

# **Silence as Policy: Institutional Fragmentation and Lived Experience in European Migration Governance**

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## **ABSTRACT**

European migration governance systems are commonly evaluated through legal compliance, administrative efficiency, and border control outcomes. Far less attention is paid to how administrative delay, institutional silence, and fragmented responsibility shape migrants' everyday lives. This paper employs an auto-ethnographic case study approach to examine how uncertainty operates as a form of structural vulnerability within contemporary migration governance.

Drawing on lived experience as a migrant parent navigating residence authorization, child welfare coordination, and social support mechanisms, the study demonstrates how prolonged delays without timelines and weak inter-institutional communication undermine integration outcomes and disproportionately affect families with caregiving responsibilities. The analysis suggests that migration systems often do not fail primarily due to punitive intent, but through governance designs that insufficiently account for human temporality, dependency, and care. The author writes from lived experience within European migration governance, which informs the analytical focus on temporality, care, and institutional silence

By conceptualizing silence and delay as active policy outcomes rather than neutral administrative conditions, the paper contributes to migration governance scholarship and advances human-centered perspectives on institutional accountability. Policy recommendations emphasize communication obligations, coordinated case management, and child-centered migration governance frameworks.

**KEYWORDS:** migration governance; administrative delay; institutional silence; lived experience; auto-ethnography; integration

## INTRODUCTION

Migration governance in Europe has increasingly emphasized control, categorization, and the regulation of legal status (Boswell & Geddes, 2011). Policy debates frequently prioritize efficiency, compliance, and decision outputs—such as residence permits granted, asylum claims processed, or returns executed. Yet considerably less attention is devoted to the lived conditions produced during prolonged administrative processes.

This paper argues that uncertainty itself functions as a mode of governance. Administrative delays without timelines, limited institutional communication, and fragmented responsibilities generate forms of structural vulnerability that extend beyond formal legal status. These conditions shape migrants' capacity to work, secure housing, access social protection, and maintain family stability.

For migrants with caregiving responsibilities, particularly parents of young children, uncertainty becomes cumulative. It affects not only individual well-being but also children's access to healthcare, education, and psychosocial stability. Despite integration being a stated policy objective across European migration frameworks, the temporal realities produced by governance systems often undermine this goal.

Using an auto-ethnographic case study approach, this paper examines how institutional silence operates as a policy practice within migration governance. By centering lived experience as a site of analysis, the study contributes to emerging scholarship calling for human-centered approaches to migration governance (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018).

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Migration Governance and Bureaucratic Power

Migration governance literature has documented the growing complexity of administrative systems regulating mobility across Europe (Geddes, 2016). These systems rely on documentation, categorization, and procedural sequencing to produce legal clarity. However, such arrangements frequently generate prolonged uncertainty for those subject to them (Khosravi, 2017).

Scholars have conceptualized these dynamics as forms of bureaucratic or administrative violence—harm produced not through direct coercion but through institutional practices that suspend lives in indeterminate waiting (Auyero, 2012). Waiting thus becomes a condition of governance rather than an unintended administrative byproduct.

## Street-Level Bureaucracy and Institutional Fragmentation

Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy highlights how frontline officials interpret and implement policy under constraints of time, discretion, and resources. In migration contexts, however, individuals rarely encounter a single institutional actor. Instead, migrants navigate multiple agencies—including migration authorities, social welfare offices, and child protection services—each operating under distinct mandates and accountability structures. This institutional fragmentation shifts coordination responsibilities onto migrants themselves, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations and deepening vulnerability (Eule et al., 2018).

## Waiting, Temporality, and Uncertainty

Waiting has emerged as a central analytical concept in migration studies. Andersson (2014) argues that waiting is structurally produced and politically meaningful. When governance systems provide no timelines or communicative feedback, migrants are placed in suspended temporality, unable to plan, stabilize family life, or engage fully in society. For parents, uncertainty extends beyond the individual to children, transforming time itself into a site of vulnerability.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an auto-ethnographic case study methodology, positioning lived experience as a legitimate and analytically valuable source of empirical data (Ellis et al., 2011). Auto-ethnography enables systematic examination of institutional processes as they are encountered in everyday life, offering insight into governance mechanisms that are often obscured within formal policy analyses.

The study does not seek statistical generalization. Rather, it pursues analytical generalization by illuminating structural patterns embedded within migration governance processes. The focus is not on the representativeness of a single case, but on the mechanisms through which institutional silence, administrative delay, and fragmented responsibility operate across governance systems.

The author occupies a dual position as both a migration practitioner and a subject navigating migration institutions. Reflexivity is employed as a methodological tool to critically examine how positionality shapes interpretation, emotional response, and interaction with institutional authority. This dual positioning enables close observation of procedural dynamics while maintaining analytical distance through theoretical engagement. While grounded in a single case, the analysis identifies governance mechanisms that recur across migration systems, offering insights into institutional design rather than individual experience.

Data consist of systematically documented personal experiences, institutional correspondence, administrative encounters, and reflective field notes recorded over time. These materials were analyzed thematically, with particular attention to temporality, communication practices, and inter-institutional coordination.

Ethical considerations included anonymization of institutions, avoidance of identifiable administrative details, and careful reflection on the implications of representing third parties. The objective of the study is not attribution of individual blame, but structural analysis of governance design and its consequences for family life and integration.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Administrative Delay Without Timelines**

A central feature of the governance process examined in this study was prolonged administrative delay accompanied by an absence of clear timelines or communicative feedback. Decisions related to residence authorization and associated rights remained pending for extended periods without indication of expected resolution. This lack of temporal information generated sustained psychological distress and constrained everyday decision-making concerning employment, health insurance, childcare arrangements, and housing stability.

Delays were not experienced as temporary administrative backlogs, but as a suspension of legal and social personhood. Without timelines, waiting became open-ended, rendering planning impossible and reinforcing a sense of institutional invisibility. In this context, uncertainty functioned not merely as an inconvenience but as a governing condition that shaped behavior, expectations, and emotional well-being.

This finding illustrates how temporality operates as a mechanism of power within migration governance. By withholding temporal clarity, institutions retain discretion while transferring the consequences of uncertainty onto migrants and their families.

### **Institutional Fragmentation**

The study revealed significant fragmentation across institutions involved in migration governance, including migration authorities, child welfare agencies, and social support services. These institutions operated simultaneously but with limited coordination, shared information, or unified case management structures. As a result, migrants were subject to multiple parallel assessments, often involving repeated requests for similar documentation and explanations.

This fragmentation produced contradictory expectations. Compliance with one institution's requirements did not necessarily translate into recognition or progress within another. Migrants were thus placed in a persistent defensive position, where their actions were continuously evaluated, yet the criteria for compliance remained opaque and shifting.

Rather than enhancing accountability or protection, institutional fragmentation intensified uncertainty and reinforced power asymmetries. The absence of inter-institutional coordination

transformed governance into a cumulative burden, amplifying vulnerability through procedural complexity.

## **Burden Shifting to the Individual**

A key consequence of institutional fragmentation was the implicit transfer of coordination responsibilities from institutions to migrants themselves. Rather than communicating internally, agencies relied on individuals to relay information, reconcile inconsistencies, and manage administrative interactions across systems.

This burden-shifting disproportionately affected migrants with limited financial, social, and emotional resources. Time spent navigating bureaucratic requirements reduced opportunities for employment, language acquisition, and social integration. The capacity to comply thus became unevenly distributed, reinforcing inequality through administrative design rather than explicit exclusion.

This finding highlights how governance systems reproduce vulnerability not primarily through intent, but through the structuring of responsibility. Administrative complexity operates as a selective mechanism, privileging those with greater institutional literacy and resilience.

## **Parenting Under Uncertainty**

For parents, the effects of administrative uncertainty were intensified and multidimensional. Inability to secure legal employment, health insurance, or stable childcare arrangements generated constant anxiety and constrained parental decision-making. Uncertainty extended beyond individual legal status to children's access to education, healthcare, and psychosocial stability.

Parenting under these conditions became inseparable from institutional surveillance and evaluation. Everyday acts of care—such as accessing services or planning schooling—were mediated by administrative requirements and ongoing assessments. As a result, caregiving was transformed into a regulated activity, shaped by compliance rather than autonomy.

This finding underscores how migration governance intersects with family life, producing consequences that extend across generations. Children, though not administrative subjects themselves, were directly affected by the temporal and procedural conditions imposed on their parents.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings indicate that migration governance systems frequently misinterpret structural vulnerability as individual non-cooperation. When migrants struggle to comply with fragmented and opaque administrative processes, this difficulty is often framed as a behavioral deficiency rather than as evidence of systemic design failure.

Silence manifested through delayed decisions, lack of response, and absence of timelines emerges as an active governance mechanism rather than a neutral administrative condition. It disciplines through uncertainty while maintaining institutional distance and limiting accountability. By suspending decision-making, institutions preserve discretion while externalizing the social and emotional costs of waiting.

This dynamic undermines stated policy objectives related to integration, social cohesion, and child welfare. Rather than facilitating inclusion, governance practices structured around silence and delay erode trust, constrain participation, and destabilize family life. The findings thus challenge outcome-focused evaluations of migration policy and underscore the need to assess governance through its lived temporal and relational effects.

### **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

The findings of this study suggest that improving migration governance requires attention not only to legal frameworks and decision outcomes, but also to the temporal and communicative conditions under which policies are implemented. The following recommendations focus on institutional design rather than individual behavior.

#### **Mandatory Communication Timelines**

Migration authorities should be required to provide minimum response timelines and regular procedural updates for pending cases, even where final decisions cannot yet be issued. Communication obligations would reduce uncertainty, enable basic planning, and mitigate the psychological effects of open-ended waiting. Importantly, the provision of timelines does not necessitate accelerated decision-making, but rather enhances transparency and accountability in administrative processes.

## **Integrated Case Coordination Mechanisms**

Cross-institutional coordination mechanisms should be strengthened to prevent duplication, contradictory assessments, and the transfer of coordination burdens onto migrants. Integrated case management systems—particularly for cases involving families—would enable information sharing between migration authorities, social services, and child welfare agencies while preserving institutional mandates. Such coordination would reduce procedural complexity and improve governance coherence.

## **Child-Centered Migration Governance**

Migration governance frameworks should more explicitly account for children’s welfare by recognizing how administrative delays affecting parents directly shape children’s access to healthcare, education, and stability. Child welfare assessments should incorporate structural factors, including prolonged uncertainty and institutional fragmentation, rather than focusing solely on parental compliance. This approach aligns migration governance with existing child protection norms and best-interest principles.

## **Recognition of Lived Experience as Policy Evidence**

Policy evaluation processes should recognize migrants’ lived experiences as a legitimate source of evidence for assessing governance effectiveness. Testimonial and qualitative data can illuminate procedural harms—such as silence, delay, and fragmentation—that are not captured by outcome-based indicators. Incorporating lived experience into policy assessment enhances institutional learning and supports more responsive governance design.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has argued that migration systems do not fail solely through exclusionary laws or overtly restrictive policies, but through everyday administrative practices that suspend lives in prolonged uncertainty. Silence and delay are not neutral features of governance; they actively shape vulnerability by regulating time, responsibility, and access to stability.

By conceptualizing silence as a policy outcome rather than an administrative absence, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of migration governance. Listening to lived experience is not a moral add-on to policy implementation—it is a structural necessity for systems that claim to promote protection, integration, and dignity. When governance frameworks acknowledge temporality, care, and human dependency as central policy concerns, migration systems move closer to their stated objectives and democratic commitments.

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