

Disciplining Poverty: “Migrant” Workers in the Maze of German Welfare Bureaucracy

Disciplinando la pobreza: los trabajadores “migrantes” en el laberinto de la burocracia social alemana

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This article examines migrant workers’ experiences with the German welfare state, drawing on three empirical studies conducted in Berlin (2014-2021) with rejected third-country asylum seekers and Southern and Eastern European Union citizens. It highlights how state bureaucracies implement selective access to welfare through everyday practices conceptualised as “bureaucratic violence” (Graeber, 2012), which are the product of interaction between legislative frameworks, their implementation by frontline officials, and legitimising discourses.

Despite migrants’ diverse legal statuses, common patterns in their interactions with the public administration are identified through four analytical dimensions—“administrative temporality,” “discretionary micro-power,” “moral economy of deservingness,” and “linguistic and racialised bordering practices”—which are traced comparatively across three distinct migrant groups within the same national welfare system.

Analysis reveals how bureaucratic practices shape power relations between local authorities and migrants, producing structural disadvantages and transnational vulnerabilities. Institutions such as the *Jobcenter* and the Foreigners’ Office (*Ausländerbehörde*) are understood as key sites where neoliberal border and welfare regimes filter access to rights and social participation.

Este artículo examina las experiencias de trabajadores migrantes en su interacción con el estado de bienestar alemán a partir de tres estudios empíricos realizados en Berlín entre 2014 y 2021.



Abstract

La investigación se centra en ciudadanos de la Unión Europea procedentes del sur y del este de Europa, así como en solicitantes de asilo de terceros países cuyas solicitudes fueron denegadas. El trabajo muestra cómo las burocracias estatales articulan el acceso selectivo a la protección social mediante prácticas cotidianas que se describen como “violencia burocrática” (Graeber, 2012), resultado de la interacción entre los marcos legislativos, su aplicación por parte de los funcionarios de primera línea y los discursos que las legitiman.

A pesar de las diferencias en términos de estatus jurídico y trayectorias migratorias, el análisis revela patrones comunes en las interacciones de los migrantes con la administración pública. Estos patrones se articulan en torno a cuatro dimensiones analíticas: la “temporalidad administrativa”, el “micropoder discrecional”, la “economía moral del merecimiento” y las “prácticas de fronterización lingüística y racializada”. Estas dimensiones se examinan comparativamente en tres grupos distintos de migrantes dentro de un mismo sistema nacional de bienestar.

El análisis revela cómo las prácticas burocráticas configuran las relaciones de poder entre las autoridades locales y los migrantes, engendrando desventajas estructurales y vulnerabilidades transnacionales. Instituciones como el Jobcenter y la Oficina de Extranjería (Ausländerbehörde) se entienden como espacios clave en los que los regímenes neoliberales de control fronterizo y bienestar filtran el acceso a los derechos y a la participación social.

Migrant workers; welfare state; Germany; bureaucratic violence; deservingness; racialization
Trabajadores migrantes; estado del bienestar; Alemania; violencia burocrática; merecimiento; racialización



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1. Introduction

In recent decades, welfare states in Germany and other European countries in the “core” (Wallerstein, 2011), such as the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Austria, have progressively restricted access to social benefits, with non-citizen residents becoming a primary target of these changes. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, both European Union (EU) and non-EU migrants have increasingly been portrayed in political and media discourses as potential threats to welfare systems allegedly overburdened by their presence (Mantu & Minderhoud, 2016; Perna, 2018). Labels such as “welfare tourists” and “welfare shoppers” have become part of public and political debates, contributing to the legitimation of restrictive welfare and migration policies across Europe (Barbulescu & Favell, 2020). These dynamics intensified after the so-called “long summer of migration” in 2015 (Marx & Naumann, 2018), when approximately 2.4 million people sought asylum in the EU (Eurostat, 2026), prompt-

ing more vehement political demands to curtail access to welfare entitlements for both EU and non-EU citizens.¹

In this context, welfare and migration bureaucracies have emerged as frontline arenas where these restrictive policies are not merely implemented but actively legitimised through everyday administrative practice. This article examines how migrants experience discrimination in accessing the German welfare state through their everyday interactions with welfare and migration bureaucracies. Drawing on three qualitative studies conducted in Berlin between 2014 and 2021 with Southern EU citizens, Eastern EU citizens, and rejected third-country asylum seekers, the article investigates how selective access to welfare and residence rights is implemented through everyday administrative practices. We conceptualise these practices as forms of “bureaucratic violence” (Graeber, 2012). By focusing on everyday encounters between migrants and institutions such as the *Jobcenter* and the Foreigners’ Office (*Ausländerbehörde*), we examine how such violence develops through the interaction between specific legislative frameworks, their implementation by frontline officials, and the legitimising discourses that normalise selective access. In doing so, we contribute to the growing debate on migrantisation (Wyss & Dahinden, 2022; Kunz, 2020), which is defined as the process by which particular mobile subjects are constructed as “migrants” and subjected to intensified forms of racialised control, while other forms of mobility (such as those labelled as “expat”) are positively valued. Following Scheel and Tazzioli (2022), we attend to the boundary-making practices through which bureaucracies enact this distinction. Despite significant differences in legal status, national origin, and racialised position, all three groups are positioned as “migrants” along hierarchies embedded in two intersecting governance regimes: the border regime and the neoliberal welfare regime.

This article makes three interrelated contributions to the literature on migration, welfare states, and bureaucracy. First, it extends Graeber’s (2012) concept of bureaucratic violence to the migration-welfare nexus, showing how ostensibly neutral administrative routines produce and reproduce racialised exclusion across legally distinct migrant groups. Second, by bringing together three independent ethnographic studies under a common analytical framework, it offers a cross-group comparison—rarely attempted in this literature—of how bureaucratic violence operates differently yet systematically among Southern EU, Eastern EU, and non-EU workers within the same national welfare system. Third, it connects street-level bureaucratic discretion (Lipsky, 1980) to wider neoliberal workfare logics, demonstrating that individual caseworker behaviour cannot be fully disentangled from the legislative design and institutional discourses that structure it. In this way, the paper speaks directly to the question of where, precisely, bureaucratic violence is located: not in aberrant individual conduct, but in the ordinary functioning of institutions designed to govern poverty and mobility simultaneously.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section situates the paper theoretically within the literature on bureaucratic violence, street-level bureaucracy, and the border and welfare regimes. The second provides an overview of the German welfare and integration context. The third presents the methodological approach and comparative research design. The empirical sec-

¹ This rhetoric, which was initially promoted by EU countries in the core, as in Angela Merkel’s statement that the “EU is not a social union” (Der Spiegel, 2014), was subsequently adopted by countries on the “periphery” and thematised in different slogans coined above all by far-right populist parties, such as the 2026 slogan “La prioridad nacional” in Spain.

tions then analyse the three case studies. Finally, the comparative analysis draws together four cross-cutting analytical categories (administrative temporality, discretionary micro-power, moral economy of deservingness, and linguistic and racialised bordering practices) as the key mechanisms through which bureaucratic violence operates across our case studies, and reflects on their implications for understanding the intersections between migration governance, welfare conditionality, and neoliberal forms of bordering.

2. The Borders of the Welfare State and Its Bureaucratic Violence

This article draws on three interconnected bodies of literature: theories of structural and bureaucratic violence, the street-level bureaucracy tradition, and scholarship on the border and neoliberal welfare regimes.

Building on theories of structural violence, we focus on “bureaucratic violence” as part of the disciplinary power deployed by the state to govern people’s lives (Foucault, 1977). The concept of “structural violence,” introduced by Galtung (1969), refers to indirect, often invisible forms of violence embedded in social structures that produce unequal life chances and asymmetrical power relations. Subsequent anthropological approaches have further explored how social violence takes shape across multiple registers (Kleinman, 2000), penetrating individuals’ lives and reshaping their sense of self (Das, 2000). Ethnographic work on “everyday violence” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992) has shown how apparently ordinary institutional practices may profoundly affect people’s lives and subjectivities in terms of marginalisation, destitution, and suffering.

Feminist scholars have cautioned against treating structural violence as an abstract, free-floating entity, proposing instead the notion of “structures of violence” (Confortini, 2006) to foreground the processual and relational character of harm, highlighting the “continuum” of overlapping dimensions of violence (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004) and their intersection with axes of discrimination (Speed, 2014).

Studies of “bureaucratic violence” develop these insights by foregrounding the state’s active role in producing, maintaining, and reproducing structural violence (Gupta, 2012). Bureaucracies, characterised by indirect power and diffuse authority (Graeber, 2012), frequently obscure the violence they enact through technocratic and ostensibly neutral processes (Milne & Mahanty, 2019), rendering it mundane and unremarkable (Cooper & Whyte, 2017). Bureaucratic violence does not emanate solely from abstract structures, but materialises through decision-making, knowledge production (Eldridge & Reinke, 2018), paperwork, institutional discourses, and administrative (in)action. These processes normalise exclusion through what Graeber (2015) calls the “utopia of rules.” Following Gren et al. (2023), we understand bureaucratic violence as an inherently relational phenomenon embedded in everyday administrative practices, enacted in the encounter between institutions, their internal logics, and the people subject to them.

Street-level bureaucrats exercise discretionary power in their everyday interactions with welfare recipients and migrants, acting as mediators between legal frameworks, institutional cultures, and individual life trajectories. Their practices may significantly shape access to welfare provisions, residence rights, and social participation (Rice, 2013; Ratzmann, 2020). However, bureaucratic violence should not be understood solely as the result of individual bureaucrats’

attitudes or discretionary decisions. Rather, it emerges through the interaction between restrictive legal frameworks, institutional organisational cultures, political discourses surrounding migration and welfare abuse, and the everyday implementation of these norms by frontline bureaucracies.

This relational character is particularly salient when we consider the role of street-level bureaucrats, frontline workers who act as mediators between legal frameworks, institutional cultures, and individual life trajectories and exercise significant discretionary power in translating policy into practice (Lipsky, 1980). Since they operate under conditions of high demand, scarce resources, and ambiguous mandates, their everyday decisions effectively constitute policy as it is experienced by those subject to it. Scholars have extended this framework to the migration and welfare context (Rice, 2013; Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021), showing how caseworkers in employment offices and immigration agencies actively shape migrants' access to rights through the selective provision of information, strategic use of procedural delays, and mobilisation of informal eligibility criteria.

However, bureaucratic violence should not be understood solely as the result of individual bureaucrats' attitudes or discretionary decisions. The neoliberal workfare turn has reoriented the role of frontline welfare workers: rather than securing entitlements, they are increasingly tasked with gatekeeping access and activating claimants towards the labour market—a mandate that shapes their discretionary choices in ways that are neither random nor purely personal, but reflect and reproduce broader governance logics (Martinsen et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, the article situates bureaucratic violence at the intersection of two regimes: the border regime and the neoliberal welfare regime. The border regime (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013) governs global human mobility through a nation-state order that produces hierarchies among mobile people, assigning them to categories—"citizens," "refugees," "asylum seekers," "economic migrants," "undocumented migrants"—each carrying differential access to rights and social protections (Faist, 2013; De Genova, 2002). The neoliberal welfare regime operates through a parallel logic, transforming social policy into a mechanism of behavioural control (Valenta & Thorshaug, 2011). This transformation accelerated from the mid-1970s onward, as the decline of Fordist production gave way to labour-market segmentation and welfare retrenchment. Welfare states were progressively reorganised around a "workfare" logic (Peck, 2001): social rights were commodified, benefits were made conditional on labour-market participation, and poverty was reframed as a consequence of individual behaviour rather than structural inequality. "Activation policies" (Eichhorst et al., 2008) have become the dominant paradigm since the 1990s, pushing recipients towards professional autonomy and self-sufficiency while simultaneously increasing administrative barriers for those at greatest risk of exclusion (Brodkin, 2007). This workfare rationale is legitimised through the moral concept of "deservingness" (Laenen, 2018; Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021): benefits are framed as conditional gifts from the state (Castellani, 2025), offered only to those who demonstrate their willingness to overcome their shortcomings, while welfare recipients are constructed as a suspicious category in need of continuous monitoring and control (Dubois, 2014).

Highlighting the intersection of the two regimes, several scholars have stressed the crucial role of welfare institutions in shaping borders, arguing that contemporary migration control increasingly operates through social policy mechanisms rather than exclusively through physical borders (Lafleur & Mescoli, 2018). In this view, welfare bureaucracies become central actors

in bordering processes, filtering access to social rights through the construction of categories of “deserving” and “undeserving” migrants.

To fully grasp this intersection, however, it is also necessary to attend to the concepts of race and racialisation. As Borrelli and Bochsler (2020) have shown, deprivation processes operate precisely through unequal access to social rights, and this inequality is shaped by the logics of both regimes simultaneously. The category of the “poor” has increasingly merged with that of the “migrant” in European political discourse, producing a figure of the racialised, undeserving welfare claimant that legitimises restrictive policies regardless of formal citizenship or legal entitlement (Grdešić, 2019). The social imaginary of the “good migrant”—hardworking, self-sufficient, culturally assimilable—functions as the normative standard against which welfare applicants are evaluated, with those who deviate from it subjected to heightened scrutiny and moral judgement (Chauvin & Garcés-Masareñas, 2014). In the German context, these racialising dynamics operate across and beyond formal legal distinctions. As Bojadžijev (2016) and Sadeghi (2019) have shown, the social boundary between “foreigner” and “native” persists irrespective of residency status, structured by historical legacies of ethno-racial differentiation that shape the practical judgements of street-level bureaucrats. Southern EU citizens, Eastern EU citizens, and non-EU asylum seekers occupy different positions in the legal hierarchy but are all subjected to overlapping forms of racialised bordering in their everyday encounters with the *Jobcenter* and the Foreigners’ Office.

This article investigates how welfare bureaucracies actively create and sustain hierarchies among people categorised as “migrants” and how the practices of bordering and boundary-making they enact highlight overlapping structures of discrimination embedded in the two regimes described above. In doing so, it traces four recurrent dimensions through which bureaucratic violence operates across the three case studies: “administrative temporality,” “discretionary micro-power,” the “moral economy of deservingness,” and “linguistic and racialised bordering practices.” These dimensions emerged from the empirical material and are developed in full in the analytical section.

3. Germany and Its (Mobile) “Poor”

Since the early 2000s, Germany has implemented significant labour market and welfare state reforms that intersect with the development of a “German integration regime” (Ilgit & Klotz, 2018; Etzel, 2022). To boost international competitiveness, wages were reduced, and a low-wage sector expanded rapidly, with temporary work, subcontracted labour, and below-minimum wage arrangements legally facilitated (Butterwegge, 2018; Nachtwey, 2017). The “Hartz IV” reforms of 2003-2005 reorganised the social security system around benefit conditionality. Welfare benefits are managed by two key state agencies: the federal employment agency (*Agentur für Arbeit*) and the *Jobcenter*, the latter of which is responsible for distributing the minimum income benefit (*Bürgergeld*) and reintegrating recipients into the labour market, embedding workfare logic into everyday administrative practice (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016).

Since 2013, migrant integration policy has followed the same conditionality logic, linking residence rights to participation in language courses and labour market integration within a framework of “conditional inclusion” (Etzel, 2022) organised around a “workfare approach to integration” (Lanz, 2009; Hinger, 2020). The 2016 Integration Act extended this approach to rejected asylum seekers, connecting asylum status to vocational training in a more system-

atic manner than previous measures (Fontanari, 2022; Drangland, 2020). The Foreigners' Office (*Ausländerbehörde*) retains significant discretionary power in determining the “degree of good integration,” particularly through participation in compulsory integration courses.

Despite formally distinct legal frameworks, all three groups analysed here face conditional and contested access to welfare rights, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Access to German Welfare Benefits by Origin (EU/Third Countries)

Migrant group	Residence framework	Access to welfare benefits
Southern and Eastern EU citizens ²	EU free movement regime	Conditional access to <i>Bürgergeld</i> /Alg II depending on worker status, employment history and residence conditions
Rejected asylum seekers with <i>Ausbildungsduldung</i>	Temporary suspension of deportation linked to vocational training	Limited or excluded access to regular welfare benefits during vocational training

Source: Own elaboration

It is within this institutional landscape that the everyday encounters analysed in this article take place. The *Jobcenter* and the *Ausländerbehörde* are the institutional sites where border and welfare regimes are enacted in practice, filtering access to rights through the routine decisions of frontline officials.

4. Methodology

This article adopts a comparative case study design, bringing together three independent ethnographic studies conducted in Berlin between 2014 and 2021 with three different migrant groups: Southern EU citizens, Eastern EU citizens, and third-country nationals seeking asylum. The decision to work across these groups was driven by the aim of identifying patterns of bureaucratic violence that cut across legally distinct categories, revealing how similar mechanisms of exclusion operate differently yet systematically within the same national border and welfare regime.

The three studies employ qualitative and ethnographic methods to research everyday interactions between migrants and frontline welfare and migration officials (Eldridge & Reinke, 2018). The first study focused on Southern EU citizens from Spain, Italy, and Portugal who migrated to Berlin following the 2008 economic crisis (Castellani, 2025), drawing on 43 in-depth interviews complemented by participant observation in migrant support organisations and community spaces. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling via informal networks and migrant associations. The second study draws on the ethnographic practice of one of the authors, who worked as a social consultant at the *Berliner Arbeitslosenzentrum* (BALO), a non-profit organisation providing independent welfare advice to *Jobcenter* users, primarily Eastern EU citizens from Poland and Bulgaria. His insider position provid-

² Although both groups formally fall under the EU free movement regime, important differences existed during the transitional periods (Fihel et al., 2015) applied to Eastern European workers after EU enlargement, which affected labour market access and welfare entitlements.

ed direct access to everyday encounters between service users and *Jobcenter* staff, supplemented by 12 semi-structured interviews with service users, each conducted on at least 2 occasions. The third study is based on multi-sited ethnographic research conducted between 2011 and 2021 with rejected asylum seekers and refugees moving between Italy and Germany, combining long-term participant observation with 30 in-depth interviews and interviews with legal practitioners. The research focused particularly on migrants holding precarious legal statuses linked to asylum procedures and vocational training programmes such as the *Ausbildungsduldung*,³ with participants contacted through solidarity networks and refugee support groups.

For the purposes of this article, the empirical material was collaboratively re-analysed through a comparative thematic approach focused on recurring forms of bureaucratic violence across distinct legal and social categories. The four analytical dimensions—administrative temporality, discretionary micro-power, moral economy of deservingness, and linguistic and racialised bordering—emerged iteratively from repeated cross-case comparison. All participants have been anonymised, and names are pseudonyms. Two authors conducted research as external observers, while one occupied an insider position as a welfare adviser, enriching the comparative analysis while requiring ongoing reflexivity about the power relations inherent in ethnographic work with populations at risk of exclusion.

5. Undeserving Beneficiaries: Three Case Studies of Migrant Workers in Germany

5.1. European Citizens or “Migrants”? Southern EU Workers Struggling to Retain Social Rights

Monica migrated from Spain to Berlin in 2012. Her experience is representative of a broader pattern documented across the study: Southern EU citizens navigating a welfare system that formally includes them while, in practice, obstructing their access to benefits. During the 2008 crisis, she lost her job in the advertising sector and was unemployed for two years, working in piecework jobs:

I had a flat and my mother had to help me pay the rent. My mother is retired [...], financially, she could help me with up to €300 or €400. I hardly had enough money to eat or to put petrol in the car [...] I decided to leave because my car broke down and I didn't have the money to pay for it. I had tried to work in many places, but they didn't hire me [...]. (Interview with Monica, August 2014)

When Monica made her decision, her partner was already living in Berlin and working in the unstable creative sector. She does not speak German or English. At first, she decided to take a German course at a public school (*Volkshochschule*), but she had to work because the couple had almost no income. She found a job as a cleaner in a Spanish restaurant relatively easily. She

³ *Ausbildung* means “vocational training” in German. The functioning of the *Ausbildungsduldung* programme for rejected asylum seekers is detailed in section 5.3.

thought she had been hired for a *Minijob*,⁴ but unfortunately discovered that she was only legally employed for a quarter of the hours she worked; the rest were paid “under the table,” with no social protection coverage (health insurance, illness coverage).

They told me: “We’re going to give you a contract, we’ll pay you €400. You have to work for one or two hours every morning from Monday to Sunday.” I said: “It can’t be like that because I have to pay my health insurance”. [...] I went to an organisation that provides information for immigrants. They told me: “Get a *Minijob* and then go to the *Jobcenter*, and they can help you pay for your health insurance because, if not, you’ll spend all your salary on that.” [...] I discovered they had hired me for €100 and were giving me the rest under the table. They were paying my salary in cash, and I freaked out. (Interview with Monica, August 2014)

Monica went to the *Jobcenter* accompanied by her partner, who had sufficient knowledge of the German language, to apply for the unemployment benefit *Alg II/Bürgergeld*. Several other research subjects reported that front office personnel explicitly told them that organisational policies prohibited them from speaking languages other than German with service users, such as English or Spanish. At the *Jobcenter*, Monica realised that her job was paid almost entirely outside of sanctioned payment methods.

On my payslips, they only paid me €100, and the *Jobcenter* told me that it wasn’t enough money: I was paid too little, and they couldn’t help me. I couldn’t say that they were paying me under the table. And she said to me: “You earn very little, so we won’t give you the benefit. It’s very unlikely that we will because you have to earn more money.” And I thought: “Well, how stupid is that? Benefits are supposed to be for people who don’t have money, not people who have.” Right? But I filled in the papers anyway. (Interview with Monica, August 2014)

This case study illustrates a practice documented repeatedly across the study: discouraging applicants from claiming welfare benefits by providing incomplete information. In Monica’s case, the alleged impossibility of obtaining *Alg II* posed a risk to her health. When she emigrated from Spain, she had health coverage under the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC). However, her EHIC expired after 3 months, the maximum period she was entitled to while unemployed in Spain (Castellani et al., 2024). After the Spanish EHIC expired, she experienced a serious health problem and did not have German health insurance (*Krankenkasse*). When her symptoms began, she did not consult a doctor for fear of receiving an unaffordable bill, and she waited for several days until the pain was unbearable. She decided to go to the hospital only after receiving the letter of acceptance of her *Alg II* application, which included health insurance. She was diagnosed with a severe kidney infection and was admitted for ten days for treatment. The doctors forbade her from working for two months. On top of that, during her hospitalisation, she was fired from the restaurant where she worked. This sequence—labour precarity feeding into welfare exclusion, which in turn produces health vulnerability—exemplifies the cascading logic of bureaucratic violence as it operates in practice.

⁴ A *Minijob* is a form of employment subject to a certain limit on earnings or time, which does not include social insurance contributions.

Monica's *Alg II* aid amounted to €370 and was granted for several months when she resumed intensive German classes as part of an *Integrationkurs*. After that, she reported:

I kept on studying, and one day the *Jobcenter* told me that they were cutting €170 off my benefits because my mother transfers me €30 for my mobile phone contract. They said that since my mother could theoretically help me, they would only give me €200. (Interview with Monica, August 2014)

Generally speaking, all recipients of *Alg II* must allow the *Jobcenter* to monitor their banking activity (even accounts held outside Germany). Monica's mother was unfamiliar with internet technologies and simply transferred €30 per month to Monica's Spanish bank account to cover her Spanish mobile phone contract. This episode illustrates how the *Jobcenter's* surveillance of bank accounts—formally applied to all *Alg II* recipients regardless of nationality—operates in practice as a mechanism of moral scrutiny, penalising ordinary family transactions as evidence of undeservingness.

Monica later received another letter from the *Jobcenter* informing her that, due to the implementation of a new law restricting the right of EU applicants to access *Alg II*, she was no longer entitled to the benefit because she was not contributing sufficiently to the German welfare system. When she received the letter, she contacted her caseworker at the *Jobcenter*, and he told her to consult a lawyer.

The caseworker said: "I've entered my follow-up with you into the system. You're doing an intensive German course too. [...] What they're doing is completely illegal. Don't say I told you this, but take this card and go and see this lawyer who deals with these issues for free." [...] The lawyer said: "Look, this is illegal. They just try it on to see if it'll work. If it works, they get other people to pay; if it doesn't, we'll see what happens. We're going to submit an appeal." She managed to win the appeal, and the *Jobcenter* paid me again for another four months. [During this period, Monica received another letter denying her entitlement, followed by a successful legal appeal.] A month later, they told me again that they wouldn't give me the benefit and, on top of that, they told me to return the money they had given me two months earlier because I wasn't entitled to it. After all, I don't have a job. That's when I said: "I'm fed up with the fucking *Jobcenter*. I mean, I don't want any money from this government." (Interview with Monica, August 2014)

Monica's experience with the *Jobcenter* caused uncertainty, anxiety, and insecurity because she did not know whether she could count on the benefit to make a living. After reaching the A2 level in German, Monica decided to quit the language school and look for a job. However, this decision forced her into another loop of exploitation. Due to her urgent need to find a job, her low level of German and poor knowledge of the labour market, and her limited social network in Berlin, she could only find work as a cleaner at a well-known hotel brand, hired by a subcontracting firm that paid her an exploitative wage.

I had to clean four rooms in one hour. That's lightning fast. I worked more hours than I had to and didn't get paid. The first month was almost 15 days. I counted it up, and they were meant to pay me €600 because they said they paid by the hour. When I received €394, I thought: "If I've only earned that for all the hours I've worked, I don't want this job because they're cheating me." I went to the manager, and I asked: "Excuse me, did you make a mistake, or are you going to pay me the rest under the table?" I showed her the count of the hours I had worked, and she said: "You haven't done the rooms you

were supposed to do.” [...] In the end, I had to ask the *Jobcenter* for help again. (Interview with Monica, August 2014)

In response to her situation, Monica drew on her past political experience within the 15M movement in Spain (Roca & Martín-Díaz, 2017). She contacted the 15M organisation in Berlin and joined the GAS (Union Action Group), a community union of Spanish migrant workers, transforming her personal experience of exclusion into collective action.

5.2. “*Amtssprache ist Deutsch*”⁵: Eastern European Workers Struggling With Communication Barriers at the Jobcenter

Ivan and Aneta are Polish and Bulgarian citizens. They live in Berlin with their young daughter. Ivan has a *Minijob* contract. Their experience is typical of a broader pattern among Eastern EU citizens: formally entitled to welfare support yet systematically excluded by language barriers and administrative opacity. The *Jobcenter* did not appropriately inform them that if Ivan is dismissed from work, the unemployment benefit is only paid for a limited number of months after the dismissal unless he starts a new job in the meantime. Indeed, European citizens residing in Germany for less than five years must meet more stringent eligibility criteria than German citizens to receive *Alg II/Bürgergeld*.

My husband was dismissed on 15 January. At the end of May, the *Jobcenter* sent us a letter. A friend of mine translated it and explained it to me a week later. It took me a while to find someone who could help me. In the letter, the *Jobcenter* informs us that the benefit will no longer be paid after 15 July. I don’t understand, the dismissal was five months ago, and the *Jobcenter* has kept paying until now. How come they’re stopping now? Why now? And why didn’t they tell us earlier? (Interview with Aneta, May 2020)

Aneta experienced uncertainty and insecurity due to the *Jobcenter*’s lack of transparency: unable to read the letter in German, she had to rely on a friend to understand its contents and lacked knowledge of her entitlements under German social law. The experience of Ivan and Aneta sheds light on how language is used as a tool to filter access to benefits (Ratzmann, 2022). Offering adequate translation services is a means to allow access to rights, yet all *Jobcenter* forms are in German, and no translation service is provided. Mara, a Bulgarian friend of Aneta, explains:

I don’t sign anything before making a formal request. I never sign anything without knowing what it involves. Nobody explained to me what this benefit even consists of. What kind of system is this? I only asked for some forms! The next thing I know, they want me to sign something that I don’t even understand. And they don’t even make sure you have a translator. This is definitely a bad service. (Interview with Mara, July 2019)

Mara’s words highlight a systemic gap: providing adequate advice on German welfare law is not optional; it is a legal duty of the *Jobcenter*, and its absence has a direct impact on beneficia-

5 “The official language is German.”

ries' livelihoods. Ivan and Aneta's family is financially dependent on *Alg II*, as their rent and health insurance are covered by the *Jobcenter*. The short notice of the benefit cut put them under tremendous pressure to make ends meet, highlighting the crucial role of time in the bureaucratic machine.

How will we manage to pay the rent now? The landlord won't wait. The rent is due at the beginning of the month! And what happens if the *Jobcenter* doesn't cover our health insurance anymore? There's no other benefit we're eligible for! We'll go into debt, we'll lose our home... and we have a young child. If we had known earlier, we would have had time to make some decisions on our own at least! Now we have very little time to understand, evaluate, and make a decision. (Interview with Aneta, May 2020)

Our fieldwork shows that when individuals' livelihoods are jeopardised at such short notice with no "plan B," a domino effect can lead to a downward spiral of debt, social isolation, and homelessness. This process is already apparent in Monica's case and runs through all the experiences documented in our research.

We only have a month to find a new job. What do we do now? Don't they know how difficult it is to find a job in Berlin? We only speak a little German. And if the *Jobcenter* knew that they can only pay the benefit for six months, why didn't they send my husband job offers in the meantime? Isn't that what they're supposed to do? (Interview with Aneta, May 2020)

Ivan and Aneta's anger reflects a broader pattern: the *Jobcenter* had failed in its central duty to support them in finding work.

I asked the employee whether the family had been invited to an advisory meeting or whether the *Jobcenter* had sent them information about the risk of "losing" the benefit. They replied: "Of course we offer our customers advice: if they have any questions, they can reach us via telephone or email, or also via regular mail. Then we can answer all their questions and clear up any doubts that they may have." (Ethnographic notes, June 2020)

This response exemplifies a recurring shift of responsibility from institution to beneficiary—one already encountered in Monica's case—enacted through bureaucratic routine rather than explicit refusal.

Throughout our fieldwork, we consistently observed how *Jobcenter* employees shift responsibility onto beneficiaries—making the "poor" feel responsible for being poor—by delegating the task of "asking the right questions" to them rather than proactively offering the information they are legally required to provide. Even interviewees with basic German could understand the words but not their meaning, lacking the institutional knowledge that caseworkers systematically withheld:

I just want them [the *Jobcenter* staff] to explain to me what this benefit is and give me the forms to fill in. You know, if you read the forms and someone translates for you, you'll understand what your duties and rights are. (Ethnographic notes, July 2019)

Instead, *Jobcenter* employees asked specific questions to channel “customers” into a predefined workflow as part of everyday practice:

“It is a standard procedure set out in the internal regulations of this *Jobcenter*,” explains the *Jobcenter* employee. His tone changes slightly as if to reassure me: “With EU citizens we always follow this procedure.” I ask if it is possible to have a look at the internal regulations. It is not. “Anyway, this really is our standard procedure!” (Ethnographic notes, July 2019)

Other interviewees confirmed this experience, recalling that they were repeatedly reassured about the “standard procedure” without receiving answers to their questions. As well as language skills, social status and personal appearance also play a role, as the experience of Pavel demonstrates:

I speak very little German, so I asked him to accompany me [points to his friend]. When we went to the *Jobcenter* last time, we just wanted to know the status of my request. The employee at the front desk told my friend that the certificate of residence was missing. My friend explained that it is not necessary in my case as I am homeless, and that a postal address is sufficient. As if he had not heard, the employee simply repeated that we needed to submit the certificate of residence. (Interview with Pavel, August 2019)

During this interaction, the employee’s refusal to listen pushes Pavel into a predefined communication strategy where institutional authority prevails over the “customer’s” needs.

My friend then asked to speak to the employee’s supervisor, but the answer was: “This conversation is over.” My friend did not accept this and asked again. At that point, the employee called the security guard to kick us out of the building. We were speechless. We asked why and that was when the security guard called the police. (Interview with Pavel, August 2019)

By escalating the situation so quickly, the *Jobcenter* employee turned the conversation into a matter of public order, criminalising and stigmatising Pavel as someone to be placed under control and surveillance in a dynamic identified by scholars such as Borrelli et al. (2024) as central to the bureaucratic governance of migrant populations. Such stigmatisation processes are even more pronounced in the next case study, focusing on the experiences of third-country nationals who have undergone the asylum procedure.

5.3. Working but Excluded from Social Benefits: Rejected Asylum Seekers in the *Ausbildungsduldung*

Ben is a sub-Saharan African man who arrived in Europe in 2011. He passed through Italy, where he obtained temporary humanitarian protection, and moved to Germany in 2013 to escape the marginalisation he experienced in Italy. There, he claimed asylum for the second time but was rejected under the Dublin Regulation, which anchors refugees to their first country of entry into the EU. In 2016, he embarked on a pathway to potential regularisation through

the Integration Act,⁶ which opens labour market “corridors” for asylum seekers with good prospects of staying, integrating “deserving refugees” while quickly deporting the “undeserving” ones. This law connects the asylum sphere with the labour market and vocational training in a more systematic manner than previous measures. Ben’s experience is representative of a broader pattern documented among rejected asylum seekers navigating the German welfare and migration system (Fontanari, 2022; Jonitz & Leerkes, 2022; Schultz, 2020). The “3+2 regulation” of the *Ausbildungsduldung* introduced by the Integration Act promises future legal residence upon completion of three years of vocational training and two years of related work, during which time asylum seekers hold the precarious *Duldung* status, which means “tolerated” and is merely a suspension of deportation and not a residence permit. The *Ausbildungsduldung* thus links the right to stay to the needs of the German economy rather than to the right for asylum (Drangland, 2020; Fontanari, 2022). As Ben pointed out one day:

If you want to stay in Germany, you need a *Beruf* [profession]! Everyone here has a *Beruf*. Without a *Beruf*, you are no one here. At the beginning, I thought that what mattered was to be a refugee. But no! [he laughs] The only thing that matters is a *Beruf*. (Interview with Ben, June 2019)

The *Ausbildungsduldung* offers a potential pathway for integration only if asylum seekers succeed in their vocational training and become “skilled workers” who are useful to the German economy; their right to stay is conditioned not on humanitarian grounds but on their economic utility (De Genova, 2002; Anderson, 2013). Until then, they remain unlawful migrants under constant surveillance and control: the law restricting asylum seekers’ mobility⁷ applies throughout the entire vocational training period, and any movement outside the administrative district requires a permit from the Foreigners’ Office (*Ausländerbehörde*), which is subject to the discretionary power of street-level bureaucrats.

There was a day when I really needed to travel to Dortmund to visit a sick uncle. I went to the Berlin Foreigners’ Office and applied for a permit, but they refused. The guy at the office window start to ask lots of questions: “why are you going to Dortmund? Do you have some illegal business there?” I was so sad. There was no way to convince him. [...] My boss called them and told them that I was a good guy, that I needed to visit my sick uncle, that I wasn’t working well because of it. [...] In the end, I got the permit but it was very late. When I arrived in Dortmund, my uncle was already out of hospital and he was very angry that I hadn’t been to see him earlier. (Interview with Ben, April 2019)

The restrictions hindering Ben from autonomously governing his own life are based not only on law but also on moral judgments by front-desk employees. Tom, a lawyer supporting Ben, describes how pressure is exerted on refugees through surveillance and suspicion—a dynamic identified by Borrelli et al. (2024) as central to the bureaucratic governance of migrant populations:

The main problems occur when my clients meet the employees at the Foreigners’ Office. The first half-hour serves only to prove that my client is not robbing the German

⁶ The law is the *Integrationsgesetz* enacted on 31 July 2016.

⁷ The *Residenzpflicht* (§ 56 AsylG, § 61 AufenthG).

state. They ask tricky questions, which are sometimes impossible to answer, and then they send you away with no clear reason. As a lawyer, it's difficult because they always draw on some bureaucratic measure or routine outside the law. (Interview with Tom, December 2018)

Tom's words illustrate how bureaucratic violence operates in practice: rather than an explicit denial of rights, it takes the form of opaque procedures that place the burden of proof on the most vulnerable.

Another crucial element of this regulation is that refugees with an *Ausbildungsduldung* are excluded from the social benefits usually available to workers in Germany. Indeed, they are framed as potential (future-)workers, but not yet full workers. The exclusion from the social benefits provided by the *Jobcenter* led refugees with the *Ausbildungsduldung* to live a life of destitution despite being in full-time employment. Ben gave us some further insight:

I am doing the *Ausbildung* as an electrician. It is very hard work: you have to wake up very early, and it's not well paid. I get €620 a month, which is nothing! I'm lucky because I'm living in a shared flat with people from a solidarity group supporting refugees, so my room is very cheap, around €270. But at the end of the month, I always end up with no money. I feel very poor, and I'm exhausted because after nine years in Europe, I need to earn a living. (Interview with Ben, July 2019)

The experience of being employed but still not financially self-sufficient has profound consequences for the self-esteem of refugees within the *Ausbildungsduldung*: they feel poor and at the bottom of the social hierarchy, with no freedom to dictate their own lives (Frank, 2025).

I must finish the *Ausbildung* because I want to be like everyone else, like you. I want to live like the Europeans, free. I want to have the same rights you have. I'm working hard, but I'm still poor. I'd also like to choose my job... one day. Not now. Now I need to be an electrician, because it's the only way for me to stay legal in Germany. [...] I can't change job, I have to stick with it because without the *Ausbildung* they will deport me to my country and that would be the end for me. (Interview with Ben, July 2019)

With these words, Ben explains that the *Ausbildungsduldung* is a legal measure that conditions his right to stay on his performance and success in his vocational training. During this five-year period, Ben has to prove that he is a "good" worker, passing several exams to demonstrate that he will become a hard-working (future-)citizen. Once he concludes the five-year *Ausbildungsduldung*, he must continue to prove himself as a law-abiding, contributing citizen, fighting against the moral judgments coming from within the *Jobcenter* itself:

Finally, the *Jobcenter* can help me. They pay my rent while I'm doing the *Weiterbildung* [further educational training]. It's eight hours a day for only €800 [...] I've only been at the *Jobcenter* for three months, but I can say they send a lot of post! So many papers! And you have to keep all the letters, I already have two full binders. Yes, because they [*Jobcenter* employees] check up on you, they can ask you to bring a letter that was sent a year ago, and you have to bring it! [...] The *Jobcenter* works like this: they pay you, and you have to be active and busy; you can't be lazy! You have to inform them of everything you do. They monitor your bank account! One day, my girlfriend from Italy transferred €65 so that I could buy a plane ticket to visit her. The *Jobcenter* called me, asked a lot of questions, and decided not to give me any money for the next month. They said that if

I can travel, I am not poor, and I don't need their support. Crazy. [...] It's impossible to explain yourself, they always answer: "I don't care, the only thing I can see is that you received €65'. If you want to move away, you have to tell them three months before and they have to give you a permit. [...] When I came back, the *Jobcenter* people were very angry with me. They asked a lot of questions: "where have you been?", "what did you do?," "I don't trust you," they're always like this. [...] You're always anxious when the *Jobcenter* calls you, they ask for documents, information that you don't always have. They're obsessed with papers. You're always afraid to make a mistake with them, to say something wrong, to behave the wrong way. To me, it's crazy that they control every aspect of your life. A *Jobcenter* man told me: "you want our money? Then you have to accept control." I think the idea is that you're begging and that's why they give you money... At least, that's how it feels to me and I don't like it. I mean, I'm working, actually. (Interview with Ben, July 2021)

Ben's initial experiences with the *Jobcenter* show that he must integrate beyond merely working—attending compulsory courses, submitting extensive documentation, justifying every financial transaction, and demonstrating cultural and civic compliance, all while remaining subject to deportation. This performance of "migrant civic value" (Chauvin & Garcés-Masareñas, 2014) is never complete: Ben must continuously deconstruct the moral judgments that place him under examination, proving his deservingness at every bureaucratic encounter (Frank, 2025; Drangslund, 2020).

6. The Neoliberal Borders of the German Welfare State

The cases presented in this article span diverse countries of origin, residence permits, and biographies. Southern and Eastern EU citizens have different access to social benefits than third-country nationals with precarious legal status under asylum law. However, in our analysis, the relationship with the German public administration emerges as a point of convergence, highlighting similarities within this diversity. We identify four key dimensions through which bureaucratic violence shapes power dynamics between local authorities and migrants. These dimensions are embedded in the structures of border and neoliberal welfare regimes and intertwine with bureaucratic practices through the implementation of laws and policies informed by specific cultures and social imaginaries that "moral monitor" migrant populations (Schinkel, 2017). Legal frameworks and their implementation highlight the central role of "administrative temporality" and "discretionary micro-power" in fostering unequal power relations between state administrations and beneficiaries. The discourses underpinning bureaucratic practices are shaped by a "moral economy of deservingness" and by "linguistic and racialised bordering practices," which together shape the social imaginary of the "good migrant" to be integrated into the German context. None of these dimensions is proposed as a novel analytical category: scholars have extensively theorised administrative temporality in relation to asylum and detention (Griffiths, 2014), deservingness in relation to welfare access (Laenen, 2018; Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021), and racialised bordering in relation to migration governance (Borrelli et al., 2024). Our contribution lies rather in tracing how these dimensions operate simultaneously and systematically across three legally distinct migrant groups within the same national welfare system, revealing their interconnected character as expressions of a single logic of bureaucratic violence.

First, the slow “times of administration” often fail to align with the basic livelihood needs of applicants. Waiting, delaying, or hurrying administrative procedures endangers applicants, especially those in vulnerable situations, creating a domino effect that leads to a downward spiral of debt, social isolation, and even homelessness (Bonizzoni & Dimitriadis, 2024; Antinori, Fontanari & Leonardi, 2024). This is described by Sackett & Lareau (2023) in their study of Congolese refugees resettled in the United States as “institutional knots” whose reverberating consequences cascade through institutions and time. For Monica, the delayed response from the *Jobcenter* resulted in a prolonged lack of health insurance, placing her life at serious risk. Ivan and Aneta were given only short notice of the time limit on their benefits, forcing them to find new employment within a month to avoid the same downward spiral experienced by Pavel. In Ben’s case, being excluded from *Jobcenter* benefits for 5 years has left him in destitution despite working full-time in the German vocational training system. Across our case studies, the dilation of time emerges as a recurrent strategy through which street-level bureaucrats push applicants to renounce their legal and social rights, provoking reactions that range from impotence to rage and from resistance to surrender. In Monica’s case, the continuous back-and-forth between concessions and denials of *Alg II* left her in limbo and forced her to postpone and rewrite her migration project. This is a form of “forced immobility” (Stock, 2019; Fontanari, 2018), embedded in the neoliberal technologies of citizenship (Khosravi, 2021) that keep people waiting for social welfare (jobs, housing, health care) and turn welfare applicants into “patients of the state” (Auyero, 2012).

Second, we understand these practices as manifestations of the “discretionary micro-power” of street-level bureaucracy in the era of new public management (Moynihan & Herd, 2010). Both the *Jobcenter* and the Foreigners’ Office (*Ausländerbehörde*) appear to be guided by informal policies aimed at reducing applications and ejecting people from the system. In Ivan and Aneta’s case, the *Jobcenter* failed to clearly inform them that *Alg II* would cease after six months if they did not find new employment. In Ben’s case, the lack of clear information about the *Ausbildungsduldung* forced him and his lawyer to make repeated trips to the Foreigners’ Office. Sometimes, as in Monica’s case, discretionary power can also operate in other directions: her caseworker referred her to a lawyer to dispute what he considered a bad administrative practice, while insisting: “Don’t tell the lawyer that it was me who recommended her to you.” We understand these practices as ways of operating within institutionally produced ambiguity: rather than following clear written procedures, caseworkers operate within a space of informal, unwritten norms that reflect broader institutional logics while appearing as individual choices (Brodin, 2007). This exacerbates stress, anxiety, and feelings of loss, uncertainty, and helplessness among beneficiaries (Gren et al., 2023), posing an invisible, indirect obstacle to rights and social benefits (Gargiulo, 2021; Artero & Fontanari, 2021).

Third, the use of micro-power is strictly informed by the “moral economy of deservingness,” which legitimises bureaucratic practices through social imaginaries based on suspicion and moral judgement (Alberti, 2017; Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021). Monica’s benefits were cut because her mother transferred €30 per month for her phone, while Ben’s benefits were reduced because a *Jobcenter* employee refused to believe his explanation for a €65 transfer for a plane ticket. The Foreigners’ Office employee insinuated that Ben wanted to travel to Dortmund because he had illegal business there. The *Ausbildungsduldung* is a crystal-clear example of the moral economy of deservingness in action: people enrolled in the programme must remain under scrutiny for five years, working for €620 per month, to demonstrate that they deserve to stay in Germany (Drangland, 2020; Fontanari, 2022). These asymmetrical, paternalistic attitudes infantilise people and construct them as undeserving guests through mi-

cro-rituals of control and moral scrutiny—a logic embedded in the broader shift from welfare to workfare (Hansen, 2019; Castellani, 2025), which places an obligation on applicants to continuously demonstrate their deservingness.

Fourth, racialised bordering practices structure bureaucratic encounters across all three groups, albeit in different ways. The three empirical studies present different groups of mobile people: people of colour but also non-colour people with stable EU citizenship who are nonetheless all constructed as “migrants” or “foreign workers” along ethno-racialised hierarchies. Rejected asylum seekers from sub-Saharan Africa face the greatest barriers to credibility and empathy from administrators; Eastern EU citizens are highly stigmatised, as Pavel’s criminalisation illustrates; and Southern EU citizens, while treated better in relative terms, are still constructed as linguistic and cultural outsiders. These hierarchies are not arbitrary; they reflect historical legacies of racism, ethnic prejudices, and ethnic diversity embedded in German society (Bojadžijev, 2016; Sadeghi, 2019) and are apparent in German labour market stratification (Koopmans et al., 2019; Blachnicka-Ciacek et al., 2021). Crucially, these dynamics cannot be reduced to cultural or attitudinal racism alone: they are also embedded in the logic of racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya, 2018), whereby racialised bodies are selectively incorporated into the labour market under conditions of heightened exploitation and precarity, a dynamic that cuts across all three groups analysed here.

Language operates as a primary mechanism through which this racialised bordering is enacted. Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese speakers repeatedly reported how front-office staff insisted on German-only communication even when caseworkers could speak other languages. It is ultimately at the discretion of street-level bureaucrats whether communication is facilitated or not, including the use of translation services (Ratzmann, 2022). Applicants go back and forth between offices because they cannot fully understand what is required of them, while language becomes a primary resource for paternalising those not fluent in German: they may be blamed for incorrectly completing forms or spoken to in a raised voice. These behaviours make it clear that there is a fundamental difference between native speakers and those not socialised in Germany.

In conclusion, this article analyses the power relations between street-level bureaucrats and three different groups of people on the move constructed as “migrants” in Germany, casting light on the production of structural disadvantages and transnational vulnerabilities. The *Jobcenter* and the Foreigners’ Office (*Ausländerbehörde*) are understood as institutional sites where border and neoliberal welfare regimes are enacted in practice, filtering access to rights and social benefits and thereby to the basic conditions for participating and living in society.

Data access statement

The data analysed in this study are not publicly available in order to protect participants in situations of high vulnerability, in accordance with ethical and confidentiality requirements.

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