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Mensink, S.; Glasius, M.; Verhoeven, I.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Front stage contestation and back stage consultation: how Amsterdam navigated the governance of undocumented migrants

Sander Mensink¹, Marlies Glasius^{2*} and Imrat Verhoeven²

*Correspondence:

Marlies Glasius
m.glasius@uva.nl

¹Dutch Climate Research Initiative (KIN), Utrecht, The Netherlands

²Department of Politics, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

Migration governance is one of the most contentious issues of our time, not just between political orientations but also between different levels of government. At the local level, the reality of undocumented migrants' existence often places municipal authorities in an awkward split between acting in accordance with intransigent national policies and the need to guarantee public order and provide basic care. The academic literature on the 'local turn' in migration governance has not given attention to how municipal authorities may navigate the interplay between contestation and consultation in their relations with their national government. Focusing on two periods in which Amsterdam's executive authorities tried to establish a form of shelter for undocumented migrants, we find that municipal authorities may publicly contest national authorities and privately consult with them at the same time. While the escalation of front stage contestation actually gives birth to back stage consultation, back stage consultation is continually constrained and threatened by the pressures on both municipal and national political actors to act out expected positions on the front stage. Over time, increased knowledge and trust between municipal and national actors can mitigate this vulnerability and stabilise backstage consultation to some extent.

Keywords Migration governance, Cities, Undocumented migrants, Contention, Front stage, Back stage

Introduction

In Amsterdam in 2012, a group of undocumented migrants – supported by Dutch activists and NGOs – came together under the name 'We Are Here' (WAH), erected a tent camp, then squatted a church. Their protest sharply visualized failing national immigration policies as well as municipal reluctance to provide basic care, such as shelter, for undocumented migrants (Hajer & Bröer, 2020; Mensink, 2019). This incident marked the beginning of two episodes of contentious interaction between WAH, supported by voluntary organizations and NGOs, and the municipal government (Mensink, 2019; Roodenburg, 2021), and in turn between the municipal authorities and the national

government. This article focuses on the latter relationship. Both episodes ended in a compromise brokered between the municipal authorities and the Ministry of Justice, resulting in the establishment of a temporary night shelter for a group of undocumented migrants at the end of 2013 (Hajer & Bröer, 2020; Mensink, 2019; Roodenburg, 2021), and 24-hour shelters for a larger group in 2019 (Roodenburg, 2021).

At the heart of the conflict between the municipality of Amsterdam and the Ministry of Justice lies an issue of ‘different but overlapping mandates’ (Spencer, 2018, p. 2034): the national government is responsible for overall asylum policies, including admission, granting or rejecting refugee status, deportation, and providing temporary shelter facilities for those people who await their (sometimes forced) deportation. The official in charge is the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration Affairs at the Ministry of Justice. Municipal governments bear responsibility for upholding local public order. Moreover, the Dutch Constitution (arts.20–22) obliges the state to provide a basic degree of care for its population; this ‘duty of care’ is usually interpreted as being primarily located at the municipal level (Kos et al., 2016; Oomen et al., 2021). Dutch national legislation meanwhile excludes undocumented migrants from access to ‘regular employment, social security benefits and subsidized housing’ and non-urgent health care (Ersanilli, 2014, p. 9). While this system of divided responsibilities should work in theory, the national government regularly fails to expel or contain undocumented migrants, who often end up dwelling in cities without the social rights of residents. This situation, where undocumented migrants are neither expelled nor supported, is referred to as the ‘asylum gap’ (Kos et al., 2016). As a result, local authorities have to deal with the practical consequences of failing national policies, sandwiched between the needs and demands of the undocumented and their supporters and an intransigent national government.

In both episodes, the initial conflict between the municipality and the national Ministry of Justice outwardly resembles what the literature has variously referred to as local authorities ‘challenging’ (Bauder, 2017, p. 174), ‘resisting’ (Zapata-Barrero, 2023, p. 2838), ‘disrupting’ (Oliver et al., 2020, p. 8), ‘by-passing’ (Bazurli & Kaufmann, 2023, p. 1141 and 1144), or ‘decoupling’ (Scholten & Penninx, 2016) from harsh national policies. However, such characterizations do not fully capture what happened between successive municipal governments of Amsterdam and Secretaries of State at the Ministry of Justice: while there was conflict, there was also a remarkable extent of consultation, and eventually cooperation, between them. It is this interaction between contestation and consultation which presents an empirical puzzle that has not yet been adequately addressed in the multilevel governance literature on migration, and that we seek to theorise and empirically demonstrate in this article.

While our empirical focus is on the vertical interactions between the city and the national government, we take inspiration from two studies that simultaneously explore horizontal relationships (between local governments and civil society organizations) and vertical relations (between municipal and higher level authorities). These studies discern a more complex and fluid set of relationships behind apparently contentious interactions (Campomori and Ambrosini 2022; Roodenburg, 2021). We adapt and deepen these insights by drawing on a sociological approach that emphasizes interactions and performativity, based on Ervin Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective centring on the concepts of front stage and back stage. We argue that rather than choosing between a contestation and a consultative response to national migration dictates, municipal

authorities may engage in simultaneous front stage confrontation and back stage consultation. We then address the precariousness of backstage consultation, which is constantly constrained and threatened by front stage confrontational interactions. Finally, we show how increasing knowledge and trust stabilises back stage consultation over time.

Empirically, we focus on the two periods in which Amsterdam's executive created shelters for undocumented migrants. The first period, from late 2012 to early 2014, ended with the so-called 'Havenstraat' night shelter being approved for six months as part of a national program. The second period, from early 2018 until mid-2019, resulted in the municipality opening 24-hour shelters for a total of five hundred undocumented migrants at different locations in the city within the framework of a national pilot project. The comparison helps us trace and compare patterns of contentious and consultative interaction between municipal and national authorities.

The empirical material in this study is based primarily on in-depth interviews with eight key civil servants and political advisors at the municipality of Amsterdam and at the national Ministry of Justice and two local politicians. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed by using an inductive coding method in Atlas-ti. We have anonymized all interviews. Although some interviewees were willing to speak on the record, blanket anonymization offers better protection to those who were not. The civil servants and political advisors are abbreviated as 'CS' (1,2,3) etc. The local politicians are indicated as 'LP' 1 and 2. We also used news articles from local and national newspapers and tv stations and minutes from city council meetings to triangulate and enrich narratives and themes that emerged in the interviews, as well as to check factual events and dates. All interview and newspaper quotes have been translated from Dutch by the authors.

In our next section, we will first further review the multilevel governance literature on migration to make the case that the co-occurrence of contestation and consultation in the vertical dimension has not been sufficiently theorised. We will then illuminate how Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach can help us develop an understanding of the interplay between contentious and consultative interactions. The third section provides an overview of the most important events in the two time periods. The next three sections employ our empirical analysis to demonstrate the dynamics between simultaneous frontstage and backstage interactions (Sect. "[Front stage and backstage: understanding a precarious relationship](#)"), the vulnerabilities of backstage interactions (Sect. "[The frontstage as giving birth to, but constraining the backstage](#)") and the ways in which increasing knowledge and trust can stabilise these interactions over time as they evolve from highly improvised to more premeditated policies (Sect. "[Stabilizing the backstage through increased knowledge and trust](#)"). In our conclusion, we discuss the implications of our findings and new avenues for research.

Theorising the co-occurrence of contestation and consultation in migration governance

Contention and consultation in the multilevel governance literature

Amsterdam's attempts to forge a municipal policy for the protection of undocumented migrants are based on a combination of pragmatic problem-solving (Scholten, 2013) and political will formation grounded in an urban imaginary (Hoekstra, 2017; Roodenburg, 2021). These attempts are by no means unique, as cities have become particularly vocal

and active in the field of immigration policy over the past decade, in part as a response to failures of and gaps in national and supranational policies (Doomernik & Ardon, 2018). This has given rise to a burgeoning literature on a 'local turn' in migration and integration governance (Doomernik & Ardon, 2018; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017; Spencer, 2018; Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018; Bazurli & Kaufmann, 2023), and more specifically on 'sanctuary cities' (Bauder, 2017; Bazurli & De Graauw, 2023; Davis, 2020; Houston, 2019).

Bazurli and Kaufmann (2023, p. 1131) refer to municipal defiance of strict national asylum policies as 'insurgent urban asylum policymaking', while Oliver et al. (2020, p. 2) focus on municipal innovation in creating oppositional policies: 'sometimes developing policies completely apart from national policy' and 'as an antidote to national policies'. Zapata-Barrero (2023, p. 2852) similarly argues that 'urban resilience necessarily involves (...) resistance and mobilization' on the part of cities. In terms of governance, all these forms of contention are qualified by Scholten and Penninx (2016, p. 94) as examples of 'decoupling,' with policies at different levels being dissociated, contradictory and thus lacking policy coordination.

Decoupling can take several forms. Oomen et al. (2021) and Baumgärtel and Pett (2022) suggest that local governments can employ strategies of 'defiance' (extra-legal and explicit), 'dodging' (extra-legal and implicit), 'deviation' (legal and explicit), and 'dilution' (legal and implicit) in contesting national level policies. Likewise, Spencer (2018, p. 2046–2047) has distinguished between decoupling in the form of open conflict and decoupling as 'low visibility conflict avoidance,' i.e. subverting rather than openly challenging national policies. In the US context, Davis (2020) similarly distinguishes between declared 'sanctuary cities' and especially smaller cities that prefer quiet non-cooperation with national migration enforcement policies.

Multi-level governance relations in migration governance are neither static nor one-dimensional: cities can switch between contestation and consultation over time (Scholten et al., 2018). Municipalities can adopt divergent policies that point to decoupling, while at the same time developing a form of multilevel governance with the national government in other areas, such as regularization of status or crime prevention (Homburger et al., 2022; also see Spencer & Delvino, 2019). Yet the literature has not sufficiently theorised *how* contestation and consultation can occur simultaneously on the same policy issue. This is a particularly important omission within the relational approach (Adam & Caponio, 2018), which focuses on the relationships between governments as key to understanding how migration and integration policies are shaped. Simultaneous contestation and consultation is the empirical puzzle we encountered in our case study of Amsterdam, and we seek to explain how municipal authorities navigated this apparent contradiction.

We draw inspiration from two studies that have examined a broader field of interactions comprising both horizontal relations between civil society actors and municipalities and vertical relations between different levels of governance. Campomori and Ambrosini (2022, p. 16) discern 'fluctuating patterns' in vertical relations: 'from ones in-between centralist and cooperative to an open conflict', as well as four possible configurations in the horizontal relations between civil society actors and municipal authorities. They recommend 'an in-depth investigation of conflicts', in the context of what they term the 'battleground' between all the different political actors with an interest in undocumented migrants, which is what we undertake to do in this article. Roodenburg (2021,

p. 55), who has also studied the provision of shelter in Amsterdam, focuses on what she calls the “network circumstances” of the case, which she finds “unstable” due in part to divergent problem definitions within both the NGO community and between different political actors. We take up these ideas of a ‘battleground’ of actors creating ‘unstable’ network circumstances in our fifth section, to contextualise the fragility of consultation oriented modes of interaction between the municipal authorities and the national government. In order to zoom in on the Amsterdam municipal authorities’ interactions with the Ministry of Justice specifically, we employ Erving Goffman’s (1959) ‘dramaturgical’ approach, which focuses on the concepts of ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage.’

Goffman’s front stage and back stage

Central to Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical approach is that people, like actors in a play or film, want to convey a particular impression to the world around them during their actions and interactions. An important prerequisite of such impression management are the stages and their settings that provide people a context for their interactions. The term front stage traditionally has been associated with individuals or ‘teams’ of people (see Goffman, 1959, p. 83–85; Ritzer, 2012, p. 378) acting publicly, while there are other people (often called audiences) watching or present. When they are front stage, people – in our case mainly politicians – ‘generally try to present an idealized image of themselves’ (Ritzer, 2012, p. 377). Such idealized images (also called roles) might differ depending on the setting in which (inter-) actions take place (see Ritzer, 2012, p. 376; Goffman, 1959, p. 34). Next to the frontstage, Goffman (1959) also uses the term ‘back stage’ as the place where ‘the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character’ (Goffman, 1959, p. 115). Crucial for the backstage is that there is no audience present, which allows people to prepare for their performances on the frontstage, to have informal interactions with team members, and to discuss if and how the performance needs to be changed (Kivisto & Pittman, 2013, p. 307).

In sum, we generally tend to associate front stages with controlled, highly socialised and dramatised behaviour before audiences, whereas back stages are generally associated with more relaxed, spontaneous and informal behaviour behind closed doors. As we will see, the distinction between front and back stage is analytically rewarding for understanding the vertical interactions in the governance of undocumented migrants. Kihato and Landau (2024) have already applied these metaphors in the very different context of the Horn of Africa. They showed how municipalities acted on two front stages, an international and a national one, respectively making refugees visible or making them invisible as political expediency dictated, while collaborating in a joint back stage by sharing resources and working on scripts for their different audiences. In our case, there is only one ‘frontstage’, since the local and national public spheres are not separate.

By applying Goffman’s perspective, we offer new possibilities for understanding the interactions between municipalities and national governments, as it reveals how what looks like a ‘decoupling’ or ‘insurgent’ strategy on the front stage may be combined with a precarious back stage consultation. Moreover, we will show that the escalation of front stage contestation gives birth to back stage consultation, but also constrains and threatens it. Finally, over time increasing knowledge and trust between municipal and national actors can mitigate this vulnerability and stabilise backstage consultations to some extent.

A brief overview of the two periods under study

In September 2012, WAH started a protest encampment in Amsterdam, which was soon joined by other activists and NGOs. Their main goal was to protest against their precarious living conditions caused by the asylum gap (Hajer & Bröer, 2020; Mensink, 2019). According to Dutch law, the national government is solely responsible for asylum procedures (Ersanilli, 2014), with Dutch municipalities being responsible for public order and seeing themselves as having a humanitarian mandate of care (Kos et al., 2016). In reaction to the protest, mayor Eberhard van der Laan carefully chose to label the camp a 'demonstration against national asylum policies' rather than an 'encampment'. This circumvented the need for immediate eviction and bought the WAH group as well as the municipality some time (Vugts, 2012), but it also caused tension in the relationship with the national government. Fred Teeven, as the Secretary of State responsible for asylum seekers, argued that national policies were clear, and that the municipality should deal with this as a public order issue (Wiegman, 2012).

In December 2012, WAH squatted an empty church – labelled the 'refugee church' – triggering a nationwide surge in attention and support (Mensink, 2019). Mayor Van der Laan reacted sympathetically but hesitantly, arguing that his hands were tied by national legislation (Karman, 2013a), while at the same time inviting property owners to allow WAH to use their empty buildings (*Het Parool* 3 June 2013). Throughout the summer and autumn of 2013 WAH moved between squatted buildings. Meanwhile, the majority of the municipal council pushed the mayor to create a night shelter for the WAH group (Karman, 2013a; Mensink, 2019). In late November 2013, Van der Laan and Teeven announced a remarkable agreement that allowed the WAH-group a night shelter for six months in a disused prison building in the Havenstraat, thus disregarding national legislation (Karman, 2013b). WAH largely fell apart as a coherent group after the Havenstraat shelter was closed, even though some factions continued to squat new buildings.

The second period under study begins in April 2018, when remnants of WAH gained negative public attention by inadvertently trying to squat an inhabited building (AT5 19 April 2018). The event more or less coincided with the municipal elections, after which a new municipal coalition led by the Green Left party presented a plan at the end of May 2018 to open 24-hour shelters for five hundred undocumented migrants, who would not be evicted while at the shelter. As well as providing shelter, the plan included counselling for undocumented migrants on their prospects of staying or returning (Coalitie-Akkoord 2018). According to Dutch law, municipalities had no discretion to provide such counselling to undocumented migrants, as quickly pointed out by Teeven's successor, Secretary of State Mark Harbers (Jonker, 2018).

The conflict over shelters was resolved in November 2018, when Alderman Groot Wassink announced that he had agreed with the Secretary of State that Amsterdam's 24-hour shelters would be included in a state-approved 18-month pilot project for national reception centres in five Dutch cities, which would serve as temporary living facilities to replace all forms of shelters organized by various Dutch municipalities. Secretary of State Harbers commented: 'We have come from very far (...) This is a historically charged subject between the state and municipalities (...) it remains precarious' (Meijers, 2018). In the spring of 2019 various suitable shelter locations were being scouted (Hielkema, 2019), with NGOs being hired by the municipality to run day to

day matters and various national agencies assisting with asylum procedures (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2018; Roodenburg, 2021). The first shelter locations were opened in 2019.

Front stage and back stage: understanding a precarious relationship

A major finding in the interviews and the analysis of the media coverage was the distinction between front stage and back stage in one of the most contentious policy issues of the last fifteen years. The general image was that of a contentious, unstable and 'stormy' public *front stage* during both periods. Ranging from prickly exchanges during the Havenstraat-period to threatening language during the early phases of the 24-hour shelters period, frontstage interactions were oftentimes tense. Two newspaper quotes from Secretary of State Fred Teeven illustrate this tension during the early phases of the Havenstraat-period. Teeven commented to local newspaper *Het Parool*: 'If he [mayor Van der Laan] thinks he has chosen a wise path, that is his responsibility, but as far as I am concerned it does not contribute to a real solution' (Wiegman, 2012). In another newspaper he is cited saying the 'obligation to leave must apply without exceptions ... We must avoid offering false hope' (Kas, 2012).

During the early phases of the 24-hour shelters period front stage interactions were even more openly contentious. Pressure in the national parliament mounted when a majority of right-wing and conservative parties voted in favour of a motion to stop the local shelter plans (Koops, 2018a). Local newspaper *Het Parool* commented (Couzy, 2018): 'This is going to be heated: a power struggle between the right-wing cabinet and the left-wing city council'. Alderman Groot Wassink insisted that the municipality would not change its 24-hour shelter plan: 'I listened very carefully to the Secretary of State. He had lots of comments, but I don't think he said that the 24-hour shelter would not be possible' (AT5 8 June 2018). Secretary of State Mark Harbers, Teeven's successor, responded unequivocally: 'It is clearly written in Dutch law: this is not allowed', and added that the cabinet had 'instruments' to force Amsterdam to comply with national law (Jonker, 2018).

So far, everything looks like a typical case of decoupling (Scholten & Penninx, 2016), with the municipality of Amsterdam in a clear strategy of defiance, as frequently documented in the 'local turn' literature (Bauder, 2017; Oliver et al., 2020; Oomen et al., 2021; Baumgärtel & Pett, 2022; Bazurli & Kaufmann, 2023; Zapata-Barrero, 2023). On the front stage, a left-wing local political coalition, playing to its local constituents, stands up for undocumented migrants, while a right-wing national political coalition loudly proclaims it must enforce strict migration policies, in accordance with the preferences of its electoral base. The municipal authorities openly acted in opposition to national policy, exceeding their jurisdiction.

Meanwhile, however, backstage consultations were taking place to reach joint solutions to the shelter issues. In sharp contrast to front stage appearances, nearly all interviewees were appreciative of the day-to-day back stage interactions between the municipality and the national government during both periods, which they described as good, healthy and productive. Typical for back stage settings, respondents mentioned that negotiations often took place in an informal one-on-one setting, or with a small team of close advisors. A former local politician characterized the working relationship between mayor Eberhard Van der Laan and Secretary of State Fred Teeven during the 2012-13 Havenstraat period as:

That is just Eberhard and Fred. Why do I say Eberhard and Fred? Because it was just simply these two men who sit together and come to agreements. And of course it is not just Eberhard and Fred, it is the mayor and the Secretary of State, so civil servants do a lot of preparation and give advice. But in the end you do see that it is those two people. At least from Eberhard's position, well, that Eberhard said: I am going to come to some agreement with the Secretary of State, or with Fred. (...) And that will be my agreement with him, and that [agreement] will not only be with me, but with the city (LP1).

A civil servant (CS1) likewise remarked: 'Eberhard and the Secretary of State always liked each other (...) He and Teeven, they could do business'. During the more recent 24-hour shelters negotiations relations between Secretary of State Harbers and alderman Groot Wassink were seen as somewhat more formal, but also as good and friendly: 'You always hear Groot Wassink saying he has really good talks and that everything is done in close consultation. He doesn't feel the need to oppose things, or [do] things autonomously' (CS2). Another civil servant confirmed this, adding that Harbers' own background as an alderman in Rotterdam was helpful, that he did not have an 'ivory tower' perspective, but understood the ground level dynamics in a city (CS3). The back stage of this type of negotiation never becomes quite as informal as Goffman describes. It is still a place where the politicians operate strategically, so they will only 'step out of character' to a certain degree (Goffman, 1959, p. 115). However, they can quietly acknowledge each other's positions and negotiate a deal with each other without all the public drama that comes with migration and integration politics.

Respondents were clearly aware of the difference between contentious public front stage interactions and more consultation oriented and pragmatic back stage interactions. As one respondent (CS2) mentioned: '[T]here is of course a big difference between how one reacts politically, and how one reacts behind closed doors'. Another civil servant summarised how respondents generally felt about the difference between 'front-' and 'back stage' interactions:

Of course, there are clashes, of course you don't agree with each other. But I think that has always been the strength of those two [Van der Laan and Teeven] combined, that they were able to maintain their own position, but that they could do business. (...) Yes, and at a certain point [Secretary of State] Teeven might have said something in the newspapers that might have been bad, but Eberhard [mayor Van der Laan] never lost one second of sleep over that. They both understood very well: you have to deal with your particular dynamics, I have to deal with mine, let's not get carried away (CS1).

Another respondent noticed similar dynamics with regard to negotiations that alderman Groot Wassink and Secretary of State Harbers had during the 24-hour shelters episode in 2018: 'The first part is the political part for the stage, the second part is the governance part, what you resolve together behind closed doors' (LP1). The backstage thus constitutes a familiar environment in which politicians are accustomed to conducting real business, while knowing that, for electoral reasons and to legitimise their actions, they must disagree with each other on the front stage area and acknowledge that this is how it works.

The front stage as giving birth to, but constraining the back stage

Underneath the contrast between contestation oriented front stage and consultation focused back stage interactions lies a deeper reality of major institutional contradictions and political antagonisms, which makes the attempts at back stage negotiations inevitably precarious. Scholten and Penninx (2016, p. 100) suggest that such contradictions and antagonisms can be understood as 'divergent logics of policy formulation' with 'politicization at the national level and pragmatic problem-solving logic at the local level.' Our interview material suggests that, as Hoekstra (2017) has also found, politicians and civil servants in Amsterdam were not only driven by pragmatism, but also by an inclusive and humanitarian 'urban imaginary' informed by ideas on diversity and a duty of care, as a civil servant explains:

We have always said, despite whatever the law says: we are facing a problem in this city. Because these people were here, and we did not want them to sleep under a bridge, so we tried to help them in whatever way possible. (...) So, we did feel a responsibility towards the [WAH] group. (CS4).

The practical, humanitarian and moral reasons for providing care at the local level were confirmed by another respondent:

[W]e felt that, inhuman behaviour or legal loopholes in legislation, or just being left to your own fate (...) and also to some extent the chilly aloofness of the national government, yes, we did not really care for that kind of message in Amsterdam (CS5).

At the national level civil servants and politicians worked from a politicised perspective, focused on returning undocumented migrants to their country of origin, although they were aware of the municipal predicament, as a civil servant working for the Ministry of Justice explains:

For municipalities, their prime concern is: how do we keep safety and care sustainable? For the national government it [24-hour shelters] largely remains a vehicle to get people motivated, with the help of shelter and a programme, to return. (...) The government is much more invested in the return policy perspective (CS6).

Within this context of fundamental contradictions, and the need to act these out in front stage performances, there was a clear sense of instability, precariousness and vulnerability. Describing both periods, respondents used metaphorical terms such as 'minefield', 'bomb (waiting to) explode', 'balancing acts', 'inflammable', 'walking a tightrope' or 'walking on eggshells' to describe the interactions between the municipality and the national government. The precarity and vulnerability of these back stage interactions is directly related to how the institutional contradictions are performed on the front stage.

Both periods started out with a turbulent phase during which the matter of shelter was openly discussed on the frontstage or 'battleground' (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2022) inhabited by migrant activists, NGO's, political parties, voters, and media, at different levels, with different agendas. In the Havenstraat period, the turbulent phase coincided with the occupation of the 'refugee church', whereas in the 24-hour shelters period the squatting of rental houses by WAH and the presentation of shelter plans by the new municipal coalition created a turbulent phase.

These stormy front stages give birth to the back stage: they make the existence of undocumented migrants in the city visible, bring deviant municipal policies out in the open, and thus put pressure on the national government to do something, providing ground to initiate negotiations. But they also constrain and threaten what is possible on the back stage. Interviews indicated that the executive at both levels was 'wedged in' between pressures from the local city council (and behind it, NGOs and activists) and pressures from parties in the national parliament or the national government. For example, during the turbulent phase of the Havenstraat period, the national coalition between the Labour party PvdA and liberal party VVD was heavily divided over immigration issues. The Labour Party had been fiercely criticized internally for accepting stricter asylum policies as part of the 2012 national coalition agreement. Mayor Van der Laan – himself a heavyweight within Labour – had to carefully manoeuvre a way between local pressure to act and further upsetting the inflammatory situation in the national coalition (and his own party). One respondent summarized this position as follows:

The coalition in The Hague was really of a different colour than the one here in Amsterdam. And there, they really were following a tough line, while here we were dealing with a municipal council with a majority who wanted us to do more for the [WAH] group. But there was very little room for manoeuvre in The Hague. That's a tough one. (...) Because as a mayor you are neither looking to bring down the national government, nor do you want to not listen to your municipal council. So, I have experienced it as walking a tightrope (CS4).

At the same time, respondents mentioned that Secretary of State Teeven was in a somewhat similar situation during the Havenstraat period, having to deal with national political dynamics and his own constituency:

Well, he [Secretary of State] did not necessarily have much support from the VVD constituency for facilitating and paying for a housing project for rejected illegal migrants. So, we did understand that. It was not exactly making him look good. But on the other hand, he was also in a tight spot, because the media attention and the poignancy of the situation were increasing (CS5).

During the 24-hour shelters period in 2018, a similarly awkward situation arose when the Amsterdam branch of the liberal party VVD openly refused to back their VVD Secretary of State Harbers' planned merger between his national reception centres and alderman Groot Wassink's shelter plan.

While both episodes eventually delivered provisional agreements, civil servants involved in municipal policy-making constantly felt the strain coming from the institutional contradictions and political antagonisms being performed on the front stage, within the context of the unstable networks (Roodenburg, 2021) of political stakeholders surrounding the municipal authorities and the Secretary of State respectively:

The tightrope on which the mayors and now the aldermen are walking is very thin (...) Things can escalate quickly, starting with something small, you can easily slide into a whole different discussion, with lots of people having opinions (CS4).

Goffman's dramaturgical concepts help us to understand both the emergence and the fragility of consultation in the midst of contestation. Back stage consultation is an

essential preliminary step towards actual collaboration on a joint ‘solution’ (we are not suggesting that these were actually adequate solutions to the precarious situation in which undocumented migrants in Amsterdam found themselves), which was the eventual outcome of both episodes. Back stage consultation only becomes necessary, and therefore possible, because front stage contestation has made the problem so salient that something needs to be done to break the deadlock. However, as we have shown, back-stage consultation is at the same time made vulnerable and precarious due to the pressures on both municipal and national political actors to act out expected roles on the front stage.

Stabilising the back stage through increased knowledge and trust

While there are many parallels between the Havenstraat period and the 24-hour shelters period, the interactions were not identical. In this paragraph we will reflect on these differences. Respondents describing the Havenstraat period always referenced the improvised character of the executive branch’s actions during the first year of the WAH-protests. By contrast, the interviews concerning the 24-hour shelters emphasized the stabilising role of increased practical knowledge, as well as more formal knowledge (evaluations, scientific reports), and trust that increased during sustained interactions between municipal and Ministry personnel.

When the WAH-protest started, there was generally speaking a lack of knowledge about how to deal with shelters and more broadly municipal policies for the undocumented. The municipality of Amsterdam had never before been confronted with the type of protest staged by the WAH-group and its supporters in 2012. Although there was an urgent need to act, there were no existing policies to guide that action. Instead the municipality was ‘improvising’ by taking action towards WAH and the national government, while analysing the interactions and carefully listening to what the other actors were saying (Forester et al., 2023). One respondent sums this up as follows:

I think that at the start [of the WAH-protest], we did not have a very sharp focus on what we could do ... I think we just dealt with the facts as we encountered them, and we tried to approach them pragmatically. (...) Along the way it became clear what was possible and what really was not (CS5).

According to another respondent involved in the Havenstraat episode:

It is a constant: something comes up, you react, you try to solve it, a deadlock arises, you try to overcome that, you try to bring all those lines together. You cannot really do something on day one that is in complete contradiction with the day before, but other than that, of course you do not have a complete overview (CS1).

During the 24-hour shelters period, we can observe a development toward more pre-meditated policy action, built on an increasing knowledge base. For example, the evaluation of the Havenstraat shelter made it clear that six months at a shelter was simply too short a period for undocumented people to plan for their futures, and that highly specialized help was crucial for progress in individual cases (CS2). Similarly, a scientific report in June 2018 concluded that offering stable and reliable living conditions was a necessary prerequisite for undocumented migrants to be able to even consider (let alone work on) voluntary return (Pro Facto, 2018). Alderman Groot Wassink happily quoted

this report as proof of the importance of his 24-hour shelters plans (Koops, 2018b). When asked to compare the Havenstraat shelter and the 24-hour shelters, one respondent involved in both episodes said:

I think the basic idea is the same, but we are more advanced in terms of implementation, because we know much more, we are much more attuned to providing tailor-made solutions (CS2).

This shift was not only the result of improved knowledge, but also built on increased awareness of and understanding between municipal and Ministry actors, for each other's positions and goals. This fostered an increase of trust, which allowed them to move more easily to back stage talks and agreements and to be less easily derailed by the threat of front stage turbulence. Referring to a specific, potentially explosive incident in 2019, a municipal civil servant with a long track record said:

Immediately there is very quick consultation with everyone: okay, how are we going to solve this? And that was not possible six years earlier (...) It is a real network. And the willingness of Harbers, and below that the directors who passed it on to him, [to think] ok we are working together and this is the problem and we have to solve it (...) the willingness of the people who are involved is already there. From top to bottom. So that is a real gain (CS2).

Another respondent who has been involved with the undocumented migrant care dossier for a long time similarly stated:

The foundation, but also the implementation plan [of the 24-hour shelters] is that we simply want to work together much better. We have seen that in the past we always worked on little islands and that people were primarily working against each other, and thought of each other as the devil (CS3).

The front stage, this respondent suggested, was as contentious as ever, but the back stage had been stabilised by intensified contact:

With politicians, from the VVD in particular, it is quite popular to see Amsterdam as a bit evil, so to speak, the city where they all just go their own way. And they don't care at all about national agreements etc... That is not how the Ministry sees us. Because we work together with them a great deal, and very well (CS3).

An additional incentive for consultation was the much greater cost of these shelters, with extensive counselling and support for the migrants, compared to the Havenstraat, requiring both national and municipal funding to make it work. And finally, perhaps paradoxically, the change in local government after the Labour party lost to the Green Left party may also have contributed: the Green Left had a greater electoral obligation, and commitment and preparedness, to develop sustainable shelter plans for the undocumented migrants (LP2). This was a political reality, acted out by Groot Wassink on the front stage, but with a corollary on the back stage that pushed toward consultation, and which national civil servants and politicians needed to manage.

The increased practical and theoretical knowledge on how to run shelters for undocumented migrants, coupled with increased trust between municipal and national actors, stabilised the backstage consultations to a certain degree, making them more robust

vis-a-vis disruption by front stage dynamics. This supported the development of a municipal policy-making process less based on crisis management and improvisation and more focused on formulating goals and working on solutions that were acceptable to multiple actors.

Conclusions

Governance of migration is one of the most politically salient and contentious issues of our time. At the local level, the reality of undocumented migrants' existence often places municipal authorities in an awkward split between acting in accordance with intransigent national policies and the need to guarantee public order and provide basic care.

The academic literature on the 'local turn' in migration governance has not given much attention to the interaction between contestation and consultation in multi-level governance. We find that, when examined against the backdrop of a 'battleground' (Camptomori & Ambrosini, 2022) or unstable 'network circumstances' (Roodenburg, 2021) in which multiple stakeholders with divergent problem definitions compete, a dramaturgical approach better explains municipal navigation of its interactions with national authorities. We have shown, first, that municipal authorities may be contesting on the front stage and consulting with national authorities on the back stage at the same time. Second, while the escalation of front stage contestation actually gives birth to back stage consultation, the former also constrains and threatens the latter: back stage consultation is made vulnerable and precarious by the pressures on both municipal and national political actors to act out expected roles on the front stage. Third, over time increased knowledge, more premeditated policy action and the increase of trust between municipal and national actors can mitigate this vulnerability and stabilise back stage consultations to some extent.

Our case studies raise important questions about scope conditions. We are convinced that the existence of a (precarious) back stage, where consultations go on and may even find provisional governance solutions is not a purely Dutch phenomenon. In other cases that appear as deeply contentious, insurgent or de-coupled local governance may upon closer scrutiny have a contentious front stage, that serves electoral and other political purposes, and a more collaborative back stage in which municipal and national political actors create joint solutions. We also expect the constraints on and fragility of back stage consultation to be a common feature of such episodes, whereas the finding of increased knowledge and trust leading to stabilisation over time may be more contingent. What is important to bear in mind is that the Netherlands is a relatively centralised state, where only two levels of governance were at play. Interactions in federal states such as Germany, Spain or the United States will inevitably be more complex, but that is not to say back stage interactions on migration governance will be absent.

Another important scope condition is the political make-up of the different levels of government. In the episodes we studied, a left-wing municipal government was dealing with a centrist or centre-right national government. The arrival of far-right parties in democratic national governments in Austria, Italy and the Netherlands, and possibly elsewhere in the near future, raises new questions for local migration governance. These parties thrive on front stage contestation of hospitality towards undocumented migrants. With major cities still often governed by the left, insights are urgently required

on whether back stage consultation between local and national can still occur, and what forms it might take, in the context of these new configurations.

Author contributions

All authors were involved in the development of the key arguments, analysis and writing of the manuscript. The first author conducted the interviews, undertook initial media analysis, had primary responsibility for the empirical sections and contributed to the theory section. The second (corresponding) author undertook further media analysis and had primary responsibility for the introduction, literature review and conclusion. The third author contributed to theorisation and analysis and reviewed several drafts of the manuscript.

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Data availability

This article rests partly on data that are in the public domain, such as news articles and policy documents, and partly on interviews. The publicly available sources can be found in the reference list. The interviews were anonymised in order to protect the identity of the policy-makers and politicians in question, and cannot be publicly accessed.

Declarations

Competing interests

Not applicable.

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