

Scientific Report for Project PZ00P1_185890

“Violent Safe Havens? Exploring Articulations and Repercussions of Violence in Refugee Reception and Settlement”

Summary of the research work conducted

The overarching aim of this project was to explore articulations of violence, which continue to affect refugees even after they were granted protection. Focusing on refugee reception and settlement, we investigated how and with what effect different actors perceive and are involved in articulations of violence, including refugees themselves, state authorities and representatives of civic support structures. In particular, the project sought to uncover how persons who have been granted protection, experience violence and how experiences of violence affect images of the self and aspirations for the future. To address the research questions deriving from the wider aim of the project, we proceeded in different phases. Having started in February 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic strongly shaped the first 1.5 years of our research and forced us to adjust the timing of the activities outlined in the research plan (see deviations from research plan for details).

Phase I: An initial literature review yielded a refined overview of the theoretical and empirical literature on migration and violence and violence in contexts of forced migration and refugee arrival more specifically. During this initial phase, we also conducted interpretive policy analysis of national immigration and asylum legislation, immigration and asylum statistics and relevant programmes and policy initiatives. Policies of particular interest address reception conditions and avenues for residency. In addition, we analysed national and local-level programmes and policies that seek to encourage integration. A series of expert interviews – many of which were conducted online because of restrictions induced by the pandemic – complemented this phase of desk-based work. The persons interviewed include representatives of national refugee councils, members of national and local support organisations, such as legal advisors, mental health professionals as well as scholars with relevant expertise.

During Phase II, we conducted multi-sited ethnography, including repeated narrative interviews, in both countries to generate in-depth accounts of peoples’ everyday lives and incidents of violence within them.

Our ethnographic encounters unfolded differently in both case study countries. Between September 2020 and June 2022, Manuel Insberg spent a total of 11 months in Norway. His longest, uninterrupted stay in the country lasted six months. He generated ethnographic data through participant observation, informal conversations and complementary semi-structured and audio-recorded interviews with 12 adult refugees who had been granted permanent protection and were living in Oslo and surroundings. Most of these individuals are Syrian or Turkish nationals. Others come from Eritrea, Sri Lanka, Iran and Iraq or were considered stateless. Manuel Insberg accompanied research participants in various settings of their everyday life in Oslo. This included joint walks, meetings in cafes or bars, visits at workplaces and participation in language classes.

In Switzerland, Carolin Fischer has been meeting ten persons repeatedly over the course of one and a half years, from June 2020 until December 2022. Her research participants come from different countries of origin, including Armenia, Benin, Eritrea, Iran, Syria, Togo and Turkey, and hold refugee status in Switzerland. They now live in different places in the cantons of Berne and Fribourg. Their trajectories of arrival and settling in Switzerland are very different and so are their current living conditions and future perspectives. Most of these encounters took place in cafés, in peoples’ homes, at their workplaces and – in one case – in the facilities of a church.

During this second phase of the project, we organized an international, interdisciplinary workshop series entitled “Questioning the Safe Haven: Interdisciplinary Inquiries into Violence in Refugee Arrival and Settlement”. These workshops gathered a group of 12 scholars from various countries and different disciplines whose contributions were published in a special issue for *Geopolitics*. In addition, both members of the project teams presented work in progress at national and international academic workshops and conferences.

Phase III was dedicated to the write-up and valorisation of research findings. In addition to published research output, we organized a series of three events on the interplay of violence and safety in forced

migration and asylum. These events addressed different audiences: 1) Practitioners from different fields of social work, 2) the general public and 3) Persons holding refugee status. In this way, we ensured key findings from our research were widely transmitted to different audiences.

Main research results

The empirical findings, we have generated in our project leave little doubt that persons who have been recognised as refugees in Norway and Switzerland experience their protection status as an essential basis to continue living their lives. Most of our research participants emphasised that living in Norway and Switzerland is a relief from the immanent threats they experienced in their countries of origin or en route. Legal protection also grants people a capacity to aspire in the sense that they can develop desires and expectations that often remain suppressed under conditions of even more acute hardship. Yet, given the legal guarantee of freedom from persecution, the desires and expectations of our research participants were rarely restricted to the wish to stay and be safe in the receiving country. Rather they were oriented towards the future and parallel what Sara Ahmed (2010) refers to as an aspiration for a fulfilling and happy life, including social and professional fulfilment and personal recognition.

In many ways, the conditions constraining the desires and expectations which people develop in the light of legal protection, promote a situation of continuous crisis (**Fischer and Insberg 2025**). To an important extent, this crisis results from the fact that the (neo)liberal state is not caring but demanding. The constraints and restrictions which our research participants encounter in their legal safe havens can be read as an extension of a tightening European migration regime that pays lip service to its liberal, humanitarian values rather striving to turn them into lived reality of the persons subjected to it in different ways. The politics of protection in Switzerland and Norway are not as much about protection as they centre state-led expectations and integration requirements, which has repercussions in the way people experience asylum in everyday life.

While the state's overarching expectations for the pathways of accepted refugees may be similar in CH and NO, both countries pursue different policies aimed at the fulfillment of these expectations. Notwithstanding the differences in refugee governance, important dimensions of peoples' everyday experiences are similar in both countries. Most of our research participants adjust the pathways for their lives in the alleged safe haven according to the states' expectations rather than feeling encouraged and enabled to follow their desires.

In Norway, legal protection is tied to a promise of equality, which should be achieved through measures of an allegedly caring state. The norms and regulations in place, however, limit equality on the ground and there is no true self-determination. And the idea of (neo)liberal society - which follows from the logic of the free market - ignores structural, violent inequalities that shape people's everyday lives and deprives them of the possibility to fulfil their potential. In Switzerland the state apparatus behind the country's refugee regime does not cultivate a self-image as proactive and caring. However, what claims to be a humanitarian tradition is overshadowed by widespread misrecognition of persons holding refugee status, which is coupled with suspicion and instances of continuous control (**Insberg and Fischer 2025; Fischer, in progress**). Many research participants experience structural and epistemic violence in the form of non-recognition of their qualifications (**Fischer 2023**). Such instances of indifference have both psychological and physical effects on peoples' everyday lives while simultaneously creating a distance from, and a desire for, normality.

Much of what we identify as drivers of a continuous crisis is closely related to the principles of refugee governance and the way refugees remain stuck in the position of a perpetual other. These findings urge us to reconsider the self-image of liberal states as safe havens and to work towards lasting transformations of the structures and associated power relations that create and uphold the identified limitations of legal protection and that turn asylum into a condition of continuous struggle. Many of our research participants experience the allegedly caring and humanitarian state and the bureaucracy associated with it as a restrictive, authoritarian force (**Insberg and Fischer 2025; Fischer, in progress**). Our focus on two countries thus enables us to explore how alleged safe havens confront accepted refugees with very similar constraining expectations and structures, regardless of their different welfare state systems and politics of refugee admission.

Although experienced constraints leave their imprints on peoples' lives, our research participants mobilise different strategies to navigate such conditions of perpetual crisis. Different forms of self-care enable refugees to navigate their everyday experiences. For example, some of our research participants adapt their expectations and desires for their lives in Norway and Switzerland, sometimes developing new ones to cope with their current realities. They also make decisions on when to voice complaints and resist prevailing structures, while at other times, they choose to remain silent and keep certain aspects of their experiences to themselves. Likewise, they show resilience and determination in the light of prevailing restrictions. What we identify as instances of self-care are responses to the shortcomings of what is a caring state in name only rather than in people's lived everyday reality **(Fischer and Insberg 2025)**.

Liberal Europe also revolves around the idea of personal freedom, possibilities of self-determination and enabling persons to thrive. Refugee protection, however, comes at the cost of unfreedom, coercion and continuous devaluation **(Fischer and Insberg, in progress)**. People can navigate constraints rather than make proactive choices. As a result, their lives require constant navigation. While we observe that individuals succeed in (re)contextualizing past, recurring, and newly emerging experiences of violence in their everyday lives through acts of self-care, thereby creating a sense of ordinariness for them, it is also telling that this process continues to inevitably relate to their social position as refugees and others in society. Many of the narratives informing this project exemplify how persons who were granted refugee protection are reduced to the requirement to fulfil the demands of the receiving system. They are hindered from living their own version of an ordinary life in case it involves aspirations that deviate from the offers and expectations of their respective safe haven **(Insberg and Fischer 2025)**.

The narratives of our research participants illuminate acts of navigation amidst conditions of chronic crisis. More specifically, they enable us to demonstrate that navigation not only constitutes a momentary response to given conditions. By considering different forms of self-care as integral to navigation, we also highlight its future-oriented dimensions. Thus, safeguarding acts of self-care may help people to put some counterweight to the restrictions that structure their everyday lives in an ambivalent safe haven.

References to published, submitted and planned research output:

Fischer, Carolin 2023. Asyl, Schutz und Gewalt. Einblicke in den Alltag anerkannter Geflüchteter. *Psychiatrische Pflege* 8 (3), 16–19, <https://doi.org/10.1024/2297-6965/a000488>

Fischer, Carolin and Manuel Insberg 2025. Self-Care, Experiences of Protection and Continuous Crisis in the Everyday of Refugees in Norway and Switzerland. *Geopolitics*. Published online on 13.02.2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2025.2464143>

Fischer, Carolin. The interplay and discontinuities of humanitarianism and epistemic violence in Swiss Asylum governance. In progress, contribution to special issue for *Migration Studies*.

Fischer, Carolin and Manuel Insberg. Questioning the Safe Haven: Interdisciplinary Inquiries into Violence in Refugee Reception and Settlement. *Introduction to special issue for Geopolitics*, in progress, submission planned for April 2025.

Insberg, Manuel and Carolin Fischer. Soziale Arbeit im Spannungsfeld zwischen humanitärem Selbstbild und restriktiver Asylpolitik. Submitted to *Impuls, Magazin für Soziale Arbeit* for publication in April 2025

Deviations from the research plan

As a result of the PI's professional re-orientation (see below), there were noteworthy changes to the initially planned outputs. Instead of writing a monograph that would serve as her *Habilitationsschrift*, Carolin Fischer decided to publish her research findings in peer reviewed contributions to different Journals.

We also decided to place a greater emphasis on the dissemination of research findings to different non-scientific audiences and therefore organized the aforementioned series of events that addressed practitioners in social work, persons holding refugee status as well as the general public.

The SARS-Covid19 pandemic also caused significant deviations from the original research plan, delaying fieldwork by at least six months. Ethnographic research, which relies heavily on direct human interaction, was particularly affected by restrictions, uncertainty, and logistical hurdles.

In Switzerland, a mandatory home office policy complicated the early orientation and research phase. In Norway, the requirement to follow social distancing rules, lockdowns, event cancellations, and institutional closures severely restricted access to research participants and in-person encounters.

Manuel Insberg's second fieldwork phase in Norway, initially scheduled for early 2021, was postponed to September 2021 due to strict entry bans. This prompted us to adapt our research methodology and to temporarily resort to digital and online ethnography. Even after returning to the field, access to public spaces and face-to-face interactions remained restricted for an extended period.

Contributions of Project Staff

As envisaged in the research plan, both team members conducted independent research in Norway (Manuel Insberg) and Switzerland (Carolin Fischer). Manuel Insberg conducted in alignment with the objectives and research questions outlined in the research plan. The core component was the implementation of ethnographic fieldwork in Norway, consisting of seven months of digital ethnographic research and eleven months of on-site fieldwork. The primary focus was on adult individuals residing as recognized refugees in the Norwegian capital, Oslo. Their experiences and perspectives formed the central empirical foundation of the study. These insights were further enriched by contributions from various stakeholders and experts involved in refugee reception, settlement, and integration. This included social workers, teachers in integration courses, psychologists, policymakers, and representatives of civil society organizations. The collected data provided the basis for Manuel Insberg's dissertation, which was successfully completed within the amended timeframe of the project. The dissertation was awarded *Insigni Cum Laude*.

Carolin Fischer carried out research in Switzerland as detailed above. Together with Prof. Sabine Strasser, Carolin was responsible for supporting, supervising and evaluation Manuel Insberg's research and doctoral thesis. She was part of the

In addition to their independent research activities, both team members worked closely together in the planning and implementation of courses, the organisation of workshops and specialist events and the presentation of research results at (international) conferences.

Important Events

Besides the above-mentioned, global event of the COVID-19 pandemic, an important event that strongly affected the project was that Carolin Fischer was offered and took up a new and permanent position at Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH). Her main role in this position is to lead an inter- and transdisciplinary thematic field that revolves around the theme caring society (*Strategisches Themenfeld Caring Society*). In addition, she is affiliated with the BFH Department of Social Work, where she holds a lectureship at the Institute Social and Cultural Diversity. As a result of this professional re-orientation, Carolin Fischer had to give up her fulltime research position based on the SNSF Ambizione grant and complete her research activities alongside the new professional responsibilities.

With the PI changing institutions, also the PhD student and the project were transferred to the BFH Department of Social Work. Manuel Insberg welcomed this change of institutional affiliation, also because the BFH offered him an opportunity to extend his working contract beyond the duration of the project.

The change of host institution and the additional commitments of the PI significantly affected the pace at which the project could be successfully concluded. After taking up her new position in April 2023, Carolin Fischer reduced her employment level in the Ambizione project to 30% for a transitional period of 6 months (financed by the SNSF) and to 10% from October 2023 until the end of January 2025 (financed by the BFH). To ensure that the project produced sound output nevertheless, the SNSF granted a cost-neutral extension of one year.

Research Output

Fischer, Carolin 2023. Asyl, Schutz und Gewalt. Einblicke in den Alltag anerkannter Geflüchteter. *Psychiatrische Pflege* 8 (3), 16–19, <https://doi.org/10.1024/2297-6965/a000488>

Fischer, Carolin and Manuel Insberg 2025. Self-Care, Experiences of Protection and Continuous Crisis in the Everyday of Refugees in Norway and Switzerland. *Geopolitics*. Published online on 13.02.2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2025.2464143>

Fischer, Carolin. The interplay and discontinuities of humanitarianism and epistemic violence in Swiss Asylum governance. In progress, contribution to special issue for *Migration Studies*.

Fischer, Carolin and Manuel Insberg. Questioning the Safe Haven: Interdisciplinary Inquiries into Violence in Refugee Reception and Settlement. Introduction to special issue for *Geopolitics*, in progress, submission planned for April 2025.

Insberg, Manuel 2024. Lives in an Ambiguous Safe Haven. Exploring Meanings and Practices of Asylum and Integration in the Norwegian Refugee Regime. PhD Thesis, submitted at the University of Bern on 01.07.2024

Insberg, Manuel and Carolin Fischer. Soziale Arbeit im Spannungsfeld zwischen humanitärem Selbstbild und restriktiver Asylpolitik. Submitted to *Impuls, Magazin für Soziale Arbeit* for publication in April 2025