

## Opening the black box of asylum seeker reception of the Greek hotspots: Stakeholders' power negotiations and their influence on policy implementation

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### Abstract

At the height of asylum seekers' arrivals in 2015, the Greek reception collapsed. The European Commission introduced the hotspot approach, mandating EU agencies to support authorities. Numerous reports have been filed for substandard conditions in the Greek hotspots, highlighting inadequate conditions, delays but also organizational issues like the lack of coordination between organizations which led to legal omissions. What makes these centers interesting to study is their governance model, which endorses a 'centralized multi-stakeholder approach'. Decision-making power is centralized upon national authorities, while implementation power is dispersed to international organizations (IO), EU agencies and civil society organizations (CSO). As new reception facilities sprung up, more research is needed to shed light on the governance dynamics within centers where state and non-state actors are cooperating.

This study set out to answer the question: How do stakeholders, working under a fragmented multi-levelled governance arrangement in the Greek hotspots, perceive and negotiate their organization's responsibilities, and how do these negotiations affect the implementation of asylum seekers' reception policies?. 24 semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with four types of front-line workers: local authorities (N=9), IOs (N=4), European agencies (N=6) and CSOs (N=5) from two 'Closed Controlled Access Centers' and one Reception and Identification Center in the islands of Chios, Lesbos and Kos. The study employed a post-structural feminism framework (PSF) to uncover understudied meaning-making processes of implementers, that pertain to their goals, motives, interests and interactions. It looked at these micro-level processes, interactions and power negotiations to grasp what is happening at the meso-level. To operationalize 'power practices', a framework was developed from the PSF elements, 'language and meaning-making', 'power imbalances', 'communication' and 'individual characteristics', extracted from the actor-interface model. Analysis showed that first, actors' discretion influences implementation despite tight top-down control. Power practices in inter-organization encounters were identified, ranging from facilitation to contestation, and even exclusion, prominent in the case of CSOs. Second, negotiations on a discursive level exist over how the target population is framed and what the policy problem at hand is. Third, the use of terms and negative labels to describe partners and asylum seekers shows how actors perceive one another and their serving population. Fourth, patterns of bypassing formal communication channels were found, as well as interdependencies between actors. Findings suggest that the linear top-down power of legitimate authorities is questioned, as the actors' worldviews, ideologies

and languages steer agency and power, which can reveal how mandates are really commissioned, resisted, denied and acquired.

### **Biography**

**Maria Sofia Skaltsa** is a migration professional with three years of progressive experience in asylum seekers' reception in two EU member states: Belgium and Greece. She holds a BA in Psychology from Open University, UK, and an MSc in International Public Administration with a focus on the Governance of Migration and Diversity from Erasmus University in Rotterdam. Her master thesis explored how hotspots' stakeholders, working under a multi-leveled governance arrangement, perceive and negotiate their organization's responsibilities and how these negotiations impact the implementation of reception policies. Maria's interest in the topic stemmed from her diverging work experiences in two Reception and Identification Centers on Greek islands. There, she witnessed intriguing patterns of communication and negotiation between stakeholders that inspired her research. Maria's career in migration started as a volunteer working with underprivileged children in Athens. In 2015, coincidentally, the refugee crisis broke out and she soon found herself in an emergency camp with 350 children from Afghanistan. Since then, she hasn't stopped seeking opportunities to learn more about this field and grasp the complexities of providing, above all, humane reception. Currently, she is based in Brussels working for the Red Cross Flanders in the biggest emergency reception center of the country, which receives temporary protected Ukrainians and asylum seekers from all over the world.