

# Beyond Formal Structures: Exploring Bottom-Up Governance Dynamics in the Assyrian Community's COVID-19 Response in Germany

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## Abstract

This article examines pandemic governance towards migrant communities in Germany in the context of mobilisation and demobilisation of state–society relations during the COVID-19 crisis. By studying how informality is reproduced in social practices and community networks as a response to top-down governance practices in the case of Assyrians – a quintessential diaspora community that settled in Germany through various migratory waves starting from the 1960s – this article aims to explore the bottom-up dynamics of governance practices among migrant communities. The study identifies three key themes for studying bottom-up dynamics of governance: informality embedded in everyday practices in response to formal governance, particularly vaccine policies; the existence of alternative epistemologies based on mistrust towards authorities, manifested in dual narratives; and the articulation of migrant agency in navigating top-down structures. Adopting a grounded theory approach, the study utilises theoretical sampling. Data were collected from various sources, including reports, newspaper articles, official statements and press releases from migrant organisations, alongside interviews with key migrant stakeholders.

## Keywords

COVID-19, governance, informality, migrant agency, Germany, Assyrians, sociology

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep societal fault lines, with migrant and disadvantaged communities bearing a disproportionate burden (Tai et al., 2020). This disparity stemmed from a complex interplay of factors. One of the main issues underlined in relevant studies is the authorities'

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lack of insight into cultural differences, being unable to grasp the social networks, power hierarchies and influential community gatekeepers within migrant communities. Authorities often see immigrants as a ‘hard to reach’ group regarding public health communications (Behrouz et al., 2020), which is further compounded by pre-existing social inequalities (Hintermeier et al., 2021; Ruiz et al., 2020). These factors, coupled with language barriers and low health literacy (Schumann et al., 2020), created fertile ground for adverse health outcomes during the pandemic.

While various studies have thoroughly discussed these factors, the role of pandemic governance vis-à-vis migrant communities awaits systematic analysis. Certainly, research has highlighted the short- and long-term consequences of the crisis on the structures of governance, covering the introduction of new parameters and modalities in relations of governance between the state and society (Boin et al., 2021; Buzinkic et al., 2024 – in this special issue; Dodds et al., 2020; Kövér, 2021; Schmidt, 2020). Yet, these studies have concentrated principally on formal, top-down governance practices, and a crucial gap in the scholarship remains: understanding how migrants themselves navigated and potentially reshaped formal governance structures through informal practices.

Germany’s response to COVID-19 offers a compelling case study to explore this gap by analysing both top-down governance techniques targeting migrants and bottom-up dynamics taking shape within migrant communities. Although Germany’s leading health authority, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), has not published any official figures regarding infection or death rates among ethnic groups (or those with a ‘migration background’<sup>1</sup>), media reports (Focus-Online, 2021a) suggest a disproportionate number of severely ill patients from migrant backgrounds. In the German debate, the disparities in COVID-19 demographic data were mainly attributed to the lack of information among migrant groups about the virus, leading to the conclusion that COVID-19 was ineffectively communicated to migrant groups in their respective languages. In the media coverage of the debate, ample space was afforded to the accounts of German health authorities. Lothar H. Wieler,<sup>2</sup> the president of RKI, pointed to ‘parallel societies’ as the leading cause of ineffectual governmental communication with specific groups, describing the situation as a ‘taboo’ (Bild, 2021). As will be discussed later in this article, top-down governance efforts with migrant communities in Germany were framed within a discourse that portrayed such groups as homogeneous and lacking both self-regulation and health awareness. Given the importance of critically analysing this discourse, the current article focuses on the responses of migrant groups to these top-down governance practices.

The article does so by focusing on the Assyrian community, a well-established migrant group and vibrant diaspora in Germany with active civic and religious organisations. It explores how community actors navigate and potentially reshape formal governance structures through informal practices. The article pursues two sets of questions in particular: (1) How do migrants (in this case, Assyrians) exercise informality (e.g. through social networks) through everyday practices in response to top-down pandemic governance strategies? How does this informality reshape the relationship between formal and informal governance in the context of a pandemic? (2) How do informal practices employed by migrant communities influence power dynamics, knowledge production and subjectivities? And how do these changes affect the community’s overall approach to navigating formal governance structures?

By focusing on these questions, the paper aims to shed light on the complex interplay between formal and informal governance during COVID-19, particularly within migrant communities. It offers a novel approach by shifting the focus to the bottom-up dynamics of informal governance among migrants. As such, it highlights the responses and actions of subaltern groups that are frequently overlooked in governance studies. As I outline, this neglect primarily reflects the dearth of understanding about subaltern groups’ agency and the failure to recognise them as governance

actors in their own right. During the COVID-19 crisis, various societal groups, including migrants, engaged in localised governance practices, complied with or resisted COVID-19 policies and acted within and outside institutional forms of governance in everyday life. Here, bottom-up dynamics constituted a response to top-down practices of governance. Such responses can be understood along a spectrum, ranging from ‘rule compliance’ to ‘resistance’. Unpacking the different forms of governance practices observed during the COVID-19 sheds much-needed empirical light on governments’ efforts at mobilisation and demobilisation efforts and how society is positioned vis-à-vis these top-down modes of governance.

The first section of this paper details theoretical approaches to informality in governance structures. A background section about pandemic governance vis-à-vis migrant communities in Germany follows. This section identifies the specific contours of top-down governance during the COVID-19 crisis and contextualises the dynamics of bottom-up governance that emerged in response. The paper then discusses the responses of migrant organisations to the crisis. The fourth section draws on interview data to analyse bottom-up governance dynamics through the lens of informality. The article thus seeks to establish theoretically and analyse empirically what informality means in this process and how it shapes bottom-up governance. Finally, it outlines how migrant communities themselves navigated this complex governance field, seeking to resist or exploit informal practices. The conclusion summarises the key findings, discussing them in light of the critical literature on governance, informality and migrant agency.

## Theoretical Background: Exploring Informality in Governance Structures

My research delves into the ‘realm of informality’ within COVID-19 governance, encompassing not only the grey zones in top-down structures but also the ambiguous spaces constructed in bottom-up practices. This concept of grey zones, originating from Primo Levi’s (1989) exploration of life in concentration camps, signifies situations where uncertainty and ambiguity become the norm. Levi (1989: 23) challenged the binary of victims and perpetrators, highlighting a ‘grey zone’ inhabited by those coerced into collaboration. Similar to Turner’s (1977) exploration of liminality, these grey zones reflect in-betweenness, marginality and ambiguity (Ledeneva, 2018: 34). Turner describes liminality as an ‘antistructural’ state, a space ‘betwixt and between’ social statuses (‘*communitas*’). Liminal space is characterised by fluidity, in which structures and roles dissolve (Turner, 1977: 96). While Turner suggests a return to structure after liminality, the ‘informality realm’ in governance structures, as will be discussed below, offers a potentially lasting space for challenging established structures through bottom-up practices.

Identifying the grey zones in governance structures and practices requires a *focus on informality*, broadly defined as networks, norms and practices that are not formalised and are produced and exercised outside the formal domain (Ledeneva, 2018: 33). According to the ‘neoliberal orthodoxy’, informality is perceived as a ‘pathology’ – something transitional, exceptional or marginal in society (Polese et al., 2019: 23–24). However, the realm of informality is pervasive across all socio-cultural and political domains, in top-down and (more often) in bottom-up governance practices.

Scholarship pioneered by James Scott questioned the dichotomous relationship between formality and informality and explained the co-constitutive relationship between the two, arguing that formal rules ‘parasitically’ rely on informal networks and practices (Scott, 1998: 310). Thus, informality is in a residual relationship vis-à-vis formality and legal norms. One can argue that *informality* is both a central part of governance structures and practices and a result of formal governance practices. Similarly, informal practices can sometimes *complement* formal governance structures

by providing flexibility and responsiveness. They can also materialise as a structural dynamic that *undermines* formal governance structures, particularly when alternative modes of governance thrive, or informality is used strategically to bypass or exploit loopholes in formal systems. But, as argued in this article, the line between them is often *blurred*. Informal practices can become institutionalised over time, influencing the evolution of formal structures. Conversely, formal regulations can inadvertently create new grey zones where informal practices flourish. As pointed out by Ledeneva (2018: 41), ‘ambivalence’ is an essential feature of informality which is ‘enacted in doublethink (sociability vs instrumentality), double standards (us vs them), double deed (supportive vs subversive), and double purpose (publicly declared vs self-serving)’. Informal practices, she notes, ‘are often invisible, resist articulation and measurement, and hide behind paradoxes, unwritten rules and open secrets’ (Ledeneva, 2018: 39), thus blurring the boundaries between formality and informality. For example, in a study on Palestinian refugee camps and urban surroundings, Navone and Rahola (2018) point to the emergence of the continuum whereby camps and cities overlap: ‘[W]hile the camps are incorporated into irregular urban growth, the cities are affected by the informality of the camps’ (p. 33).

In the governance literature, informality has been primarily studied in relation to formal governance structures, mechanisms and practices. Rod Rhodes (1990) was among the pioneering scholars who emphasised the significance of *informal spheres of authority*. Governance involves attempts to reduce the complexity of socio-economic and political realities, as Jessop (2020: 35) argues. These attempts encompass both formal and informal structures, dynamics, processes and practices, which are characterised by non-linearity, scale-dependence, path-dependence and recursion (Jessop, 2020: 46). The outcomes of these attempts are not always predictable and can be influenced by various factors, leading to unintended consequences. This approach promotes a comprehensive understanding of governance, encouraging researchers to explore both hierarchical governance methods and grassroots initiatives that manage complexity within particular contexts and timeframes.

From a governance perspective, informality is significant, given the transformation of the state under conditions of contemporary neoliberal globalisation. This transformation denotes the dissolving of territorial and legal boundaries, dispersion of authority upwards, downwards and horizontally (Hooghe and Marks, 2001) and hybridisation of control mechanisms. This has led to a fragmented, multilevel order ‘within the state, by the state, without the state and beyond the state’ (Levi-Faur, 2012: 3). Scholars have attempted to explain the emergence of various governance models using different terminologies, such as ‘hybrid orders’ (Meagher, 2012), ‘extra-legal governance’ (Fazekas et al., 2022) and ‘grey zones’ (Knudsen and Frederiksen, 2015).

Informality is also seen as a ‘by-product of state-making’, a pathological existence of non-state, alter-state and anti-state practices (Polese et al., 2019: 35) that manifest in forms of marginalisation, peripheralisation and criminalisation. Informality may thus come to represent an instrument of contestation of and resistance to statehood (Scott, 1985). Formal governance mechanisms outlaw certain activities. However, such proscription does not automatically gain social acceptance if many see the proscribed activities as legitimate or morally acceptable, creating a mismatch between formal rules of governance and informal norms and practices. For example, although migrant rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea are outlawed, they are seen as ‘legitimate’ and constitute alternative, subversive forms of governance that operate outside the state’s control, contesting formal migration regimes. Similarly, even though voices critical of COVID-19 governance measures were (largely) stigmatised, often being labelled as conspiracy theories and linked with far-right populism, these narratives still found some ground among the public.

Informality is a frequently discussed aspect of migration. Migration studies have analysed the topic variously, including the activities of migrants themselves (Fontanari and Ambrosini, 2018),

the actions of civil society organisations (CSOs) and grassroots initiatives working with refugees (Witcher and Fumado, 2022), border practices (Lewkowicz, 2021), administrative detention (Leerkes and Broeders, 2010) and actions undertaken by states outside their formal jurisdictions. Informality is associated with the governance of transit migration and diaspora engagement. It is considered a governance practice that fills the void of missing policies or challenges explicit rules (Koinova, 2022: 18) and is seen as constitutive of polycentric ordering (Koinova, 2022).

Understanding informality in governance structures requires research delving into ‘zones of ambiguity’ (or policy vacuums) in which informality is produced, reproduced and developed ‘in spite of’ and ‘beyond’ the state (Polese et al., 2019: 27). This is a space in which formal political authority may have failed or in which a ‘strategic ambiguity’ (Stel, 2021) has been deliberately pursued, wherein the operations of the informal realm are ignored so long as they do not threaten formal governance.

Regarding COVID-19, we first ask how informality materialises, looking specifically at the actors who practice and encourage it, including states, international organisations, local authorities or state officials, social workers and non-governmental organisation (NGO) actors. As explained above, informality is not only a top-down governance modality. It can also (and even more so) be observed in bottom-up governance practices, especially as a coping strategy to escape top-down control mechanisms.

Against this backdrop, this article examines two interrelated governance processes: top-down and bottom-up governance strategies embedded in practices in the grey zones of governance. At a theoretical level, the article seeks to provide some entry remarks to the new, emerging processes and arrangements of governance practices at informal levels that are different from the dominant institutionalist view about formalised governance architectures. It suggests that understanding of practices and relations – specifically negotiations, contestations and co-optation – taking place beyond formal governance realms and beyond ‘normal’ times (such as during ‘crisis’) can help us to make sense of growing complexity (Scholten, 2020) and messiness of governance structures (Triandafyllidou, 2022), and elucidate power relations between the state and society, along with negotiations, contestations, alliances and ambiguities therein, as also captured by Fontanari and Ambrosini’s (2018) concept of ‘battleground’. Focusing on bottom-up, micro-governance dynamics of migrant communities, the article seeks to provide empirical insights about how actors from margins (below) navigate through formalised governance structures and reshape them to some extent.

In this regard, *community stakeholders* play a crucial role in shaping governance responses through everyday practices. Indeed, they are governance actors in their own right. Their role in shaping and influencing the primary narratives among migrant groups is a crucial point that requires more comprehensive elaboration. Especially in times of crisis, where top-down governance structures weaken or fail, community stakeholders often step in and play an active role in shaping community responses. Migrant stakeholders create their own narratives vis-à-vis dominant, top-down narratives. This relationship is intricate, ambivalent, mutually constitutive and subject to ongoing negotiation.

Migrant organisations occupy a unique space within civil society, existing at the intersection of national and global networks. To understand their role, we must first examine civil society’s position in governance structures. Jessop (2020) defines civil society as a vibrant network of institutions and actors that operate outside direct state control or market forces (Jessop, 2020: 1–4). It fosters diverse identities and allows marginalised groups to advocate for change (‘self-emancipation’) or potentially collaborate with the state (‘self-responsibilisation’) (Jessop, 2020: 220). This duality reflects civil society’s multifaceted nature, serving as a platform for top-down and bottom-up strategies alike.



Governance extends beyond formal structures. Barkay's concept of 'governancing' highlights 'governance-in-action: the process through which non-state actors are responsabilised and in turn constituted as moral, political, and authoritative actors' (Barkay, 2009: 361). This approach aligns with Foucault's concept of governmentality, which argues that power shapes behaviour beyond the state and its laws alone. It encompasses self-control, guidance and the production of knowledge that shapes conduct (Foucault, 1991). Dominant ideas can be internalised, promoting self-governance and making external control more subtle. This resonates with de Certeau's concept of 'tactics'. He argues that the 'weak' can find agency within formal systems through informal practices (De Certeau, 1984: 23). These tactics can range from subtle actions (like gossiping about a boss) to more explicit resistance (like organising a protest). These tactics are ingenious ways individuals or groups manoeuvre within, or even subvert, complex formal systems (De Certeau, 1984: xviii).

Further enriching this perspective, the concept of 'invited/invented spaces' (Miraftab, 2004; Rother, 2022) is useful for examining the interplay between authorities and migrant organisations. The interplay between authorities and migrant organisations can occur in two key spaces. 'Invited spaces' (Miraftab, 2004; Rother, 2022) are new or existing areas that are gradually opening up for civil society participation. Such spaces are governed by state actors, with civil society actors being guests instead of hosts. Conversely, invented places provide an arena where such actors possess autonomy (Rother, 2022: 5) and challenge the status-quo (Miraftab, 2004).

By combining these perspectives, we gain a richer understanding of how community stakeholders and migrant organisations shape governance responses. They create their own narratives, negotiate with hegemonic ones and employ tactics to navigate the complexities of the system. Here, informality as a grey zone in governance plays a vital role in understanding and conceptualising community stakeholders' responses and practices. We can identify two types of informality within this grey zone. While *adaptive informality* describes coping mechanisms that emerge as a response to limitations or rigidities of formal structures, *strategic informality* encompasses informal practices or tactics used by actors to navigate complex situations or even contest the power dynamics embedded in formal governance. Strategic informality may involve collective actions, forming alliances, establishing alternative information networks and institutionalised forms of resistance.

This framework allows us to analyse how migrant organisations leverage both adaptive and strategic informality to shape governance practices within their communities.

## Research Methods

The article drew on various sources of data, including reports, newspaper articles, officials' statements and migrant organisations' press release statements, as well as interviews conducted with migrant stakeholders.

To analyse the secondary data, I employed the critical content analysis method. This method provides flexibility in analysing different types of written text, such as legal documents, newspaper articles and grey literature, from a theory-driven perspective. It goes beyond 'surface-level understandings of a theoretical frame' (Utt and Short, 2018: 3). A grounded theory-driven analysis of community stakeholder interviews supplements the critical content analysis.

For the second component of the research design, this research employs theoretical sampling within a grounded theory approach to explore the bottom-up dynamics of governance within the Assyrian community in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic. Theoretical sampling allows me to iteratively refine my understanding of how informal practices shape these dynamics.

The initial data collection involved interviews with key informants within the Assyrian community, including two religious leaders and representatives of community organisations. While coding these data, 'informality' emerged as a key theme. This finding guided my subsequent data collection to explore specific aspects of informal practices.

Data collection, coding and analysis occurred iteratively throughout the research process. The grounded theory methodology allowed me to design my empirical categories inductively and develop my ideas about the data ‘through early analytical writing’ (Charmaz, 2006: 2). The interview material was systematically analysed and reviewed using open coding to identify recurring and emergent themes. The first-level codes were then categorised, and their relationship was explained through an iterative process. In the second round of interviews and participant observations, I aimed to further saturate my empirical findings by looking for additional emerging patterns and themes. For instance, the remarkable emergence of alternative epistemological communities within the community during COVID-19 led me to explore their communication tools, the content of discussions, the language used and the demographic composition of their internal networks. ‘Agency/subjectivity’ emerged as a third key theme through this iterative process. To reach saturation, I read some interview transcripts multiple times, identifying subjectivity through various semantic constructions, particularly focusing on interview participants’ ‘doings’ (i.e. their practices, verbal and active responses, and relationships with others).

The ethnographic component of this research (interviews with migrant stakeholders, participatory observations, informal talks) was conducted between February and June 2023. I conducted a total of 11 interviews with community stakeholders who represent migrant organisations (both civic and religious) and hold influential positions within their respective circles. The participants were selected from Assyrian organisations, including association representatives, the youth federation, the women’s branch and clerics and laypeople from the Syriac Orthodox Church. Elaborating on my positionality in relation to the sampling group is important as I am a member of the same community and speak their mother tongue. Critical social research acknowledges that researchers from a specific group have a valid and critical positionality for deeper understanding. Being part of the community allowed a deeper understanding of cultural nuances and facilitated trust during data collection. Personal contacts were utilised to reach this group, and the topic was discussed with other Assyrian individuals in informal conversations. However, this position also necessitates reflexivity throughout the research process. Grounded theory’s iterative approach allowed me to constantly examine my own biases and assumptions, ensuring the emerging themes accurately reflect the experiences of the wider Assyrian community in Germany, not just my own. Interviews were conducted solely in the respondents’ mother tongue, Surayt Aramaic, and then translated into English and coded using Maxqdata software. The interview data were combined with my field notes and participatory observations conducted during two meetings of a local association, one after the Sunday sermon in Paderborn and one at the Syriac Orthodox monastery. Before the discussion, a brief account of my sampling background is required.

Assyrians, an ethno-religious minority with roots in the Middle East (particularly in present-day Iraq, Syria and Turkey), are a prime example of a diaspora community. Assyrians primarily belong to various Eastern Christian denominations, including the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Assyrian Church of the East and the Chaldean Church. Due to conflicts and persecution in their countries of origin,<sup>3</sup> most Assyrians have migrated to other parts of the world, including Europe, North and South America and Australia. Studies suggest this migration has been a one-way journey, and statelessness has solidified diaspora communities (Atto, 2011; Barthoma, 2014). Assyrian migration to Germany took place in different waves, first, along with Turkish *Gastarbeiter* (‘guest workers’) during the 1960s and 1970s (Atto, 2011; Merten, 1997), and subsequently as refugees beginning in the latter half of the same decade, intensifying after the 1980 military coup in Turkey. In the 1990s, conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish guerrilla movement (PKK) led to the departure of the remaining Assyrians from the country. Many migrated to Western countries, with a large proportion settling in Germany.<sup>4</sup> Only a small number of Assyrians (approximately 2–3,000) reside today in their historical homeland in southeastern Turkey.

The migration of Assyrians from Syria and Iraq did not occur in the same migratory waves, yet followed comparable patterns. The Syrian civil war (since 2011), two Gulf wars and the post-Saddam Iraq era prompted the mass displacement of Assyrians from their ancestral regions.<sup>5</sup> A substantial portion of these Assyrians relocated to Germany. Overall, Assyrians have scattered worldwide and exemplify a quintessential diaspora community with a unique transnational social network, an important characteristic for the theoretical sampling of this study.<sup>6</sup>

A key limitation of the study is that interviews were only conducted with members of the Syriac Orthodox Church, even though there are Assyrian members of other churches in Germany. Here, membership in a congregation is taken as a social tie rather than a formal membership or faith practice. In addition, the study's scope is limited as it only focused on one migrant group. A comparative perspective that includes several other migrant groups in Germany would have enhanced the study. To gain a broader perspective, I analysed available resources from other migrant communities, including the websites of migrant organisations, including the *Türkische Gemeinde in Deutschland*, the *Kurdische Gemeinde Deutschland* and the BAGIV (*Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Immigrantenverbände*).

### **Context: Top-Down Governance of the Pandemic Towards Migrant Communities in Germany**

COVID-19 governance vis-à-vis migrants in Germany evolved with the pandemic. In its early phase, federal and local governments implemented digital multilingual 'Corona awareness' campaigns and introduced various initiatives to encourage vaccination uptake in migrant communities. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) funded CSOs to promote vaccination initiatives within migrant communities. Official statements note that federal and local governments cooperated with CSOs and religious leaders to promote vaccination uptake and tackle misinformation regarding vaccine safety and effectiveness.<sup>7</sup> In certain localities, leaders received their vaccinations in public, such as in Nuremberg, where the mayor was vaccinated in a campaign held at a local mosque. In other areas like Stuttgart and Berlin, city councils coordinated decentralised vaccination efforts, utilising locations such as migrant associations, places of worship, or refugee housing to reach migrant communities in their respective neighbourhoods. According to a spokesperson, the Berlin city council utilised low-threshold communication channels, such as social media, and engaged in close and intensive exchanges with diverse migrant communities (Focus-Online, 2021b).<sup>8</sup>

The issue of vaccine hesitancy in migrant communities in Germany garnered attention in various media (Focus-Online, 2021a). While German official statistics do not record race- and ethnicity-related data, the RKI reported that some cities with a high proportion of migrants, such as Bremen and Berlin, achieved above-average vaccination rates. A survey by the RKI that assessed vaccine uptake of individuals 'with and without a migration background' found that 'migration background' has limited value in explaining differences in vaccination behaviour. Socio-economic and socio-demographic factors partially explain these disparities (COVIMO, 2022: 1,7). Similarly, a study by Koschollek et al. (2023) investigated the impact of 'migration background' on the risk of COVID-19 infection in Germany using data from the German COVID-19 Snapshot Monitoring online survey and found that living and working conditions, rather than 'migration background', determined the risk of COVID-19 infection. Nonetheless, official discourses and media reports often used subtle language to single out 'migration background' without considering broader inter-sectional factors like socio-economic disparities.

From a crisis management perspective, German federal and local governance responses during the pandemic were mostly reactive, reflecting the lack of pre-crisis planning and preparation.



Despite the salience of socio-economic factors and living and working conditions in health disparities, the narratives of political leaders and health authorities foreground a lack of information and language issues. The underlying reasons for health disparities were not sufficiently addressed. Consequently, governance responses favoured information and awareness campaigns, oversimplifying societal complexities and offering quick-fix solutions. This can be seen as a lack of engagement with the so-called ‘immigrant integration’ in the narrow sense but also, in the broader sense, a lack of (or reluctant) engagement with social inequalities.

Official top-down communication on COVID-19 towards migrant communities reflected the assumption that a deficiency of German language skills among migrant communities and a lack of access to accurate information were the central issues. Consequently, official communication focused primarily on translating information into migrant community languages. This was initially well-received by migrant communities for acknowledging diversity. However, as my respondents noted, the issue was not a lack of information about the pandemic in Germany. And while newly arrived individuals and the elderly may have benefitted, older adults in migrant communities generally obtain information from their offspring and a few community-based television networks offering programming in the mother tongue (DE\_S2\_May2023).

The language deficiency thesis has been researched in several studies. Contrary to official assumptions, a Munich-based survey study conducted by Aktürk et al. (2021) determined high levels of COVID-19 knowledge among patients with a migration background, whether speaking German or Turkish. The study concluded that those opposed to vaccination or who exhibit reservations might hold their beliefs due to unrecognised factors rather than a lack of knowledge. A recent study by Öcek et al. (2023: 32) has revealed that reliance on information leaflets and translations into the mother tongue may not guarantee adequate access to information. Along the same line, RKI’s COVIMO survey concluded that while many respondents with a ‘migration background’ do not view language barriers as obstacles to getting vaccinated, there was a connection between language and vaccination behaviour (COVIMO, 2022: 7). These studies collectively suggest that limited German language skills were not the primary cause of pandemic-related health disparities.

Three key points can be highlighted. First, people received COVID-19 information from multiple sources beyond official channels. These included family and friend networks, as well as digital platforms. Second, the authorities’ lack of foresight did not consider the potential influence of these alternative sources on individuals’ behaviour and cognitive schema. Finally, it is crucial to recognise that perceptions of COVID-19 information could vary depending on the channels through which it was received. In my fieldwork, I tried to understand how the authorities contacted people, the nature of the communication and the channels used. One of my organisational respondents told me they had received weekly or biweekly updates from the German Ministry of Health sent to their work email, asking them to disseminate this information among the community (DE\_S3\_April2023). A layperson in a local church board stated that the church itself did not receive a specific message or directives from the authorities. The same person recalled only one occasion in which they had been in contact with authorities when the police entered the church after a sermon to conduct a routine check on whether they were complying with the COVID-19 rules (DE\_S1\_March2023).

Both my desk research, reading through migrant organisations’ statements, and the interview material revealed that the authorities failed to engage with community organisations in a genuine way. The stakeholders I interviewed did not receive any personalised messages from authorities that addressed the head or board of their organisations. No invitations to meetings or regular gatherings were extended to them. This communication approach caused confusion among community stakeholders who were intended to play a role in response mechanisms, thereby restricting their participation in governance mechanisms. One of the emerging themes in my interviews was ‘confusion’, ‘not knowing what to do’ and ‘expectations from authorities’, which could also

be attributed to overall ambiguities in crisis response mechanisms. The limited communication primarily consisted of general information circulated through email, which also caused fatigue as they received the same and repetitive information about COVID-19 from different sources, including television, newspapers and social media. In October 2020, Chancellor Angela Merkel and Health Minister Spahn invited migrant organisations and religious communities to a video conference to discuss the current pandemic-related developments. The official statement stated that the meeting<sup>9</sup> was intended to ensure compliance with pandemic regulations within migrant communities.

My respondents confirmed they did not realise they were being given a meaningful role in 'fighting' the pandemic in all these communication cycles. As a result, the ambiguity in top-down governance practices led to the inactivation of migrant organisations and their limited practices during the pandemic. From a critical perspective, governance practices towards migrant communities in times of crisis cannot be understood without looking at the practices in the pre-crisis phase.<sup>10</sup> The lack of genuine engagement appearing in official communication is just a snapshot of overall the long-standing issues when it comes to the perception and relationship with migrant communities, which has remained essentially unchanged during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

According to German population statistics from 2022, around 29% of the German population has a 'migration background in the broader sense'.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, migrant groups and their organisations are not adequately represented within either federal or local governance structures (Kersting et al., 2022: 106). This gap is highlighted in the National Action Plan for Integration (NAP-I) and detailed in an official report (Fachkommission Integrationsfähigkeit, 2021). Still, the main modus for determining the relations between authorities and migrant organisations is based on projects and ad hoc initiatives. Pre-existing project-based collaborations with migrant organisations, like 'IKAT' and 'Migranten und Corona', lacked stable funding and could not evolve into enduring partnerships. For instance, according to a medical officer in Neuköln in Berlin, 'No health department or health authority has established permanent migrant-specific communication staff' (Migranten und Corona, 2021).

The lack of a strategic partnership with migrant organisations intersects with representation, participation and equality issues. One of my respondents, the leader of a major migrant organisation in Germany and a founding member of BAGIV, stated that their interactions with authorities have always been project-based. While this has resulted in the development of some social and professional contacts with federal and local authorities over time, these relationships remain limited in the absence of funded projects. Apart from these projects, he also mentioned that 'only around election times do political parties have an interest in communicating with us directly' (DE\_S11\_April2023).

My respondents noted a lack of cultural sensitivity in crisis management and rule implementation, especially highlighting how they were turned away at the 'hospital doors' when trying to visit their loved ones (DE\_S7\_May2023). Although such visitation prohibitions were implemented worldwide, my respondents perceived this as a lack of sensitivity and explained it in relation to authorities' lack of communication. One respondent suggested that migrant organisations might have brought into the discussion: 'If the authorities had arranged roundtable meetings, they would have comprehended the significance of flexibility [in implementing regulations]' (DE\_S2\_May2023). Despite some symbolic gestures, migrant organisations were largely ignored and excluded from crisis governance mechanisms.

Migrant stakeholders have experienced a reduced agency not only towards top-down governance structures and mechanisms but also towards their communities. Despite the assertions made by authorities in NAP-I and in the conclusions of integration summits, in practice, there has been a lack of genuine collaboration with community stakeholders to establish durable participatory channels

and institutional frameworks. Relationships and rights remain ambivalent and are undertaken in an ‘unpublicised manner’ (Guiraudon, 2000), which, in turn, has led to their further marginalisation and peripheralisation towards the realm of informality and hindered their participation in social, economic and political life. The ambiguity reproduced in top-down governance practices conditioned the ambivalence in bottom-up governance practices, as will be discussed in the next section.

## **Crisis Responses of Migrant Organisations**

The responses of migrant organisations reflected the limited space given to them in the overall governance of the pandemic. This constraint hindered migrant organisations’ capacity to engage and act as autonomous governance actors. During my interviews, it became clear that migrant stakeholders were unsure of their next steps and how to expand their roles within their networks. Some attempted to organise activities voluntarily, but overall, there was a lack of action from migrant organisations at a time when their engagement and participation were crucial. The hegemonic articulation of the ‘crisis’ narrative (see further Buzinkic et al., 2024 and Fröhlich and Varga’s, 2024 articles in this Special Issue) during the pandemic not only devised governance strategies to mobilise people to align with mainstream narratives and comply with rules but also de-mobilise the societal powers to the margins.

Community stakeholders that I interviewed primarily adhered to the COVID-19 regulations and, within the limited space allocated to them, adapted their activities to the ‘new normal’, explored the digital landscape for internal meetings and organisational activities, and formed new informal networks, among other things. Despite these innovations, the COVID-19 crisis had a notable impact on the organisational activities of community organisations and led to a remarkable decline of ‘active members’ (DE\_S2\_May2023; DE\_S3\_April2023). The same adaptive practices were observed among the religious elites. During the pandemic, the Syriac Church, like all other religious organisations, ‘Zoomified’ (Rother, 2022) its activities and sermons (DE\_S1\_March2023).

Several community organisations I interviewed within their limited scope organised various activities voluntarily, including promoting vaccine uptake among their members, sharing promotional posts on social media, and arranging seminars for the community (DE\_S5\_May2023). Some of them took a limited approach and only disseminated the information they received from the authorities to all their associations and contacts in their network, encouraging them to get vaccinated through emails, WhatsApp messages, voice messages and telephone calls (DE\_S10\_June2023). Some civic organisations communicated with local religious leaders whose congregations failed to comply with the regulations (e.g. gatherings of over 100 individuals) (DE\_S3\_April2023). These initiatives, especially the vaccine promotion, received mixed responses from the community members. On the one hand, positive feedback praised the Assyrian organisation’s promotion of vaccines, which was unexpected. Some community members questioned their vaccine promotion (DE\_S5\_May2023).

I interviewed clergy and church board members, who hold considerable sway over their congregations. The official approach of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate towards COVID-19 was in line with its religious discourse and was mentioned in several official messages issued by the Patriarchate (Christmas and Lent messages, 2020, 2021 and 2022).<sup>12</sup> During his visit to Germany, the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church delivered a speech advocating vaccine uptake in English (DE\_S1\_March2023). The choice to deliver the remarks in English indicates that the wording was carefully aimed at aligning with the official discourse. Overall, the Syriac Orthodox archbishop’s official stance was consistent with the church’s. The Syriac Orthodox archbishop of Germany stated that most of their church congregations followed government regulations, adhering to social distancing guidelines, limiting the number of church attendees and complying with mask mandates (DE\_S7\_May2023). Some

local Syriac churches took a more proactive role and organised vaccination campaigns, online seminars and community meetings. I was informed that these activities were all undertaken voluntarily. However, most local churches took no stance on the pandemic except to ensure rule compliance (DE\_S9\_June2023). One church board member told me that the authorities had requested that his church promote vaccination during the September 2021 vaccination campaign, but according to him, the church did not pursue this. However, the archbishop published one video message on Facebook urging congregants in high-risk groups to follow the recommendations and regulations and get vaccinated (DE\_S1\_March2023).

Knowing the sensitivities of their congregants, most religious elites kept their engagement with vaccination campaigns to a minimum. Some of my respondents criticised their church's responses, highlighting their failure to take further action to develop a specific policy or systematically promote activities. In their opinion, the church was inactive, failing both to organise the community and to develop effective response strategies and recovery plans (DE\_S1\_March2023; DE\_S6\_April2023).

In conclusion, my initial objective was to understand the intermediary links between top-down and bottom-up governance levels, where community organisations and non-state actors could potentially play a role. However, after conducting my initial set of interviews, it became apparent that these actors were not invited to share their opinions, nor given space to exercise a meaningful activity as a governance actor. Consequently, community actors, by and large, complied with regulations and expressed no public criticism or dissatisfaction. Notably, despite some voluntary attempts that could be identified as proposing 'invented' spaces (Miraftab, 2004; Rother, 2022), migrant organisations (both civic and faith-based) were ineffectual and simply acted as intermediaries, transmitting information received from authorities to their networks. Thus, their agency as "invited guests" in decision-making was confined to a limited realm of action delineated by the German authorities.

## **Bottom-Up Governance Dynamics: Exploring Informality, Alternative Epistemological Communities and Agency**

Analysing the empirical findings, I distinguish three main emerging themes that explain characteristics of bottom-up governance dynamics among Assyrians in Germany. These findings can be generalised to study similar cases. The first theme is *informality embedded in everyday practices* and responses to top-down governance practices, particularly concerning vaccine policies. The second is *alternative epistemologies* built around mistrust towards authorities, which usually manifested in the reproduction of dual narratives, which reflected a 'reserved' positioning towards public and mainstream knowledge channels. The third is the *practical articulation of agency/subjectivity vis-à-vis hegemonic governance structures*. These three categories are interrelated and, from a Foucauldian perspective, denote how governance practices result from relations between power, knowledge and subjectivity. Informality is a space where various epistemological communities are shaped and reproduced non-linearly. It is also an analytical zone to explore the articulations of different subjectivities and their diverse, sometimes subversive, governance practices.

### *Leaning Towards Informality*

The discourse on COVID-19 measures shifted within the Assyrian community during the pandemic, particularly with the launch of vaccination campaigns, leading to a division between vaccination proponents and critics. The community witnessed increased spurious information and

conspiracy theories concerning vaccines. Notably, socio-demographic factors impacted individuals' cognitive frameworks, encompassing their attitudes towards dominant and alternative narratives, self-perception and the opinions of other groups. Several community stakeholders I interviewed highlighted how informality was a breeding ground for misinformation. According to my respondents, a significant proportion of Assyrians hold a negative stance towards COVID-19 vaccinations. In informal conversations with family and friends, they expressed scepticism towards vaccinations and questioned the speed at which the vaccine was produced. Some even believe COVID-19 was created by powerful interests (such as multinational pharmaceutical companies) to maximise profits, echoing narratives commonly found among vaccine sceptics in Germany and elsewhere. They are not specific to Assyrians or any other group. These counter-narratives are socially communicated, learned and reproduced in different circles. For my research, it was important to explore how these narratives gained currency within the community, particularly during crisis periods, contributing to the expansion of informality in everyday practices.

Concerning socio-demographic factors, Assyrians with higher education reported aligning themselves more closely with the government's position, while those with less education were said to be more likely to contest the information provided by the authorities (DE\_S2\_May2023). However, my field observations showed a slightly different picture, where no clear-cut socio-demographic boundaries assigned a certain attitude to a particular group. These viewpoints were expressed by a diverse group of community members with varying levels of education and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as by civic and religious leaders, often in informal settings.

During my fieldwork, I also had participatory observations in informal settings. In one of my encounters in a monastery, I interviewed a nun who was strictly against COVID-19 vaccines and defended her argument ardently. Surprisingly, despite having no formal power as a nun in a patriarchal institution, she acted as a social magnet during informal gatherings. Numerous people, particularly women her age, would gather around her and engage in intense discussions regarding vaccines. Although the nun lacked formal power, she exerted significant influence within the community. She shaped the opinions and beliefs of those around her, establishing an organic network around this issue. When I asked what the source of her information was, she displayed her smartphone and Facebook page, revealing the existence of a lively transnational group communicating in Arabic and sharing news, videos and articles on Facebook and WhatsApp. I realised that this informal network had the potential to expand rapidly, like a snowball, through informal exchanges and gatherings as well as the digital landscape.

One of my respondents told me that WhatsApp groups were the main internal community channels for distributing misinformation. During the pandemic, he received more than 20 messages daily from friends and extended family members with similar content (DE\_S2\_May2023). A notable aspect is that Assyrian social media users primarily shared content created by other social media users rather than personally generating material reflecting their own opinions. They also endeavoured to remain anonymous and assume a liminal positionality. In fact, my research participants could not recall any individual actively associated with the anti-vax movement in Germany, confirming this anonymity reflex.

The concept of informality is crucial for understanding the internal networks of Assyrians as a migrant community. Within the realm of informality, genuine and unrestrained views on significant political matters are voiced. For a minority like the Assyrians, who have endured centuries of subjugation, informality has long represented a haven for breaking free from such oppression and communicating their opinions openly. One advantage of informality for these groups is that it provides them with a protection and anonymity shell, turning them into an 'anonymous' power and knowledge centre constituting a different form of governance dynamic.



## Emergence of Alternative Epistemological Communities

COVID-19 attitudes represented a snapshot of long-standing public attitudes. In general, conspiracy accounts were particularly strong in countries or among groups with low trust in public institutions (WHO, 2020). Distrust towards authorities establishes the conditions for alternative epistemological communities with unique dynamics to emerge, relying on a specific network. These epistemological communities may have structured and organised forms or simply develop through loose networks. The digital landscape has also opened up a vast space for building anti-systemic and anti-mainstream networks and epistemological communities.

However, from a governance perspective, further research is needed into the different roles played by epistemological communities. Some epistemological communities exist due to mistrust in the system. In their research on the ‘political sociology of the Corona protests’, Frei et al. (2021) concluded that despite the diversity in motives, content and ideology within the protest movement in Germany and Brazil, there is a prevailing unifying characteristic. Participants and sympathisers ‘communalise’ themselves by adopting a staunch self-image as ‘critics’. Referring to the preceding discussion, epistemological communities construct a collective, unified identity through self-identification, which requires identifying those not part of their group. The self-identification of anti-systemic, alternative epistemological communities, which exist outside or have weak links to the system, is significantly influenced by top-down governance regimes and practices. The more these communities are marginalised, pushed to the periphery and relegated to the informal realm, the stronger their self-identification becomes.

One factor contributing to the mistrust of authorities in the Assyrian case is rooted in history. One of the stakeholders explained this with the group’s experiences in Middle Eastern countries ‘where governments are known for not communicating the truth’. This traditional savvy has contributed to a persistent cross-generational mistrust in ‘governments’. The same stakeholder shared his father’s attitude: ‘I recall my father always having an opinion on everything he saw on the news, complete with his own theories. [His generation always] believed that something was going on behind closed doors (*bithre de jule*)’ (DE\_S2\_May2023). This quote effectively encapsulates the socio-cultural underpinnings of conspiracy theories, especially among older-generation Assyrians. My informal discussions with group members also confirmed this way of thinking, which was shaped through historical experiences but also reconstructed vis-à-vis contemporary events. Being suspicious about governments’ statements and practices, seeking an oversimplified explanation, an embodied source or a power centre (e.g. the United States or Israel) for all acts of ‘banality’ is a historically shaped cognitive schema.

This narrative is not unique to Assyrians. For example, in a different study, Amaral et al. (2022: 149–150) found ‘distrust in vaccination’ to be the primary narrative among the highly varied German anti-vaccination movement. Informality can also be seen as a way of resistance, an articulation of distrust towards authorities, which has been extensively studied in explaining the situations of ambiguities in post-communist transitions. Hence, informality and illegality have become the expression of a kind of resilience in these countries (Polese et al., 2019: 38). The societal grasp of informality constitutes a bottom-up governance dynamic that needs to be considered.

Migrant communities, viewed as a diverse array, are members of different epistemological communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants were exposed to various information sources. This is primarily due to their expansive, transnational familial networks and multilingual proficiency, which are vital pathways for generating knowledge (but also spreading misinformation). Some of my respondents highlighted the significance of their transnational, extended family bonds, which display a great deal of diversity. Within Assyrian families, the educated and non-educated, as well as the poor and rich, communicate extensively. This diversity impacts every Assyrian in diverse societal milieus (DE\_S9\_May2023).

What struck me was the difference in discussions about the COVID-19 pandemic and relevant regulations within the community compared to those in public channels. During my interviews, I found a *language duality* where individuals would switch to their mother tongue when speaking informally. This phenomenon resonates with Erving Goffman's (1959) concept of front- and back-stage performances in his seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman argued that in everyday social interactions, we act like performers on a stage. We manage how others perceive us by carefully tailoring our behaviour and appearance (including setting, clothing and mannerisms) according to the social situation. This concept of social performance as a theatrical act underpins Goffman's dramaturgical analysis. He compares social interactions to plays with a public 'front stage' where we strive to present ourselves favourably, and a hidden 'backstage' where we can relax and be more authentic (Goffman, 1959: 69–86).

Interviews are also social settings, so switching to the mother tongue can be seen as a shift from the 'front stage' of formality to the more relaxed 'backstage' of familiarity. Contentious issues are sociological phenomena shaped by historical experiences, so migrants – particularly those with a subordinated and peripheral position in their country of origin – prefer to discuss them using internal communication channels. Such discussions often occur in informal zones, closed groups and networks (e.g. WhatsApp groups), with individuals linked by familial or kinship relations. This behaviour is connected to issues of trust and the fear of stigmatisation. Internal channels are perceived as trustworthy and provide a sense of security to the group. However, public channels (and 'public language') are seen as potentially harmful to this safe environment. As a result, this can lead to *double narratives* as a tactic, whereby one narrative is intended for internal communication and the other for external communication. Similar to the historical practice of *taqiya* among Alevis, where they concealed their religious affiliation due to persecution (Sökefeld and Schwalgin, 2000), Assyrians deployed 'double narratives' as a safety tactic which allowed the group to maintain a sense of security while navigating a more complex external environment. From a Foucauldian perspective, political struggles and alternative or critical 'voices' cannot be limited to expressing a contradictory logic or an antagonistic relation. They have their own dynamics, temporalities and techniques (Lemke, 2013: 37). This can also indicate the existence of different epistemological communities with diverse knowledge production channels embedded in their language, social ties and transnational networks. This is crucial for understanding governance dynamics on the ground.

### *Agency: Navigations, Tactics, Going Informal*

Most respondents expressed reluctance towards COVID-19 vaccines, using various means to communicate their thoughts, usually in their native language. Despite their reservations, they ultimately made pragmatic decisions to comply with the rules. One of my respondents told me how, among her extended family, the initial 'reserved' approach towards vaccination changed, and all members ultimately chose to receive the vaccination: 'They felt compelled to get vaccinated' (DE\_S2\_May2023). This pragmatic aspect was frequently reiterated in my interviews: 'What else could we do? We couldn't access public spaces, restaurants, or travel without a Covid pass'. These statements demonstrate that they were not entirely persuaded by the regulations but also did not sense sufficient authority to voice their true beliefs in public.

This aligns with Foucault's (2007) exploration of neoliberal governmentality, where freedom and choice become tools for managing populations. The illusion of voluntariness in following rules serves as a critical element within this biopolitical framework, ultimately enabling the silencing of unwanted voices and perspectives under the guise of 'collective good' during the COVID-19 crisis. Foucault's framework helps us to understand the pressure to comply. However, focusing solely on compliance overlooks the agency migrants displayed. As noted

above, De Certeau's (1984) concept of 'tactics' – subtle manoeuvres employed by marginalised groups to navigate dominant structures – offers another lens through which to understand these resistance strategies. Consequently, their adoption of a co-optation strategy signifies a form of adaptive informality that demonstrates both their agency and a countervailing logic to dominant governance, especially during crisis situations. These tactics may not necessarily lead to successful attempts to create a new social imaginary. Nonetheless, they reveal the resilience and resistance spectrum among individuals and communities.

One topic that has attracted academic attention but has not been systematically studied in the context of governance studies is migrant agency. Researchers increasingly emphasise the importance of studying migrants' practices, experiences and responses (see, for example, Banko et al.'s (2022) concept of 'refugeedom'). Agency can also be seen as a form of 'social navigation' in which migrants seek to 'regain control and negotiate their situation' (Triandafyllidou, 2018: 5). In a similar vein, my respondents navigated through governance structures and created their own spaces, narratives and knowledge channels by acting in informal zones and making pragmatic choices. In order to escape detection and control, they often employ strategies of invisibility and informality, navigating through the loopholes of hegemonic governance structures. James Scott refers to these acts as 'infrapolitics' (Scott, 1998: 183). Manifestations of these strategies can include resistance, opposition, civil disobedience, foot-dragging, non-compliance, limited cooperation, rhetorical resistance or other 'hidden acts of resistance' (Richmond, 2011: 6). Subaltern groups exert their power through 'practices' (Pouliot, 2012: 46).

A thought-provoking example of this can be found in Lendaro's (2015) article discussing various forms of resistance enacted by migrants held in administrative detention in Lampedusa. She highlights the impact of migrants' non-compliance with the law, specifically their reluctance to submit their fingerprints for the 'Dublin Regulation' process, on the system of classifying and relocating asylum seekers. As outlined in my research, non-compliance with COVID-19 regulations (particularly vaccination programmes), such as not taking vaccines, remaining in an undecided position, waiting until the last moment until the introduction of compulsory vaccination programmes, or making a reluctant decision to take vaccines, also occurred in a 'quasi-silent' manner (Polese et al., 2019: 32). Such tactics (e.g. sharing externally created posts, indirect/subtle messaging) provided them with protection from retaliation. The practices of informal resistance towards top-down governance not only include 'active gestures and actions' but also 'passive ones (non-compliance)' (Gupta, 1995).

In this section, I have sought to shed light on migrants' agency through their practices. My respondents expressed reservations about vaccines but complied due to practicality. My respondents articulated their subjectivity concerning top-down governance regulations by employing an adaptive informality, keeping a low profile in the public sphere and postponing their vaccine uptake. Their actions highlight the spectrum of resistance strategies migrants use to navigate power structures.

## Conclusions

This paper aims to explore the bottom-up dynamics of governance by examining the responses and (informal) practices of migrants that are shaped by formal governance structures. The paper challenges the top-down narratives targeting migrants in Germany. By examining the Assyrian community in Germany, it explores how migrant communities utilise informal social networks and practices to navigate and potentially subvert formal top-down governance structures in the case of COVID-19. By doing so, the article explains the complex interplay between formal and

informal governance structures. It highlights the embeddedness of informal practices in grey zones of governance.

The study identified three key themes for studying bottom-up dynamics of governance: *informality embedded in everyday practices* in response to formal governance, particularly vaccine policies; the existence of *alternative epistemologies* based on mistrust towards authorities, manifested in dual narratives; and the articulation of *migrant agency* in navigating top-down structures. These interconnected themes illustrate how the interplay of power, knowledge and subjectivity influences governance. The article has thus proposed various ways to comprehend the intricacy of bottom-up governance dynamics, encapsulating them in alternative forms of epistemological community where informality, invisibility, duality of narratives and pragmatism determine the spectrum of alignment and contestation with hegemonic governance modalities. In doing so, this article revisits the concept of governance by shifting the focus to structures, mechanisms and processes taking shape beyond formal governance structures and modalities.

The study highlights several key findings. First, the top-down governance of COVID-19 towards migrant groups in Germany is based on the assumption of a lack of language and knowledge, as argued in this article. The pandemic response failed to address underlying socio-economic disparities and inequalities, resulting in limited space for migrant organisations to engage as autonomous governance actors. This constriction hindered their capacity to respond to COVID-19 effectively. As stated in the article, community actors generally followed regulations and did not openly express dissent. At times, their role was limited to relaying information received from authorities to their networks. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a top-down approach to governance, resulting in demobilisation and restructuring of state–society relations. Bottom-up governance dynamics are shaped in response to government mobilisation or demobilisation attempts.

Second, migrants and minorities use informality to navigate complex governance structures. The realm of informality, including language, practices and networks, provides a protective shell for subaltern groups, turning them into an ‘anonymous’ centre of power and knowledge, constituting a different governance dynamic. As discussed concerning language duality, individuals switch to their mother tongue when speaking informally (off the record) and use internal communication channels to discuss contentious topics. They deliberately avoid using ‘formal’ or public channels. Similarly, as discussed in the example of the nun, although she lacked formal power in a patriarchal institution, she exerted significant influence within the community by expressing her opinions and connecting with people informally. This example offers an avenue for further elaboration on the gender dynamics of formality and informality. A relevant question to ask is which gender roles dominate the realm of formality and informality. Consequently, from a gender perspective, whose practices are declared formal, rational and licit, and the opposite? Answering these questions will map the (in)formality landscape from a gender perspective and explain further the bottom-up dynamics of governance concerning the use of ‘(in)formality’.

Third, informality – understood as alternative epistemological communities – signifies the notion of plurality in power, knowledge and subjectivity constellations. This article highlights the existence of alternative formations that are built around distrust towards authorities or ‘the system’ at large. These formations are considered to be an important dynamic of bottom-up governance. However, further research is necessary to understand the role that different epistemological communities play from a governance perspective.

Finally, the study proposes two types of informality, ‘adaptive’ and ‘strategic’, to explain the extent of informality used in practices. Adaptive informality refers to informal practices that arise in response to formal structures and can be viewed as a coping mechanism. Conversely, strategic

informality involves informal practices such as forming alliances and networks, as well as more institutionalised forms of collective action, which actors use to challenge the power dynamics inherent in formal governance structures.

This paper concludes that informality is an important characteristic of bottom-up governance, particularly for marginalised groups. It provides a space for self-determination and challenges hegemonic top-down structures. The existence of alternative epistemological communities further complicates the governance landscape by showing the diversification in power-knowledge and subjectivity constellations, which is essential to analyse governance systems in a given context and time.

The case study in this research was Germany's Assyrian community. To achieve broader generalisation and enrich our understanding of informal practices, further research is needed with other migrant groups in Germany or elsewhere. Prospective studies could refine the conceptualisation of the connections between top-down and bottom-up governance dynamics, including formal and informal governance practices.

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### Notes

1. German official statistics adopt the term 'people with/without migration background', a definition with which I have some reservations. Instead, in the present research, I adopt the term 'migrants' for the sake of consistency.
2. On 5 March 2021, the daily *BILD* published details of a conference call between Wieler and several of the country's leading physicians, in which the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) chief expressed these thoughts.
3. For a more historical account, see Gaunt et al.'s (2019) edited volume, *Let Them Not Return: Sayfo The Genocide Against the Assyrian, Syriac and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*. New York-Oxford: Berghahn.
4. See Atto (2011: 166–169, 174–177).
5. See the Assyrian Policy Institute's country profiles: <https://www.assyrianpolicy.org/syria> and <https://www.assyrianpolicy.org/iraq>
6. Assyrians offer a compelling case study to understand the multiple facets of identity. They are a minority group, a migrant population, a diaspora community and an ethno-religious community. These overlapping characteristics have led to the historical and current marginalisation of the group, which often faces a form of 'structural invisibility' to the outside world.
7. See also Fröhlich and Varga's (2024) article in this special issue about crisis politics in Saxony, Germany.
8. However, I was unable to confirm this with respondents based in Berlin.
9. I could not find additional information about this meeting.
10. See also Buzinkic et al. (2024) article in this special issue that highlights the potential exploitation of crises to expand control over marginalised populations in Croatia.
11. 23.83 million with a migration background in a total population of 83.1 million. Source: Destatis.



12. See further the messages issued by Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate at <https://syriacpatriarchate.org/2020/12/christmas-letter-of-his-holiness-patriarch-mor-ignatius-aphrem-ii/>

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