

Local Bureaucracy in Migration Governance: The Case of Istanbul

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According to data provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than half of the refugee population of the world lives in non-camp areas, predominantly in cities or city peripheries. Access of refugees to social and public services in cities is more difficult compared to camps where social services such as health, education and shelter are provided centrally by states or humanitarian aid institutions. The most sustainable way of overcoming this difficulty in non-camp settings is integrating refugees into existing service infrastructures.

This requires that institutions and actors that provide services at the local level be included in migration governance processes. Indeed, municipalities and local administrations have started to come to the fore all around the world as policymakers, in addition to implementers of migration policies created by central governments.

We can say that municipalities in Turkey have also become one of the mainstays among actors in migration governance, in parallel with the same tendency around the world. As of now, Turkey is the country with the largest migration population in the world. Of the roughly 4.5 million refugees residing in Turkey¹, 98% live in non-camp areas, mostly in cities. According to Directorate General of Migration Management data, Istanbul is the city harboring the highest number of refugees in Turkey. About 550,000 refugees live in Istanbul according to official figures, and about 1 million refugees according to unofficial figures².

While refugee numbers vary from district to district, there is a considerable number of refugees residing in every district of Istanbul. District municipalities play a key role in the access of refugees to social services and assistances. While this is the case, there is no comprehensive legal arrangement that regulates the services that municipalities provide to refugees³. Thus, district municipalities follow diverse roadmaps when it comes to both whether they will provide services to refugees or not and the variety of services that are to be provided.

In this article, I discuss the role of local bureaucracy in services provided to refugees by municipalities. The local voice that is becoming louder when it comes to migration and refugees does not solely consist of political actors. Beyond being the implementer of decisions taken by politicians, local bureaucracy is directing many of the policies concerning immigrants. According to results of the fieldwork I conducted in Istanbul in 2018-2019, civil servants working as directors and chiefs in the relevant departments of the municipalities are among the primary decision makers on issues ranging from whether refugees will be provided with services or not to which service models will be applied and who will receive how much service. These civil servants, who work closely with many stakeholders (local people, refugees, the management cadres of the municipality and local organizations including local branches of political parties) as a function of their duties, are able to perform risk management using the advantages afforded by their position and implement the politically risky seeming decision to serve refugees in municipalities⁴.

This area that local bureaucracy has carved out for itself presents various policy opportunities. Identifying and supporting the personal and institutional factors that goad civil servants working at municipalities towards developing and implementing rights-based services is likely to produce positive outcomes in terms of cohesiveness and integration in the long term.

Social services provided by district municipalities in Turkey and refugees

While municipalities have played one of the key parts in the social service network in Turkey for many years, the institutionalization of social municipalism applications took place with the 2004 Local Administrations Reforms. Social Services Departments were founded in many of the district municipalities in Istanbul following the reforms.

It is possible to group the services provided by these departments today under three main headings: (1) cash assistances, (2) in-kind assistances, (3) projectized services targeting disadvantaged groups. Cash assistance is available for families in need at not all but many of the district municipalities. The amount of assistance, timing of the provision (monthly or yearly) and means through which it will be transferred (direct cash or aid checks and/or cards loaded by the municipalities that enable

How well, then, are refugees able to take advantage of these services? First of all, it must be pointed out that it is not that easy for municipalities to integrate refugees into their existing social service infrastructures. In the present system, municipalities do not receive additional funding from the central government for services they provide to refugees.

purchases at places identified by the municipality) to the families vary from municipality to municipality. Similarly, there is no standard practice followed by all district municipalities concerning assistances in kind either. In accordance with their budgets and the needs of district residents, municipalities deliver many kinds of products, from secondhand furniture and clothes to medical supplies, to district residents free of charge as in-kind assistance. Field teams make home visits to means-test families who request cash or in-kind assistance.

In addition to cash and in-kind assistances, district municipalities also develop projects that target many “disadvantaged” groups such as the elderly, disabled, women and children. Municipal services such as afterschool study services for primary school children, house cleaning service for the elderly and disabled etc. are available in many districts.

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The budgets of district municipalities are determined each year by the number of citizens living within their district’s boundaries. Refugees are not included in this number. In other words, the number of beneficiaries living within their boundaries constantly increases, while the budgets of the municipalities remain the same.

Meanwhile, the number of refugees in some districts have reached upwards of 50,000 according to official numbers. In the interviews I conducted, employees of the Social Services Departments of the municipalities stated that the financial burden of cash or in-kind assistances made to refugees is not prohibitively large; however, that the operational burden of means-testing tens of thousands of families in need through home visits was a challenge to them.

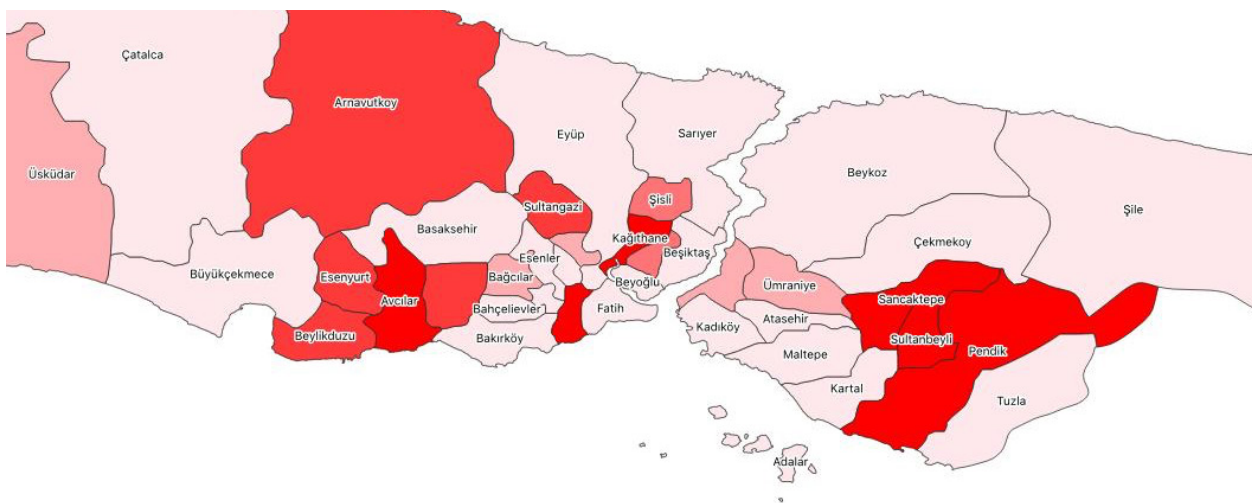
However, despite all the financial obstacles and operational difficulties, some municipalities are venturing to integrate refugees into their existing social service infrastructures; in some instances, they are even developing service models that target refugees. Some on the other hand are choosing to do nothing about this issue. For the purpose of laying out the behavior of district municipalities in terms of providing services to refugees, I have developed the Refugee Service Provision Index

(RSPI), based on data I gathered from 39 district municipalities of Istanbul between the years 2018 and 2019.

The index consists of four main headings: (1) Ability to take advantage of in-kind and cash assistances, (2) Presence of a translator who can speak the language of refugees at the municipality, (3) The municipality having appointed/hired personnel responsible for migration management, (4) The municipality having collaboration protocols with institutions that specialize in the field of migration. Each municipality gets a score out of 5: For items (1), (2) and (4) of the index, municipalities are scored “1” or “0” to indicate a positive or a negative. For item (3), municipalities that have not appointed/hired personnel are scored “0”, municipalities that have appointed one or two personnel are scored “1”, while municipalities that have appointed/hired more than two personnel are scored “2”.

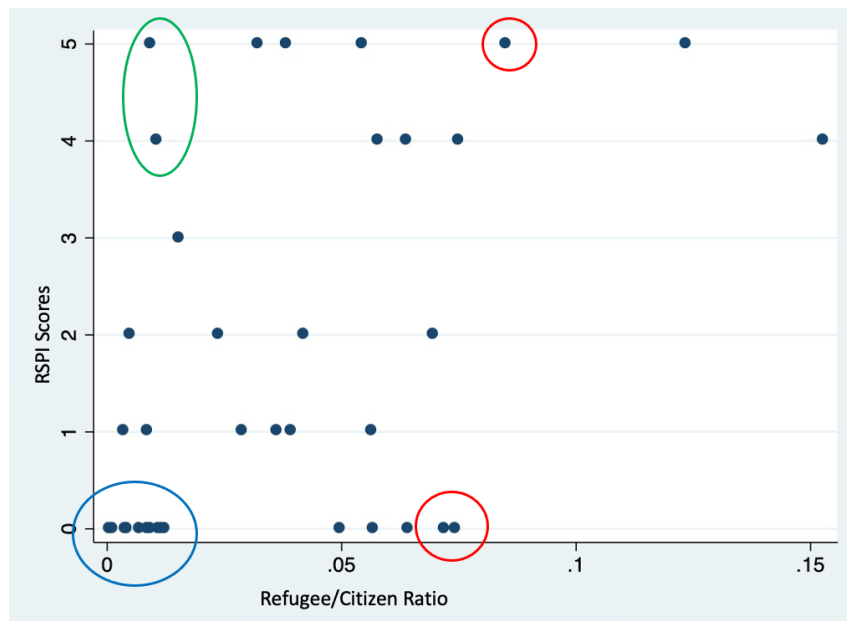
There are two fundamental reasons why I used the criteria above to form the index instead of the amount of money spent to serve refugees and/or the number of refugees served by municipalities: First of all, there is no legal basis for the services provided to refugees by district municipalities⁵. While the precedent that these services are within the purview of municipalities has been established today, there is also no guarantee that this practice will not change. Many municipalities are therefore wary of sharing these numbers with the public. Additionally, my aim with this index is to measure not the one-off, irregular assistances provided to the refugees but the institutional investments of municipalities such as personnel hiring, capacity building and know-how transfer, which will continue to show an effect over the long term.

I have visualized the scores of the district municipalities in the map below; darker colors indicate higher scores while lighter colors indicate lower scores.



Map 1: Distribution of RSPI scores across Istanbul's districts

You can see the distribution of RSPI scores according to the ratio of refugees to citizens in districts in the graph below as well. By looking at the clustering in the bottom left corner of the graph (the dots inside the blue circle), it is possible to say that the RSPI scores are lower in municipalities where the rate of refugee populations is relatively low. However, we also see in the same graph that there are municipalities with high RSPI scores despite a low rate of refugee population (dots inside the green circle). Similarly, some of the municipalities with a high rate of refugee population (dots marked with red circles) have received high scores while others have received low scores.



Graph 1: The distribution of RSPI scores according to the ratio of refugee population to citizen population in districts

RSPI is a useful tool to depict the different attitudes of municipalities towards providing refugees with services. However, it is not sufficient to explain what causes this difference in attitudes.

Possible explanations: political parties and electoral competition

As I stated in the introduction of this article, according to my findings, the source of the differences in attitudes of municipalities towards providing services to refugees is bureaucratic initiative. The decision to provide refugees with services or not is usually made not by mayors but by civil servants working at the director and/or chief level in relevant units of the municipalities. The motivations behind the civil servants making this decision vary. The kinds of services that municipalities have begun to provide with different motivations to refugees also vary.

I will analyze the issue of bureaucratic initiative in detail in the next section of the article. However, I would like to share, in brief, two other assumptions that I have evaluated and eliminated before reaching this finding:

One of the first explanations that comes to mind as the source of the different attitudes of municipalities towards providing services to refugees is political parties. We can assume that especially in a country like Turkey where centralism is predominant in mainstream politics, municipalities will not act out of step with the political party they belong to in a highly contentious policy field such as migration.

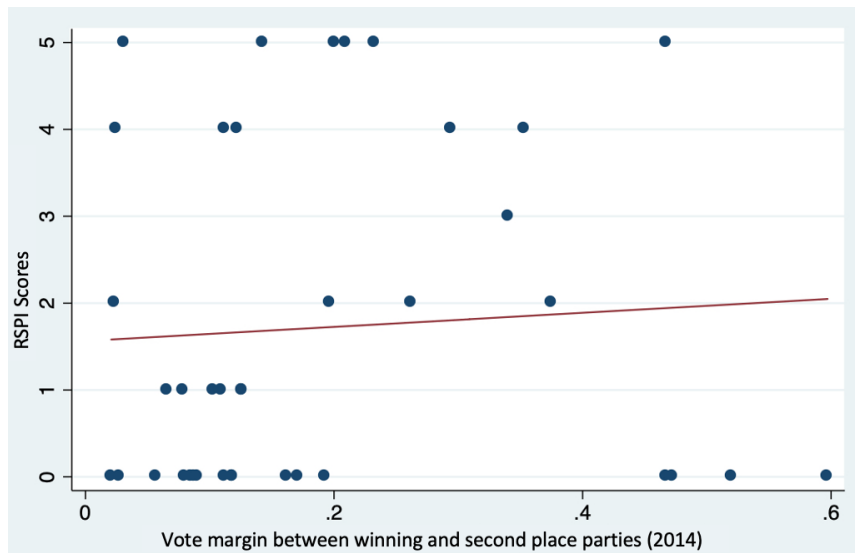
The table below shows the distribution of RSPI scores of Istanbul's district municipalities according to political parties they belong to between the years 2014-2019. The table appears to confirm the assumption I mentioned above. AKP municipalities have higher scores compared to CHP municipalities. This might be because of CHP's anti-immigrant position and/or the refugee population rates being lower in CHP municipalities⁶. However, the table also shows the following: It is also not possible to speak of a coherent approach among AKP municipalities themselves concerning serving refugees or not. These municipalities act differently on this issue even though they belong to the same political party. This means that political parties constitute one of the explanatory elements concerning the different attitudes of municipalities, but they cannot be the sole answer to the question.

RSPI scores	Political Parties		
	CHP	AKP	Total
0	10	7	17
1	1	5	6
2	0	4	4
3	1	0	1
4	1	4	5
5	1	5	6
Mean	0.29	2.16	

Table 1: The distribution of RSPI scores according to political parties

Another reason for municipalities belonging to the same political party having different attitudes towards serving refugees might be electoral concerns. Indeed, in the interviews I made with the municipalities, almost all of them stated that they had faced negative reactions from the local people on the issue of social services provided to refugees. Thus, it can be claimed that in districts with more intense electoral competition, existing mayors may refrain from providing services to refugees.

In order to test this, I visualized the relation between RSPI scores and the vote gap between winning and second place parties in districts in the 2014 local elections. According to the graph below, a relationship between the tightness of the electoral competition and RSPI scores is almost non-existent.



Graph 2: RSPI scores and the vote percentage difference between the winning and second party

Bureaucratic Initiative

The qualitative side of my research however, points to other findings. This is what I saw when I analyzed the process by which the decision to serve is taken in municipalities which serve refugees: The decision-making process does not take place through a top-down procedure where political parties and mayors make the decisions and the employees at the relevant units implement them. To the contrary, it is the directors and chiefs of the relevant units who identify the necessity of these services, occasionally do the budgeting, design the projects to provide the services and present them to higher management.

The authorities which deal with the matter in Istanbul's district municipalities are usually the social Services / Assistances directorates. The decision to serve refugees is a politically risky decision for mayors. The services provided lack legal basis and furthermore risk negative reactions from the constituents and has a chance to lead to loss of votes. Therefore, persuasion processes come into play when the decision is going to be made. Social Services directors and chiefs are key actors of the persuasion processes: Due to their positions, they work at arm's length from many stakeholders including but not limited to local people and refugees, local branches of political parties, townsmanship and solidarity associations in localities, and NGOs that demand partnerships with municipalities.

These connections of directors and chiefs allow them to evaluate the service recipe they propose from the perspectives of different stakeholders and to perform risk management. Thanks to this, they are able to persuade mayors and deputy mayors as to why a service model that appears politically risky is nevertheless necessary.

To cite an example from the cases I studied, when I asked one of the civil servants working at a CHP municipality with a relatively low refugee population rate but an RSPI score of 5/5 to explain the role of the mayor in the creation of these services, they said the following: “The mayor’s approach to the issue is very important. However, it is usually the personnel who persuade the mayor to take action on the issue. We form the idea, flesh it out and then present it to the deputy mayor and the mayor.” Meanwhile, the director of the relevant unit at the same municipality describes their communication with the mayor about serving refugees as follows: “When we decided to provide these services, our biggest supporter was our mayor. And what I mean by support is this: Because I’m the most knowledgeable person about this issue, the mayor left this field to me and did not intervene.”

Interviews I made with international institutions and NGOs which work in the field of migration and run joint projects with district municipalities also point to the same finding. Many of the institutions stated that, starting from the acceptance of project proposals by the municipalities, when it comes to projects progressing without a hitch to their completion, directors and chiefs who work at the relevant directorates are the key actors at municipalities. A representative of an international institution that carried out joint projects with municipalities summarized the issue in the following manner: “Even if the mayor is willing to do something, it is up to the civil servant to get the project running. The mayor doesn’t have the time. If lower echelons drag their feet, it doesn’t work out.”

These findings are both surprising and unsurprising at the same time. To start with why they are surprising, as I mentioned before, in Turkey where centralism is assumed to have taken hold of every area of politics, it is unexpected that local administrations and perhaps even more interestingly the bureaucracies can carve out a space of their own in a highly contentious field of politics like migration.

On the other hand, the emergence of bureaucrats as policymakers is not an entirely new topic for political science. To cite recent examples from the literature on the topic; many studies were published in the last few years which describe local bureaucrats coming to the fore as policymakers, especially in areas that were perceived to be the subject of global politics like migration and global warming until recently. For example, Barry Rabe (2004) talks about bureaucrats working in localities in the US taking up the mission of “policy entrepreneurship” and being able to produce progressive policies

on global warming and carbon emissions despite all the objections of parties in the institutions they work at. Similarly, again in the US, Abigail Fisher Williamson (2018) discusses the power of innovative local policies concerning migration and immigrants, especially produced at the municipal level, in changing both central politics and the perception of local people towards migration and immigrants. Williamson states that civil servants working at municipalities are the key actors in this transformation.

The answer to the question of why some district municipalities serve refugees and others don't, may be the presence of bureaucrats who take the initiative on this issue in certain municipalities. This finding rightly brings to mind these two questions: (1) Why do bureaucrats who take up the initiative go to the trouble of providing services to refugees despite municipalities not being under the legal responsibility to do so? (2) Why are bureaucrats in municipalities that don't serve refugees not taking the initiative, or why are they unable to do so?

Finding the answers to both of these questions requires identifying the individual and institutional factors that encourage or discourage bureaucrats when it comes to providing service. The preliminary findings of the as of yet incomplete third part of my research are briefly as follows:

- Bureaucrats who define services for refugees as “a professional duty” are more open to conveying experiences from international institutions that work on the issue. Experience conveyance usually results in analysis of the needs of refugees and development of rights-based service models that can meet the needs of refugees.
- Bureaucrats who define services for refugees as “a political necessity” usually limit the services they provide to cash support and in-kind assistances. They state that these services act as a security measure in the district, at times reduce crime rates and –if only indirectly– help keep the negative reactions of the local people under control.
- In municipalities where bureaucrats are given more leeway in decision-making concerning topics like developing service models, projects and resources, there is a greater chance that refugees will be provided with services.
- A significant majority of bureaucrats express that they find partnerships with international institutions and associations that are experts in the subject of migration to be politically risky.

- When bureaucrats in municipalities that do not provide services to refugees are asked why the municipality does not take initiative on this issue, the main responses they list are as follows:
 - Lack of legal basis
 - Reluctance due to negative reactions coming from the people
 - Lack of personnel and experience
 - Unwillingness of municipal personnel to act on this issue

Policy Recommendations

Benefits of rights-based services provided to refugees by district municipalities are not limited to making the lives of refugees easier in the short-run. The institutional investments concerning refugees that municipalities make are at the same time one of the building blocks of integration policies that will produce results in the long term. Therefore, it is very important that the individual and institutional factors that encourage municipal employees to provide services are identified and that an environment favorable to the formation of these factors is created. The policy recommendations that I have formed based on all of the findings I presented in this brief are listed below:

- For the purpose of identifying factors that encourage bureaucrats in the municipalities to provide rights-based service,
 - Studies about best-practices should be produced. In addition to detailed presentation of the service model, they should also contain details regarding the creation process (project development, participation in decision making, personnel hiring and/or direction) of this service.
 - Researches to be made with and about municipal employees should be supported.
- Independent institutions should be in charge of measuring the impact of existing services. Detailed information about services that are identified as high impact should be disseminated across municipalities.
- Under the leadership of the Directorate General of Migration Management, partnerships and experience conveyance between international institutions and associations and district municipalities should be supported.

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- The hiring of sociologists, social service experts and similar professionals at the Social Services Directorates of municipalities should be prioritized.
 - Training modules in which bureaucrats working at different positions (deputy mayors, directors, directorate employees etc.) in municipalities will participate together should be developed and implemented. In addition to migration governance, the modules should also contain content regarding effective and participatory decision-making processes at municipalities.
 - The legal basis that defines the role of municipalities in migration governance should be established. This basis should expand rather than limit the space of action of municipalities, however.

Notes

- 1 According to official data published by the Directorate General of Migration Management
- 2 According to data published in common by the International Organization for Migration and the Directorate General of Migration Management (2019)
- 3 The entirety of services provided by municipalities is regulated by the 5393 numbered Municipal Law. There is no regulation in the law regarding services to be provided to refugees. Municipalities that provide services to refugees state that they provide services in accordance with the expression “fellow-townsmanship” in Article 13 of the same law.
- 4 The findings and inferences that I will present in this article are based on the database I created through interviews I made at 39 district municipalities in Istanbul and in-depth interviews I made with civil society, public and academic representatives actively working in the field between September 2018 and May 2019.
- 5 You can find an explanation of this issue in note 3.
- 6 According to the survey conducted by Aytuğ Şaşmaz with city councilor candidates prior to the 2019 local elections, 88% of all CHP candidates have responded “I agree” or “I fully agree” to the question of how much they agree with the statement “Syrian refugees should be ensured a return to their countries as soon as possible instead of being provided with education and health services and opportunities to work”, while this rate was 44% among AKP candidates.

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