw inspiration from, Alexandre Dien conveys his apprehensions about the forthcoming months. The SEM anticipates indeed a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers in Switzerland towards the second half of 2023. Given the high cost of the current reduced capacity, it is very likely the centre will soon reach or exceed its maximum capacity.<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, at a capacity of 150 or 200, the centre is already a considerable transformation for the village. Sornetan is a small settlement of 148 inhabitants.<sup>27</sup>

Although the change may have been significant, the centre's manager values the positive collaboration with the village. Some villagers have donated clothes, and second-hand equipment for the fitness room. Others volunteer to organise language

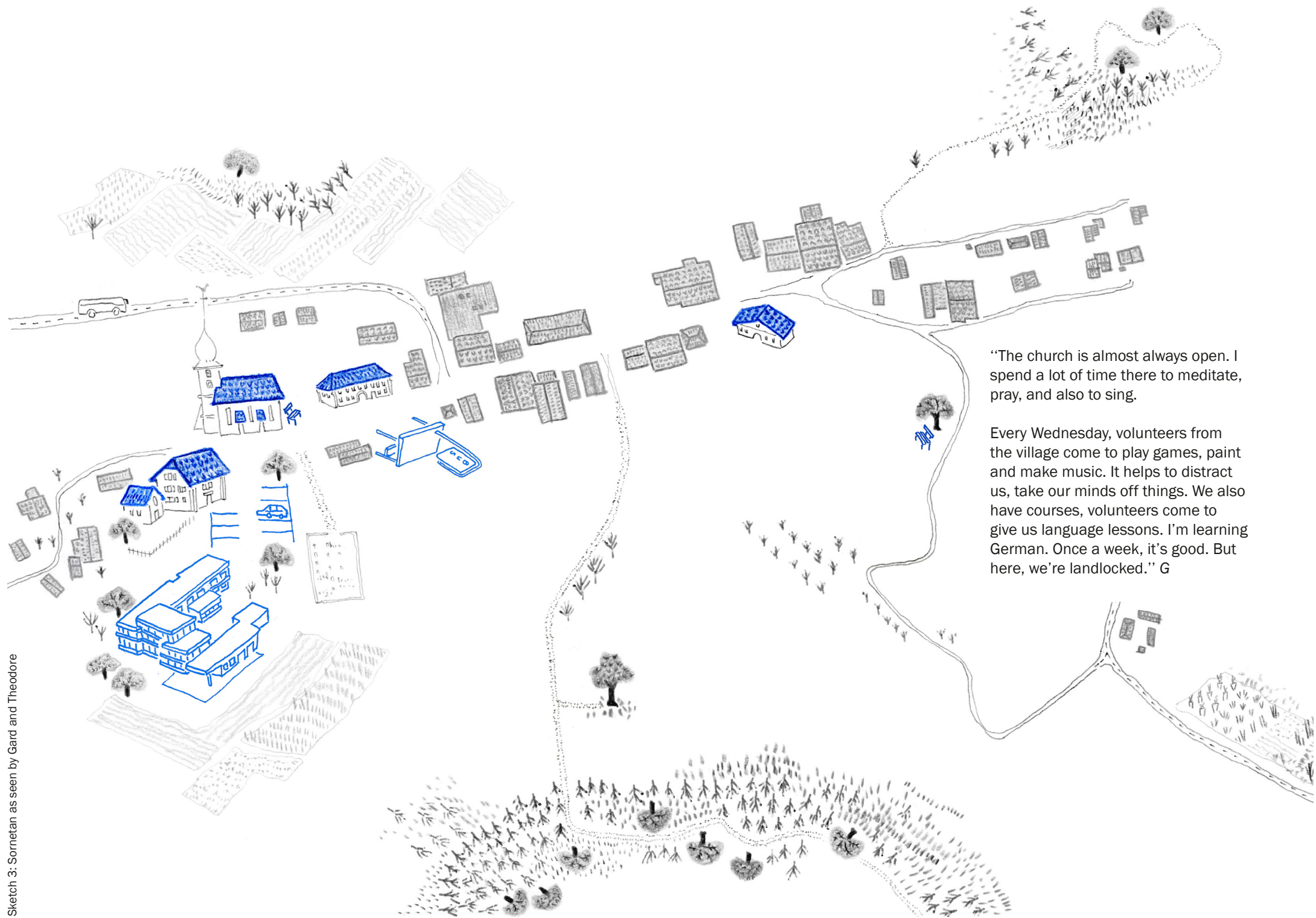


or sewing lessons and activities such as film evenings. These activities are often held in available spaces within either the municipal or neighbouring Protestant church building. Additionally, the municipality offers the possibility for residents to assist in maintaining the cemetery and forest paths, receiving a modest payment that is then shared among the centre's occupants, funding regional excursions.

While Alexandre Dien is certain a rural atmosphere benefits the development of these relationships, particularly in contrast to urban anonymity, he acknowledges the resulting complications in terms of transportation, access to essential goods, doctors, and other services.<sup>19</sup>



Pictures 1 and 2: photograph of the Sornetan Protestant church building in the 1970s and aerial view of the village of Sornetan



“The church is almost always open. I spend a lot of time there to meditate, pray, and also to sing.

Every Wednesday, volunteers from the village come to play games, paint and make music. It helps to distract us, take our minds off things. We also have courses, volunteers come to give us language lessons. I’m learning German. Once a week, it’s good. But here, we’re landlocked.” G



DALL·E, prompt: Bernese Jura "it's important for me to be in nature to resource myself."

"I like to walk around the village. Here, I like nature and tranquillity. You just can't get supplies." T



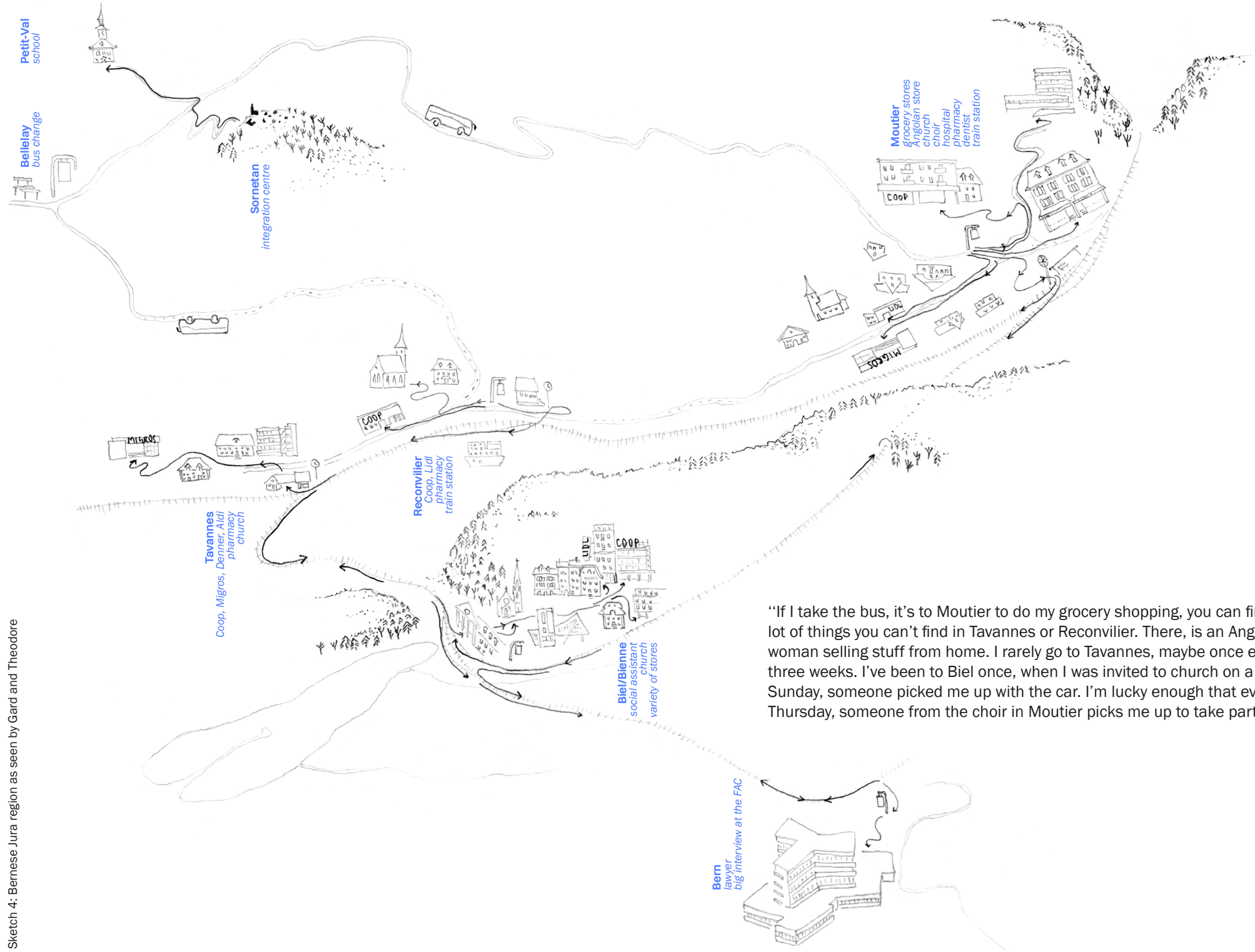
“In the region, I don’t get around much.

Transport is expensive and it’s hard to get around from Sornetan.

We can’t always get around as we like. Even during the week, we don’t have a bus all the time, only four times a day. There is none at the weekend. It’s hard to get supplies. With the bus journeys, and changes in the middle of nowhere, you can’t carry too many things.” G

DALL.E, prompt: “Having to change buses at a stop lost in the Swiss countryside, waiting for the next connection with my groceries”





"If I take the bus, it's to Moutier to do my grocery shopping, you can find a lot of things you can't find in Tavannes or Reconviiler. There, is an Angolan woman selling stuff from home. I rarely go to Tavannes, maybe once every three weeks. I've been to Biel once, when I was invited to church on a Sunday, someone picked me up with the car. I'm lucky enough that every Thursday, someone from the choir in Moutier picks me up to take part." T

“Sornetan is far from everything, and we don’t know if we are really integrating. We know it’s temporary, so we can’t complain. But at the same time, you’re here for several months, and it would be essential to be able to get around and meet people.

When I say I live in Sornetan, people say, “Where’s Sornetan? Is it in Switzerland? [Gard laughs]” G

“I stay at the centre most of the time.

The mail arrives here.

Some friends at the centre have already been given appointments to see the lawyer to prepare for the big interview. There are a lot of people, so I understand that we have to wait.

Me, I don't know when that will be. I'm still waiting to receive something.” G

“In any case, it’s up to them. All I have, is my story.” G

DALL.E, prompt: "waiting for a verdict, in some administration hall in Bern, with only my small blue backpack"





“The worst, are the merchants of hope.”

*Marco Rizzelli, Head of accommodation and occupancy  
sector, Swiss Red Cross*

**epilogue**



September 02, 2023

Theodore is still at the center in Sornetan, waiting for an appointment for his “big interview”.

Gard, who encountered hostility at the center due to his sexual orientation, could exceptionally move into a small studio in Biel, with the help of Queer Amnesty. He is still waiting for an appointment for his “big interview”.



This work is guided by interviews conducted with Gard and Theodore, originally in French and subsequently translated into English.

To protect the individual's privacy, the names 'Gard' and 'Theodore' are used in place of the real names.

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## DALL-E

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- F1 The asylum context in Switzerland in 2022: main relevant migration routes, transit, Dublin transfers, redistribution of asylum applications

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- F2 Evolution of asylum applications in Switzerland, main influencing conflicts and principal legislative developments

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- F4 Swiss Asylum procedure  
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- F8 People in the asylum sector in Switzerland, per status  
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- F10 Countries of origin of people in the Swiss asylum process  
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- F12 Asylum seekers by gender and age group  
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