

# Digital Practices of Negotiation: Social Workers at the Intersection of Migration and Social Policies in Switzerland and Belgium

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## Abstract

Paperwork has always been a central part of bureaucratic work. Over the last few years, bureaucratic procedures have become increasingly standardised and digitalised. Based on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork within welfare offices in Switzerland and Belgium, we reflect on the way evidence is constructed within social policy and cases built for or against noncitizen welfare recipients in order to show how paper truths are established and challenged. The focus on digital practices within public policy implementation highlights how it contributes to enhanced control mechanisms on the implementation level and how migration law continues to guide welfare governance for noncitizens. This allows targeting of the most marginalised groups, whose rights to access state support are institutionally impeded. Through database information flows, official forms, paper reports and face-to-face meetings, we further show how a hybrid form of bureaucratic work emerges, where direct contact with the client is still key, yet highly influenced by standardisation processes.

**Keywords:** Digitalisation; materiality; migration control; paperwork; social services; welfare policies

## Introduction

Paperwork, both digital and analogue, plays a crucial role for various groups of foreign nationals who have arrived in Europe and applied for residency on various grounds, such as asylum, to reunite with their families, to work, or to get medical treatment. The relevance of documents, however, does not stop at the border, or once a legal status has been granted. In a context where researchers reflect on the importance of biometric data (Broeders and Engbersen, 2007), on the way migrants build or destroy evidence in order to secure a legal status in their host countries (Hoag, 2010), or on how immigration bureaucrats deal with such evidence (Spire, 2008), we ask how paperwork and digital practices play out

inside the borders of “Fortress Europe” by exploring the welfare-migration nexus (Lafleur and Vintila, 2020; Lafleur and Mescoli, 2018). Based on ethnographic fieldwork within welfare offices<sup>1</sup> in Switzerland and in Belgium, we analyse how claiming social assistance can both threaten and help to advance migrants’ legal status in their host countries. We do this through the study of digital practices of communication, paperwork and the creation of information as a relevant tool of organisational and state analysis (Borrelli and Andretta, 2019). Based on prior calls for ‘more conceptually and theoretically informed qualitative groundwork as prerequisite for advancing quantitative analysis in the field’ of both welfare and employment policies (Clasen, Clegg, and Goerne, 2016, 22), we explore how digital practices support increasing control of noncitizens and how migration policies continue to affect their access to welfare. We argue that digital practices shape the way frontline staff builds cases, contributing to contestations towards rising welfare chauvinism (Barker, 2018), and a reduction of rights of foreign nationals with (and without) regular residence permits (Ataç and Rosenberger, 2019) regarding their right to stay.

Recent works have often addressed how irregularised individuals, asylum seekers and European citizens are policed through social welfare (Ataç and Rosenberger, 2019; Lafleur and Mescoli, 2018). The interplay between welfare policies and the negotiation of deportability of third-country and EU nationals with regular residency status through a digitalisation lens, however, has received little attention. In addition, the social rights of migrants have been considered more from a quantitative, macro sociological perspective, deconstructing the “welfare magnet” hypothesis (Borjas, 1999), or discussing levels of access to social rights for different noncitizen groups along comparative databases (Schmitt and Teney, 2019) and along nation states’ policies (Lafleur and Vintila, 2020). This article’s contribution is thus twofold.

First, drawing from qualitative data, we analyse the daily work of welfare bureaucrats through their digitalisation practices and organisational exchanges. We study the way documents are used and information shared in order to understand the processes through which social assistance is granted or denied to migrant individuals from both EU and non-EU countries.

Second, we reflect on the intersection between immigration laws and practices that affect clients of such bureaucracy on the one hand, and welfare bureaucratic procedures on the other (Lafleur and Mescoli, 2018), by exploring *how* welfare administrative practices can contribute to contesting but also advancing the right to remain of noncitizens who possess a residence permit but have fallen on social assistance. Information exchange through digital practices allows an increase in control and shows the influence of migration control and migration policies over social policies. These examples trace bureaucratic practices in two European states, which both have mixed approaches towards migration, neither

being entirely exclusionary, nor inclusive (see MIPEX by Solano and Huddleston (2020)).

After discussing previous works at the intersection of welfare governance and immigration, we link our data back to studies within border control and research on asylum in which digital technologies and written evidence of migration paths become crucial to establish ‘truth’ (Broeders, 2007). We build on participant observation and on interviews with welfare administrations in order to analyse how evidence is constructed in a context where information is increasingly shared through digital platforms and databases. We explore how welfare decisions are embedded in wider state and immigration governance systems, and reflect on the ways in which street-level bureaucrats deal with the overlap between the rationale of assistance on the one hand, and migration control on the other. We ultimately show how the enforcement of welfare and migration policies overlap in the daily practices of civil servants, explainable due to the rationale of both control and support that prevails in the offices (Schönenberger and Achermann, 2012), as well as due to the expansion of migration policies into other policy fields.

### **Civil servants, migration and documentation**

Material practices, including paperwork and digital technologies, influence the way we communicate, collect and receive information, and shape our relationship with the state (Carswell and de Neve, 2020). Scholars have, as a consequence, studied how algorithms contribute to redefining “the rules of work” (Rosenblat, 2018) of public assistance or policing (Joh, 2014), wondering about potential biases and implications for privacy. The use of biometric data is a tool for governance and migration control (Broeders, 2007) and documents (digital or paper) are – as argued – not passive (Hull, 2012), but infused with politics of power that differentiate between populations and also constitute political relations (Carswell and de Neve, 2020). The role of documentation becomes especially relevant when it comes to social welfare offices in which an excessive need for evidence exists, in particular when digitalisation further marginalises already precarious groups (Pors and Schou, 2020). The place of (digital) technologies in the daily work of street-level bureaucrats, however, has rarely been investigated (Holm Vohnsen, 2017; Gilliom, 2001). Instead, more focus is given to the increasing standardisation and automatising of administrative processes limiting discretion, leading to the disappearance of direct contact between clientele and bureaucrat (Bovens and Zouridis, 2002). Routines and digitalisation are thus supposed to support bureaucrats in their processing of cases. We argue that both also contribute to an increased control of clients and traceability of cases by various institutions, but do not simply replace direct interactions (Hansen, Lundberg, and Syltevik, 2018).

In this contribution, we illuminate how ‘hybrid’ bureaucratic work, between digital procedures, personal contacts and institutional exchanges, contributes to the expansion of migration control into social policies. This is supported by prior research at the intersection of social policy making and migration law that underlines the limited knowledge we have on processes and actors implementing welfare policies despite the ability of welfare governance studies to capture complexities of societies and their fragmentation (Carstensen et al., 2021). Some works focus on the behaviour and actions of social partners (Knotz et al., 2020) and how they might assist immigration control depending on the level of institutionalised cooperation (Morgan, 2020). Other contributions argue that ‘unwanted’ migrants are institutionally impeded from full access to welfare states (Hooijer and Picot, 2015; Bolderson, 2011). There is not only a high level of variation in the inclusion of noncitizens in social policies between different countries, but also differentiated belonging (Carmel and Sojka, 2021; Shutes, 2016).

We follow the idea of Carstensen et al. (2021) to conceptualise welfare professions as relevant collective actors that contribute to migration and social policy governance and study their (in)formal coordination and the increase in digital practices that supports uneven surveillance of the most marginalised (Henman and Marston, 2008).

While effects of digitalisation on workers’ well-being, organisation or efficiency in the private sector (Cijan et al., 2019) are regularly studied, only a few contributions analyse the effects of digital technologies on the daily work of civil servants. One exception is Gilliom’s study (2001) on welfare bureaucracy controlling female clients claiming benefits, in which highly technologised systems often hindered payments due to petty mistakes, thus prolonging the waiting time of welfare clients, but also limiting discretion for staff.

A study of digital practices in welfare offices thus captures the outsourcing of migration control tasks that, as we argue, support political and legal restrictions affecting noncitizens and that are not simply produced and implemented by agencies that directly deal with migration enforcement (Infantino, 2016). We highlight new responsibilities, institutional exchange and dependencies that affect not only institutions and actors that were seemingly unconnected, but also the handling of cases and clients that find themselves within this network of responsibilities and contestations (Eule et al., 2019).

### **Social assistance policies for noncitizens in Belgium and in Switzerland**

In most EU member states, welfare entitlements are contingent upon residency titles, although specific rights and access to benefits vary (Andreetta, 2019; Lafleur and Vintila, 2020). Simultaneously, social assistance can have

consequences on the residency titles of those who receive it: being a financial burden for the state can constitute, both in Belgium and in Switzerland, grounds for revoking one's right to remain (Lafleur and Mescoli, 2018; Borrelli et al., 2021).

The Belgian constitution states that “everyone is entitled to live in conditions that conform to human dignity” (art. 23). In 1976, public centres for social assistance (PCSAs) were created in order to distribute social assistance, meant to guarantee dignified living conditions. Citizens and (irregularised) noncitizens who wish to benefit from social assistance – medical or otherwise – have to file their request with the PCSA of their municipality. Based on a ‘social inquiry’ conducted by a caseworker, the administration examines whether the applicant meets the legal criteria and notifies the applicant of its decision by post. People’s residency status – which translates into various kinds of papers – is one of the first and most crucial steps of this inquiry, since it determines what kind of assistance could be awarded. Irregularised migrants only receive medical assistance, others might receive financial support. A letter on their ID card can signal whether they are Belgian citizens, permanent residents, EU citizens who registered, the family member of an EU resident or of a third-country national or foreign residents – most often entitling them to the minimum income scheme. An “orange card” meant that their immigration claim was still pending: users could therefore benefit from financial assistance, usually granted in the same amounts as the guaranteed income. An order to leave the country meant that their claim has been decided on and denied, excluding them from any financial assistance. In a lot of cases, however, the information on these documents was either outdated or incomplete; people lost them or failed to bring them to the administration. Immigration statuses also regularly changed while people benefitted from social assistance: residency titles were updated or withdrawn; different ones were awarded.

In some cases, receiving financial assistance could cause noncitizens to lose their resident status, and therefore, their right to public assistance beyond emergency medical care<sup>2</sup>. EU citizens who came looking for a job or third-country nationals whose residency was accepted based on their integration into Belgian society were indeed granted their immigration claim under the assumption that they would not represent a “burden” to the Belgian welfare system. Depending on social assistance therefore meant that the aforementioned requirement was no longer fulfilled. In these cases, welfare offices had a duty to warn applicants before processing their claims, giving those applicants the opportunity to withdraw requests for assistance. If people maintained their request and eventually received financial assistance, the information would appear on the national social security database, which the migration office had access to. Although residence permits were not systematically withdrawn, an investigation was likely to occur, potentially causing people to lose their permit. In other cases, social

workers tried to help their beneficiaries without a legal immigration status to successfully apply for long-term residency.

The history of Swiss social assistance began in 1905 when the ‘conference of caretakers of the poor’ (*Armenpflegerkonferenz*), since 1996 the Swiss Conference for Social Assistance (SKOS), came into being and tried to establish welfare based on the place of residence rather than place of origin, or ‘home’ (Schnegg and Matter, 2010). In contrast to matters of asylum, social policies are a cantonal responsibility, yet cantonal courts and the Federal court have supported the financial rates set by the SKOS so far. The SKOS thus sets frameworks for its members (including most cantons, many municipalities, different federal institutions and private actors working within social services provision) and guides social services that are in charge of handing out social assistance and taking care of recipients through integration programmes and regular meetings.

Similarly to Belgium, all residents in Switzerland have the right to social assistance. It is understood as a final support net and only takes effect once no other (re)sources are available (including private funds, unemployment benefits, or other insurances). Yet, social assistance is understood as debt, which might need to be paid back in case of positive income levels, inheritance and, for foreign nationals, if they aim for naturalisation. Most importantly, foreign nationals with a (permanent) residence permit (EU/EFTA and third-country nationals) claiming social assistance may face the revocation, withdrawal or downgrading of their permits (Borrelli et al., 2021; *Federal Act on Foreign Nationals and Integration*, FNIA, 2019 Art. 62 lit. e, Art. 63). Based on the national obligation to report (Ordinance on admission, residence and gainful employment, 2019 Art. 82b-f), several institutions, including social services, employment offices, police and prosecution (to name a few) are obliged to inform migration offices as soon as foreign nationals apply for support or come up in criminal procedures, though leaving open how this information should be given – much as, in Belgium, social services taking care of social assistance inform their applicants about this reporting obligation. The initial decision and investigation of the case is done by the cantonal migration offices, which receive information on the volume of benefits (by social services) and the level of ‘integration’ of noncitizens by several other agencies and actors that are involved within migration management.

In both countries, receiving assistance may cause noncitizens to lose their residence permit – in Belgium, only those without a permanent status; in Switzerland, all foreign residents are at risk. Both are decentralised federal states, often described as conservative (at times liberal) welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990). Our results, however, become relevant for other European member states, too, given that contesting residency through welfare receipt is allowed under EU law and given that we witness a general retrenchment of welfare states and an increase of highly differentiated access (Schmitt and Teney

2019). The following sections will explore how both administrations receive, process and share information in practice – and what kind of consequences this has for the administrative lives of migrants.

## Method

This contribution considers migration and social protection ethnographically, building on previous studies of street-level bureaucrat practices (Lipsky 1980), and on research conducted within and around welfare offices in Switzerland and in Belgium.

The article draws on ethnographic data including semi-structured interviews and fieldwork (observation) in welfare offices, which disclose how reports from welfare administrations are created and later on used by different agencies. In the Swiss context, 48 interviews with migration offices, social services, legal counsellors, cantonal courts and offices in charge of integration were conducted by Lisa between 2019 and 2021. These are actors who necessarily need to exchange information due to the legally enshrined obligation to report social assistance and other information on the integration of a foreign national. This exchange allows migration offices to assess each case and come to a decision (regarding the termination of someone's permit). The interviews gathered information on communication between different actors, discussed the content of case files (in several social services) and had an interest in how (digital) "paperwork" was produced during the decision-making process. In addition to the interviews, Lisa conducted four days of observation in one rural social services office in which noncitizen-social worker interactions were followed and case files studied. All discussed cases included foreign nationals who were investigated by migration offices due to their social assistance dependency. In French-speaking Belgium, Sophie shadowed social workers within 3 different welfare offices, sharing their daily routines, meetings with clients, and discussing cases between 2018 and 2019. Interviews were conducted with welfare recipients whose resident status ranged from third-country nationals to irregularised migrants (n=40). 50 interviews were conducted with social workers from different departments – some dealt exclusively with noncitizens, others focused only on healthcare, and some assessed all incoming requests. Participants were invited to explain their professional paths, their feelings and experiences working for and within the welfare administration, and the particularities of interacting with noncitizens. Informal conversations focused on specific cases/decisions, tasks, or issues that came up during the day or in the context of a particular case. The data collected also involved observation in court and within NGOs and law offices specialising in dealing with welfare or immigration cases.

In order to guarantee confidentiality, all interviews and field anecdotes were pseudonymised, specific locations and information about age or exact job titles

were omitted. Due to our focus on institutional practices and bureaucratic procedures of digitalisation, we do not analyse data gathered with and on noncitizen recipients in this article, though acknowledge that it has value when studying state practices in general. While the Swiss study focused on how decisions on the revocation or downgrading of permits come into being, taking into account the work of further actors such as migration offices, cantonal and federal courts, as well as legal counsellors working with ‘clients’ depending on social assistance, the Belgian project explored the judicialisation of social assistance claims, from the daily work of welfare officers to the professional ethos of judges, the role of lawyers and the experiences of noncitizens. Both of these studies thus have a significant overlap in their general interest, addressed the way cases were built, the role of (digitalised) practices across state bureaucracies, and unpacked the way social and migration policies overlapped in practice. Despite different legal structures which are more or less restrictive towards noncitizens, both cases are united in their established communication of welfare dependency between welfare offices and migration offices. Our interest lies in how the communication causes various negotiations and reflections on the side of social workers. We do not compare both country cases in their differences, but highlight the common intrusion of migration law into fields of social policies and explore the welfare-migration nexus.

### **Digital case-making and the changing work of welfare bureaucrats**

Today’s daily work of caseworkers in welfare offices includes an exchange on the legal status of noncitizens and their behaviour discussed with different agencies of public administration, as well as an increasing digitalisation of practices. Information can be exchanged personally, via phone, mails, including data and files, via paper or also via digital databases that allow several state agencies to gather relevant data on a respective client. In the specific case of social assistance, Belgian welfare bureaucracies regularly make use of, and receive notifications from, the national social security database. Introduced 20 years ago, this database contains information from various public services: it states people’s addresses and residency statutes, immigration procedures, if there are any, whether or not the persons’ health insurance is up to date, if they receive social security benefits, if they work, etc.

“We discovered a lot of frauds when the database was first introduced”, Clémentine remembers, “because people had to tell us whether or not they worked before, but we had no way of checking.” (Interview, Belgium, 2018).

By introducing a few, almost automated tools for control, the database uncovered situations – such as people working while receiving financial



benefits – that PSCAs had very few ways of verifying before. The database indeed compiles information provided by various public services – such as the national institute for healthcare (INAMI), (un)employment agencies or the Agency for Social Integration (SPP IS), responsible for funding local welfare administrations. Public institutions – such as the immigration office – can access the available data, but cannot directly modify its content. Because of the broad information that it contains, the database has become an indispensable part of the social inquiry that goes together with every request to the welfare office: social workers print out the database spreadsheets and put them inside the cardboard file before meeting with one of their beneficiaries. This allows them to verify that applicants meet the legal criteria for social assistance – having the right residency/immigration status – but also to gather information on the case, such as health coverage, whether people work or receive other benefits. Once a request is granted, the fact that the person receives social assistance will appear on the database a few months later – once the information is processed by the SPP IS. After this delay, migrants – whether irregularised or not – receiving assistance will be listed, just like any other kind of beneficiary. Welfare offices will also receive “warnings” if new information is available about an ongoing case: if the immigration status of the beneficiary changes, or if they start working. Digital communication between and across government agencies and policy areas also illustrates the embeddedness and overlap between different (social) policy areas (Clasen et al., 2016) – in this case, welfare, employment and migration.

In Switzerland, information flows are less automatised and rather work the other way around. Due to an obligation to report that pushes social services to inform migration offices about foreign-national clients receiving welfare (Borrelli et al., 2021), municipal social services share the level of benefits received by their clients and, if asked by the migration offices, also need to write a report on their clients’ behaviour, reason for welfare dependency and prospects to re-enter the labour market. These exchanges are not regulated via a national database, but depend on the canton, due to Switzerland’s federal structure. Social services make use of a national database that stores information on foreign nationals, including asylum seekers, EU/EFTA citizens and any other noncitizens, also used by migration offices. Then there are cantonal databases in which social services can search for information, as well as internal systems that store digital case files. Only rarely do we find a shared database, as in Belgium, where migration offices can automatically see whether or not a client is depending on social assistance. This is due to social assistance being regulated by each canton, in contrast to nationally regulated asylum laws. This causes parallel systems to evolve: although partly still relying on paper files, though hoping for digitalisation to fully take over, social services need to share information with migration offices mostly via e-mail or in form of letters. Where cantons have

established shared databases between different public institutions, migration officials explain that it has made their work easier, partly because it reduces the need for direct communication between them and the social services. Yet, this automated sharing of information also circumscribes the power and thus discretion of social services, unable to frame dependency in a specific way. As such, social services become an automated part of migration control, also broadening the control that clients experience. Where there is no harmonised database, information can still be selectively transferred, or its communication delayed. Further, while the existence of automated technologies may often save time and produce ready-made data, thus facilitate work, formalised ways, such as databases and standardised forms, reduce information and can cause significant and time-consuming obstacles, also explained in the Belgian context:

“Every time you get a warning from the database, you have to call people, investigate, and write a report”, Francine (social worker) explains, “Our work has changed a lot since I first started out 20 years ago. We used to take people’s request directly, ask for their identity card, and give them money in cash. We didn’t have computers or any of that. Now, with new technologies, there is so much admin that there is no room for people anymore” (Interview, Belgium, 2018).

Swiss social workers reflect on the same issue. The need to log every step of their work into an online system severely reduces their time for clients, shaping them more into technocrats than being frontline workers (see Bovens and Zouridis, 2002). The lack of time to really assess and work on a case also challenges potential contestation, something that has also been highlighted in the Danish and U.S. contexts (Holm Vohnsen, 2017; Gilliom, 2001). Standardisation increases the screen-level time for bureaucrats and digitalisation pushes them towards system maintenance, rather than handling single cases (Bovens and Zouridis, 2002). Social workers consistently highlight that their job has gone from being mainly “social”, although there was of course always paperwork involved, to mainly administrative. They refuse their role as mere paper-pushing bureaucrats, who ask for documents, fill in forms and templates, and write reports and official notices. This shift in technologies, which reduces the necessity for direct physical exchange, affects the self-understanding of social workers.

In large Belgian cities, every staff member handles at least 100 cases, of which an average of 20 need to be called in for a meeting every month. This is similar to Swiss social services. These meetings mostly consist of bringing paperwork: bank statements, school transcripts, medical certificates, job applications, etc. Social workers, on their end, check the database for changes.

“When I started working, I really wanted to do more”, Romuald explains, “I asked if I could accompany someone to city hall, and I was told that I could. However, it took me

2 hours, and my other cases ended up being late as a consequence. So, although doing social work is not forbidden, it turns out to be impossible in practice” (Interview, Belgium, 2019).

Romuald’s actual understanding of social work is to accompany clients to other appointments and to follow their cases more physically, something he is unable to do, due to his caseload. Similarly, Marlene, working in a Swiss social service, acknowledges:

“We once had a system of time recording for everything, but that was quickly aborted since the time recording was too time consuming, hindering our actual work. Now, in theory we have to register everything via case notes, every meeting, every action, but we do not always do that.” (Interview, Switzerland, 2020)

The reduction of social workers’ ‘physical’ activity is caused by the expectation to excessively control clients, which is facilitated through digital information storage and standardisation (see also Henman and Marston, 2008). Digitalisation, as Gilliom (2001) already underlined, may thus reduce the ability for bureaucrats to react in an individualised manner and adapt their work to the client. Discretion can be hindered or more guided – a goal that was institutionally aimed for and was investigated by various researchers focusing on bureaucracy (Evans and Harris, 2004; Bovens and Zouridis, 2002), while coming at a cost for the individual client that faces very specific circumstances.

Despite the masses of data that are collected, welfare offices still rely on direct contacts (interviews and field notes, Belgium and Switzerland), needed to assess individual situations and decide on support or sanctioning. Due to the complexity of cases that cannot be depicted by database entries, we argue that especially the bureaucratic work of social assistance has not (yet) become a fully automated and standardised field of computer-controlled decision-making, but rather an entangled hybrid practice shaped by new rules to communicate with other agencies, internal digitalisation processes and the professional rationale of individual service.

Administrative systems that are supposed to routinise procedures in order to counteract heavy workload can create professional disagreement among social workers, sometimes even increasing workload. The level of routinisation and standardisation in migration decisions and welfare has not (yet) reached the level of entirely human-free systems, yet digital technologies become tools of increased control that support data and information sharing with other institutions and also allow agencies to exert more power upon certain individuals. These exchanges support migration policies further undermining the right to receive welfare for foreign nationals: while foreign nationals may receive social assistance, it can endanger their stay – and today’s fast information flows allow for an enhanced and quick control.

### **The creation of evidence in digital times and client control through documentation**

Besides information exchange and digitalisation, welfare bureaucrats' daily work consists of investigating every individual request, collecting and examining documents, writing reports and recommendations (Andreetta, 2019). After a request is granted, additional reports have to be written every time new information comes to light. Those reports are, however, supposed to be discussed with beneficiaries – who can then provide additional information, explain inconsistencies, or challenge the information received by the welfare office.

Belgian and Swiss welfare offices also get notices when people work or are listed as beneficiaries of other social benefits: other state institutions thus also provide social workers with information that they need to act upon. As soon as individuals receive money, Swiss social services expect to be informed in order to re-assess the budget that individuals receive (field notes, 2020), e.g. if their clients received an income, lottery winnings, inheritances or money from friends. The system is itself already suspicious and prone to collecting as much documentation as possible, something that is facilitated by digital storage and databases. Evidence is also created through registering people's debts (including loss certificates, or unpaid bills), something which will also affect the right to stay on the territory. In the Swiss case, even if someone paid back all debts, it will still be registered in a national database, unless one pays a fee for its deletion and the creditor agrees to it (interview with Barbara, Swiss cantonal integration centre 2020).

Importantly, information from the database or by other actors is assumed to be true. Therefore, if warnings are incorrect, or the received social assistance budget wrongly calculated, beneficiaries end up having to provide evidence – in the form of documents – that the information is false.

“Sometimes, we get a warning saying that a person worked. We ask them to come and explain . . . and if they haven't, then we need to ask them for a document proving that they didn't work on that day” (Valérie, Belgian social worker).

Proving that something did not happen turns out to be difficult for beneficiaries, not to mention that it forces them to produce yet another document. However, offices ask for the production of evidence through paperwork or online documents. They need to scan, save and sort such documents that create a case file and thus become the story of each client. Due to the ability to store and organise huge quantities of data, but also the need for evidence and documentation, we gain insights into digitalisation processes from their absurd side. Foreign nationals become fearful of registering and making use of support, because it remains unclear what kind of information will be used how, and which kind of support impacts upon their residence permit:

‘The population is strongly insecure. They know, “oh, money from the state equals bad, equals one can lose the residence permit”. But it is never clear what kind of money of the state is bad . . . Insecurity goes all the way to whether or not to take financial advice, everything suddenly becomes a little dangerous. And that worries us, because we have the feeling that the gap between the state and foreign population constantly grows.’ (Barbara, Swiss cantonal integration centre 2020)

In Switzerland, the receipt of social assistance directly affects foreign nationals’ right to stay, no matter if they have a permanent residence permit or have lived in Switzerland for decades (FNIA, 2015). Legally, the (significant and long-term) dependency on welfare leads to the revocation, non-prolongation or even downgrading of (permanent) resident permits. Following their duty to inform beneficiaries of their rights and duties, most welfare offices (in both countries), when faced with a request from EU and third-country nationals with a residence permit, warn them of the risks – sometimes causing beneficiaries to withdraw their request. Social services and legal counselling offices thus problematise this clash of rights and restrictions to their claimants, at times even proposing that clients do not apply for assistance, despite their right to receive financial support.

The digitalisation and data exchange drastically increases the documentation of each case and thus allows bureaucrats (and in particular migration offices) to trace individuals and control them, something that creates unease within welfare offices. In Belgium, updates or alerts also indicate when a new decision has been made at the migration office, whereas in Switzerland it is often non-citizens who take the migration office letters to the welfare offices. These decisions are partly based on prior reports done by welfare offices making them into tools for ‘*postentry migration-control aims*’ (Ataç and Rosenberger, 2019, 2). Here, information flows and migration law undermine certain social and welfare rights, due to the consequences that the former have on foreign nationals and their right to remain. However, there is also the possibility to contest such policies, using digital practices and information flows to the clients’ advantage.

### **Contesting documentation and practices of control**

While controlling and gathering evidence are significant aspects in the daily work of those granting welfare, social work is also embedded in a culture of care. The social workers that we shadowed regularly pointed to the tensions between their professional ethos, the values embedded in their training, and the system of control that “working for the state” entailed. This section will show how both digital and analogue paperwork can sometimes be used in favour of the client, by using delays in database information transfers, or by writing paperwork that will eventually help advance their immigration case.

Welfare office, 5 May 2019. I'm shadowing Sarah, a 34-year-old social worker from the "first requests" team. A 34-year-old woman from France is our first case. She has a Belgian residency card and explains that she has been living in Belgium for more than 6 months. She was supposed to start working, but the starting day of her contract has been delayed, and she needs some financial help in the meantime: for one or two months, she estimates.

*Sarah:* So, in theory, the problem with this is that you risk getting your card withdrawn. Because as a European citizen, you're allowed to live in Belgium, but you cannot, as the law says, be an unreasonable burden for the state.

*Client:* That's not what I want. I'm already ashamed to ask . . .

*Sarah:* Now between you and me, nothing will happen to you during the first 3 months. So if we open a file, and then you ask that we stop helping you, nothing will happen, probably.

*Client:* Yes, I hope that in 3 months I'll be working.

*Sarah:* OK, I'll set it up for you.

We go back to Sarah's office and check the national database. We then realise that the woman only got her resident's card in March, less than 3 months ago – she had been in Belgium since October but was removed from the list of the population in December when the police failed to establish residency. We check with the legal team, who confirm Sarah's first impression: our 'client' is not allowed anything. Sarah sighs: "She is not going to be happy . . . I gave her false hope. But that's the problem when you cannot consult the national registry beforehand. Since the GDPR [General Data Protection Regulation] we've been asked to check with people first. So now we have to go back and tell her she is not entitled to anything" (Field notes, Belgian social services, 2019).

Sarah's example demonstrates that while the introduction of technologies has changed the daily work and practices of civil servants, in welfare administrations, social workers still have discretion in the way they deal with requests, yet sometimes are also hindered through routinised work steps. They know time frames in which migration offices might react and can write reports explaining or contradicting information from the database: they can encourage clients to amend or withdraw their requests. Such withdrawal is, however, criticised by Swiss social workers, since they are worried that people will not be able to make ends meet. The fear of registering and non-take up of support, as Swiss staff assume, will create a new group of marginalised and poor individuals. At the same time, welfare offices also negotiate what kind of information they are willing to hand out:

'The migration office sends us a questionnaire. It is a form for which we have negotiated what kind of, well to which extent we are willing to inform them. That includes, for example, do we support the person? How much has (s)he received? In total? Over what period of time? And then follows a questionnaire about the economic integration, the financial stuff. But it is also about the people who shirk for whatever reasons. Is someone a single parent and does not have any opportunity for improvement? Well, because we have of course professional codes, us social workers, where we say we are not here to snitch on people, are we? Otherwise, it would be a totalitarian regime of control.' (Victor, Swiss social service 2020)

Social workers are well aware that their information matters, even though they cannot be sure to what extent their reports are taken into consideration, causing noncitizens to lose their permit. As such, they negotiate what kind of paperwork and contents they are willing to share, to the extent that legal requirements allow them to.

Communication across different state institutions finally includes the transfer of case files to welfare courts, in case applicants decide to challenge administrative decisions. In Belgium especially, social assistance claims have become increasingly judicialised, and applicants without a permanent resident status have regularly gone to the European Court of Justice – see, for example, *Grzelczyk v Centre public d'aide sociale d'Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve* (2001) or *Abdida v Centre public d'aide sociale d'Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve* (2014) – in order to claim social assistance 'against the state'. In such cases, social workers can choose to write reports 'in favour of the user' in order to help further their case in court (Andreetta, 2019). As explained in the case of *Grzelczyk*, local offices indeed rely on state funding for the benefits that they grant: if such funding is denied on the grounds that the applicant is not eligible due to their immigration status, the only way for welfare administrations to qualify for state reimbursement is through a judicial decision. In such contexts, case workers use their discretion – both in face-to-face interactions with users, and in the documents that they write – in order to aid despite, or outside of, migration control.

## Conclusion

Paperwork has always been a central part of bureaucratic work. Over the last few years, bureaucratic procedures have also become increasingly standardised – and digitalised. This increased use of digital technology has contributed to the tracking and surveillance of migrants' movements even before the moment they reach the borders of the Schengen area, but also beyond. While previous studies have scrutinised border practices, immigration policies and the daily practices of those implementing them, interactions between migrants and "ordinary" street-level bureaucrats once inside their host country have received less attention. This also holds true when it comes to the effects of welfare governance on noncitizens. This is despite our knowledge on the relevance of institutional interplay for socioeconomic outcomes of migrants (Bowes and Meehan Domokos, 1998), in which welfare states increase migrant vulnerability (Hooijer and Picot, 2015). With our focus on welfare bureaucracies, we have underlined how case-making in welfare cases concerning noncitizens becomes a part of continuous control that is exercised towards groups which are perceived as non-belonging. We showed that administrative developments, including surveillance technologies, are facilitated through digitalisation practices and

target those who depend on the state the most (Henman and Marston, 2008). The kind of information that welfare officials gather for noncitizens applying for social assistance, and how such information is shared and transmitted to immigration authorities, marks a crucial moment in which social rights are undermined by restrictive migration policies.

Drawing from insights from Belgium and Switzerland, we asked what the digitalisation of paperwork and information exchanges between street-level bureaucracies does to the daily work of bureaucrats and to the administrative lives of migrants who ask for social assistance. We showed cases are built based on digitally stored information and data flows from various institutions, standardising, but also significantly reducing interactions in case-making. In such an environment, paper truths are established first, and often very hard to change or challenge by claimants. However, despite the digitalisation and administrative document processing, we do not necessarily face a pure screen-level bureaucracy, but instead encounter a hybrid form, in which direct client contact is still a key part of bureaucratic work, while highly influenced by standardisation processes. Part of this hybridity is also the exchange that state institutions maintain (and are forced to), undermining professional ethics of welfare offices and highlighting the creeping of migration law into social policies. Such exchanges aim for an increased control of migrant individuals who make claims to the state – reinforced by digital means of communication that facilitate sharing and building evidence across state agencies.

Case-building, however, is not entirely centred on standardised and digital administrative control. Because they still interact with users, welfare bureaucrats can sometimes circumvent the controlling and data-sharing purpose of the database or write reports that they hope can help advance their clients' claim. The 'right to remain' can therefore sometimes be negotiated, based on paperwork constructed in the welfare office, and the fact that it is shared across other public administrations.

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### **Ethical statement**

The authors declare that their study received ethics clearance from all funding/host institutions.



## Competing interests

The authors declare none.

## Notes

- 1 Both Switzerland and Belgium have a differentiated system of support. Welfare offices – investigated in this article – enforce social assistance laws, whereas unemployment desks deal with unemployment benefits claims, etc. Due to different names of the authorities, we talk about ‘welfare offices’ in order to refer to the bureaucracies that we observed, except when referring to the specific country context.
- 2 We use the term public assistance here to include any kind of services given by the state, of which social assistance is one, as is housing or health support and emergency aid, e.g. given to rejected asylum seekers who cannot be deported. Irregular migrants were, indeed, only entitled to emergency medical assistance – unless they could prove in court that they could not be deported.

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