

# Autoethnographic study of applying service journeys to asylum applications

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## Abstract

Just as the COVID-19 pandemic was starting to fade, the Russia–Ukraine conflict erupted into a large-scale war. This caused a new influx of refugees to many European countries. In this case study, through an autoethnographic service journey, we investigate the process of applying for asylum in Norway. We aim to understand the parts of the journey that work well and the issues that still require attention. By analysing the data collected, we can see that there are two main underlying issues, which are creating transparency and building trust between the applicant and the service system involved in asylum seeking processes. We noted that in this individual case, trust was constructed by the extent to which the officials treated the applicant as an equal. Making the entire asylum application journey visible from the first step is one way to find approaches to improve this process in the future.

Keywords: social public service design, refugee, asylum seeking process, autoethnographic service journey

## Introduction

The world we are living in today in 2022 has changed drastically after the COVID-19 pandemic and the large scale war in Ukraine. The war has brought us a new challenge of more people seeking asylum in Europe and around the world. According to the UN Refugee Agency's brief from June 2022, it is estimated that around 8.3 million refugees have fled Ukraine and that 25 million people will be displaced by the end of 2022 and will need humanitarian aid because of the war (Siegfried, 2022). This is a large number of people looking for a new and secure life outside of their

home countries. Norway estimates that it will receive over 30,000 refugee applications by 2023 (Schengen Visa News, 2022). Norway's asylum seeking processes are similar to those of other European countries, so we believe our findings from this study will benefit the service design processes of public services in Norway and across Europe.

Design as a field has broadened from designing only tangible, physical objects to designing complexities, wicked problems and futures (Suoheimo, 2020). As Nobel Prize winner in economics, Herbert Simon (1981, 129) states, "To design is to devise courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones." Crisis situations require us to act rapidly, even when the root causes are wicked problems that would require long-term collaboration to solve (Suoheimo 2020; Suoheimo et al. 2020). Using service and social design is one way of providing tools to the target group (the users) so that they can design their experiences of the services that they encounter. Participatory design is a form of empowerment as it seeks to give end-users the capacity to design their social situations for themselves (Souleles, 2017).

In this article, we will report an autoethnographic study of a service journey of applying for asylum in Norway. Our study aims to answer the following research question:

- How by using autoethnographic service journey can we identify points for further development and the parts that are working well in order to design better public asylum-seeker services in Norway?

The use of ethnography is well established in service design research (Stickdorn et al., 2018). However, there is almost no research on applying service journeys as a form of autoethnographic data collection for refugee services. Google Scholar yielded no results for the four search terms "service design" and "autoethnography" and "refugee" and "service journey." Nor did changing "service journey" to "service blueprint" yield any results. Using three terms "service design" and "autoethnography" and "service blueprint", in total 30 results for publications were encountered. There were publications without any connection to refugee context. As an example, Suoheimo et al. (2019) investigated the use of Siri in ordering packages online in the form of autoethnographic service journeys. We can conclude that there is further potential in service design research of applying autoethnographic service journeys, especially in the context of services created for refugees.

The service journey reported in the current study is an individual case study, but it still can shed light on the problems that other refugees face when applying for asylum in Norway. It is vital that the services created for refugees are welcoming and create



a safe space, taking into consideration that many people arriving may have had traumatic life events (Subramanian et al., 2022). This study is important, as people's first impressions of a country are formed through the asylum-seeking processes because these are one of the main contact points after crossing a country's border. The extent to which people feel welcomed and how or what services will be provided for them right from the start play an important role in settling in a new country (Subramanian et al., 2022). We also wish to highlight that the study presents solely a personal experience and not that of any of the organisations in question.

## Literature review

### Service and social design for transformation

Service design is an approach that has been utilised in recent decades to develop services by following user-centred, co-creative, sequenced, evidenced and holistic (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011) principles. Furthermore, service design has established itself as a practice that enables the delivery of services with a human-centred approach that places human needs at the centre of the development process (Miettinen, 2016). Penin (2018) recognises the transdisciplinary nature of services and describes a hands-on mindset operated through a service design process that encompasses five steps (problem definition, research, concept development, prototyping and implementation). Service design practice is constructed around the use of several tools and methods that help in analysing and developing services (such as service journeys), which describe crucial touchpoints for users, their needs in using the service itself and a service blueprint that describes the infrastructure and resources required to deliver the service.

Social context and social design overlap with the ethos of service design. Young (2012) proposes that service designers have a role in the co-design of socially responsible community practice, whereas for Tunstall (2013), design innovation has much to contribute to fighting global inequality if it commits to clear principles of respectful engagement with people's values as part of an inclusive co-design practice. Kuure and Miettinen (2017) propose that service design is recognised as a tool for creating understanding of challenging life situations, and it can be used as a co-design process that suggests more equal positions between different stakeholders.

It is important to note that service design can be seen both as a strategic as well as a more tactical and operational activity. Miettinen and Vuontisjärvi (2016) have developed service design in the context of community and organisational



development. It can enable development work on two different levels: a) on a strategic level, where service design can be used to enable the empowerment process, and b) in the participatory development process, which embraces stakeholders and communities in a process of social innovation. This process is categorised into four phases: 1) learn, 2) identify, 3) train and 4) build. The process is based on the idea that the identified challenges would also be handled, which would require engagement and participation from communities and stakeholders. For the participatory development process, service design is practiced through workshops with stakeholders and community members through practical engagement and “service design doing” (Stickdorn et al., 2018). The strategic and participatory development levels work together to enable transformational change. In service design, there is very often a motivation for organisational transformation or change for the better (Kurtmollaiev et al., 2018).

### **Service design in the sensitive refugee crisis environment**

A refugee is defined as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2021a). Research shows that countries receiving refugees are often unprepared (UN, 2021) and especially “those in low- and middle-income countries where nearly 90% of the world’s refugees live—have continued to demonstrate a remarkable welcome” (UNHCR, 2021b). We can note that neither Norway nor Northern Europe can be counted as low- or middle-income countries, and they have structures that have been designed for refugees arriving in those countries. Nevertheless, war situations present crises, and even in the global North, it is difficult to be well prepared for such events. This requires reflection on the service design practices in the public sector for receiving and settling newly arrived refugees.

A systematic literature review by Subramanian et al. (2022) show how there have been only few publications in service and/or marketing research-related journals regarding service-related research on refugees. The authors investigated journal articles from between 2000 and 2020. The refugee’s journey, from becoming a refugee to settling into a new country, is generally divided into three stages: 1) Entry is when a person begins to make plans to seek protection; 2) Transition is the physical transition of one person moving from one place to another and 3) Exit, when the refugee settles into a new country. One discovery of Subramanian et al.’s (2022) study was that there was a lack of balance in research publications, as the largest number of publications focus on the exit stage of the refugee process, while fewer focus on the entry stage. There is often a wide range of service providers that aid refugees in the application process, such as “government agencies, non-government



organisations (NGOs), for-profit organisations, quasi-government agencies, religious bodies and formal and informal volunteer groups” (Subramanian et al., 2022, p. 909; Fozdar & Banki, 2017). These services play an important role in helping refugees to settle and return to a “normal” life (Subramanian et al., 2022).

Scientific studies show that refugees often suffer from trauma, which has an effect on their wellbeing (Mangrio et al., 2018). This points to the need for health services right from the start even though refugees often find difficulties in navigating the health system (Bilecen & Yurtseven, 2018), which requires a certain awareness and knowledge of health literacy (Doocy et al., 2016). In general, Subramanian et al. (2022, p. 912) point to a lack of language proficiency and that “comprehension, communication and cultural issues were the common problems encountered by refugees, both service researchers and practitioners are required to identify the options to better visualise and tangibilise available service provision and processes.” The same authors highlight the findings in their recommendation that service providers should provide services that are easy to understand and are culturally adapted and appropriate.

Junginger (2012) have written that service design in the public sector is the implementation of public policies and new laws. We have clearly seen this to be the case in the immigration of Ukrainian refugees, as the EU, for the first time, gave permission for Ukrainian refugees to begin working in Europe for three years (BBC, 2022). Previously, this was not possible for refugees arriving in EU countries. However, the refugees often need to go through lengthy language learning programs and gain some professional education before entering the labour market. The current structures of taking in refugees have not been designed for this type of situation. The introduction of this new EU law has forced each country to push forward other laws that make the three-year work permission possible. For example, Norway is currently introducing a new national law that states refugees who begin to work straight after their arrival will not lose their rights to educational opportunities or other benefits created for refugees, as is currently the case (IMDI, 2022). This kind of setting makes service design work unpredictable and difficult to forecast.

## Participatory autoethnographic service journey

In this paper, we report a research through design case study of an autoethnographic service journey. It is common for service design to use ethnographic tools to create insights in the first stages of the Double Diamond model (Design Council, 2019). The Double Diamond has four phases, namely, discover, define, develop (test) and



deliver. The “discover” stage is important for understanding what the main struggles are in a current service. Data are collected through various empathy-building tools. In the next phase, the data are analysed, and the main problems, often called “pain points,” are raised for future development. In the first diamond, a brief is created based on the data and analysis. The next two stages (the second diamond) consist of developing and testing prototypes of possible service solutions. Using the Double Diamond as a process in our case study is the methodology of doing research through design (Zimmerman et al., 2007).

Our report concentrates on the first stage, “discover;” in other words, we focus on building empathy towards the service through an ethnographic service journey. It is typical for service designers to use empathic methods, often loosely referred to as “ethnographic methods” (Segelström et al., 2009). Empathy towards the users’ situation also helps stakeholders understand their own position or role in the service journey.

According to Adams et al. (2017), autoethnography “is a research method that uses personal experience (‘auto’) to describe and interpret (‘graphy’) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (‘ethno’)” (p. 1). Holman (2007) highlights that autoethnography focuses on experiencing and reflecting on “the relationship among self and culture, individual and collective experience, and identity politics and appeals for social justice.” (p. 1). Autoethnography is a personal narrative and sociocultural exploration (Holman, 2007).

The study also uses a participatory design in creating knowledge, as Souleles (2017) explains how this design is a way of distributing power in the design process. In service design, it is vital to make end-users’ voices heard and involve them in the design process as co-designers. This is one way of distributing power because it questions the top-down managerial approaches to creating knowledge.

The service or customer journey is a central concept and tool in service design practice and research. Følstad et al. (2013) reviewed 55 scientific articles to summarise the customer journey as, “The process a customer goes through to achieve a specific goal involving one or more service providers,” suggesting that

... by analysing the customer journey we can gain knowledge on how customer care is experienced from the customers’ point of view. Furthermore, customer journey visualisations may be helpful to summarise user research and also support design of innovative solutions for customer care. (p. 4)

Stickdorn et al. (2018), referring to the service journey as a journey map, suggest there are two main purposes of the service journey, namely, to capture and visualise



user experiences (current-state journey maps) or to visualise projected, designed-for-service experiences (future-state journey maps). In this report, we use the service journey as a way to capture “current-state” experience through a participatory autoethnographic approach in order to gain insight into the experience of applying for asylum in Norway from the asylum seekers’ point of view.

### **Data Collection**

The anonymity of the research participant is preserved in this paper. For this reason, we will neither provide a gender nor an age or any other personal information. The story contains only one refugee’s view on applying for asylum in Norway. We will use “they” as a gender-neutral pronoun throughout the text and it can be understood as she or he. The research participant used autoethnography, and during the service journey, they made observations, took photos and made sketches. They wanted to rely only on Norwegian state authorities and not on the experience of other Ukrainians. It was the research participant’s choice to communicate with the authorities and follow their rules in the process of seeking asylum and settling in the country as a refugee. The study was conducted in 2022.

### **Service journey of the asylum-seeking process**

The asylum-seeking process is divided into three stages: A) pre-journey, B) actual journey and C) post-journey. Figure 1 illustrates the entire journey made by the research participant.



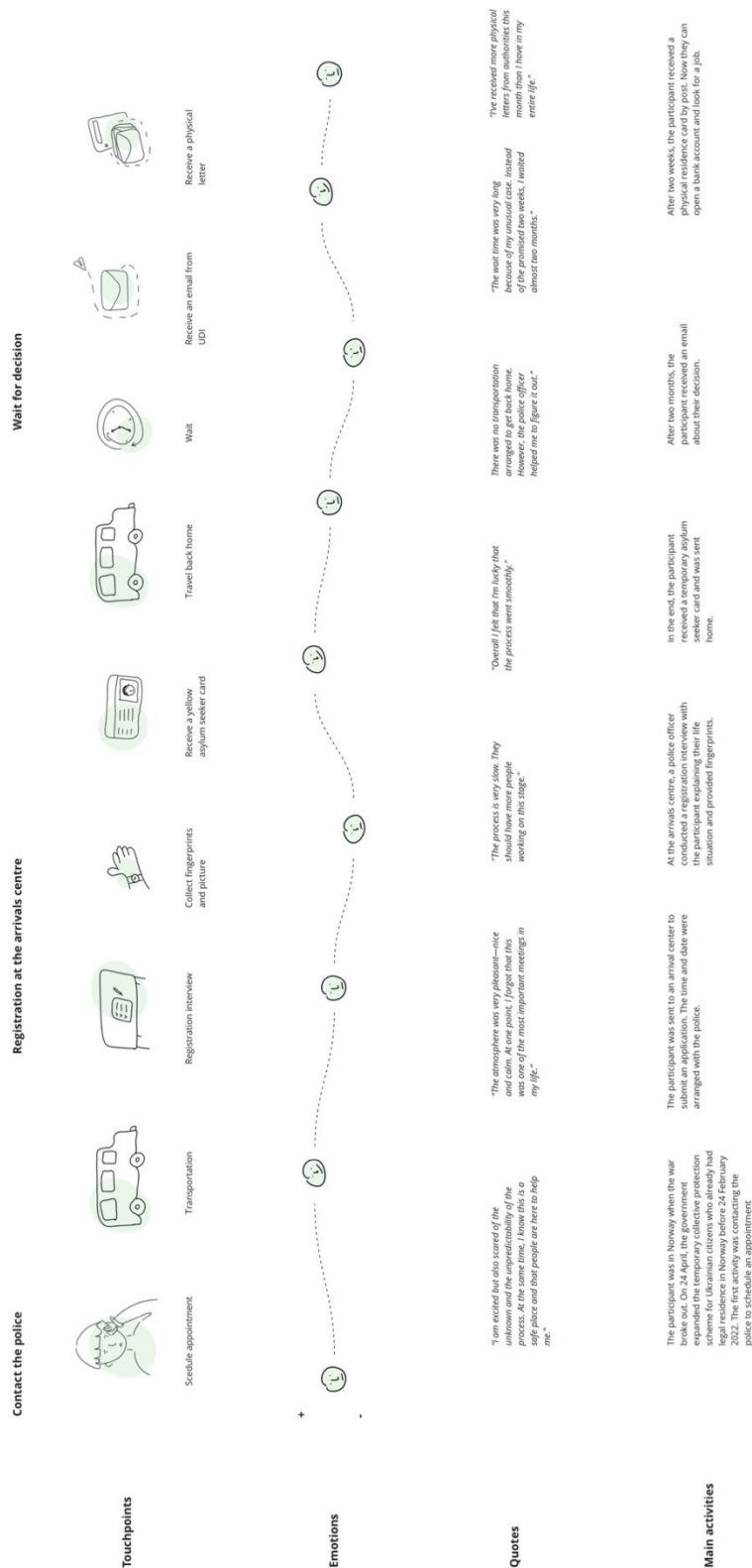


Figure 1. The service journey made by the research participant to apply for asylum (Illustration: Tetiana Dubovenko)



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### *Part A: Pre-journey—Getting prepared*

The participant found information about collective protection on the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration's website. The Norwegian Police's and the Norwegian Organisation of Asylum Seekers' (NOAS) websites were also consulted. The participant's Norwegian resident permit was about to expire. They describe the application process as follows:

“My story of seeking protection from the war is a little different because by the time Russia started a full-scale war, I was already in Norway and had a student permit. At one point, I had to decide whether to stay in Norway or seek asylum in another country because it was very dangerous to return to Ukraine.”

The participant noted that obtaining documents had general requirement even though the system was quite new because new rules, regulations and laws had been adopted and entered into force very quickly; as a result, the process for obtaining documents was constantly changing.

The Norwegian Parliament (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2022) expanded the scheme of temporary collective protection to give persons who were in the territory of Norway before the full-scale invasion, such as students and seasonal workers, the opportunity to obtain collective protection. Still, the previous basis for being in Norway must have lapsed or be about to lapse in less than two months after the application for protection. After considering all the pros and cons, the participant decided to stay in Norway.

### *Part B: Actual Journey—Applying for collective protection*

The research participant contacted the police and made an appointment. As there were not very many people applying for protection, the appointment was arranged for the next day. The police arranged transport from the police district to the National Arrivals Centre.

On the way to the centre, the research participant described their feelings as follows:

“On my way to the National Arrivals Centre. I am checking again if I have my documents with me. My feelings are similar to ones that you experience on your way to the airport. I am excited but also scared of the unknown and the unpredictability of the process. At the same time, I know this is a safe place and that people are here to help me.”

When they arrived at the meeting place, the participant saw a police officer standing near a dark minibus. The participant boarded the bus, and the driver and the police



officer came onboard and welcomed the people very pleasantly, saying that the trip would take around one hour and asking people to fasten their seatbelts.

The National Arrivals Centre is situated in Råde, in south-eastern Norway. The centre is very large and can receive 250–500 asylum-seekers per day (Faull, 2016). It is a sprawling grey building that looks like a warehouse surrounded by a fence. After arriving at the destination, the participant was greeted by a worker that spoke their language. Inside, the participant was subjected to a security check similar to the ones at airports. Unfortunately, there was no official person waiting, and the participant had to ask to be accompanied.

After this, the participant was immediately asked where they would live and if any help was needed. Then, the volunteer put a piece of tape on the participant's arm with a number. While walking, he said that the procedure would be short and that at that time, there were not very many people applying for protection. However, instead of 15 minutes, the wait time was around two hours.

Inside the centre, there were large tents with double-decker beds (Figure 2). Almost all the tents and beds were empty. There were also TVs, tables, children's toys, and food. The participant met an old couple around 65 years old that did not speak English and another young couple with a child. In the waiting room, there was food, cutlery and equipment to make tea or coffee.



Figure 2. A sketch of the internal space (Illustration: Tetiana Dubovenko)

In another room were four police officers sitting near a table. Each asylum seeker came one by one to meet with a police officer who was available for a registration interview. The purpose of the interview was to collect information about the asylum seekers' identity and to check whether they could pose a threat to society. The police



officer was interested in the participant's previous residency permit and asked about their address and where they were studying. After asking these questions and filling out an online form, the police officer took the participant's passport.

"I was not afraid to give my passport. I trusted the police officer and knew that I had nothing to worry about. The atmosphere was very pleasant—nice and calm. One of the police officers also brought me a cup of coffee. At one point, I forgot that this is one of the most important meetings in my life. The officers made jokes among themselves and talked very nicely and politely."



Figure 3. While waiting, a meal was provided to the participant

After the registration interview, the officer accompanied the participant to another room where other people were also waiting. While the participant was waiting, a meal was provided (Figure 3). After waiting for an hour and a half, the police officer took the participant's fingerprints and scanned their documents. The officer was familiar with the fact that the participant already had a student permit and asked them hand over their old residency card.

"At this moment, I became nervous; even though I knew that I have a right to collective protection, I was not 100% sure. In a couple of minutes, the officer came back, gave me my card and passport back, and said that everything was fine and I had to wait a little bit longer for the asylum seeker card."



Following this, the participant waited around 30 minutes for the officers to get the asylum seeker card ready (Figure 4). The officer asked if the participant needed any further help and if they needed some clothes or any other essentials. The participant asked to talk to NOAS, an organisation that provides unbiased information to new asylum seekers. Unfortunately, it was late, and everyone had left for that day. The officer asked the participant about transportation back to Oslo and checked into how they could go back. The next bus was an hour later, and the participant waited inside. When they left the building, another police officer explained where the bus stop was. The student ticket for the bus cost 155 NOK (around 15 euros).

“While seated on the bus, I thought again and again about my day and the people I met. Overall, I feel that I’m lucky that the process went smoothly.”



Figure 4. The participant received their passport and a temporary asylum seeker card (Illustration: Tetiana Dubovenko)

### *Part C: Post-journey—waiting for the result*

The wait time was longer than normal for the participant because their case was unusual. Instead of the promised two weeks, it took almost 2 months to receive approval. After receiving an email that their application for asylum had been approved, the participant went for an appointment with the police to give back the temporary asylum card and get a new residency card. During this two-month wait, the participant began learning the Norwegian language online. It is worth noting that without the residency card, the participant would not be able to look for a job or travel abroad.

At the police station, a police officer took back the temporary asylum card and assured the participant that the new card would arrive by post in two weeks. That



was exactly what happened. Besides the new identification card, the participant received many other letters from the Norwegian authorities, such as information about how to apply for a F-number (a Norwegian identity number granted by the local tax office), information about health-care services, a new bank card and information about paying taxes.

## Results

We divided the insights into two categories: the parts of the service journey that require some attention and the parts that are working very well. While analysing the participant's asylum seeker service journey, we found the following issues that need some improvement:

- At each stage of the process, the officials explain to the asylum seekers what will happen, but the asylum seekers have no idea of the general picture of what awaits them.
- The process of applying for protection is quite clear, but a lot of time is spent waiting.
- There are inconsistencies in the stated waiting times; employees give false expectations related to wait times.
- A misunderstanding about transportation caused some disappointment, as it turned out later that the participant would need to organise transportation back to Oslo on their own.

Issues that are working well:

- The staff is very responsive and good natured; the police officers brought coffee to the participant, which indicates a lack of hierarchy and equal treatment.
- Transportation to the arrivals centre was organised.
- Volunteers and people in green vests are passing by, available to chat or help.
- Officers bring food; after six hours in the arrivals centre, the participant was hungry.
- The participant's decision to rely on government agencies reduced anxiety and distress; this decision arose from a high level of trust in the state sector, as the participant had already lived in Norway for a year and is familiar with the concept of trust in the state and people.



## Discussion

We can note that the research participant does not represent the majority of Ukrainian asylum seekers as they did not come from the war zone and had already settled in Norway before beginning the process. Nevertheless, the participant is unable to return safely to their home country. Since the participant had been living in Norway before the asylum application, they are more likely to trust the local authorities in comparison to those arriving directly to Norway from their home countries. We see that it is vital to construct a relationship of trust between the applicant and the authorities. It is also salient to consider that levels of trust in public entities in Northern European countries is higher than in Eastern European countries, where corruption rates are generally higher (Transparency International, 2022). The people in the chain of the service journey are the face of public authority, which is why it is useful to pay attention to these encounters, as they are an element of building trust within the service system in the country.

We learned that there were several positive encounters during the service journey, as the staff handled the participant in an egalitarian manner and provided for the participant's needs, such as bringing food during the wait process at Råde. The journey also reflected some issues, however, that could be improved upon; for example, there was no transportation back into town for people who do not intend to stay overnight at the arrivals centre. We must note that the transportation issue probably only affects a minority of asylum applicants, as the majority need to spend the night at Råde until they have a more permanent place to go.

Although the participant already trusted the authorities, we should consider that having one's identification documents taken away can generate moments of discomfort. This is a point of contact that could be service designed and brainstormed with the stakeholders. One possibility would be to give the applicants a stamped document or a form stating the name of the person who collected the documents and how long it will be before the documents will be returned. Having the necessary contact details and information explaining that this is a normal procedure could help in building even more trust. We nevertheless note that the people who helped the participant during the journey were building confidence by treating the person as an equal and taking their basic needs into consideration.

The participant did not have a general view of the entire journey or of what was going to happen at each stage. This could be solved by, for example, providing a pamphlet that explains the general steps of the application process. This pamphlet could be provided online on institutional websites a refugee would need to visit, and it could be also given in printed form to people arriving at Råde. Additionally, there were several



stages where the participant needed to wait during the asylum application. At Råde, there could be, for example, info desks of the process with pamphlets that an applicant needs to know. Furthermore, providing language learning services (offered via a QR code linking to Norwegian online courses) would also be beneficial. The internet is provided in Råde for the asylum seekers, which makes this type of service possible, and the keenest applicants can also start searching the local job and housing markets.

Another point we believe is important is to construct pre-systems for emergencies, such as the arrival of a large number of refugees. It would be easier and faster to respond if these structures were already in place. Often, this relies generally on the worldview that we have and it reflects on the way that the authorities and politicians are willing to make planning accordingly. We have been fortunate to have had a long period of peace in Europe, without any large-scale wars, but European history is marked with many wars, and it is often through the past that we can predict the future.

How well Northern European countries are prepared or how they make decisions related to refugees is very much related to the politicians (elected by the people) who are currently in power. There has been a recent swing to the right, and the parties that are less welcoming to immigration are gaining power; the 2022 elections in Sweden are one example of this as the anti-immigrant party won most of the votes (Crouch & Rauhala, 2022). As we have noted in the literature review, the people working in public services need to adjust their work and/or execute the decisions that are coming from the legislature (Junginger, 2012). We can see that this service journey is one example of recent changes to immigration law. Processes are created on an ad hoc basis, and rapid decisions are made to try to accommodate as many people as possible.

## Conclusions

By analysing the service journey of one asylum seeker applying for protection in Oslo, Norway, we can see there are two main issues that stand out: a) the need for transparency about all the steps of the entire journey, and b) building trust throughout the entire service journey. We can see that these two issues are interlinked because trust is built through the transparency of the entire system. These findings also are in accordance with previous research on how communication, comprehension and visualisation of service provisions and processes are much-needed assets (Subramanian et al., 2022).



In this article, we used the service journey in a novel way by doing an autoethnographic self-reflection, which has not appeared in the mainstream literature of service design research. We see that this novel approach has provided insights that help us to understand user needs.

We propose doing further research on the design for emergency and crisis response in local public services. This is a more systemic question and will require more systemic tools to handle these issues, as well as some different strategies. We would also like to see studies on the subsequent stages of the process, such as applying for a work permit and identity card or looking for work, to name a few. As this is a new law giving Ukrainian refugees a work permit straight away, how the Norwegian government implements this law will provide novel ways of designing the related services. It is also possible that the services being designed for Ukrainians now will become further models for other refugees arriving in different European countries. This will provide a fruitful area of investigation and design of services.

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