

# The Street-Level Bureaucrats – an Analysis on the Future of the Romanian Front-Line Public Services

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**Abstract:** *The study focuses on street-level bureaucrats in Romania and on their activity within public services. In this paper we will describe how the issue of discretionary power is tackled in emergency situations and the theoretical framework in the area. The general hypothesis of our research is that among different street-level bureaucracy there are necessary and well-protected relations. Within the paper we have started a comprehensive analysis of the desirability of the interactions among street-level, screen-level and system-level bureaucracies and of the relationship with the citizens as clients. Moreover, for a deeper understanding of how system-level bureaucracy works we will emphasize how street-level bureaucrats incorporate new technologies and practices in their procedures. Based on the investigated theoretical framework of street-level bureaucrats, in this material we will provide supportive evidence for the claim that improving bureaucratic accountability is not only about defining it but also about the “fear of discretion”.*

**Keywords:** *the rule of law, policy makers, discretionary power, administrative procedures, accountability.*

In a previous analysis [1] we suggested that Romanian public administration reform should concentrate more on the organizational structure and on the behaviour of the ‘lowest’ hierarchical levels. Also,

we have opened the discussion over the desirability of continuing and expanding researches on the interaction between street-level, screen-level and system-level bureaucracy. Based on the latest theoretical also findings and on the European and global evolution in the field, through this study we will investigate how the new technologies will influence front-line bureaucrats’ activity in the future.

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## **The Romanian Front-Line Public Services**

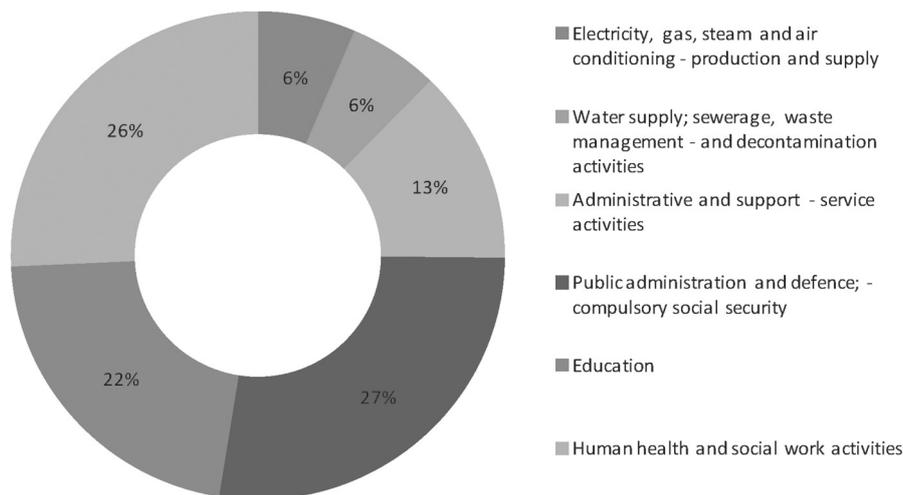
Lipsky’s [2] innovative approach liberated analysis from reifying formal policy as coherent and consistent and from treating discretion as potentially controllable. Lipsky [2] complicated policy analysis treats complex organizational behaviours as part and parcel of the policy-making process, not separate from it.[3]

Lipsky [2] focuses on the individual bureaucrat, his relationship to clients, colleagues, and supervisors. Lipsky’s [2] street-level bureau-

cracy includes those relentlessly routinized people-processing agencies that represent the authority of the state behind the counter (le guichet) or work directly with the people – the social service workers, counsellors, police, and educators. They are those who become the targets of simmering resentment. Street-level bureaucrats work with inadequate resources and with high demands. Within these constraints they have broad discretion. While many aspects of their work promote client orientation, still others lead to reducing commitment to the work such as the ambiguous goals. [2]

Lipsky pointed that those who work with people, in services, may be considered as street-level bureaucrats. Based on this assumption we find out that in Romania more than 16.5 % from all activities (1428.4 thousand people) are represented by the services. When we established the services percentage we took into account all the services related to street-level bureaucracy and we omitted the employers and the self-employed people.

Figure 1. Data processed from the 2015 Romanian Statistical Yearbook – Employment structure, by activity of national economy and by age group, in 2014[4]).



Source: Author

A quarter of the services are directly delivered by public administration and the other two quarters are on health and education. In March 2017, the Romanian High Court of Cassation and Justice decided, in the decision no. 8 on the case to solve law issues on the Criminal Code<sup>1</sup>, that school teachers are civil servants if they work in a public education institution. Thus, almost half of the services are provided by street-level bureaucrats one of the reasons which support our concern on the future of front-line services. Moreover, by merging the data on employment in services with the one on Romanian population age, the level of concern is increased because Romanian population is getting older and the state is the primary social service provider. Social protection expenditure weight in the Gross Domestic Product was in 2013 of 14.8% and more than half (50.1%) was for old age people.

Table 1. Romania’s usual resident population, by age group, on July 1, 2014.

Age groups (years)	2010	%	2012	%	2014 <sup>2</sup>	%
0-15	3.201.789	15.82	3.162.246	15.76	3.084.079	15.49
15-64	13.779.545	68.06	13.646.880	68.03	13.486.828	67.75
65-85 and over	3.265.464	16.12	3.251.056	16.21	3.337.667	16.76
-	20.246.798	-	20.060.182	-	19.908.574	-

Source: 2015 Romanian Statistical Yearbook [4].

According to the above table the young population decreased since 2010 with more than 2.4% and, unfortunately, it will continue. The World Bank [5] data base pointed out that Romania will reach in 2050 the level of age dependency ratio for old people to 51.8 while for 2014 was less than half – 25.1. Additionally, also in 2050 from the total population of Romania the percentage of people age 65 and over will be of 29.2%, higher with more than 12% than it was registered in 2014.

Aging population will hit Romania from two directions at once. Not only old people are likely to need more services, especially health care and social services; they are also the public administration’s recipients (clients) who prefer to work directly with civil servants. The real challenge for public services is how they will provide front-line services for old people in an era of technological innovations and screen-level bureaucracy. Romania must adapt to the new technologies and ponder on accommodate civil service to the 2050 requirements.

### Street-Level, Screen-Level and System-Level Bureaucracies

Weber’s [6]bureaucracy is characterised by few principles: fixed jurisdictional areas limited by the rule of law; the principle of hierarchy; office’s work and management based on written files; principle of professionalization of full time personnel.

Weber [6] described bureaucracy without idealising it. Bureaucrats tend to expand, and to preserve and extend their own power, making them a form of domination, which turns the public into clients. They do not necessarily recognise or act for the public good, especially where this might conflict with the underlying regulatory system.[7]

Based on Weber’s principles, Rose et al.[7] established the values of bureaucrats:

- ‘durability: professionalism expressed as ensuring a robust, resilient and competent public service, backed by a secure and accurate public record;
- equity: professionalism expressed as honesty, fairness, objectivity and impartiality in dealing with civil society;
- legality: professionalism expressed as framing decisions by law and authorised policy; and
- accountability: professionalism expressed as traceable responsibility for legitimate actions, authorised through the chain of command and documented in the public record.’

Thus, the public servant has a special responsibility for citizens: to listen to, to be responsive to and to ‘find and articulate a general or common interest and to cause government to pursue that interest’ [8].

As Keiser [9] mentioned, often, bureaucrats who determine eligibility for government programs are referred to as street-level bureaucrats. One central characteristic of street-level bureaucracies is the face-to-face interactions between bureaucrats and clients [2], [10].

A number of large executive organizations have undergone a process of gradual but fundamental change over the past few decades. Key in change was information and communication technology (ICT). In the public sector, ICT implementation is made more complex by the decision-making process and accountability systems, together with a plurality of stakeholders with many differing objectives [11].

In the responsibility area the e-Government's role is 'to support the involvement of citizens in democratic policy making' [12]. New studies revealed a new kind of citizen – the daily connected one to government's social media channels [13], [14]. E-government literature [15] is more and more preoccupied with the engagement ideal: e-participation and e-democracy.

Technology for some European states was the sunshine's ray in public administration. For example, the Danish local authorities managed efficiently the services' digitalisation and diminished public resources. But the citizens now must access and understand increasingly complex government's websites [16]. Meanwhile, in Romania we find the reversed situation: even if citizens are generally satisfied with the electronic provision of information (transparency), there is great dissatisfaction with the transaction and interactivity of websites. [17]

Furthermore, on-line channels of communication have increasingly been implemented in order to pursue the welfare of citizens. Screen-to-screen encounters replace face-to-face encounters, and this trend is influenced by age, gender and education. In our study we assert that screen-to-screen interaction cannot totally replace face-to-face encounters; even if many face-to-face encounters are related to screen communication. Moreover, because the digital competence combined with the life circumstances appear to be the source of a new divide among welfare service users [18]. We have to (re)think the future front-line services for aging population.

The dynamism caused by the introduction of computers affected both the street-level bureaucracy and its legal setup. In a relatively short period of time, the street-level bureaucracy changed into a screen-level bureaucracy. [19] The Internet improved the ability for e-citizens to interact with government, and some initial movement from street-level to system-level bureaucracies were made. [20]

Table 2. Comparison of bureaucracies' characteristics [19].

	<i>Street-level bureaucracy</i>	<i>Screen-level bureaucracy</i>	<i>System-level bureaucracy</i>
<i>Role of ICT</i>	Supportive	Leading	Decisive
<i>Functions of ICT</i>	Data registration	Case assessment and virtual assembly line	Execution, control, and external communication
<i>Human interference with individual cases</i>	Full	Partial	None
<i>Organisational backbone</i>	Case managers	Production managers	System designers
<i>Organisational boundaries</i>	Strict, with regard to other organisations	Strict, both within and between organisations	Fluid, both within and between organizations
<i>Legal regime</i>	Open, ample discretion, single legal framework	Detailed, little discretion, single legal framework	Detailed, no executive discretion, exchange between legal domains

Real life had already been altering and the screen-level bureaucracy is almost in force. Starting from the research highlighted in Bovens & Zouridis' paper [19] we can note that for example in most of the European countries speeding violations are generally no longer observed by individual police agents, but by cameras installed by the police in different locations. The camera photographs the license plate and registers the violation. The digital files are processed into fines that are sent to offending citizens without any human intervention. The administrative sanctions are imposed directly regardless of the circumstances of the case and no legal and professional assessment is involved. In this way the street-level bureaucracy is transformed into the screen-level one (e.g. in Austria). The network of screen-level bureaucracy has gradually changing into a system-level bureaucracy which is intricately linked at the country level or transnational in groups of countries. But this is not the case of Romania, because we can still talk about a high street-level bureaucracy and a low implementation of e-government. [17] Even so, the future public administration's arrangements have to take into account the global and European development in the field.

## Street-Level Bureaucrats' Administrative Practices and Procedures

Bureaucrats do not gather all of the necessary information to reach rational decisions, but instead make decisions when they have gathered adequate information [21]. Street-level bureaucrats are policy-makers, they are not docile policy robots [19] and, according to Jones [22], when they make quick decisions biases appear.[9]

We saw in the previous section that street-level bureaucracy is transforming into screen-level and system-level ones and alter the Lipski's [2] bureaucracy because citizens no longer interact directly with bureaucrats. In addition, just as the street-level model predicted, when caseworkers lack sufficient resources to be fully responsive to individual needs or to address complex (and time-consuming) dimensions of their work, they develop varieties of 'coping mechanisms' that, indirectly but significantly, shape policy on the ground.

One core dilemma of street-level work is that it requires judgment, and most of the decisions are tacitly accepted, even supported. Street-level judgment, therefore, lies in the space between the current normative order and the needs and circumstances of the citizen-client in an environment of social interdependency and communicative complexity.

Tummers et al. [23] examples show how front-line workers' ways of coping have an effect on citizens. First, front-line bureaucrats might cope with high workload by rationing their services: not calling back citizens and not following up on citizens' requests. Secondly, by contrast, front-lines bureaucrats through instrumental actions, try to solve policy problems by using their networks and skills, in the end, improving public service delivery [24], [25]. But, when oversight is difficult front-line bureaucrats will show self-interested behaviour and make their own lives as 'easy' as possible by rationing and routinizing services [26]. Or as Delfgaauw and Dur [27] show 'lazy' workers prefer to work in task environments in which personal effort is harder to verify, crowding out dedicated workers. E-government reforms help them and place greater responsibilities on citizens to manage benefits on their own. [23]

This bureaucratic-style reveals a logic of street-level work that is simultaneously rational (enables practitioners to manage their jobs with the limited resources they have) and functional (these practices help limit and de-legitimate the expression of individual service needs and

demands). [3] Street-level bureaucrats “decisions are based on practical knowledge and judgments about people and are improvisational in the face of unpredictability. . . . Front-line workers do not think abstractly about the deserving poor: they deal with the blind woman who qualifies for assistance but has a personality disorder that will forever limit her ability to function in society” [10].

## In conclusion

In the study we suggested that front-line bureaucrats cope even during the implementation of e-government policies to limit their own efforts by rationing or routinizing. Adoption and use of information and communication technologies it does not bring the disappearance of operational discretionary power but rather obscures it. In screen-level bureaucracy the tension between rules and norms and situations that arise on the front-lines will not create anymore ground negotiation on the right way to implement the law (no more civil servants’ normative judgement). We build our study on the idea of some street-level bureaucracy scholars [2], [10] for who the most defining characteristic of street-level work is the physical interaction between bureaucrats and citizens. This interaction has an intense impact on how street-level bureaucrats make decisions and these will be lost in the screen-level bureaucracy. Also, the interaction is proofed to be important for aging population and future public administration has to find a path to reach both challenges.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Court was asked to establish if a teacher is a civil servant according to the Criminal Code provisions in order to be judged for corruption. Through the decision the Court establish that school teachers are civil servants but the meaning is only under the criminal law and not the administrative one. We considered them as part of the civil service because of their accountability as front-line bureaucrats and also based on Lipsky’s inclusion of educators among street-level bureaucrats.

<sup>2</sup> Provisional public data.

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