# How do private companies shape responses to migration in Europe? Informality, organizational decisions, and transnational change

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**Abstract**

This article takes an actor-centered and bottom-up perspective to analyze how private companies shape public responses to migration in Europe. It builds on ethnographic research with top managers and civil servants involved in visa policy, asylum reception, and immigration detention. Drawing on organizational theories about decisions and change, I analyze empirical evidence to put forward processes of international migration governance that take account of private and public actors, the implementation stage of policy-making, the organizational and informal dynamics underpinning decisions and change within and across borders of polity, therefore adopting a transnational lens. I show three interrelated aspects: Personal contacts, informal interactions, and informal exchange that promote private companies' business while affecting change in the delivery of public policies; private companies' involvement in decision-making and their engagement in solution-driven processes of change; the diffusion of organizational responses to migration across national contexts, which contribute to transnational change.

**Keywords:** ethnography, garbage can, policy implementation, private companies, transnational diffusion.

## 1. Introduction

This article focuses on how private companies shape decisions and change in public organizations which implement migration and border control policies. Drawing on perspectives which consider the implementation to be a distinct yet crucial stage of policy-making (Lipsky, 2010; Palumbo & Calista, 1990; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1974), this analysis focuses on dynamics that unfold at that stage of policy-making, independently from developments at the level of policy design. It brings under analytical scrutiny the worlds of practices most notably the organizational responses to migration in Europe and the role of private companies therein, a "black box" within the "black box" of policy implementation. The implementation of migration and border control is a bourgeoning and expanding field of research which has well documented decision-making and the uses of discretion in several policy areas (Gilboy, 1991; Miaz, 2017) while putting forward the implementation's almost magical unpredictability (Eule et al., 2019) and the values, affects, judgments and emotions that state institutions mobilize when they implement policies (Fassin et al., 2015). Some studies have focused explicitly on the cooperation with private companies and put forward a series of effects such as the state dependency on solutions and ideas developed by private companies which account for "lock-in effects" (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2012), the depoliticization of policy issues that the privatization of policy delivery brings about (Bosworth & Singler, 2022; Darling, 2016; Infantino, 2016), and the production of an "illegality industry" that makes profit out of the business of policing borders, and forges while fighting irregular migration (Andersson, 2014).

Important works have demonstrated the influence of the border security industry on policy-making at the level of European institutions. Using a strategic constructivist approach, Thomas Baird (2018) has shown the alignment of EU border security policies to the preferences, identities, and frames of business actors.

Julien Jeandesboz (2016) has argued that processes of policy-making on border security, most notably the "smart borders" approach, is sustained by chains of association with the techniques of mass dataveillance, including large scale IT systems, triggered and shaped by the security industry. Didier Bigo (2022, p. 241) has described the evolution of corporate actors involved in the EU strategies of security and borders and highlighted their role of "visionaries of a future in the making" who fundamentally shape EU IT architecture. To analyze policy processes of international migration governance, some scholars have gone beyond the state: Christina Boswell (2008) has put forward the role of epistemic communities and the use of expert knowledge to substantiate policy decisions; Andrew Geddes (2021) has shown how regional cooperation shapes repertoires of policy actors' understandings; Antoine Pécoud (2015) has focused on narratives emanating from international organizations which make sense of policy actors' decisions. However, a research gap exists when it comes to address the question of how private companies shape the responses to migration of public organizations at the implementation stage.

To tackle that question, this article engages with specific approaches to the study of governance. First, the interpretive governance approach (Bevir & Rhodes, 2015; Rhodes, 2012) which proposes a new way of conceptualizing processes of change in government by adopting an actor-centered or bottom-up approach. Second, the "informal governance" approach, for it considers public and private actors' "regular though non-codified and not publicly sanctioned exchanges" (Christiansen & Neuhold, 2012, p. 7) which lead to public decisions. Such a framework has been applied in the migration policy area exclusively in reference to the constitution of a European asylum policy field (Vink & Engelmann, 2012). By building on in-depth ethnographic research with public organizations and private companies that implement visa policy, immigration detention and asylum, this analysis puts under analytical scrutiny organizational decisions and organizational change while revealing the informality characterizing those processes. I show that informal contacts and informal interactions between private and state actors shape decisions and change, not just within boundaries of organizations and borders of polity but also across them, while accounting for social processes of knowing and learning that fundamentally affect policy implementation. As Freeman (2006, p. 376) noted, "implementation [is] the process by which agencies and employees learn how to deliver [policy]."

This article aims to expand the state of knowledge about "global policy and transnational administration," a frame of analysis that has come to describe "the public and private agents that interact directly with policy-making, policy design and its delivery through policy experiments like global public–private partnerships and via the porous boundaries of transnational policy communities" (Stone & Moloney, 2019, p. 11). It does so in four main manners: (1) By taking account of a specific yet overlooked kind of policy actors namely public implementers and professionals in private companies; (2) by fostering a non-rational approach that focuses on social processes such as practice-based social interactions and their effects on learning and knowing; (3) by focusing on how communities of policy actors learn, an understudied topic (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013); (4) by shedding light on the informality of policy processes with a particular emphasis on how informal interactions affect decision-making and organizational change.

The article proceeds as follows: I start by locating this study within interdisciplinary bodies of academic literature which have brought insights on the involvement of private actors in government's functions, also beyond the studies that focus on migration and borders. After the presentation of the methodology, data collection and the sources of the empirical part of the research, I continue by analyzing empirical evidence on how private companies shape decisions and change in the light of three interrelated aspects: (1) Business invention and business development; (2) the pro-active engagement in occasions in which organizations are expected to make choices most notably within the frame of disruptive events such as the refugees' reception crisis[1] and the COVID-19 pandemic; (3) the dynamics of diffusion across national contexts that are spurred by corporations which are global players. The last section discusses findings in the light of the literature about informal policy processes, policy learning, and policy transfer. Concluding remarks discuss the distinct perspective of this study, the limits that draw directions for future research and normative issues connected to this topic.

## 2. Private companies and modes of governing: Interdisciplinary approaches

This article tackles a topic that lies at the crossroad of different bodies of academic works. A systematic discussion of the literature that studies private/public modes of governing is beyond the remit of this analysis. Therefore, I

will consider the most relevant approaches to conceptualize this case of analysis. The first one is the "governance turn" in political science, for it takes account of the transformations in modes of governing. To take governance as an analytical framework is to see the larger picture of governing, one that includes multiple kinds of actors and structures as well as their interactions (Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007; Pierre & Peters, 2020). The concept of governance has come to describe a shift of scholarly attention toward governing structures such as markets and networks, softer policy instruments and aspects of policymaking that cross the boundaries between public and private. Governance is associated with public sector neoliberal reforms of the 1980s that have encouraged the use of markets and the import of their norms, especially in the delivery of public services (Hood, 1991). Other approaches stem from the literature that focuses on migration and borders, policy implementation, and sociological perspectives on public action. These different bodies of literature have advanced the state of knowledge about the transformations of modes of governing in two main directions: First, they have brought insights into the implications for the state and have attempted at explaining the emergence of such transformations in historical perspectives; Second, they have unraveled broader effects on policy recipients, the rule of law and the ways in which policy outcomes take shape on the ground.

The co-optation of carriers in pre-departure border checks has been analyzed as an instrument of nation-state building in the context of the United States (Zolberg, 1999) and one of the Europeanized policy instruments of "remote control strategy" allowing for the lifting of inter-state frontiers and the achievement of the freedom of movement within the Schengen area (Guild & Bigo, 2010; Scholten, 2015). These studies have put forward that delegation to third parties implies the reinforcement of state capacity to control borders and migration and that states adopt delegation because they embrace the neoliberal paradigm and the new public management doctrine, which does not result in the retreat of their punitive and disciplinary functions (Menz, 2013). Studies of policy implementation echo those findings. The recourse to nonstate actors is a generic, expanding tendency of public policy delivery (Hill & Hupe, 2021) that have led to the conceptual shift from street-level bureaucracies (Lipsky, 2010) to street-level organizations (Brodkin, 2011). Delegation is analyzed in connection with the spread of the new public management doctrine, which certainly characterizes how delegation is framed in the contemporary era. Doctrinal components of new public management include the predominance of performance metrics, managerialism, private-sector styles of management practice, and a shift to greater competition in the public sector mainly by contracting out (Hood, 1991). As Philippe Bezes (2015) has put forward, new public management is a "doctrinal puzzle" deriving from a mix of theoretical and practical knowledge, mainly stemming from economics and descriptions of "best practices," that fosters the belief in market-based modes of regulations, including instruments and norms, which represent "solutions" to the "problem" that the state bureaucracies represent. New public management is a frame that allows for standardizing local practices (Ancelovici & Jenson, 2013). The new public management frame ascribes aims, such as efficiency and effectiveness, that can be very different from the reasons that have led to the adoption of certain policy instruments such as contracting out and to the effects of that choice, both revealed by sociological enquiries about public policy instrumentation (Ansaloni & Smith, 2017; Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007).

Policy implementation perspectives have also noted that the recourse to non-state actors raises issues of accountability, as frontline workers serve many masters (Thomann et al., 2018), while achieving blame avoidance for state actors (Hood, 2020). Legal perspectives on the analysis of commercialized migration management have contributed to this debate by putting forward the separation of legal responsibilities, the human rights violations, the lack of transparency in privately managed deportations, border checks, and pre-screening of travelers (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013).

Although these bodies of interdisciplinary literature follow parallel paths, their insights are complementary, tend to reinforce each other and cover different aspects of a topic that can be addressed from several angles. This analysis fosters an interdisciplinary stance by applying a mix of approaches stemming from studies about governance and studies about organizations to domains of international migration governance, in which the recourse to private companies for day-to-day implementation is an expanding tendency. Before applying those analytical lenses to the discussion of the empirical evidence, the next section specifies the methodology of this study.

## 3. Methodology

The empirical research on which this analysis builds is rare. Although private actors are increasingly involved in international migration governance, their role in informally shaping public decisions tend to go under the radar of public and academic scrutiny. I have used fieldwork for its advantages over other methods in political science rather than to test hypotheses. Fieldwork is a source of data not available elsewhere and a way to identify key actors and core processes (Wood, 2009).

The study of dynamics that unfold behind the scenes results in methodological challenges. As Thomas Christiansen and Christine Neuhold (2012, p. 12) put it, "the ultimate test is then about gaining access to information about developments that are undocumented and generally lacking in transparency and in which actors tend to have an interest in it remaining so." When studying the informal influence of private companies' top managers on public decisions, in which business dynamics such as the selection of companies, the awarding of contracts and the provision of services are involved, obtaining research access is particularly challenging. In the case of visa policy, I obtained research access because I started my fieldwork research with state actors who introduced me to the private companies. Private companies could not deny access, otherwise they would have disappointed their customers. In the case of detention and asylum, I identified some academics who had and shared their contacts with managers of private companies and policy officers in international organizations. Little by little, the people I approached put me in touch with their colleagues. I have always disclosed my role as a researcher for doctoral and postdoctoral projects and explained the motivations of my research in terms of interest in the perspectives of the individuals implicated in the operational side of policies. Rather than on migrants, who tend to occupy the stage of academic research, my fieldwork has focused on less documented governing elites whose practices directly affect the life of migrants. Challenges emerge when it comes to ethnographically "studying up" governing elites (Bevir & Rhodes, 2015), especially due to the power imbalance between research participants and researchers (Shore & Nugent, 2002). Researchers wait for interviews, need permissions, and continuously negotiate access and disclosure. This analysis builds on empirical research about behind-the-scenes dynamic. Time has been crucial to gather empirical evidence about governing elites and the hidden role of private companies. I have conducted in-depth fieldwork research over the last 10 years, with public and private organizations in visa, immigration detention and asylum policy areas. The result is a multi-sited empirical research in consulates and visa application centers in Morocco, detention centers in the United Kingdom, Belgian, Italian, French, and British Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs, and also Brussels and Fiesole, where I interviewed policy officers of international organizations. The accounts of the research participants mention practices in other countries as well, an aspect which reflects the diffused presence of these private companies and the added value of following the companies. I gathered the hidden aspects of organizational life that I am describing through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. My long-term research experience in the policy and social worlds of implementing actors allowed me to gain credibility, trust and familiarity which also led to access to informal settings such as dinners, internal meetings, and coffee breaks. This exposed important insights on informal dynamics that would not have been visible otherwise.

Private companies involved in migration governance are wide-ranging. The companies analyzed in this paper are involved in migration governance because of business opportunities rather than for cooptation by the state based on sanctions, like in the case of carriers. To address the shaping of policy-making on the ground including a transnational perspective, I select private companies which are not only dominant in national contexts, but also represent global players in the outsourcing of visa services, immigration detention, and asylum reception. The companies are VFS Global, TLS Contact, G4S, and SERCO.[2] VFS Global was created as a wholly owned subsidiary of the Swiss tour operator Kuoni Travel Group. It is specialized in providing visa services to governments at a global scale. It is the first and largest company in that sector. TLS Contact was born as a subsidiary of the French company Teleperformance Group, specialized in telecommunication. Just like VFS, it was specifically created to provide visa services. G4S (formerly Securicor) is an Anglo-Danish transnational corporation specialized in a series of services, mainly security services, including "care and justice," a sector that includes running detention centers and prisons. SERCO is a British subcontractor operating globally in several sectors such as defense, healthcare, justice, immigration, transport, citizen service. In 2022, SERCO has acquired the Swiss-based immigration service provider Organization for Refugees Services, which operates in Switzerland, Italy, Germany,

Austria, Greece, and Spain in the domains of asylum reception and returns.[3] I use also interviews with national civil servants in charge of visa policy and detention operations (Italy and UK) and policy officers of the European Asylum Agency (EUAA), the International Organization for Migrations (IOM), and the Intergovernmental Consultations on Asylum, Refugees, and Migration (IGC), all of which cooperate or engage in multiple manners with private service providers.

## 4. Shaping and diffusing responses to migration: The role of private companies

This section focuses on how private companies involved in policy implementation affect decisions and change in public organizations. I focus on three interrelated aspects, which are treated separately for analytical clarity: (1) Personal contacts, informal interactions, and informal exchange that promote the business of private companies while affecting change in the delivery of public policies; (2) private companies' participation in decision-making processes and their engagement in solution-driven processes of change; (3) the diffusion of organizational responses to migration across national contexts, which contribute to transnational change.

### 4.1. Personal contacts, informal interactions, and business development

To develop their business, private companies seek for a specific type of organizational change in the public sector namely contracting out. Chris Rodgers (2006) put forward that organizational change tends to be the result of informal interactions, joint sensemaking and political accommodations rather than compliance with rational analysis, since organizations are first and foremost networks of people interacting with each other. Being part of a network of interpersonal relationships and having opportunities to interact is a priority to start and develop the business of private companies. Professionals in private companies consider informal contacts to be particularly effective. In Casablanca, I had dinner with Rani,[4] a business developer of VFS Global, who talked about the time in which the outsourcing of visa services needed a legal basis in the Visa Code, the Council regulation that provides for the conditions and procedures to issue Schengen visas.[5] Rani described the "*almost daily exchange of emails with policy officers in the European Commission.*" In the case of visa services outsourcing, the informal exchange between public officials working in diplomatic missions and private companies in specific local contexts, such as Mumbai and Shanghai, is at the very origin of the creation of a new business for new companies (Infantino, 2016). As Rani has stated, "*VFS was born by accident; we discovered this market by accident.*" In the beginning of 2000s, an existing company, Kuoni India, that provided services to visa applicants by going through the application process on their behalf, is tasked by the USA embassy in Mumbai with carrying out visa processing. "*The USA embassy in Mumbai noticed the work of Kuoni India and asked us to go inside the embassy to do some data entry and things like that,*" Rani has claimed. VFS Global is then created as a specific company that manages the visa application process for diplomatic missions. The story of TLS Contact, the visa service provider created 10 years later, is very similar in that respect. During an informal conversation, Jacques, the vice-president of TLS Contact, has claimed:

> *The French CEO of an IT company in China came in contact, I don't know how, that was not foreseen at that time, with a friend who worked at the embassy, the initial idea was to create a software for Chinese students who traveled to France in the summer. TLS Contact – Vice President*

The unfolding of those dynamics is not publicly available. During my fieldwork research, the issues of informal contacts, informal exchange, and business development seemed to be a tabooed topic. These issues challenge the myths of market competition and of the autonomy from private actors in the decisions of the public sector. The selection of companies is formally based on market competition if we understand markets as the institutionalization of social relations based on competition (François, 2008; Polanyi & Pearson, 1977). When we focus on legal aspects, it appears that states launch calls for tenders to select the service providers, as in any public contract. However, if we look at the logic underlying the choice of companies, public–private cooperation in the field of visas is rather based on the fiction of market competition. Few companies respond to calls for tender, as these are new services. VFS Global is created specifically to operate in the novel sector of visa processing, an issue that

makes competition non-existent in the beginning. The creation of TLS Contact as a new player in that business is due to personal contacts. As Jacques has stated, "*Call for tenders were launched in China and given our good relations, everything started, and we entered this business.*" The number of companies that jump into this new business increases over time but, as consuls have frequently said, the selection depends on who is truly able to do the job. The position of domination of certain companies such as VFS Global and TLS Contact is constantly reinforced. These companies are awarded increasing numbers of contracts. They are recognized and considered to be reliable. Reputation and trust, rather than competition, explain the results of call for tenders and the functioning of the market. As Granovetter (1985) pointed out, economic action is embedded in structures of social relations. Social relations build the trust from which market relations develop. Trust is based on past and present actions and interactions. Trust underpins the expectations of state actors about the cooperation with private companies, on which contracts are based.

Informal contacts and informal interactions build relationships based on trust, which are aimed at triggering change in public organizations. During his mission in Casablanca, Jacques has spent most of his time to promote and develop TLS Contact's services in Morocco, by organizing dinners with consuls who do not use TLS as their service provider for instance. Carlo, the head of the Foreign Affairs Ministry's *Centro Visti*, the Italian office for visa policy, has talked of the informal influence that representatives of private service providers try to exercise. Carlo has said "*private service providers come here; they make lots of presentations.*" Empirical evidence from other domains of migration policy also suggests the existence of multiple occasions in which private companies establish contacts. That is the case of the IGC, the intergovernmental forum that gather high/mid ranking practitioners of participating states. Mary, one Programme Officer at IGC, has claimed that "*technology providers are regularly invited to the meetings of the technology working group.*" Giovanni, one Programme Manager at IOM, has described his colleagues' participation to technology service providers fairs, a kind of setting for public/private actors' social interactions also discussed in the academic literature (Baird, 2018). Another example stems from the EUAA in which informal contacts and informal exchange characterize the interactions with private service providers specialized in ICTs. Endre, one senior officer in the Asylum Processes sector interviewed during the COVID-19 pandemic, has noted,

> I know that other agencies like EU-LISA [European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems] and Frontex [European Border and Coast Guard Agency] have industrial roundtables on a regular basis, we the [EUAA] don't have such an event yet. But I know about ad-hoc presentations, which I attended, when specific business management systems were provided by external service providers, so I have seen some demos, in which we were interested. EUAA, Asylum Processes, Senior Officer

Sharing presentations and demos is particularly relevant in the context of the spreading of digitization and automation of asylum procedures, spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, an issue on which I will return later.

Informal contacts in the public sector might also build on personal careers. In the UK, immigration detention and deportation policy areas are a remarkable example of "revolving doors" situations. Senior managers of privately run detention centers were previously employed in the public sector, in the prison service, therefore providing not just the appropriate skills and experience to run a detention center but also informal contacts in the public sector. Andrew, the manager of the Immigration Sector at SERCO has clearly stated, "*From the public sector they come to the private. They bring a lot of knowledge, they know where the risks are, and they have contacts.*" Regular and informal exchange characterizes state/private actors' relationship, as Andrew has described:

> In the UK, we know the government very well and we talk to them all the time. We will be throwing in ideas, "have you thought about this, this is a way of doing something." I am in the Home Office at least once a week and some of those are formal meetings, and a lot of them are catch ups with people I know, and sort of how we can help to bring assistance. They probably get annoyed with me turning up all the time, but, you know, we try and have a sensible partnering relationship where we can try and bring solutions to things that are causing problems. Manager of Immigration Sector – SERCO

A network of personal contacts sustains informal interactions that, in turn, support informal influences when it comes to select services, products, and companies. These dynamics underpin mechanisms of organizational change while making sense of problems and solutions, a topic that I address in the next two sections.

## 4.2. "The salmon in the bear's mouth": How private solutions find public problems

One of the most prominent hypotheses about organizational change is the so-called solution-driven problems (March, 1981), according to which change is driven less by problems than by solutions. In other words, the solution finds the problem to be addressed. Organizations face larger number of problems than solutions, so if one starts with a solution, there is a good chance of finding an appropriate problem. As James March (1981, 569) noted, "an organization scans for solutions rather than problems." This case of solution-driven organizational change is characterized by two elements. (1) The scanning of solutions happens through informal interactions with private actors, who are particularly active in looking for opportunities to make solutions discoverable and available; (2) personal networks trigger informal interactions. John, the UK-based business developer of G4S, whose job is developing care and justice services, has provided an exemplary illustration. According to John, his job consists in "*trying to develop new ideas to take to the governments.*" When asked about how one can succeed in making public organizations adopt new services, John points to behind-the-scenes dynamics characterized by the interplay of opportunities, personal contacts, and services that the company can offer. He has said:

> The diffusion of the business goes in the background […]. More often what happens is that they [G4S staff in a specific country] stumble across something, they have a chat or a conversation with a customer or pick something in the newspaper and they see a potential opportunity that might be lined in some way to care and justice. They pick up the phone and talk to me and ask me what I know about such and such. Business Developer – G4S

These professionals' skills consist of establishing and using personal interactions to make policy actors aware of what their company might offer. John makes the example of the provision of security services to the then European Asylum Support Office (EASO), which became the EUAA in January 2022. Contacts with EASO in Greece opens business opportunities for G4S in the asylum reception centers:

> [I have] Another example, in Greece, the EASO, the immigration authority, who is interviewing asylum seekers on the island. Because of the links that we have with EASO, we jumped in and provided them the guarding services, and we have continued to do that for the last three years. Business Developer – G4S

These empirical accounts exemplify the dynamics of "garbage can decision process" (March & Olsen, 1976) in which the different streams within an organization are linked in ways that result in those contextual and fortuitous behaviors that can be called decisions. These streams consist of four main elements: Problems, understood as internal or external concerns that require attention; Solutions, which are answers that look for a question and create needs; Involvement in the decision-making processes of public organizations, in which informal and local contacts play a pivotal role; "Choice opportunities" understood as "occasions when an organization is expected to produce behavior that can be called a decision" (March & Olsen, 1976, p. 27), which private companies actively seek. The following excerpt of interview with John is exemplary of the interplay of those different elements in organizational decisions:

> You can push very hard and go nowhere. You have to find an opportunity and dive in. That was not intended, we were there, we saw the opportunity and we jumped in. You look around for where the customer pain is, for where it needs some help and then it's so easy just to step in and do what we do. I always say keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities. There is a visual I use of the polar bear feeding in the Arctic and there is a salmon that jumps in his mouth. It's about being in the right place at the right time. Business Developer – G4S

From the point of view of professionals in private companies, it is key to seize events which have the potential of becoming opportunities to pro-actively offer solutions. When presenting a solution, private actors make sense of the problem to be solved. The success of visa services outsourcing, rapidly adopted by increasing numbers of Schengen signatory states, is due to the fact that the outsourcing has been framed as a new public management instrument, which allowed to respond to specific concerns such as the requirements that the novel European regulation dictated, most notably those concerning time frames for processing applications and the quality of the reception of visa applicants (Infantino, 2016). A private solution finds the problem to be addressed—the public management of the visa application process. Such a framing of the issue of visa services outsourcing is crucial to reconstitute a causal story (Stone, 1989), meaning that framing constructs causality that connects a (private)

solution to the definition of a (public) problem. The process of adoption of the EU law regulating the conditions and procedures to issue the Schengen visa provided a choice opportunity.

The field of migration seems to be ideal to find choice opportunities. In the field of migration, governance is characterized by a "crisis mode" that results in the opportunity to expand the actors involved, nationalize narratives, and take action, with an aim at showing that the state has not lost control (Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022). From an organizational standpoint, exceptional events, often depicted as crises, represent choice opportunities, such as the 2015–2016 refugees' emergency, when G4S started to provide security services to the then EASO in Greek islands and SERCO attempted at entering the implementation of asylum policy in Belgium. As Andrew, SERCO's head of the immigration sector has pointed out:

> We looked at asylum management in Belgium. (…) They [SERCO in Belgium] have been talking to the Belgian government. It was the peak of the inflow of migrants. And very quickly they wanted to stand up accommodation units. They didn't think that they could move quickly enough inside the government, so they wanted to go and find some people who could move more quickly. It was a conversation we were having with the Belgian Red Cross on something entirely different that led to that opportunity coming up. But it was one of those odd ones that come in from an oblique angle. In the UK, it is different, because we know government very well. Manager of Immigration Sector – SERCO

A series of elements sustain the presentation of SERCO's solutions: A concern that needs attention such as the sudden inflow of asylum-seekers; existing contacts with organizations involved in asylum reception such as the Belgian Red Cross; the expectation that the public administration must take action. Those are occasions used by SERCO to participate in, and influence organizational decision-making processes. According to Andrew, the attempt was unsuccessful because the opportunity to offer solutions to the Belgian government came from "*an oblique angle,*" that is, a contact with the Belgian Red Cross, unlike what happens in the UK, where SERCO "*know(s) the government very well,*" meaning that interactions and contacts are direct, regular and informal. Occasions to participate in and influence decision-making processes stem not just from the refugees' emergency but also from the COVID-19 pandemic, during which ICT service providers reached out to the EUAA, as seen above. The COVID-19 pandemic provided an excellent choice opportunity. When I attended the on-line presentation of the 2021 Asylum Report, digitization and automation were key terms.[6] Most of the innovations connected to digitization and automation were outlined as solutions that allowed to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and the so-called refugee crisis, some of which "are here to stay," according to Teddy Wilkin, the Head of Data Analysis and Research Sector. The involvement in the asylum policy covers several aspects such as the automated language detecting, used to assess origins of asylum seekers, artificial intelligence to forecast flows, to categorize and to sort applications, and caseload management.

At the time of the refugees' emergency in Belgium, G4S rather than SERCO obtained contracts to run reception facilities for asylum seekers. In the case of G4S, once the numbers of asylum seekers decreased, well-established contacts in that country most notably with mayors provided the context for reinventing the service offered and finding a different problem and emergency, from asylum reception, to the integration of refugees. John has stated,

> The asylum reception facility ran for about 18 months, until the asylum seeker problem went away. Now we're looking at more services that we could provide. So, I've been talking to them all recently about how we can help asylum seekers who are living in the community, how we can help them get a job, get themselves job ready, training, and so we've linked up with our employment services business here in the UK and they've shared some of their know-how with us. So, we'll then be able to go to the mayor of Ostend and say, "we're putting together a proposal." G4S Business Developer

The accounts of these top managers are exemplary in two respects. On the one hand, they describe the importance of contacts and informal exchange to be involved in organizational decisions and, on the other hand, they show how change is driven by solutions developed by private companies. Expansive business logic underlines the offer of solutions which look for problems to be addressed. Furthermore, these accounts reveal that private companies operate beyond one national context, an issue on which I focus in the next section.

## 4.3. Organizational change beyond borders

The analysis of the empirical evidence points to another relevant aspect of private companies' informal influence namely the transnational dynamics of organizational change. Change is driven by social interactions involving professionals of private companies and public actors. Rather than being the outcome of "global" forces, the diffusion of "ways of doing things" is spurred by the circulations and the interactions of national actors from transnational private companies, following traceable directions, from Australia to the UK or from the UK to Belgium and Austria and so on, as exemplified here after.

In the case of immigration detention in the UK, Stephen, the Deputy Director of Detention Operations at the Home Office has claimed, "*We get inputs from our service providers like G4S or SERCO that has big contracts in Australia. Knowledge comes through that route.*" One example is the provision of trainings in immigration detention, borrowed from Australia via SERCO. As Stephen noted, "*In Australia, SERCO does something around incentives and privileges in their establishments, they call it 'stick and carrot', engagement about education and skills learning.*"

In another case, the Austrian government builds an immigration detention center that replicates the management style of G4S in the UK. G4S gave instructions to the Austrian government on how to build the Vordernberg detention center. As John has stated, "*The immigration removal center in Austria is a very modern looking place and it's managed in a very similar way to how we manage Brooke House and Tinsley.*"

At SERCO, Andrew has described regular interactions with colleagues from other areas of the world in which SERCO operates most notably North America and Australia/Pacific:

> We try to reach out to other organizations, we have got a large business in SERCO, I have spent the last two days with my colleagues from Australia, they have a large immigration estate, we talk about how they do stuff, we try to exchange ideas. The contexts are different, and we adapt to our context. (…) We try to innovate in a way that is practical and useful. In our center of excellence, we get people from Australia/Pacific, Europe, North America, we come together in two meetings a year in one of our locations, we visit places and then we sit down for two days and exchange presentations. Manager of Immigration Sector – SERCO

Coming together around shared practices is an established routine also in another private service provider like G4S. As John has noted,

> What we are trying to do is to share best practices, new ideas, new projects. I used to run a hang out session on Skype and we had business development people from each of the countries sharing new business ideas. Business Developer – G4S

Professionals in private companies also travel and visit the facilities of their companies in another country, as in the case of the G4S Belgian manager. When G4S opened asylum reception facilities in Belgium, its manager traveled to the UK and engaged with the UK model of center management, based on the idea that residents should carry out activities outside and that centers should be empty during the day, a way of managing that also reduces staffing needs. John has claimed:

> There is a guy form G4S who came to the UK to see how we operate here, to open in Belgium immigration accommodation centers. We provide help and support to encourage independent living, they came to see the Compass project in Sheffield and that's where they got the idea about how they should run their center in Belgium. Business Developer – G4S

The circulations and interactions of private actors across national contexts expand the dynamics discussed above, about business development and solution-driven organizational change, beyond state borders. Informal influences on policy processes in other national contexts result from the active engagement of these professionals in promoting the expertise developed in one national context, such as in the UK:

> What we tend to do is to use the expertise that we have in the United Kingdom as a lever to try to help other businesses to learn from that and develop their own services. I go to one of our countries that doesn't know anything about care and justice type businesses and explain to them the type of expertise that we have, give them enough information to try to sell the concept to one of their customers. Business Developer – G4S

The transnational influence of corporations that are global players builds on the interplay of local contacts, choice opportunities and the pro-active offering of services and products, a dynamic that is exemplified by the transmission to Turkey of technologies used to manage prisons and detention centers in the UK. As John has claimed:

> The most recent example was in Turkey, they [G4S in Turkey] came on and said they built 180 prisons in Turkey, what technology, what systems could we recommend to the Turkish authorities that they should use in these prisons that we could install and maintain? G4S called me, somebody who knows somebody with the contacts within the Turkish authorities and through these contacts we try to see if we could get a way into making a presentation about UniLink innovative systems. Business Developer – G4S

UniLink is a UK company specialized in the provision of digital services mainly in prisons and immigration detention facilities. Among its customers there are a series of private service providers that run immigration detention centers, prisons, and asylum reception facilities like G4S, SERCO, Geo, Mitie, in the UK, Australia, Ireland.[7] Similarly, in the case of visa services outsourcing, both VFS Global and TLS Contact introduce specific work routines regardless of the specific national contexts in which they operate (Infantino, 2016). Ways of doing things in public policy-making travel through private service providers.

## 5. Private companies, social processes of knowing and the transfer of policy practice

The study of international migration governance from the perspective of the configurations of actors involved and their interactions allows consideration of an overlooked nexus between professionals in private companies and informal social processes that shape public responses to migration, within and across national contexts. Private service providers develop their business by engaging in the decision processes of public organizations, and by influencing organizational change. I have built on the "garbage can" model, aptly adopted to make sense of the elaboration of an EU immigration policy (Guiraudon, 2003), to analyze private companies' informal influence on decisions and change in implementing organizations and on these organizations' development of public responses to migration. This study of public responses to migration from the perspective of actors and organizations on the ground has shown the public policy relevance of professionals of private service providers, the role that practice-based social interactions play in shaping those responses, the informal aspects of policy processes, and the ways in which such factors contribute to organizational decisions and change beyond national contexts. In a nutshell, long-term ethnographic research has shown that private and public actors' informal interactions underline decisions, change, transnational transfers of practice and growing similarities in ways of doing things.

The findings of this study are relevant to and have broader implications for bodies of scientific literature interested in public policymaking, from three viewpoints in particular: (1) This study shows dynamics at the implementation stage which shape public responses from the bottom-up; (2) it includes implementing organizations, most notably private companies, in comparative policy analyses interested in diffusion, transfer and transnational dynamics of policy change; (3) it focuses on overlooked actors and processes of public policy making most notably private companies and the informal, organizational social processes of learning and knowing.

Students of policy processes have well documented the long-term existence of non-state actors and the informal processes involved in governing, most notably in the study of the European Union decision-making processes, to consider the role of non-state actors and systematize forms of informality (Peters, 2006), to put forward the formalization of informal practices that underline the making of the EU (Farrell & Héritier, 2007), and to reveal the hidden influence of some Member States on supranational actors (Kleine, 2014). This analyses has shown how informal processes underline organizational change and the decision processes of public organization in the Global North. Such a finding follows the lines of those scholars that juxtapose informal governance and formal institutions (Dittmer et al., 2000), dismiss the views of informality as pertaining to developing countries or a synonym of un-rule of law (Conrad, 2006) and consider informal governance unavoidable to understand the behavior of organizations in international governance (Stone, 2013). This analysis sheds light on the informal role of private companies in policy-making from below, beyond lobbying at the level of legislative policymaking and for agenda setting, a topic that has deservedly received much analytical attention, also in the context of the European Union (Beyers et al., 2008; Calvo Rufanges, 2016; Coen, 2007).

Change and growing similarities across national contexts have been addressed in several bodies of academic literature, mainly from the point of view of policy design. The reference to knowledge and learning is key, as exemplified by analyses of policy transfer (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000) and of typologies of diffusion mechanisms (Blatter et al., 2022). However, learning tends to be understood as an individual's update of beliefs underlined by a rational theory of cost–benefit analysis (Dobbin et al., 2007). Corrections to that stylized model of diffusion can be found in the sociological-inspired model of emulation. Emulation associates learning in public policy-making to non-rational, collective processes whereby perceptions of appropriateness are constructed (Gilardi & Wasserfallen, 2019). To understand the relationship between learning and public policy-making, some scholars have also drawn attention to the politics of knowledge utilization (Dolowitz, 2009), in the context of migration policy as well (Boswell, 2008) and proposed explanatory typologies that go beyond rational perspectives (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013). This analysis shows that public policy actors craft responses to migration in the domains of visas, detention for the purpose of expulsion, and asylum reception, in interaction with private companies. Empirical evidence has exposed social processes of knowing characterized by informal interactions between professionals in private companies and public policy actors, within and across national contexts. Professionals in private companies actively seek to engage in informal social interactions with state actors and consider social interactions to be essential to the success and to the development of their activities. These professionals become members of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) understood as a group of people who share a common practice, interact regularly and, in doing so, develop and share practical knowledge while making sense of issues at stake, problems and solutions. These dynamics can be characterized as social processes of learning which unfold around shared practices. Following the analytical views of social theories of knowing and learning in organizations (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nicolini et al., 2003) learning is an interactive, collective process, inherent to the participation in a social practice, whereby knowledge is developed and shared, which goes under the label of practical, every-day or tacit knowledge.

To unravel the shaping of public responses to migration at the stage of the implementation, this analysis points to the relationship between social interactions, informality, knowing in organizations and the diffusion of "private" solutions. It does so by focusing on less-documented actors, namely implementing personnel in public and private organizations. As actors of learning, knowledge and transfer, the literature includes "elected officials, political parties, bureaucrats/civil servants, pressure groups, policy entrepreneurs and experts, transnational corporations, think tanks, supra-national governmental and nongovernmental institutions, and consultants", as well as international organizations and non-state global networks such as consultants and think-thanks, which allow to go beyond methodological nationalism and to apply a transnational analytical lens (Stone, 2004). Very few empirical studies have considered non-elite actors (Baker et al., 2020) or have taken a bottom-up perspective to ethnographically studying social interactions of practitioners and their effects on knowing and transfer, such as street-level bureaucrats that implement Schengen visa policy and account for "transnational policymaking from below" (Infantino, 2021) and liaison officers that act as "brokers" of knowledge to shape the practicing of immigration control in countries of departure (Ostrand, 2022). However, ethnographic accounts of the processes of diffusion of "private" solutions at the implementation stage, including a transnational perspective, remained scarce.

## 6. Conclusions

This analysis has put under analytical scrutiny informal and social dynamics of organizational change that affect policymaking on the ground, in specific domains of international migration governance. It has taken the perspective of insiders namely the actors and organizations that put policies into practice. To focus on uncodified processes of private actors' participation in the decision-making of public organizations, this article has brought the insights of organizational studies and organizational theories in the analysis of migration governance. The analysis has shown the informality of policy processes. Informality is neither good nor bad. It is a reality to investigate empirically, which tend to be less documented, especially due to the methodological challenges that such investigations imply. Informal aspects raise normative issues, such as the lack of transparency and the lack of public accountability, just like the hidden role of transnational corporations in shaping and influencing public policymaking on the ground, because of "revolving doors" dynamics and participation to community of

practitioners. Concerns about the contamination of public policy-making by the logics of profit and of business expansion require more transparency of decision-making processes and overall increased public scrutiny.

Some limits to this study indicate directions for further research. The effects on the ground of the private actors-led organizational change remain to be questioned. The analysis of actors and processes that account for transnational processes of transfer and change are incomplete without consideration of the ways in which practices are transformed, translated, and adjusted to novel contexts. Further research could develop longitudinal accounts of the legacies of crisis and emergency situations, in terms of the dependency of states vis-à-vis "private" solutions and the possibility for states to withdraw and abandon "private" solutions. Moreover, the logics of delegation could be investigated by developing comparisons with other kinds of non-state actors most notably not-for-profit organizations. The comparison with private service providers' influence on organizational responses in other policy areas could shed further light on the specificities of migration governance while allowing to identify mechanisms that go beyond the differences in policy areas.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## Endnotes

[1] I choose to use "refugees' emergency" or "refugees reception crisis" rather than "refugees' crisis." The latter is not neutral. It reflects stereotypical discourses circulated by the media, or policy actors (Almustafa, 2022) while deflecting the responsibility of an exceptional situation to refugees rather than to the policies of destination countries or to the dynamics of a "system" that produces the condition of refugees (Arar & Fitzgerald, 2023). The academic use of a certain terminology provides scientific legitimacy to policy-driven terms, as discussed in the case of "unwanted migration" (Joppke, 1998) and "illegal migrant" (Bauder, 2014).

[2] See: https://www.g4s.com; https://www.serco.com; https://www.vfsglobal.com/en/governments/index.html; https://www.tlscontact.com/en/; Last Accessed: June 6, 2023.

[3] See: https://en.ors-group.org; Last Accessed: June 6, 2023.

[4] This is not her real name. I have given all research participants pseudonyms.

[5] The cooperation with private service providers in the visa application process of Schengen Signatory States raised a series of legal issues among which the infringement of the Council Decision 2006/440/CE (OJ L 175) that fixed the Schengen visa fee at €60. The service fee paid by the applicant to the private service providers unlawfully raised the visa fee. A legal basis for the outsourcing was successively provided in the Visa Code-Regulation (EC) No 810/2009 (OJ L 243/1 of 15.09.2009). For a detailed discussion of the negotiations involved in the legislative process, see Infantino, 2016.

[6] The on-line presentation is available at: https://euaa.europa.eu/easo-asylum-report-2021; Last Accessed: June 6, 2023.

[7] See https://www.unilink.com; Last Accessed: June 6, 2023.

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