



Katerina Glyniadaki

October 24th, 2024

What happens when migrants implement migration policy?

Social services for migrants are often provided by local organisations and “street-level bureaucrats”. Yet as Katerina Glyniadaki explains, when the actors providing these services also have a migration background, they are forced to navigate a double – and at times conflicting – set of pressures and expectations.

In times of high influxes of migrants, or what some describe as “migration crises”, the frontline actors who deliver social services on the ground **play a critical role**. Whether public servants or third sector employees, the identities and discretionary decisions of such actors are found to shape the reception and integration experiences of migrant newcomers, and consequently the outcomes of migration policies.

What happens, however, when those who deliver services to newly arrived migrants are themselves migrants from previous migration waves? Although the populations of European capitals have become increasingly diverse in recent decades, the role of migration policy implementers with a migration background has so far not been adequately understood.

Lessons from Athens and Berlin

In a **recent study**, I examine the overlooked phenomenon of “old” migrants serving “new” migrants, focusing on Europe’s 2015-2017 migration “crisis”, and the cities of Athens and Berlin. I look at how migrant policy implementers, or street-level bureaucrats, navigate a double – and at times conflicting – set of pressures and expectations: on the one hand, serving the interests of the state and the organisations they work for, and on the other, meeting the needs of their migrant clients.

I draw on qualitative interviews with “migrant bureaucrats” who work at the frontlines of migration management, primarily offering psychosocial support in housing facilities for asylum seekers in the respective capitals. My first key observation is that migrant bureaucrats’ self-understandings

become drivers that guide their daily decisions. Specifically, migrant bureaucrats may demonstrate greater loyalty to the local migration management system or to their migrant clients, depending on how they see themselves in the given context.

If they see themselves primarily as policy implementers and therefore representatives of the local migration management system, following policy to the letter is more likely to be their guiding principle. By contrast, if they see themselves primarily as “migrant-representatives”, they are more likely to interpret policy and carry out daily tasks in a way that is more advantageous for their migrant clients.

Representative bureaucracy

This observation is better understood via the lens of representative bureaucracy. This term is used to describe the arrangement whereby policy practitioners share the same key identities (such as race, ethnicity and gender) as the citizens they serve.

Scholars who study representative bureaucracy generally view it as good and desirable, signifying as it does a more democratic governance and more effective public service delivery. Nonetheless, having minority or female bureaucrats does not automatically lead to substantive representation of minority and female citizens (one can think of minority home secretaries with harsh anti-immigration agendas). Put differently, passive representation does not always lead to active representation.

Among the factors that **have been found** to explain the linkage between passive and active representation is the propensity for bureaucrats to adhere to the “minority representative” role, i.e. to see themselves as representatives of their minority clients.

Accordingly, I find that, within the European social context of migration policy delivery, migrant bureaucrats who see themselves as “migrant representatives” are more likely to use their professional discretion in a way that is likely to benefit their migrant clients. They are therefore more likely to turn passive into active representation.

Profiles of migrant bureaucrats

Adding further nuance, I identify four profiles of migrant bureaucrats, each identifying to a different degree with the local migration management system and the migrant clients.

Depending on whether migrant bureaucrats see themselves as representatives of the system (localised), the clients (spokesperson), both (peacemaker), or neither (ambivalent), they adopt a more or less favourable stance towards migrant clients. This means that embodying a client representative role is not simply a matter of yes or no but may reflect the simultaneous

embodiment of different identities, in this case the system representative role, and varying degrees of identification.

An important question that arises is what determines this pattern of identification. I find that the “status” of migrant bureaucrats plays an important role. Because of the legal rights associated with their nationalities (such as more rights for EU nationals), or their class, or the way in which they are perceived in the local society (for instance as culturally compatible), some migrant bureaucrats may enjoy a higher status than others.

Higher status migrant bureaucrats appear more inclined to see themselves as migrant representatives and to use positive discretion towards migrant clients. Compared to lower status migrants, they have a relatively greater sense of security and less to lose by going against “the system”.

As global migration flows are increasing, the phenomenon of migrants who are also migration policy implementers is here to stay. Acknowledging the diversity of such actors, in terms of both their individual identities and their social standing, is a significant step towards developing a greater understanding of migration policy implementation.

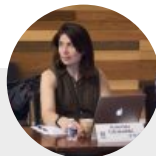
For more information, see the author's accompanying paper in the [Journal of Public Policy](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Halfpoint](#) / [Shutterstock.com](#)



Subscribe to our newsletter

About the author



Katerina Glyniadaki

Katerina Glyniadaki is a Lecturer in Public Policy and Administration at the University of Southampton and a Visiting Fellow in the European Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Posted In: EU Foreign Affairs | LSE Comment | Politics



© LSE 2024