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Résumé de l'article

Cet article analyse les micro-pouvoirs des bureaucrates suédois «cruels» et «non cruels» qui utilisent diverses logiques de contrôle, des «actes minuscules» réalisés à l'aide de stylos, d'ordinateurs et de tâches imposées, pour conditionner la vie des demandeurs d'asile et fragmenter leur espoir. M'appuyant sur des entretiens avec des demandeurs d'asile afghans et l'observation de leurs rencontres avec les autorités, je soutiens que le traitement bureaucratique des Afghans en Suède constitue une forme de violence raciste sanctionnée par l'État et de «departheid» exercé afin d'exclure les personnes discréditées de l'État-providence. L'article attire l'attention sur le recul rapide des droits d'asile en Suède depuis 2015 et sur les préjudices causés aux personnes demandant l'asile.

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# Fragmentation of Hope Through Tiny Acts of Bureaucratic Cruelty—Another Kind of War on Afghan People Seeking Asylum in Sweden

Torun Elsrud<sup>a</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the micro-powers of Swedish “cruel” and “non-cruel” bureaucrats using various logics of control, “tiny acts” enacted with pens, computers, and imposed assignments to condition asylum-seeking peoples’ lives and fragment their hope. Based on interviews with asylum-seeking Afghans and observations of their meetings with authorities, I argue that the bureaucratic treatment of Afghans in Sweden is a form of state-sanctioned racist violence and “departheid” executed to exclude discredited people from the welfare state. The article draws attention to a rapid downhill slide regarding asylum rights in Sweden since 2015 and the harm caused to asylum-seeking people.

## KEYWORDS

asylum; hope; bureaucratic cruelty; departheid; ethnography

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse les micro-pouvoirs des bureaucrates suédois «cruels» et «non cruels» qui utilisent diverses logiques de contrôle, des «actes minuscules» réalisés à l’aide de stylos, d’ordinateurs et de tâches imposées, pour conditionner la vie des demandeurs d’asile et fragmenter leur espoir. M’appuyant sur des entretiens avec des demandeurs d’asile afghans et l’observation de leurs rencontres avec les autorités, je soutiens que le traitement bureaucratique des Afghans en Suède constitue une forme de violence raciste sanctionnée par l’État et de «departheid» exercé afin d’exclure les personnes discréditées de l’État-providence. L’article attire l’attention sur le recul rapide des droits d’asile en Suède depuis 2015 et sur les préjudices causés aux personnes demandant l’asile.

“Go back to Afghanistan. You cannot stay in my hotel.” It was his hotel. He started shouting and waving. He shouted at me a lot in Swedish. It was my first year in Sweden. ... I didn’t understand what he said. He was yelling at me. He was swearing at me, and I just understood that “you have to go back to Afghanistan. Go back to Afghanistan.”

Saleh was 16 years old at his first encounter with spitefulness from representatives of Swedish authorities. The man in charge of a residential care home run by the social services to cater to “unaccompanied minors” did not like him or other people from

Afghanistan. While the racism and antagonism in the statement above are blunt, other Afghans seeking asylum described encounters with authorities that appeared more restrained but were experienced as both cruel and violent.

This article exposes how Afghans in Sweden are forced to deal with long-term, recurrent bureaucratic violence from the Swedish Migration Agency and in meetings with other authorities throughout the asylum process. The term **bureaucratic violence** in

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this context refers to a type of violence that is “built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (Galtung, 1969, p. 171; see also Abdelhady et al., 2020; Näre, 2020). Meanwhile, I argue that it is state-sanctioned violence that hides the inherent racist processes of exclusion while legitimizing the continued control and exclusion of people who are deemed undesirable (e.g., Bhatia, 2020; Bhatia & Lentin, 2022; Kalir, 2019).

The violence of bureaucracies is primarily understood as the consequences of bureaucratic actions in the form of cruel and adverse long-term outcomes **after** bureaucratic day-by-day activities (Galtung, 1969; Näre, 2020). However, as this article shows, bureaucratic violence can also be experienced by people in subordinate positions **during** interaction with bureaucrats. Violence enacted by representatives of bureaucracies is sometimes considered an unintended consequence of bureaucrats doing their jobs without cruel intent (Bauman, 1995). This article acknowledges that actions performed **in innocence** or through impersonal interaction can have cruel consequences. Such performances build on the rationality of professional guidelines regardless of the mood or position of the case officers (Arendt, 1969; Bauman, 1995; Weber, 1958).

However, based on recurrent observations and interviews with 20 asylum-seeking Afghans in Sweden, this article also draws attention to instances of ill will and explicit cruelty that sometimes inform the discretionary powers among street-level bureaucrats, who have “permission to be cruel” (Bhatia, 2020). Their authorization comes with discretion and involves the latitude to choose among alternatives. Bureaucratic rules, regulations, and formal structures leave ample space for bureaucrats to make decisions and act based on organizational and individual

choices, emotions, and preferences (Belabas & Gerrits, 2017; Bhatia, 2020; Gupta, 2012; Lipsky, 2010). While carrying out their duties, street-level bureaucrats at the Migration Agency, migration courts, or social services may use discretionary powers provided within administrative functions to direct antipathy, anger, or prestige towards certain individuals or groups of asylum seekers. As I argue, intentionally or unintentionally, these acts cause severe suffering, hurting peoples’ economy, security, and health, as well as their ability to nourish and experience hope.

Because of negative media representations and callous treatment from authorities, Afghans in Sweden have been described as second-class asylum seekers (Skodo, 2017, 2018; Sundström & Obenius, 2020). Using observations and participant statements, I analyze two significant and urgent aspects of the Swedish bureaucratic violence that my participants have encountered. The first aspect concerns the micro-power exercised by bureaucrats to exclude and sometimes torment people deemed undeserving of a future in Sweden. I call these **logics of control** that legitimize and neutralize “cruel acts” (Bhatia, 2020). The second aspect concerns the consequences of administered cruel acts on asylum seekers’ ability to experience hope and orient themselves towards the future.

The article contributes to the literature on micro-powers and logics employed by bureaucrats that conceal and neutralize bureaucratic violence and state-sanctioned racism (Abdelhady et al., 2020; Bhatia, 2020; Fassin, 2015; Kalir, 2019; Schütze, 2019). The research findings sharply contrast with the long-lived idea of Swedish exceptionalism that has held Sweden as a stronghold for anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practices (Schierup & Ålund, 2011). In addition, the article exposes the severe suffering and destruction of asylum-seeking people’s conditions to

feel hope caused by bureaucratic actors implementing increased austerity politics and legal restrictions (e.g., [Elsrud, 2020](#); [Elsrud et al., 2021](#); [Kazemi, 2021](#); [Schierup & Ålund, 2011](#); [Skodo, 2020](#)).

The next section of this article provides the context for Afghan asylum applicants in Sweden as well as the theoretical framework. I highlight that the asylum system is permeated by uncertainty and creates strong emotions that challenge hope and faith in the future for those stuck waiting. The section clarifies how Sweden, like many other countries, in recent years has established a “departheid system” that legitimizes bureaucratic violence, which will be analyzed later.

A methods section follows, which presents the research participants and the longitudinal multi-sited ethnographic work from which this article draws data. Here I also underline the benefits of studying structures “from below” with a longitudinal multi-sited ethnographic approach that involves long-term and recurrent researcher participation in the participants’ everyday lives. This section also includes some ethical considerations for doing research in sensitive environments.

The subsequent section presents research findings structured around four control logics: repetition, strategic inefficiency, enforced co-operation, and faceless violations. Here I show how representatives of the authorities are involved in routine acts of cruelty in their interactions with asylum applicants, and how these acts deeply influence the research participants’ ability to have hope and faith in the future.

In the conclusion, the findings are discussed on a more structural level. I claim that the participants, like many other asylum applicants in Sweden, have suffered from hope-draining and health-reducing bureaucratic violence that legitimizes a racist

departheid system. This system may, in part, be sustained by “non-cruel” bureaucrats carrying out routines while doing their portion of the (deportation) job. Nevertheless, it is also maintained by individual, emotional actors who use their discretionary powers in ways that cause severe harm to people in need of protection and a just asylum process.

## WAITING AND HOPING UNDER DEPARTHEID—THEORY AND CONTEXT

Deportation of undesired people has been a well-integrated policy practice in Europe, including Sweden, for a long time (e.g., [Brekke & Brochmann, 2014](#); [Garvik & Valenta, 2021](#); [Schierup & Ålund, 2011](#)). Nevertheless, efforts to exclude through additional restrictions to laws and praxis have increased significantly following the “long summer of migration” of 2015 ([Abdelhady et al., 2020](#)). That year, 163,000 people sought asylum in Sweden, of these, 41,000 were Afghans fleeing following the country’s worst “fighting season” since 2009, combined with mass deportations of Afghans from Iran and Pakistan ([Skodo, 2018](#), p. 2). Thirty-five thousand applicants were registered as unaccompanied minors, with approximately 23,500 registered as Afghan citizens. This circumstance made Afghans the second-largest nationality of all asylum seekers after Syrians and, by far, the largest among unaccompanied minors ([SCB—Statistics Sweden, 2016](#)).

A set of laws and restrictive praxis were hastily introduced to control the influx of asylum seekers and make Sweden less appealing ([Abdelhady et al., 2020](#); [Garvik & Valenta, 2021](#)). Restrictions included making temporary residency the standard, obstructing family reunification, and punishing people who refused to self-deport by eliminating economic support (e.g., [Act \[2016:752\]](#) on temporary restrictions on the possibility of

obtaining a residence permit in Sweden; [Act \[2021:765\]](#) amending the Aliens Act; [Act \[2016:381\]](#) amending the Act [1994:137] on the reception of asylum seekers and others). The restrictive immigration and welfare regulations were backed by racializing notions of asylum seekers being risks, costs, and societal threats (e.g., [Abdelhady, 2020](#)). Such sentiments were fuelled by increasingly racist media discourses all over Europe portraying refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants as costs and threats to national culture and security ([Anderson, 2017](#); [Bhatia, 2020](#); [Hansen, 2021](#); [Krzyżanowski et al., 2018](#); [Lems et al., 2020](#)). [Abdelhady et al. \(2020, p. 11\)](#) suggest that Sweden appeared overwhelmed by fear and may have suffered a “panic attack” rather than a “refugee crisis.”

Although negative sentiments have affected asylum-seeking people from many nations, Afghans, in particular, have been met with suspicion and hostility. Despite experiencing decades of war and political turmoil, Afghans have not been considered genuine or deserving refugees but have become discursively shaped as an example of “bogus refugees” or “second-class asylum seekers” in Sweden ([Skodo, 2017, 2018](#); [Sundström & Obenius, 2020](#)). This has led to adverse treatment by authorities ([Skodo, 2017](#)) and negative representations in the media that began even before 2015 ([Stretmo, 2014](#)).

The combination of large numbers of applications, changes to former praxis, and new criteria restrictions led to long waiting times that affected Afghans more than others. By 2018, the general average processing time for first-level decisions in individual asylum cases had reached 507 days, and for Afghan asylum seekers, 785, compared with 344 for Syrians, who had also arrived in large numbers in 2015 ([Swedish Migration Agency,](#)

[2023](#)).<sup>1</sup> In addition, the processing time for appeals in the migration courts increased from 117.5 days in 2015 to 401 in 2020 ([Swedish National Audit Office, 2022, p. 41](#)). The combination of extensive processing time for both first- and second-level decisions has resulted in many Afghans being stuck in uncertainty for several years ([Elsrud, 2020](#); [Herz et al., 2022](#)).

While in 2014, 74 percent of Afghan citizens had received positive asylum decisions (compared to the 67 percent average in the EU), the proportion was down to 32 percent in 2018 (46 in the EU) ([Eurostat, 2023](#)), making Sweden one of the least generous EU countries towards Afghans. Meanwhile, in 2018, 98 percent of Syrians, the largest group, received asylum.

Following critique from civil society solidarity movements and human rights advocates, occasional adjustments were introduced to mitigate the effects of legal restrictions and sluggish asylum processes on groups considered particularly vulnerable, such as “unaccompanied minors” ([Elsrud et al., 2023](#); [Kazemi, 2021](#)). These young people had often turned 18 before their cases were handled. Their coming of age was not necessarily based on their true birthdates. Many have been re-aged by the Migration Agency following the extensively criticized medical age examination, performed via X-ray scanning of body parts, carried out by the Swedish National Board of Forensic Medicine ([AIDA, 2015, 2017](#); [Elsrud, 2020](#); [Lundberg, 2017](#); [Malmqvist et al., 2018](#); [Mostad & Tamsen, 2019](#); [Noll, 2016](#)). The eighteenth “birthday” generally resulted in asylum rejections and the insistence that, as adults, they should be able to handle internal displacement in their country of origin.

<sup>1</sup> Average processing times for other, relatively large groups of asylum seekers show that conditions vary greatly, with Eritreans waiting 308 days, Somalis 571, and Iraqis 727.

The “new upper secondary school act” (Act [2016:752] on temporary restrictions on the possibility of obtaining a residence permit in Sweden, ss. 16 f, 16 i, 17) was introduced as a second chance for young people who had waited for the first decision on their asylum cases for more than 18 months and fulfilled several other specific requirements. This act meant that those who qualified could stay in the country to study. Subsequently, they became eligible for permanent residency if they managed to get a permanent job within six months of completing school (Kazemi, 2021). The act also meant extended waiting and additional stress, including new administrative routines with more opportunities for authorities to deliver rejections (Elsrud et al., 2021; Kazemi, 2021). Further, the law became a way to circumvent young people’s right to asylum. Their ability to study in Sweden and compete in its labour market conditioned their right to protection. Thus, asylum rights for people from one of the world’s most war-torn countries were exchanged for demands for economic success and achievements.

In the meantime, research interest has been directed towards an ongoing undermining of the rule of law within the asylum system (Skodo, 2020). Several studies indicate significant shortcomings in how the Swedish Migration Agency and migration courts have interpreted and handled people’s claims for asylum. These shortcomings awaken a concern for predictability, flawlessness, foreseeable consequences of action, and equal treatment before the law (e.g., Elsrud et al., 2021, 2023; Hedlund, 2016; Johannesson, 2017). Bureaucratic routines obscure and hide legal injustices and flaws, making administrators’ subjective decisions appear neutral and objective.

The asylum system sets the stage for a bureaucratic machinery that contributes to a

system of **departheid**—an “exercise in spatial engineering based on the identification, separation, and differential treatment of illegalized migrants” (Kalir, 2019, p. 20). The concept of departheid draws attention to the connection between contemporary exclusionary practices of foreign bodies in wealthy European nations and a long settler and colonizer history of controlling racialized people. While the characteristics of departheid are contextually bound to one country’s specific bureaucratic rules and practices, they are versions of a global departheid that restrict the mobility of people whose lands were previously under European and “Western” control. As systems for excluding racialized people, bureaucracies in the wealthy countries of the Global North are also processors of state-sanctioned racism (Bhatia & Lentin, 2022).

Since departheid refers to a structural set-up using rules and regulations that force people to self-deport or become expelled, it needs people’s agency to materialize. Kalir (2019, p. 32) writes:

It is only through the daily work of loyal state actors and street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980) that Departheid is made operational and gets translated from the cynical chart boards of political and economic elites to the horrendous lived realities of millions of illegalized migrants.

Caseworkers, social workers, and other officers have an active and discretionary role in turning ideologies, discourses, rules, and structures into action and lived experiences. They have leeway to use personal emotions, values, and political standpoints to influence bureaucratic agency and decision-making (e.g., Belabas & Gerrits, 2017; Bhatia, 2020; Gupta, 2012; Lipsky, 2010; McDonald & Marston, 2006; Nordling, 2017).

## The Fragility of Hope

**Hope** describes a complex mental state of both emotional and cognitive qualities with some key elements: a desire for an outcome that is uncertain, a belief that this outcome can be obtained, and the realization that one's own agency will not be enough to bring about this outcome (Stockdale, 2021, p. 19). People who hope know it takes external force for the desired outcome to become realized. While privileged groups have ample opportunities to anticipate positive things coming their way, oppressed groups are often forced to "hope against hope" (Stockdale, 2021, p. 10; see also Kleist & Thorsen, 2016). Asylum-seeking people are in the hands of bureaucrats with the power to decide on asylum applications and material support. The authorities become the external agents needed for desires to come true.

Meanwhile, Stockdale (2021) and Ahmed (2010) argue that hope and other emotions considered attractive in contemporary individualistic and neoliberal societies should not be understood or analyzed in isolation from other, less attractive emotions such as fear, despair, and uncertainty. Emotions regarded as opposites and "extremes" work both in tandem and against each other. In the asylum context, where lives and livelihoods are at stake, these emotions abound, making hope fragile and challenged while coexisting with despair and hopelessness (Svašek, 2010).

Importantly, hope can be a tool for exploitation used by those in power to govern and control the powerless (e.g., Eagleton, 2017; Herz et al., 2022, Stockdale, 2021). Serving asylum-seeking people with glimmers of hope through appeal processes, extended deadlines, temporary visas, emergency economic support, and a bed for the night, for example, authorities who will not accept them as full members open the door just enough to keep them hoping,

docile, and quiet (Fontanari, 2017; Herz et al., 2022). In some circumstances, hope gives people the energy to endure oppression and keep fighting for their rights to safety. In other cases, it can be what stops them from opposing the injustices they face.

## LONGITUDINAL PARTICIPATORY ETHNOGRAPHY IN MIGRATION CONTEXTS

The empirical data for the arguments in this article emanate from longitudinal multi-sited ethnographic research into 20 Afghan citizens' experiences of the Swedish asylum process and beyond as project participants ended up leaving Sweden to seek asylum in other countries. The research that began in late 2016 and is still ongoing connects to an ethnographic tradition involving researcher participation, collaboration, and critical approaches to power structures (e.g., Fine, 2017; lisahunter et al., 2013). My approach has been characterized by long-term researcher immersion in participant contexts, recurrent interviews, and participatory observations in asylum camps/housing, leisure activities, and meetings with authorities. The work has also included reading and analyzing asylum case documents together with the participants.

Of the 20 participants, 17 were male, with 12 of these registered as "unaccompanied" and 5 as adults. Of the three women, two arrived as adults and one as a teenager. The gender imbalance reflects that more Afghan boys than girls have sought asylum in Sweden. In addition, the selection of participants has evolved out of my prior involvement as a legal guardian and volunteer in an asylum context dominated by expelled boys and young men. Established trustful relationships led to contacts with key informants who aided the recruitment of additional participants. While my interviews and observations

started in Sweden, only five participants remain in the country at the time of writing: their rights to safety and welfare in Sweden are still conditioned by their temporary status and asylum case processing. The other 15 have left on a “continuous flight” or “secondary migration” to other European countries (Brekke & Brochmann, 2014). They have either been granted refugee status or are living in transit while searching for asylum (e.g., Fontanari, 2020).

Each participant has been formally interviewed, with their interviews recorded, between 2 and 10 times during the research period, depending on when they entered the project and how their asylum situation evolved. Between interviews, I maintained regular contact through conversations and “face-to-face” meetings via apps such as WhatsApp, Imo, and Messenger. Most remained participants for the entire period, while a few left due to challenging asylum-related circumstances. Further, I have, up to the time of writing, conducted 152 participatory observations, documented as observation notes. Observations have ranged from a couple of hours to full weeks (nights excepted), as entire research trips to Italy, France, or Portugal have been spent together with the participants who left Sweden. These recurrent participatory observations in Sweden and abroad have involved various everyday activities in settings where young people expelled from all welfare support commonly gather to live, study, and engage in leisure activities. These experiences have included playing games together, cooking, visiting friends, shopping, and taking part in informal interviews and conversations with the participants, which were written down in observation notes afterwards. Observations have also taken place during meetings with representatives of the authorities, which is the focus of this article.

Working ethnographically this way, with recurrent interviews, observations, and contacts with project participants over several years, provides extensive empirical material that accounts for singular events and processes over long periods. It also provides a comprehensive and complex insight into each participant’s asylum process and experiences over time, which accounts for their individual positions as well as similarities shared by several participants. While each participant’s story is unique, they all have in common having been administered, rejected, temporarily incorporated, and rejected again for several years by Swedish authorities.

For confidentiality reasons, the names of people and locations have been pseudonymized. While the research has received ethical approval, it has entailed ethical challenges connected to research in precarious settings, people enduring extreme stress and suffering, and unequal relationships between researchers and participants. Some challenges within participatory research approaches such as these are related to the importance of being honest and transparent about project-related issues with the participants (Fine, 2017; lisahunter et al., 2013). Thus, developments within the research process and researcher positionality have been recurrently described to the participants. The participants have also been continuously informed about their free choice in participating, and they have been invited to define research questions and topics during observations and interviews.

Nevertheless, without denying the creativity and inventiveness of people who have lost societal support, the undisputable suffering of the participants calls for unconventional research methods, such as engaging in activism when needed (e.g., lisahunter et al., 2013). Examples of activism in my approach include supporting participants in finding



places to live and establishing contacts with solidarity networks or lawyers to help with their continuing legal struggles.

### Approaching Structures From Below

Two settings are at the forefront of this article's arguments. One involves observing participants' meetings with authorities, such as the Swedish Migration Agency, the migration court, and social services. The other involves conversations that have taken place when participants have met and talked with me and among themselves about their experiences during meetings with authorities. The methodological approach has been to seek knowledge about the structures through the participants' experiences.

Ethnography has a significant advantage for those studying how structural conditions are reflected, at the actor level, in people's experiences. Describing the benefits of ethnographic studies of peoples' encounters with institutions, [Fassin \(2015, p. 7\)](#) argues:

Because they occupy this specific space where the action is produced at the intersection of the national and the local, institutions allow for the theoretically delicate and methodologically uncertain operation of interconnecting the macro-sociological and micro-sociological levels, a problem long faced by the social sciences.

To study people's interaction with representatives of these institutions is to participate where the "action is produced" and structures become tangible. A meeting between an officer and a deportable person comprises a confluence of different structural levels, logics, and sentiments—the lived experience at the individual level and the overarching organizational, political, and ideological levels that set most of the conditions for the former. Such an ontological and epistemological view informing ethnographies of people's interaction with institutions has influenced the analytical approach. I regard data as clues to understand the

institutional structures that condition the participants' lives as potentially deportable in Sweden. As deportables, their hopes and futures are bound to the acts of bureaucratic actors, which directs attention to the findings in the following section.

### THE TYRANNY OF TINY ACTS

Bureaucratic procedures and "encounters" during processes of deportability (i.e., making someone deportable) come in many forms and at several stages during the asylum process. Below, I use empirical examples from interviews, observations, and documents to visualize how bureaucratic cruelty works through different "logics of control." I apply this term to refer to patterns of micro-powers and administrative control technologies integrated into normal administrative behaviour used to maintain control in a Foucauldian sense ([Foucault, 1979](#)). These are presented as logics of **repetition, strategic inefficiency, enforced co-operation, and faceless violations**. These control logics solidify in what I term **tiny acts of cruelty**. Appearing as minor, regularized, and routinized behaviours from the viewpoint of bureaucratic actors, the signatures in pen, closing of case files, or handovers of rejection documents, with or without accompanying aggression or verbal hostility, are tiny acts of cruelty that can have vast consequences for the well-being of those subjected to such acts.

### Fragmentation of Hope Through Repetition

Yar arrived in Sweden in 2015 after dramatic events in Afghanistan and was registered as an unaccompanied minor. He was the only participant who received permanent residency in Sweden. However, the lengthy asylum process meant he paid the price of a "loss of hope" and an almost complete lack

of trust in Swedish authorities. The following is a description of his experiences:

In Sweden, they will kill people with a pen. They just write with a pen or on the computer: ... "You receive rejection" ... or "You may not have a driver's license" after three years, four years, not your whole life. They just write. But in my home country ... it is better that they kill a human with a weapon than if they kill with a pen. It means they kill a person every day when they kill with the pen. And when they kill with a weapon, your life ends at once. You don't feel pain all the time. ... They will not shout at you, they will not fight with you, they will just say, "Yeah, I understand," and then when you go out, they will just write. And you can do nothing. If you appeal, if you don't appeal. Nothing. I think it is better if Sweden kills us with a weapon. They play with us every day, every time, every minute.<sup>2</sup>

The pain was evident in Yar's voice when he described repeated negative interactions with Swedish authorities. Since arriving, he had met bureaucrats at the Migration Agency and the migration court who mistrusted his asylum claims, physical injuries, identity papers, and documents from the Afghan court, police, and hospital. They argued that the scars on his body could have been inflicted in other ways than Yar claimed and that his documents could easily be forged.<sup>3</sup>

Confirmations from relatives were brushed off as biased accounts. As Yar only knew his birth month and not his birthday, and his Afghan birth certificate only stated his birth year, the case officer claimed that Yar's age could not be determined in the asylum rejection decision: "The Migration

Agency assesses that nothing has come to light in your case that indicates that you are a minor. The case will therefore be tried according to the procedure that applies to adults." This "nothing-ness" that the Migration Agency refers to consists of several Afghan documents that Sweden rejects as proof of age and identity. In Yar's case, the Swedish authorities never conducted a medical age assessment using X-ray technology, which was common among the other participants and their friends (Elsrud, 2020). Being re-aged into adulthood means losing the extra consideration granted to a child in the asylum process. It subsequently leads to high expectations of the applicants' narration skills and ability to handle a return to the country from which they fled (Kazemi, 2021).<sup>4</sup>

Yar's re-aging took place through the discretionary power of one specific migration officer, Hanna, who took an active part in Yar's case, making decisions over his life for several years. She rejected his age claim, his asylum application, and, repeatedly, his numerous applications for the right to work while waiting during appeals. His friends and other participants with fewer ID documents than Yar could turn to the local Migration Agency office and receive permission to work, but not Yar. According to the local officers, a "remarkable" entry was added to his file; anything Yar asked for had to go through Hanna in Bigtown (i.e., the main office). In Bigtown, Hanna rejected every application Yar filed. Yar and civil society volunteers who supported him experienced her as aggressive and unfriendly when they asked for explanations for the rejections. They felt sure Hanna allowed her negative emotions towards Yar to manifest in repeated bureaucratic acts of rejection.

<sup>2</sup>Näre (2020) reports similar statements about being killed by pens from asylum seekers in Finland.

<sup>3</sup>Most Afghan participants lacking documents received rejections based in part on their lack of documents, while those who had documents received rejections because these documents did not meet Swedish standards. Some with birth certificates were told they should have had passports instead to prove their identity, and some who had passports were told Afghan passports are based on untrustworthy documents. The understanding that the bureaucratic process is staged to produce rejections is common among participants and civil society support networks (e.g., Elsrud et al., 2021).

<sup>4</sup>Yar and most other participants described very stressful and interrogation-like asylum interviews, which negatively affected their ability to give detailed and coherent accounts.

For Yar, every tiny act by Hanna felt cruel and also created a bureaucratic chain reaction, bringing massive cruel consequences for his physical and emotional well-being. After re-aging him and rejecting asylum, the staff at the social services quickly discharged Yar from the residential care unit for young people in the town of his only existing social network and where he went to school. When he objected to leaving, the staff threatened to call the police. It shocked him when, suddenly, adults with whom he had cooked food and played games turned against him. Several others have also described being expelled from their homes by social workers they knew and trusted. Sometimes this was accompanied by threats of calling the police and other times, with assurances that while it was their job, they disliked what they were doing.

Half a year later, after being relocated to a camp for adults and losing his will to study or even stay alive, activists provided him with support and housing, where he slowly recovered. While he expressed that the activists made it possible to experience a “bit of hope” again, his trust in the authorities was severely injured. Later, when he became one of the few to fulfil all the criteria for “the new upper secondary education act,” he received a conditioned temporary permit to study in Sweden. This was a new chance, providing him with new conditions to feel hopeful. He turned to social services for housing and food support, only to receive yet another rejection because he was not applying for enough jobs. To qualify for a residency extension under the so-called education act, he had to complete his full-time studies. Meanwhile, social services demanded he work to survive. Yar was in a bureaucratic Catch-22 and again became depressed and lost hope of building a life in Sweden.

Finally, he gave up on applying for support from local authorities. Against the odds, he found and worked one full-time job and one part-time job while studying full time, anticipating one of the jobs would lead to a permanent position after he completed his studies. If he didn't have a permanent job within six months of completing his studies, he would (again) become illegalized and deportable.

After seven years in Sweden, Yar managed to get a permanent job and, therefore, permanent residency in Sweden. However, after experiencing multiple profound, life-altering rejections, his capacity for feeling positive and hopeful about the future was injured. Over the years, he has described these rejections as “being killed by a pen,” having his “life stolen” and “hope stolen,” hinting at a fragmentation of hope that follows upon repeated bureaucratic violence (Herz et al., 2022). Having endured too many instances of “hopes given” and “hopes taken away” eventually leads to erosion and loss of hope. Loss of hope through repetitive tiny acts of cruelty is one reason that many young Afghans gave for why they left Sweden and applied for asylum in other countries, as will be discussed below.

### Strategic Inefficiency

Another hope-draining logic of control is expressed through acts—or lack thereof—that force people into waiting (e.g., Bendixsen & Eriksen, 2021; Jacobsen et al., 2020; Khosravi, 2021). Ahmed's (2018) concept of “strategic inefficiency” describes processes where authorities stall people's rights and progress through inaction. Such stalling is carried out through all sorts of delays: decisions being avoided, documents lost, new queries added, notifications of postponed decision dates, and so forth. As Ahmed points out, strategic inefficiency is “not just about errors in an operating system; errors can be an operating

system” (para. 1), suggesting inefficiency is a method rather than an unintended consequence of bureaucratic shortcomings.

The most common strategic inefficiency permeating the lives and hopes of many participants is delays during the asylum process. Over the years, several participants have expressed the hope-draining effects of delays and waiting in Sweden. Sadat arrived in Sweden as a 16-year-old boy who had just escaped a kidnapping in Afghanistan. He turned 18 right before his asylum application was rejected. Like Yar, he was threatened by the police when he did not want to leave the social service’s residential care home. He became dependent on charity for his livelihood and suffered from shame and hopelessness. A year later, he was still waiting for his asylum appeal to be processed by the court but decided not to wait anymore. Before he left for France, he explained:

You can only have hope when you believe that there is at least a small chance that it will eventually be okay. There is no such chance anymore. Sweden does not want us to be here. They will find new things all the time that will eventually force us to leave.

Sadat was unable to feel hope in Sweden and directed it elsewhere, to another country where he felt he had a better chance of receiving asylum. Meanwhile, he exposed the interplay between strategic inefficiency and contextual changes that manifest when nothing is processed in individual asylum cases. The most obvious example of an institutionalized interplay between strategic inefficiency and contextual change is when decision-makers at the Migration Agency postpone decisions until minors turn 18 to expel them as adults. Several participants and their friends who had not been re-aged received their first rejection right after their eighteenth birthday.<sup>5</sup> Amir, for instance,

underwent the same expulsion processes as Yar and Sadat upon rejection right after his eighteenth birthday. He became homeless, lonely, and, in his words, “without hope,” to the point where he attempted suicide. He was subsequently supported by members of a Swedish church who helped him re-escape to Italy. He received asylum there within a year—he was one of 13 (of 15) participants who left Sweden after rejections and were later granted asylum in other European countries.<sup>6</sup>

After a long period of complete, inefficient silence from the authorities, many young people like Sadat and Amir, who were not re-aged, found that they were suddenly noticed and rejected around their eighteenth birthday. By strategic inefficiency, creating slow processes while waiting for suitable times for rejection, the authority takes control of the applicants’ lives and conditions for hope (Fontanari, 2017). Waiting for a decision to be able to build a life puts people in a state of fragile hope and passiveness, where objections and complaints must be suppressed in order not to irritate the authorities and risk punishment.

## Enforced Co-Operation

Another control logic can be described as enforced co-operation. It manifests, for instance, in acts where a case officer distributes tasks to the rejected applicant, who must obey or be punished. On one occasion, I accompanied Fatemeh and her teenage daughter

(2020). According to statistics, 13,840 minors were re-aged by Swedish authorities between 2015 and February 2018; 5,896 of these were re-aged after X-rays (Hagström et al., 2018, p. 25). For several participants, a femur bone X-ray indicating the age of 18 and teeth indicating an age less than 18 rendered the conclusion that the person was likely to be 18 years old.

<sup>6</sup>This pattern of re-escaping—propelled by bureaucratic inefficiency, rejections, and hopelessness—followed by asylum being granted in other countries may be a sign of the legal uncertainty claimed to negatively impact the Swedish asylum process (Elsrud et al., 2021; Skodo, 2020). It also connects to Ahmed’s (2018) suggestion that bureaucratic errors can become an operating system.

<sup>5</sup>Meanwhile, those who were re-aged received a new eighteenth birthday that matched the date of rejection (Elsrud,

ters Soraya and Dunya to their “return conversation” with the Migration Agency officer, Emma. Fatemeh and her daughters’ testimonies of abuse in Afghanistan were deemed fake and were rejected by the Migration Agency and the migration court. They had also failed to prove that their visible body scars resulted from abuse. Thus, they had recently received the last of three possible rejections and should prepare for self-deportation, according to Migration Agency procedures. These meetings were far from “conversations” and much more about coercion and punishment.

The small family had lived through four years of strategic inefficiency, but when confronted with the logic of enforced cooperation, speed became crucial. The Migration Agency officers did not want to wait. Ignoring the family’s profound angst and questions regarding alternatives to deportation, Emma frequently stressed that the family must leave Sweden “within two weeks.” She repeatedly asked if they agreed to complete their “assignment” [uppdrag]. This so-called assignment—a treacherously neutral and bureaucratic paraphrase for life-threatening coercion—was to make an appointment with the Afghan embassy in Stockholm, pick up travel documents, and return to Emma on the coming Thursday, four workdays ahead. As many participants and civil society activists who have tried setting up appointments or getting documents from the Afghan embassy know, this task usually takes several months to complete.

There would be repercussions if they refused to carry out their assignment. Looking steadily at the family, Emma explained that if they did not perform the assignment, it could lead to a host of consequences. These included obligations to come once a week to report to Emma and her colleagues at the Migration Agency 50 kilometres away

from their refugee camp and school, loss of Fatemeh’s financial support, reports to the border police, and an imminent threat of being taken into detention. When the children started crying during the meeting, Emma bluntly said, “Now I receive a reaction,” before telling them that the Migration Agency was “not responsible for what happens” to them in Afghanistan.

They had suffered from physical and psychological health issues during years of waiting. The unfriendly and coercive character of the return conversation made matters worse. Fatemeh described afterwards how she used to feel ashamed because she could not protect her girls from male violence in Afghanistan. Now, she felt terrible for not being able to protect them from bureaucratic violence in Sweden. She felt threatened by Emma’s demands that they appear weekly at the office: “I know that every time we go there, they want to crush us somehow. They want to say bad things all the time, threaten us somehow.” When asked why she felt that way, she replied: “Because the things she said to us, somehow she tortured us.” In this instance, the cruelty of bureaucratic acts was experienced not just as final adverse outcomes but as torture during interaction. It was the way Emma treated and spoke to them and the impossible “assignment” she forced upon them that they felt “crushed” them.

A few months after two “return conversations” with Emma, the family managed to halt their deportation following an application for an impediment to enforcement. In an interview a year later, while waiting for a new asylum interview, the family still expressed shock over what they described as a fake allusion to (impossible) collaboration on one hand and the recounting of punishments on the other.

Encountering this type of bureaucratic violence had a price—a fear of hope. When talking about their conversations with Emma, the oldest daughter, Soraya, looked back at the whole asylum process and said:

I had a lot of hope. When we received our rejection, it was as if I fell apart. I have not become whole yet. I don't **dare to hope** one more time. It will be easier to feel that it will not go well.

Having lived with uncertainty for a long time, the family had juggled hope and despair, but meeting Emma and the logic of enforced co-operation had drained the family of the will to feel hope. For Soraya, even the prospect of hoping was too painful. After disclosing the controlling and seductive function of “glimmers of hope” (Fontanari, 2017, p. 47), she tried to protect herself emotionally against the pain of future violence by rejecting hope.

### Faceless Violations

Another logic expresses itself through faceless violations. The facelessness of bureaucratic life and structures has been a critical focus of scholarship on bureaucracy's efficiency—and power (Arendt, 1969; Bauman, 1995; Herzfeld, 1992; Weber, 1958). Bureaucratic processes are permeated by impersonal rationality and maintained through routinized activities by anonymous actors doing their delimited tasks in a grand system of control. In this structure, the organization—and not its bureaucrats—makes the decisions, thus rendering the decision-maker free of guilt. Case officers at the Migration Agency and the social services commonly refer to this notion of “only doing my job” in meetings with participants.

The facelessness of bureaucracy also appears in the participants' accounts of pain and hopelessness. After a conversation with two young men who shared the experience

of receiving many rejections, I added this entry to my field diary (October 6, 2019):

Esmatullah and Abbas start talking about the Migration Agency as a “monster” that plows forwards, consuming people from Afghanistan on its way. Abbas says it is a racist monster. It only consumes “some brown people.” The monster has no identity, they say. It is made up of an enormous amount of people who write “the Migration Agency assesses” and “the Migration Agency decides.” When I ask them how it feels when they write like that, Abbas says it makes him super frustrated. There is no person to get angry at or put up against the wall. Just a racist monster without a face.

Bureaucrats help create this image of a faceless monster by giving the organization agency through linguistic metamorphoses, using the Migration Agency as a subject, and employing active verbs. “The agency **assesses**” and “the Migration Agency has **given** you repeated opportunities” were common phrases in the written communication from the Migration Agency to the participants. The participants also described interactions with officers who claimed they were just doing their jobs—directing blame and responsibility away from themselves and onto their anonymous, faceless bureaucratic organization. This situation is painful for people receiving rejections; it makes resistance towards officers futile.

Bureaucrats' discretionary powers are hidden in a faceless organization not only while communicating decisions. Depersonalized responsibility also occurs through constant anonymized refusals and delays in support. Closely related to the logic of strategic inefficiency, such as when errors become an “operating system” (Ahmed, 2018, para. 1), people are advised to contact the Migration Agency and often spend weeks, months, or even years trying to reach someone who can deal with their issue. Often, participants describe receiving useless information or being

directed elsewhere within the organization for new rounds without answers. They can find no person who takes responsibility for meeting their needs.

Another entry in my field diary (June 16, 2020) refers to the description that three young men provided of their interaction with the authorities as they sat in the backseat of my car while heading back from a meeting at a local Migration Agency office:

The guys say life with the Migration Agency is like walking in a never-ending labyrinth. You try everything, turn right—a dead end; turn left—a dead end; walk hundreds or “maybe thousands” of metres back before you try to start over. Sometimes there is a guard in an opening, laughing at you or “slapping you.” Sometimes there is a robot-like lady at a desk who hands you a new map to a new labyrinth.

Their comment that they can encounter either a cruel guard (laughing and slapping you) or a robot-like person (just doing her job) signifies different experiences shared by many participants. Bureaucratic actors can be either emotionally cruel or neutral while performing cruel acts with fateful consequences. Regardless, both approaches take place behind the facelessness of bureaucratic organizations. Descriptions of labyrinths and the authorities as faceless monsters connect to [Arendt's \(1969\)](#) reasoning about ripe bureaucracies where “there is nobody left with whom one could argue, to whom one could present grievances.” In such a state of “tyranny without a tyrant,” the attraction of executing bureaucratic violence is at its greatest (s. V, para. 22). Nobody is to blame while the system runs itself. From a hope perspective, when the external agent who could have helped to fulfil the desired outcome has become a faceless monster, it can feel almost impossible even to “hope against hope” ([Stockdale, 2019](#), p. 29).

## CONCLUSION

The examples of acts of cruelty and the logic working through them are by no means an all-inclusive list of violations that have affected the participants and other people seeking asylum in Sweden. However, control logics—repetitiveness, strategic inefficiency, enforced co-operation, and bureaucratic facelessness—help us to visualize some critical aspects needing more attention to better understand the incarnation of bureaucratic violence that torments many people seeking asylum in Sweden.

First, the examples presented here provide essential evidence of some of the long-term consequences for people exposed to equally long-term bureaucratic violence. As [Bhatia \(2020\)](#) argues, bureaucratic cruelty severely impairs the health of exposed people. No data are available on suicide among asylum-seeking adults or families. Still, adult interlocutors have expressed extreme stress and hopelessness following their long wait in Sweden, permeated by tiny acts of bureaucratic cruelty delivered by either indifferent or cruel officers. Hope is vital for health and well-being ([Stockdale, 2021](#)). My research shows that hope under oppression is fragile and ambiguous (see also [Fontanari, 2020](#); [Herz et al., 2022](#); [Stockdale, 2021](#)). My interlocutors experienced their ability to hope being ground down to fragments and “glimmers” ([Fontanari, 2020](#))—and sometimes even lost altogether, eventually leading to suicide attempts.

Second, the bureaucracies responsible for these acts with such dire consequences are not faceless. They may be set up to remain abstract and “human-less” to direct attention and blame away from human actors. However, scholarly perspectives focusing on bureaucracy as structures maintained by “non-cruel” and routine-prone bureaucrats have contributed—most likely

involuntarily—to an image of these bureaucracies being, above all, self-propelled structures (e.g., Arendt, 1969; Bauman, 1995; Weber, 1958). Indeed, bureaucrats can inflict pain and cause cruelty without the intention to do so. As claimed by some participants and researchers, some officers try to apply rules and regulations justly (e.g., Belabas & Gerrits, 2017; Nordling, 2017). However, the participants' overall experiences and my observations reveal the power of case officers who let their values and emotions permeate conversations, decisions, and punishment for disobedience. Officers become something more than the long arm of laws and regulations when using discretionary space fuelled by their personal positionality to treat people with cruelty. These findings raise alarming concerns about the impact of biased officers upholding the rule of law principles within the legal system over individuals seeking protection in Sweden.

Third, bureaucratic organizations such as the Swedish Migration Agency and social services become responsible for making and keeping people deportable and maintaining a departheid system that forces some groups—such as Afghans—into precariousness and rightlessness. Kalir (2019) proposes that the maltreatment of groups of people by departheid bureaucracy is the outcome of a system that is inherently racist since it functions to divide, racialize, and exclude without explicitly addressing issues of race, superiority, and inferiority. With or without emotional bureaucrats, bureaucracy remains a tool for keeping undesired people out.

Afghans in Sweden seem particularly affected by the bureaucratic violence many are forced to navigate. They face bureaucracy's inherent exclusionary processes and the antipathy towards Afghans that occur during contact with bureaucratic actors and societal rhetoric (Skodo, 2017, 2018). This research

calls for policy-makers to acknowledge the racialized separation that takes place in the bureaucratic governing of migrants in Sweden. It also highlights a need to admit the leeway that allows individual officers to use their powers arbitrarily and unleash their emotions in ways that threaten the instant and long-term well-being of people seeking protection as well as the rule of law principles. Accepting that racist state violence exists is a first step towards engaging in anti-racist societal repair work and solidarity, as well as acknowledging asylum-seeking people's contributions to society (e.g., Hansen, 2021).

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