

# **Towards Street-level Communities of Practice? The Implications of Actor Diversification in Migration Management in Athens and Berlin**

**Katerina Glyniadaki**, European Institute, London School of Economics

## **Abstract**

The so-called refugee crisis of 2015-2017 has accelerated the diversification of frontline actors involved in the field of migration management. Although this shift has been widely acknowledged, its implications remain unclear. Focusing on the capital cities of Athens and Berlin, this paper examines the views and experiences of individual frontline actors from different organizational sectors. The findings suggest that the intensified inter-organizational collaboration at the street-level leads to the emergence of wider communities of practice, composed of diverse “front-liners”. Although the front-liners develop a shared community membership, they simultaneously experience internal conflicts due to enduring sectoral divides and competing institutional logics.

**Key Words:** Migration Management, Street-level Bureaucracy, Communities of Practice, Front-liners

## Introduction

During the so-called refugee crisis of 2015-2017, an unprecedented number of asylum seekers arrived in Europe, finding most European capitals underprepared to respond to the needs of the situation. The mismatch between the new demands for social services and the services available led to an *administrative* crisis<sup>1</sup>, both in transit countries, such as Greece, and in destination countries, such as Germany. In response, the body of front-line actors involved in the delivery of services for migrants quickly expanded, both in size and in diversity. An amalgam of public and private, non-profit and for-profit, paid and unpaid actors became now involved in the management of migration at the street level, both in Athens (Kalogeraki, 2020; Rozakou, 2017) and in Berlin (Bock, 2018).

Of course, neither the principle of subsidiarity (Wegrich and Hammerschmid, 2018) nor the rise of mixed social services due to contracting and privatization (Hood, 1991; Smith and Lipsky, 1993) constitute novel political and social phenomena. The crisis functioned as a catalyst, however, further intensifying the diversification of frontline actors, while also calling for a more collaborative approach to social service delivery. The under-preparedness of states, along with the urgency of the situation, in a way “forced” various – often dissimilar — types of frontline actors to work side-by-side (Bock and McDonald, 2019; Ishkanian and Shutes, 2021). The implications of such developments for the actual delivery of migrant services remain underexplored.

This paper examines these shifting dynamics from the perspective of front-line actors who are active in the field of migration management, and migrant integration in particular. Using a street-level bureaucracy theoretical standpoint (Lipsky, 1980) and a qualitative methodological approach, it seeks to answer two key questions: a) *in what ways has the delivery of migrant services changed during the 2015-2017 period?* And, b) *how have the individuals at the front lines of migrant service delivery been influenced by these changes?* In doing so, it focuses on the cities of Athens and Berlin, both of which were at the epicentre of the 2015-2017 crisis.

Drawing from extensive in-depth interviews with diverse frontline actors, this study offers two main contributions. First, the spontaneous emergence of multiple and, at times, unexpected links between different actors on the ground ignited the genesis of city-level networks of practitioners or, in Wenger’s (1998) terms, Communities of Practice (CoPs). The paper suggests that this framework, together with the theory of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980), is particularly helpful in understanding street-level dynamics at work. Second, the consolidation of dissimilar organizations and groups into single CoPs was not a smooth process but came with both internal and interpersonal tensions for the individual actors involved. Despite these tensions, however, by sharing a membership in the same CoP, these actors also developed a broader collective identity (Wry, *et al.*, 2011; Wenger, *et al.*, 2002). To describe this umbrella-identity in the migration management context, this paper uses the term “frontliners”.

The rest of this paper is organized in four sections. The first section describes the theoretical background and contributions of this research. The second section offers an overview of the research methods used and provides some key contextual information on the local settings of

---

<sup>1</sup> It is in the sense of an administrative crisis that the term crisis will be used in this paper, unless indicated otherwise.

the two capitals during 2015-2017. The presentation of the findings comes next, followed by the discussion and conclusion.

### **Street-level Communities of Practice?**

In the quest to understand and explain today's politics of subsidiarity, it is worth turning our attention to those representing the interface between government and citizens. One of the most prominent theoretical tools for examining the delivery of social services on the ground is Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy. Lipsky defined street-level bureaucrats as "public service workers who interact directly with citizens and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work" (1980, p. 3). In a few words, he has suggested that no matter how well a particular policy is designed, there will always be some room for discretion by those at the lowest level of a bureaucratic hierarchy, whose role is to put this policy into practice. Depending on how these bureaucrats make use of the discretion they have, they will play a critical role in shaping policy outcomes. Because of that, the street-level bureaucrats are the "ultimate policy makers", Lipsky noted.

In the context of migration management, street-level bureaucrats are known to play a key role in enacting policy, thereby substantially influencing the lives of migrant service users (Belabas and Gerrits, 2017; Ellerman, 2006; Eule, 2014; Hagelund, 2010; Schultz, 2020). Asylum judges, for example, are to determine which asylum applicants are "deserving" of refugee protection (Dahlvik, 2017); social workers are to select which migrants should receive access to private housing in the face of limited available facilities (Author, 2021); and doctors and nurses are to decide whether to serve the "sans-papiers" migrant patients who have no formal access to healthcare services (Malakasis and Sahraoui, 2020). As these examples indicate, the discretionary behavior of street-level bureaucrats directly impacts migrant clients, while it also determines the extent to which particular policies are being put into practice. Through his framework, Lipsky (1980) offered a bottom-up view to policy implementation, emphasizing the importance of the human factor.

However, significant as this contribution remains, there have been notable changes since the framework's inception. Perhaps most importantly, in today's era of New Public Management, the enactment of policy is no longer in the hands of civil servants alone, but also in the hands of contractors, be they private service employees or members of the civil society (Smith and Lipsky, 1993; Maynard-Moody and Portillo, 2010; Brodtkin, 2011). Although recent studies in the field have increasingly examined the intra-organizational practices of non-state actors, these studies tend to focus on a single type of organization, whether for-profit (e.g., Sager et al., 2014) or non-profit (e.g., Humphris, 2018). The existing literature therefore overlooks the complex dynamics of today's mixed social services, especially in the migration services context, where various different types of actors – civil servants, private professionals, International Organization (IO) employees, Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) employees, volunteers and activists — work alongside each other, if not together.

The "refugee crisis" of 2015-2017 has offered a pertinent analytical opportunity to examine these inter-organizational dynamics in greater depth. As already noted, the governmental response to the unprecedented wave of asylum seekers had gaps and shortcomings. In turn, the urgency of the situation mobilized many new frontline actors, of very diverse backgrounds, both on a paid and on an unpaid basis (Bock, 2018; Ishkanian and Shutes 2021). By extension, it further intensified the plurality and diversity of those who deliver social services to migrant clients and who, officially or not, implement migration policies at the street level. In that sense,

the crisis period functioned as a magnifying lens, amplifying the hybridity of frontline service delivery, and making inter-organizational dynamics at the street-level more easily observable.

Moreover, the nature of the required services enhanced the collaboration across different (types of) frontline actors. Asylum seekers naturally have multiple and complex needs – such as accommodation, legal assistance, healthcare, and education – which require the assistance of professionals from various fields, including social workers, lawyers, doctors, and teachers. Given that some of these services are usually state-provided (e.g. asylum determination, education) whereas others are contracted (e.g. housing, legal assistance), the cooperation among frontline actors with different organizational affiliations is unavoidable. For example, an NGO lawyer who represents asylum applicants may need to be in contact with public doctors who examine applicants' physical health or private psychologists who assess their mental health. Accordingly, a public-school teacher who has unaccompanied minors among his/her students, may need to frequently speak to the social workers at the minors' privately-run shelters or the independent volunteers who act as the minors' guardians. Inter-organizational communication of this kind is likely to be recurrent, inevitably leading to long-term inter-organizational links.

Drawing on existing literature as well as on extensive interviews and ethnographic observations, this paper suggests that, together with the theory of street-level bureaucracy, the communities of practice approach (Wenger, 1998) constitutes a useful theoretical tool for understanding social service delivery. This is especially relevant in today's context of migration management, where contracting is increasingly common, inter-organizational collaborations thrive, and those working at the street-level spontaneously form a wider network of policy implementers. Against this backdrop, considering the two perspectives in conjunction would allow for contextualizing the behavior of individual frontline actors and, more generally, for enhancing our understanding of the implications of "hybridization" at the street-level.

By definition, communities of practice are composed of people who are active in the same domain and are mutually engaged around a joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002). These communities may consist of a wide range of professionals and/or novices who share a common interest, are active in the same field, and together engage in social learning. Classic examples include a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems or a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This approach can be suitable for studying frontline actors in migration management, too, both because the boundaries of what constitutes a community of practice are rather fuzzy and because it involves collective 'learning by doing' (see also Kortendiek, 2018).

To address the various frontline actors, who are members of the same communities of practice, regardless of their profession, task focus, or institutional affiliation, this paper employs the term "front-liners", as opposed to "street-level bureaucrats". Front-liners are defined here as the frontline actors who implement policy in the same way street-level bureaucrats do, but who are not necessarily public servants. Instead, they may be affiliated with a diverse range of street-level organizations and civil society groups. While the term "street-level workers" has previously been used to address this diversity (e.g. Brodtkin, 2011), the word "workers" did not adequately cover a significant portion of this study's civil society members (Table 1 in Appendix), who saw themselves as political activists rather than workers. Not only did they not receive compensation for the services they provided, but they even rejected the term "volunteer", to which they attached connotations of a hierarchical relationship between

assistance providers and assistance receivers (Rozakou, 2017). The use of the term “front-liners”, thus, aims to offer an additional layer of inclusivity.

Returning to the Communities of Practice approach, as front-liners work in the same domain and towards the same superordinate goal of providing social services to migrants, they inadvertently come to share a common superordinate identity (Tajfel, 1982; Wry, *et al.*, 2011; Wenger, *et al.*, 2002). This new, shared identity does not necessarily develop in a smooth and linear fashion, of course. Albeit new links formed among different (types of) front-liners, stark divides also endured over time. Inevitably, being part of this contradictory new reality incubated internal conflicts for individual front-liners who carried out migration policies, as the sections below will illustrate.

## Research Context and Methods

Before delving deeper into the Athenian and Berliner front-liners’ experiences and responses, it is important to review some of the key features of the field of service delivery for migrants in the two respective capitals. Doing so will help contextualize the individual front-liners’ views and voices. It will also speak to the relationship between agency and structure. After an overview of the two research settings, there follows a presentation of the data collection and analysis employed in this study.

### *The Settings*

Athens and Berlin were selected as cases of EU capitals which underwent an administrative crisis, resulting from the sudden and steep influx of migrants during 2015-2017. The city-level approach was ideal for capturing the micro-level dynamics on the ground and examining the perspectives of actors from diverse backgrounds. It is important to note that the cases of Athens and Berlin were not examined vis-à-vis each other but in parallel, through a contextualized comparison (Locke and Thelen, 1955). Selected on the basis of having similar dynamics at play, meaning both cities were confronted with an unprecedented wave of newcomers, there were no specific expectations as to how their respective administrative crises would unfold overtime. Instead, the goal was to observe these dynamics as they unfolded.

Identifying the social and structural idiosyncrasies of different contexts is also helpful for understanding the behaviors of individuals within them (Simmons, 2016). Despite the differences in raw numbers of asylum seekers<sup>2</sup>, the administrative burdens were analogous in the two cities, also considering their very different sizes, state capacities and histories as migration host countries<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, as the local state mechanisms stretched to their limits, the respective civil societies reacted similarly across the two settings: various non-state actors mobilized and assumed a significant part of the states’ responsibility. In short, the Greek ‘philoxenia’ paralleled the German ‘Willkommenskultur’, both of which manifested into substantive support for migrant newcomers. Yet, while the “hybrid” character of frontline

---

<sup>2</sup> According to Eurostat, in 2015 there were 441,800 first-time asylum applications in Germany and 11,370 in Greece. In 2016, the corresponding numbers were 722,265 for Germany and 4,625 for Greece.

<sup>3</sup> In brief, Germany is the strongest economy in the EU and has historically been considered a ‘magnet’ for migrants, which comes with relevant experience and know-how. By contrast, Greece represents one of the weakest EU economies, further weakened by the “Greek economic crisis” and the austerity measures, and only recently has it also become a host migration country.

communities was shared across the two cities, there were also some qualitative differences between them.

In Berlin, largely because of the subsidiarity principle<sup>4</sup>, the delivery of social services had long been decentralized, with non-governmental welfare organizations representing an institutional pillar of the German welfare system (Wegrich and Hammerschmid, 2018). With the advent of the crisis, not only did the number of smaller NGOs in the field of migrant services increase drastically, but also many volunteers, activists, and grassroots groups became active for the first time (Bock and McDonald, 2019; Bock, 2018). Moreover, the government began contracting private companies that worked for-profit, assigning tasks such as running shelters for migrants (Chazan, 2016). As for funding, the greatest proportion of material resources these organizations and groups used came from the federal state, a lesser amount from the EU and the state of Berlin, and some from private donors (Levy, 2020). Accordingly, these activities were either publicly funded, or privately funded, or both (Figure 1).

**Figure1. Flow of funds for the purposes of the management of migration in Berlin**

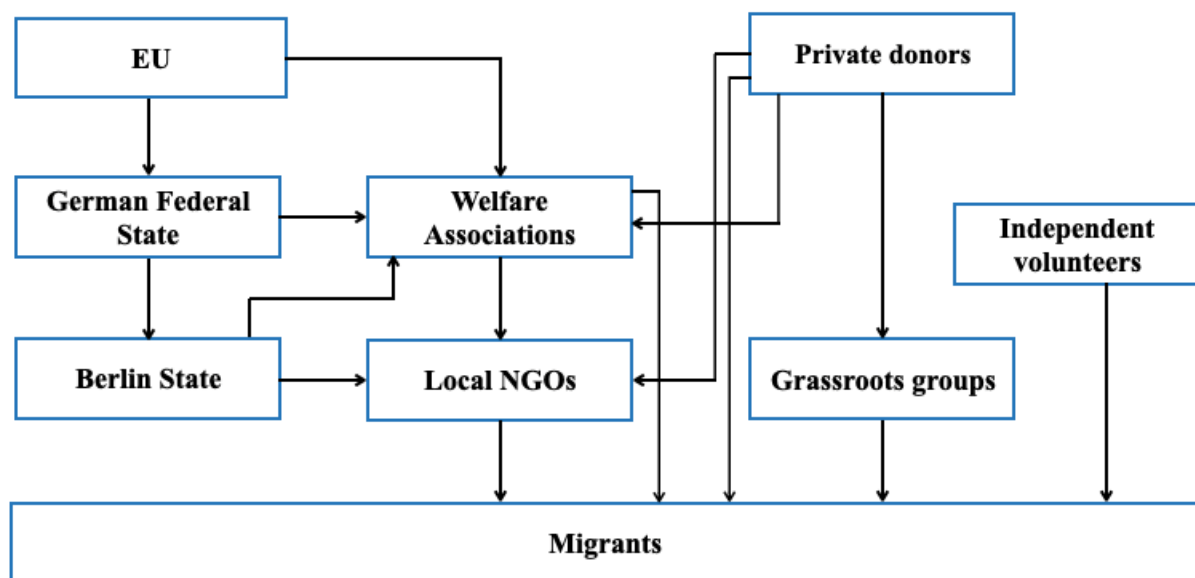


Figure created by author

In Athens, by contrast, the community of front-liners consisted of more, and more diverse, types of actors, whether formally employed or informally engaged. In the face of two co-occurring crises, the Greek economic crisis and the one of migration, the largest proportion of financial support came from abroad, primarily through EU funds (European Commission, 2017). In addition to the increase of NGOs, INGOs, and IOs in the field, the informal sector also appeared especially active. Paradoxically, Athenian grassroots groups of activists with anti-state ideologies found themselves effectively carrying out the work of the state: by 2017, more than 2,500 migrants were living in centrally located housing squats run by anarchists and tolerated by the Greek government (Georgiopoulou, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> According to the Social Assistance Act and in the Children and Youth Welfare Act, the principle of subsidiarity in the German welfare system suggests that small units must have priority over larger units, especially over the state, whenever appropriate (e.g. family over bureaucratic organizations, or welfare associations over the state).

**Figure 2. Flow of funds for the purposes of the management of migration in Athens**

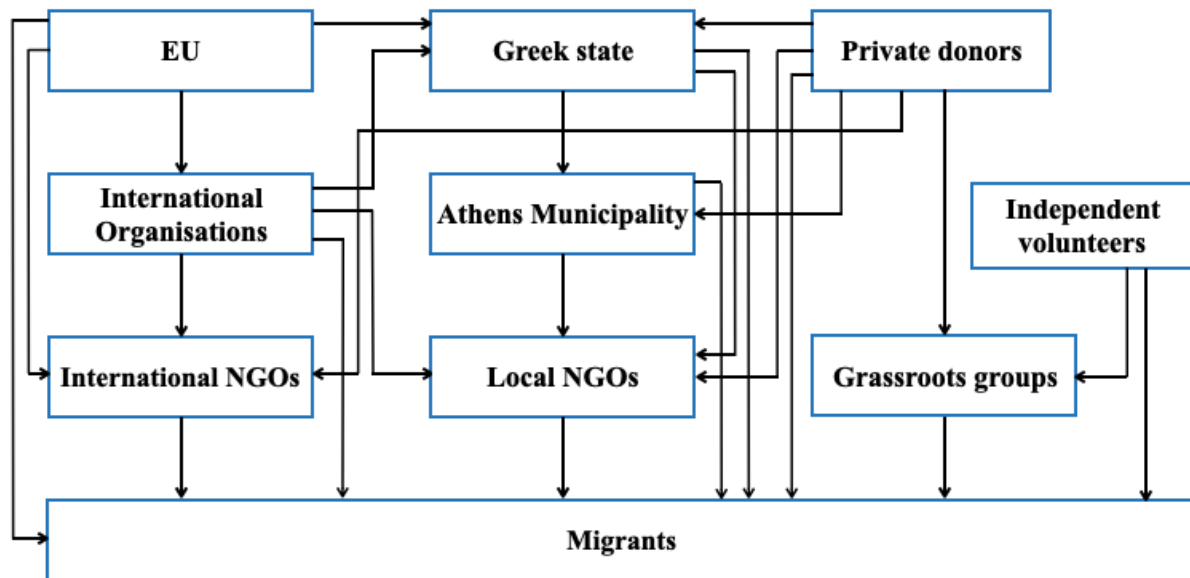


Figure created by author Although, in both capitals, there was a significant increase of civil society actors, in Athens there was a larger proportion of informal and international assistance compared to Berlin, as there were greater gaps for non-state actors to fill. In turn, the combination of international, national and local actors translated into a complex flow of funds (Figure 2) and, consequently, into the synthesis of a highly diverse nexus of front-liners (Rozakou, 2017; Kalogeraki, 2020). Berlin, on the other hand, could rely on federal funds during a time of crisis<sup>5</sup>. As the German federal government and the state government of Berlin were the primary entities that funded social services for migrants, they were also the ones who controlled the allocation of resources across the various street-level organizations and grassroots groups (Bock, 2018). Overall, while the composition of front-liners differed across the two cities, the level of plurality and diversity of these actors were largely the same.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

This study was part of a larger PhD research project focusing on the implementation of migration policies in Athens and Berlin. The research followed a qualitative methodological approach, consisting of semi-structured interviews and direct observations. The total number of interviews was 149, 79 in Athens and 70 at Berlin (Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix). The interviews were conducted in English or Greek between December 2015 and January 2019. The participants were contacted either through their online professional profiles, through physical visits to their work sites (e.g., migrant shelters, NGO offices, housing squats), or by the snowball technique. Almost all interviews took place in the working environment of each participant, and each interview lasted for approximately one hour.

Of the participants employed in the public sector, most worked for central government agencies (state/federal), and some worked for local government offices at city level or for international

<sup>5</sup> The federal government provides €670 per asylum seeker per month, while, as a response to the “crisis,” it provided the 16 German states with an additional €8 billion until 2018 for the integration of refugees and social housing projects (OECD, 2017).

organizations (e.g. the UNHCR). There were nearly twice as many participants who were members of the civil society (50 for Athens and 43 for Berlin) as those working in the public sector (27 and 22 respectively). In Athens, there was a large proportion of participants engaged on a voluntary basis, as well as a significant presence of international NGOs and IOs. In Berlin, most participants worked for local NGOs, larger or smaller. As for their professional roles (Table 2), some participants held administrative positions, others were involved in psychosocial care, and some in legal support. In each of these three categories, there were also many volunteers and activists, with or without relevant professional qualifications.

However, the lines were not always clear – neither between employment sectors nor between professional roles. As for the former, the nature of contracting, coupled with the urgency of newcomers' needs, meant that many employees were on short term contracts. This meant that there was considerable movement from one (type of) organization to another. Moreover, there were some who fit into two categories at once, such as private lawyers who also provided pro bono legal advice in NGOs or IOs. The same is true for some professional roles: some worked as teachers in the mornings but offered general voluntary assistance in housing squats in the afternoon or as social workers for a period of time but then assumed an administrative role. Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix show the primary role of participants at the time their interviews were conducted.

The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. They were then analyzed thematically through the use of the qualitative research analysis software NVivo 11. The thematic analysis followed the six phases suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) (re)reading of transcripts, 2) generation of initial codes 3) search for themes, 4) review of themes, 5) definition of themes, and 6) write-up. It is worth highlighting here that, while the theoretical discussion of this paper has preceded the presentation of its empirical findings, the process between data collection and analysis took place iteratively, constituting a continuous, cyclical process.

## **Communities of Practice and Internal Conflicts at the Frontlines**

With the increased diversification of front-line actors, two important developments followed, this study finds. First, as many new collaborations occurred for the first time between individual actors of dissimilar affiliations, new and often unlikely links developed between them, playing a key part in the formation of local communities of practice. Second, despite these newfound connecting points between different sectors, some invisible lines stubbornly remained, at times inhibiting the effectiveness of service delivery at the street level. Confronted with this contradictory reality, front-liners of the two capitals came to face internal conflicts.

### *Unlikely Links*

As noted above, some level of cooperation among different actors in the field of migration management was to be expected, due to the multi-dimensional needs of migrants, as well as the urgent nature of these needs. Nonetheless, the cooperation among certain types of front-liners came as a greater surprise than among others. One such unexpected collaboration was between a front-liner working for a state agency and another who was a grassroots activist with a firm ideological stance against the state and its policies.

This is particularly startling in the case of Berlin, where the largely efficient state mechanisms and the relatively generous state provisions for migrants left little room for anti-state action.



Yet, as the segment below shows, not only did such grassroots activists exist, but informal collaboration with state employees was recurrent. The participant here was a member of a grassroots group which provided medical assistance to those “without papers”. As he explains, individual public servants at times advised migrants to make use of the group’s services.

There were even [cases] where the [local government office] would explicitly send people to us. For example, pregnant women, because it would take them months to get the birth date that you needed to get put in a hospital... To get that approved it would take them months at [that office], so [that office] was saying, “*Well, if that is too late for you, just go to the [self-organized medical centre]*”. So, we ended up organizing birth dates and organizing this medical care for women, because we knew if we didn’t do it, nobody would do it. (Activist, Berlin)

Despite the opposing standpoints between those working at the local government office and those at the self-organized medical centre, and despite the lack of official communication channels between them, informal collaboration still occurred. On the surface, it seems absurd that a government office would direct migrant clients, often irregular ones, to a self-organized clinic run by activists. However, it is also not difficult to imagine a social worker at a public agency whose hands are tied by the existing bureaucracy and policy framework to seek out a humane solution when confronted by the sight of a pregnant woman in need of assistance (see also Malakasis and Sahraoui, 2020). Therefore, although this referral was not, officially, an appropriate step to take, from the point of view of individual front-liners, who operated within the same community of practice and worked towards the same greater goal of helping migrants, it was.

Very similar examples of unlikely links were also found in the accounts of Athenian front-liners. Moreover, because the administrative gap left by the Greek state was proportionately larger, the relevant references front-liners made were greater in number, and more diverse. The first example that follows echoes the one above. It comes from an anarchist activist who helped run a housing squat for migrants in central Athens. This participant also described cases when state-employees sought the assistance of those who, through illegal means, carried out services that would normally be provided by the state and its contractor organizations. In the words of this participant:

Several times, we would get [migrants] from [state] camps in the squats, because the camps sent them to the squats, because [the squats] are safer places, or better places. I, personally, have witnessed many occasions. I can easily recall three. For example, a woman with her two children was a victim of [gender-based violence], and she came into one of the squats, escorted by someone from [that camp], to ask for two days of safe-space, hospitality. Because her husband was beating her and, [at] the camp, they didn’t know how to deal with it. So, they put her in a taxi with someone who was working in the camp and they got her to the squat, because they knew this was a safe place. (Activist, Athens)

As with the example from Berlin above, this too describes an unlikely link between formal and informal service providers. The state actor here, however, is not so much constrained by the bureaucratic procedures as he is by the lack of adequate state infrastructures, security, and social services for women: an issue commonly raised by front-liners who worked in Greek state-run camps.

The presence of self-organized groups of activists was proportionately larger in Athens compared to Berlin. As such, the informal links between state-employees and local activists, or “solidarians”<sup>6</sup> as they self-identified, were more frequent, while the help went in the other direction, too, meaning from state-employees to solidarians. A prominent example of the latter, as shared by participants, involved public servants from the Public Power Corporation (PPC)<sup>7</sup> informally providing solidarians with the practical means and know-how to “steal” electricity from underground lines and use it for the housing squats for migrants. Another such example involved state-funded lawyers visiting activist squats to provide legal assistance to migrant residents, while the consultation would take place at the nearest public bench, so that it would be officially considered assistance for “homeless” asylum seekers.

In addition to the above, another unlikely link between front-liners in Athens was the one between squatters and NGO employees. In their dedication to helping migrants based purely on the spirit of solidarity, solidarians voiced strong opinions against the work of NGOs in Greece, which they considered dishonest, profit-seeking, and corrupt, a sentiment more widely shared in the Greek context (Fragonikolopoulos, 2014). Despite having vowed not to receive any sort of assistance from NGOs, however, there came times when it became necessary, especially as the resources were running low. Not many solidarians would admit so, but the quote below comes from one who did.

All squats will tell you that we are not cooperating with NGOs. But we all know that the [state-funded, mental-health NGO] has gotten on numerous cases from the squats. Also, the [private-funded medical NGO] is vaccinating the children for the 2<sup>nd</sup> year now so they can go to school. [One of the squats] has very close contact with [two international NGOs] from Palestine and Spain [...]. Or, at [another squat], there were Muslim Imams giving out things. (Activist, Athens).

As we see here, there were multiple links between the formal and informal segments of civil society, at times extending to an international level, as well. Although, once again, there was no formal channel of communication or cooperation between these organizations and groups, the personal connections among some of their individual members allowed for various inter-organizational and inter-group collaborations. Not only do such collaborations signify the presence of a wider network of front-liners, but they were also likely to make a significant difference to the services that migrants ultimately received.

Taken together, the above examples suggest the following. During the crisis, some of the existing dividing lines between state and non-state actors, as well as between formal and informal civil society actors became obsolete. The number of front-line actors increased, the interaction between them became frequent, and new links between dissimilar kinds of actors emerged. In time, front-liners in Athens and in Berlin formed loosely connected nexuses of individuals with various organizational and group affiliations, who effectively worked together to respond to the emergency situation and meet the needs of newcomers. As such, we see front-liners in the place of traditional street-level bureaucrats, and we also see street-level communities of practice in the place of traditional bureaucracies.

### *Enduring Divides*

---

<sup>6</sup> In Greek, ‘αλληλλεγγυοί’

<sup>7</sup> In Greek, Δημόσια Επιχείρηση Ηλεκτρισμού (ΔΕΗ)

The intensification of inter-organizational links notwithstanding, existing divides between different sectors, organizations and groups did not entirely and automatically disappear. After all, conflicts and disagreements constitute natural elements of any community of practice (Wenger, *et al.*, 2002). As different kinds of front-liners suddenly worked closely together, old divides came to the surface, while new divides also appeared. The difference, compared to the pre-crisis period existed, perhaps, within the unprecedented conditions that increased the frequency of interactions between diverse actors, “forcing” front-liners to come face-to-face with these divides. The following examples here demonstrate the mosaic of various actors who worked together at the street level and illuminate some of the barriers that hindered the collaboration between them.

Starting with Berlin, the segment below comes from a social worker who worked for a private company at an emergency shelter, where migrants went when they first arrived. This private company was contracted by the local government of Berlin to ensure the psychosocial well-being of migrants on the site, but operated alongside a group of federal employees whose work was to oversee the administrative aspect of the registration process. Moreover, it was the social workers’ responsibility to stay in touch with the local governments’ employees and to refer to them certain cases of migrants who needed further psychosocial care. This mixture of front-liners with diverse organizational affiliations did, at times, lead to tensions:

They complained about us. [...] Even [this federal employee] here, he came to me for another case and he said “*yeah but if you write all these letters, the social workers at the [local government office], will then think they have [too] many things to do*”. Yeah ok... That's their job! It's our job to see what people need, to find their needs, and their job is to try to [meet these needs]. You see? We have a different opinion on this. We are more for the people and they are more... I don't know [what] (Social Worker, Private Company, Berlin).

This extract reveals multiple, simultaneous tensions among the different front-liners on this site. More apparent is the tension between private social workers who claim to prioritize the needs of their migrant clients and the federal employees who, conversely, seem to prioritize administrative efficiency. At the same time, however, there is also a tension between these private social workers and those social workers employed by the local government. Interestingly, although this social worker is a private company employee, she positions herself closer to the migrants than to her government colleagues—local and federal. By claiming that “we are more for the people” she also expresses her criticism of her colleagues’ stance towards migrants. Regardless of whether the attitudes of these participants were representative of the sectors for which they worked or not, the tensions between them were.

In a similar vein, members of the (formal) civil society in Athens also differentiated themselves from the state. Much like above, the next quote demonstrates the colourful diversity and the newfound partnerships among front-line actors on the field, while, at the same time, it describes some enduring divides between state and non-state actors.

We have created an unofficial working group, with about another 10-15 [street-level] organizations [...]. With the organizations in the group, the cooperation is fantastic. I have been working for [this NGO] for 9 years, same position, and at no other issue have we had so close and so good cooperation with other teams. I consider those people my colleagues, as I do with the ones of [this NGO]. Very good team. [But], from the Greek government, no, there is no responsiveness at all. From the beginning, I think, there was a polarization between government and NGOs, both in terms of rhetoric, with the

various things the Migration Minister has said at times, and in practice. I would say they maintain a distance from us, and they are very suspicious [of us] (Administrative Employee, International NGO, Athens).

These words partly reinforce the earlier point that the “refugee crisis” functioned as a catalyst in developing inter-organizational links and networks. At the same time, they also reinforce the notion that some divides at the front lines persisted over time. In this particular example, it is the enduring divide between NGOs and the Greek state. Therefore, the formation of unlikely links and the persistence of enduring divides did not constitute two mutually exclusive phenomena but existed in conjunction (see also Ishkanian and Shutes; 2021; Rozakou, 2017).

### *Internal Conflicts*

Unsurprisingly, the co-occurrence of new partnerships and old divides influenced individual front-liners, as well. Even if they themselves were often the agents of change, in that they were the ones who forged or burned bridges between organizations, this change did not come easily and effortlessly at the individual level. In their effort to tackle the contradicting expectations they encountered at work, front-liners often experienced internal conflicts because of the specific position they occupied, or did not occupy, within their community of practice.

The following quote comes from a social worker in Berlin who felt very uneasy for having to work for a for-profit, private company, contracted by the state. This mix of private and public service provision, which was quite prevalent in the field of accommodation provision for migrants in Berlin (Chazan, 2016), became a common cause of internal conflicts among Berliner front-liners. The segment here highlights the subjective experience of this participant:

From my boss’s point of view, we are contract partners with this [government] authority and need to execute their will. From my professional point of view, I am the social worker of the people who are quite often in conflict with this authority. Of course, this is a completely unrealistic situation, either you stay focused on your clients which will at some point mean that you will be uncomfortable towards your profit-driven bosses, or you stay in line with the policy of the company, but then you are actually not making good social work... And I think it’s shit. Hopefully, it’s an internal conflict for everyone who works in a situation like this (Social Worker at Private Company, Berlin).

As she vividly describes here, a major cause of the inner battle she experienced stems from a public-private partnership in the delivery of social services for migrants. If the government policies are becoming increasingly restrictive towards migrants’ rights, and if the government contracts for-profit companies to enact these policies, then the persons executing service delivery are constrained in their effort to serve the interests of their clients. Although the conflict between representing the state and the clients is largely inherent in the delivery of human services (e.g. Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003), it is even more pronounced when profit-seeking contractors also come into the equation.

It is also worth noting that, at the time of our interview, this front-liner was on her last few days of duty, after quitting her job due to the said conflicts and the difficult relationship with her boss. This speaks to the troublesome, if not painful, aspects of the fast-increasing diversification for the individuals involved (see also Zilber, 2002), especially in the context of New Public Management (Hood, 1991).

Turning now to the corresponding internal conflicts among Athenian front-liners, the activist-formal-informal fragmentation of the civil society discussed above was also reflected in the subjective experiences of individuals. A characteristic example of this comes from a front-liner who self-identified as an anarchist and a solidararian, and who had been active in housing squats for a while, but who eventually decided to work for a state-funded NGO:

I don't play the anarchist role in [this NGO]. [...]... I will cooperate with the state, because I am an employee here. Like every job, it has its limitations. But, outside of here, I can be whoever I want to be. I cannot, of course, go out and say "*fuck all NGOs*", because I work for one of them. I understand the limitations, I recognize the contradictions [...]. Making ends meet is hard, so you are forced to do certain things... I admit it. I say, "*I have this [anarchist] identity and, within this work environment, it is being oppressed*" (Administrative Employee, Local NGO, Athens).

To put this quote into context, one should consider that the unemployment rate in Greece was 25% in 2015, dropping only to 23% by 2017, while, for those under 25, it ranged between 45% and 50% (Eurostat). With this in mind, it is not difficult to see why a young anarchist with a strong anti-state and anti-NGOs orientation found himself working for a state-funded NGO: "making ends meet" was challenging. To tackle this internal contradiction, this participant resorted to keeping his anarchist identity away from his official working environment, activating it only outside working hours. The fragmentations of the civil society, thus, manifested in the fragmentation of his sense of self.

In both examples above, front-liners faced internal battles, as a result of the inter-organizational and inter-sector partnerships. This finding aligns with existing research which suggests that the co-existence of multiple institutional logics causes considerable ambiguity for the individuals involved (Thornton, *et al.*, 2012; Zilber, 2002, 2016). This observation holds, despite the qualitative differences between the two cases (while in Berlin it was the public-private hybrid that ignited such conflicts, in Athens it was the formal-informal civil society mixture). In other words, the mixed social services corresponded to equally antithetical and baffling realities for front-liners in the two cities, while the distinct qualitative characteristics of the respective civil societies led to corresponding manifestations at the individual level.

Overall, front-liners who straddled between different street-level organizations and groups, whether out of obligation or loyalty, were more likely to contribute towards the formation of local, street-level communities of practice. This, of course, does not mean that most front-liners were willing and able to achieve such a balancing act, nor does it mean that those who managed to do so, did it without tensions and struggles. It does mean, however, that the crisis came at a time of profound changes in the delivery of human services, which became even more conspicuous in that period, having important implications both at the individual and the community levels.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Through the lens of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015-2017, and focused on the cities of Athens and Berlin, this paper has investigated the implications of the expansion and diversification of actors at the front lines of social service delivery. Building on previous studies that have discussed the shift towards mixed, or hybrid, services, and their inherent complexities (Evers, 2005; Smith and Lipsky, 1993), this research has offered both a

comparative empirical account, shedding light on the views and experiences of individual frontline actors, and a theoretical contribution, combining micro and meso-level perspectives.

Two main observations were discussed in this paper. First, there was an emergence of wider networks of individuals delivering migrant services at the street level, who came from a diverse range of organizational and group backgrounds. Against a shortage of available state services, these individuals were more likely to collaborate so as to meet the migrants' needs. Notably, cooperation occurred even among actors with diametrically opposing standpoints, such as state employees and anti-state activists. This was indicative of the growing number of links between different actors, the overall expansion of the frontline networks of practitioners, and the qualitatively changing composition of these practitioners. In short, new – and new types of – actors weaved new knots in the fabric of front-line service delivery.

To best understand these changes, this paper has argued, it is helpful to employ the theoretical perspective of *street-level bureaucracy* (Lipsky, 1980) along with the *communities of practice* approach (Wenger, 1998). From this angle, the diverse networks of frontline actors constitute *street-level communities of practice*. The members of these communities are active in the same domain, that of migration management, and share a common superordinate goal, that of meeting the needs of migrant clients. In time, they also come to share a superordinate identity (Wry, *et al.*, 2011; Wenger, *et al.*, 2002), that of *front-liners* of the same community of practice. This umbrella term, as used in this paper, includes “traditional” street-level bureaucrats and street-level workers, as well as those who identify themselves neither as bureaucrats nor as workers, but who operate alongside them, effectively carrying out policy in practice.

Despite the increasing prevalence of inter-organizational cooperation, however, distinct organizational and group affiliations remain relevant, as well. Whether due to competing organizational logics or differing political stances (Kallio and Kouvo, 2015; Ishkanian and Shutes 2021; Zilber, 2016), some divides across sectors do endure, even in times of crisis. As this research has shown, these divides also manifest also in internal conflicts for the individual front-liners involved, who are generally expected to navigate an increasingly complex and ambiguous inter-organizational reality (Thornton, *et al.*, 2012).

Overall, the findings of this study address the key theme of this special issue, namely the politics of subsidiarity. To some degree, this research echoes previous relevant studies which highlight the diversification of frontline actors involved in the delivery of migrant services (e.g. Bock and McDonald, 2019; Kalogeraki, 2020; Kortendiek, 2018). What it additionally offers, is the perspective of frontline actors themselves, as they experience this very shift. Through the examination of their subjective experiences and personal accounts, we see snapshots of the hybridization of social service delivery, as well as the fragmentation of civil society, which at times also leads to the fragmentation of individual actors' identities.

The implications of this study's findings and its theoretical contributions are of broader significance. First, the role of front-line actors, or front-liners, in policy implementation and social service delivery, appears to be especially important in times of crisis (Brodkin, 2021), when gaps between the demand and supply of services are more pronounced. This suggests that both governments and researchers could pay greater attention to the engagement of all actors who are active at the street-level, whether state employees or –spontaneously mobilized— members of the civil society. Accordingly, the identified *de facto* cooperation among different actors points to the significance of central coordination for better utilization of all human resources available. Perhaps more importantly, the very fact that informal civil society actors ended up playing such a critical role in the actual delivery of human services

puts the approach of “running government like a business” further into question (see Hood, 1991).

Future research could investigate the emergence of *street-level communities of practice* in different contexts, outside Athens and Berlin, and beyond the field of migration management. It could particularly examine the significant role of *front-liners* and their simultaneously distinct (organizational/group) and shared (community) identities. Given the reciprocal relationship between individual and community identity formation (Wenger, *et al.*, 2002), the way policy practitioners understand their roles within the communities they operate is likely to have a direct impact on how they carry out their daily tasks (Kallio and Kouvo, 2015), in turn shaping policy outcomes. After all, as Lipsky (1980) has noted, street-level bureaucrats, or front-liners more generally, are the ultimate policy makers.

## References

- Belabas, W. and Gerrits, L. (2017). Going the Extra Mile? How Street-Level Bureaucrats Deal with the Integration of Immigrants. *Social Policy and Administration*, 51(1), 133–150.
- Bock, J., (2018). State Failure, Polarisation, and Minority Engagement in Germany's Refugee Crisis. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 31.4: 375-96.
- Bock, J. and McDonald, S. (2019). *Refugees Welcome? Difference and Diversity in a Changing Germany*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn.
- Braun, V., and Clark, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Brodkin, E.Z. (2011). Policy Work: Street-Level Organizations Under New Managerialism, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 21(2), 253–277.
- Brodkin, E.Z. (2021). Street-Level Organizations at the Frontlines of Crises, *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 23(1), 16-29
- Chazan, G. (2016, May, 30). Migrants bring a profitable new era for shelter providers: The entrepreneurs turning Germany's refugee crisis into a lucrative business opportunity. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/8f8722a0-20d2-11e6-9d4d-c11776a5124d>
- Dahlvik, J. (2017). Asylum as construction work: Theorizing administrative practices. *Migration Studies*, 5(3), 369–388.
- Ellermann, A. (2006). Street-level democracy: How immigration bureaucrats manage public opposition. *West European Politics*, 29(2), 293–309.
- Eule, T. (2014). *Inside Immigration Law Migration Management and Policy Application in Germany*. Surrey: Ashgate.
- European Commission (2017). Managing Migration: EU Financial Support to Greece (December, 2017). [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20171222\\_eu\\_budget\\_financial\\_support\\_to\\_greece\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20171222_eu_budget_financial_support_to_greece_en.pdf)
- Evers, A. (2005) Mixed Welfare Systems and Hybrid Organizations: Changes in the Governance and Provision of Social Services, *International Journal of Public Administration*, 28:9-10, 737-748
- Frangonikolopoulos, C. (2014) Politics, the Media and NGOs: The Greek Experience, *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 15:4, 606-619



- Georgiopolou, T. (2015, May 10). More than 2,500 refugees live in Athens squats. Kathimerini. Retrieved from <https://www.ekathimerini.com/218260/article/ekathimerini/community/more-than-2500-refugees-live-in-athens-squats>
- Hagelund, A. (2009). Dealing with the dilemmas: integration at the street-level in Norway, *International Migration*, 48(2), 79–102.
- Humphris, R. (2018). Mutating faces of the state? Austerity, migration and faith-based volunteers in a UK downscaled urban context. *The Sociological Review*, 1–16.
- Hood, C. (1991). A Public Management for All Seasons. *Public Administration*, 69 (1): 3-19
- Ishkanian, A., Shutes, I. (2021). Who Needs the Experts? The Politics and Practices of Alternative Humanitarianism and Its Relationship to NGOs. *International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*
- Kalogeraki, S. (2020). A mixed method approach on Greek civil society organizations supporting migrants during the refugee crisis. *Journal of International Migration and Integration.*, 21(3), 781–806
- Kallio, J. and Kouvo, A. (2015). Street-level Bureaucrats' and the General Public's Deservingness Perceptions of Social Assistance Recipients in Finland. *Social Policy & Administration*, 49: 316-334
- Le Grand, J. and Bartlett, W. (1993). *Quasi- markets and social policy*. London: Macmillan.
- Levy, K. (2020). Local Public Administration and Social Policy in Germany and China, *LoGoSO Research Papers No. 5*, November, 2020
- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Locke, R. and Thelen, K. (1995). Contextualized Comparisons and the Study of Comparative Labor Politics. *Politics and Society*, 23 (3): 337–67.
- Malakasis, C. and Sahraoui, N. (2020). Introducing Gender into the Theorization of Health-Related (Un)Deservingness Ethnographic Insights from Athens and Melilla. In Sahraoui, N. (ed). *Borders across Healthcare Moral Economies of Healthcare and Migration in Europe* (168-198). New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books
- Maynard-Moody, S. and Musheno, M. (2003). *Cops, Teachers, Counselors: Stories from the Front Lines of Public Service*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

- Maynard-Moody, S. and Portillo, S. (2010). Street-level bureaucracy theory. In Durant, R. (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of American Bureaucracy (252–277)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- OECD (2017). Who bears the cost of integrating refugees? *Migration Policy Debates*, No 13, January, 2017.
- Rozakou, K. (2017). Solidarity #Humanitarianism: The Blurred Boundaries of Humanitarianism in Greece. *Etnofoor*, 29 (2): 99-104.
- Sager, F., Thomann, F., Zollinger, C., Heiden, N. and Mavrot, C. (2014). Street-Level Bureaucrats and New Modes of Governance: How Conflicting Roles Affect the Implementation of the Swiss Ordinance on Veterinary Medicinal Products. *Public Management Review*, 16(4), 481–502.
- Schultz, C. (2020). Ambiguous goals, uneven implementation – how immigration offices shape internal immigration control in Germany. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 8:10
- Simmons, E. (2016). Introduction. In *Meaningful Resistance: Market Reforms and the Roots of Social Protest in Latin America (Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics*, pp. 1-36). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, S. R., and Lipsky, M. (1993). *Nonprofits for hire: The welfare state in the age of contracting*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press
- Tajfel, H. (1982). Social psychology of intergroup relations. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 33, 1-39.
- Thornton, P., Ocasio, W., and Lounsbury, M. (2012). Dynamics of Organizational Practices and Identities. In *The Institutional Logics Perspective: A New Approach to Culture, Structure and Process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R. and Snyder, W.M. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press.
- Wegrich, K. & Hammerschmid, G. (2018). Public administration characteristics and performance in EU28: Germany. Report for the European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.
- Wry, T., M. Lounsbury, and M. A. Glynn. (2011). Legitimizing Nascent Collective Identities: Coordinating Cultural Entrepreneurship. *Organization Science*, 22(2): 449–463

- Zilber, T. (2002). Institutionalization as an Interplay between Actions, Meanings, and Actors: The Case of a Rape Crisis Center in Israel. *Academy of Management Journal*. 45. 234-254.
- Zilber, T. (2017). How Institutional Logics Matter: A Bottom-Up Exploration. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 48A: 137-56.

## Appendix

**Table 1** Participant Demographics and Employment Sector

City	Total	Gender		Public Sector			Civil Society Sector			Private Employees
		M	F	Int/nal Orgs	State/Federal	City/Länder	NGOs/Welfare Orgs		Volunteers and Activists	
							Int/nal NGOs	Local NGOs		
Athens	79	33	46	6	18	3	10	14	26	3
Berlin	70	31	39	1	14	8	0	34	8	5

**Table 2** Participants by Profession and Role

City	Street-Level					Top-Level
	Administration	Psychosocial Support	Legal Support/Justice System	Education	Non-specific Duties	Administration
Athens	25	9	12	2	24	5
Berlin	21	16	10	2	3	3