BALTIC JOURNAL OF LAW & POLITICS
A Journal of Vytautas Magnus University
VOLUME 13, NUMBER 2 (2020)
ISSN 2029-0454

sciendo

Cit.: *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 13:2 (2020): 109-134
https://content.sciendo.com/view/journals/bjlp/bjlp-overview.xml
DOI: 10.2478/bjlp-2020-0013

THE APPLICATION OF CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARDS AND STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS' DISCRETION IN LITHUANIAN STATE AGENCIES

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Received: September 10, 2020; reviews: 2; accepted: December 30, 2020.

ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this article is to explore how standardization of the public service provision and introduction of customer service standards affect the de facto discretion of civil servants. The study uses a qualitative case study approach. Two main research methods were used to gather data – semi-structured interview and document analysis. Analysis of the empirical data revealed that written standards only partially affect the de facto discretion of civil servants. The customer interaction standards define only a few civil servants' actions, and do not cover all aspects of the communication between civil servants and customers. Application of written standards is flexible especially in non-typical situations. Customer service standards do not restrict the actions of civil servants when they focus on customer problems, which is especially important when dealing with socially vulnerable customers. This study explores the use of customer service standards as a public management tool. The research data can be useful for understanding and improving customer interaction standards and its practical application.

KEYWORDS

Street-level bureaucracy, standardization, customer service, customer service standards

NOTE

This research has received financial support from the Research Council of Lithuania, Agreement No. GER-013/2015.

INTRODUCTION

Customer service standards are an important feature and integral part not only of individual organizations, but also the public bureaucracy as a whole. These standards are formalized and generalized rules of organizations, assuring efficiency of service delivery and equal treatment of citizens in the legal sense.[1]

In academic literature, civil servants' discretion has been rather extensively discussed. Discretion in street-level bureaucracy is understood as actual autonomy of the civil servants' decisions or behaviour.[2] Discretion can be analysed in two different forms: discretion as granted (discretion de jure) and discretion as used (discretion de facto). Discretion de jure is characterized as the degree of freedom granted by policy (rule)-makers to street-level bureaucrats to apply provisions of law (rules). Discretion de facto is defined as the autonomy in decision making or behaviour of civil servants as actually employed.[3]

On the one hand, customer service standards allow civil servants better perform their functions, orientate and even dictate the behaviours of civil servants or determine outcome of that behaviours.[4] On the other hand, customer service standards can be associated with a coercive function, which not only impairs the discretion of civil servants[5], but in some cases entails an abrogation of individual autonomy.[6] This duality of customer service standards indicates the importance of how customer service standards contribute to maintaining a balance between the coercion and sufficient discretion, which is required to properly service clients. To investigate this problem, this study explores how the customer service standards affect the de facto discretion of civil servants. Using a case analysis approach, the study looks closely at specific tools of standardization, that is, customer interaction standards, and the application of them in Lithuanian state agencies. Firstly, the article provides a literature review, followed by the methodology section. Subsequently, the development of the customer service standards of three state

[1] Stian Antonsen, Kari Skarholt, and Arne J. Ringstad, "The role of standardization in safety management – A case study of a major oil & gas company," *Safety Science* Vol. 50, No. 10 (2012) // https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2011.11.001; Louise Bringselius, "Gaining legitimacy as a public official: The case of supportive employee attitudes to the standardization of work," *International Journal of Public Administration* Vol. 35, No. 8 (2012) // https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2012.661185.

[2] Lars Tummers and Victor Bekkers, "Policy implementation, street-level bureaucracy, and the importance of discretion," *Public Management Review* Vol. 16, No. 4 (2014) // https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2013.841978; Aurèlien Buffat, "Street-level bureaucracy and e-government," *Public Management Review* Vol. 17, No. 1 (2015) // https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2013.771699.

[3] Peter Hupe, Michael Hill, and Aurèlien Buffat, eds., *Understanding Street-level Bureaucracy* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015) // https://dx.doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447313267.001.0001.

[4] Günther Ortmann, "On drifting rules and standards," *Scandinavian Journal of Management* Vol. 26, No. 2 (2010) // https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2010.02.004.

[5] Noa Nissinboim and Eitan Naveh, "Process standardization and error reduction: A revisit from a choice approach," *Safety Science* Vol. 103 (2018) // https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2017.11.015.

[6] Paul S. Adler and Bryan Borys, "Two types of bureaucracy: Enabling and Coercive," *Administrative Science Quarterly* Vol. 41, No. 1 (1996).

agencies in Lithuania is characterized through document analysis. The most attention is given to one concrete type of customer service standard, that is, customer interaction standards. The article then presents the results of the interview data analysis, revealing the attitude of civil servants toward the implementation of customer service standards. Influence of customer service standards on the de facto discretion of civil servants in Lithuanian state agencies is discussed.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarly literature on street-level bureaucracy[7] has made a clear division between "bureaucracy" and "professional" civil servants. Professionals have greater autonomy of decisions in comparison to the specialists of public administration. The civil servants' decisions that are made while relying upon discretion can positively affect the service provision or implementation of public policy.[8] Civil servants can concentrate on the satisfaction of customers' needs, show them bigger empathy, use more resources for customer service, etc.

The theory of street-level bureaucracy, which was constructed almost three decades ago,[9] at the beginning made too little reference to the application of managerial (for example, quality management, performance management, etc.) systems, and information and communication technologies (hereinafter – ICT) in the public sector.[10] Managerial factors were later analysed by Brodkin[11] and Brodkin and Marston.[12] These scholars studied how the new public management

[7] Tony Evans, *Professional discretion in welfare services: Beyond street-level bureaucracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); Gitte S. Harrits, "Being Professional and Being Human. Professional's Sensemaking in the Context of Close and Frequent Interactions with Citizens," *Professions and Professionalism* Vol. 6, No.2 (2016) // https://doi.org/10.7577/pp.1522; Gitte S. Harrits, "Street-level bureaucracy research and professionalism"; in: Peter Hupe, ed., *Research Handbook on Street-Level Bureaucracy* (UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019) // https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786437631; Nanna Mik-Meyer, *The power of citizens and professionals in welfare encounters: The influence of bureaucracy, market and psychology* (Manchester University Press, 2017); Steven Maynard-Moody and Michael Musheno, *Cops, Teachers, Counselors: Narratives of Street-Level Judgment* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Peter Hupe, Michael Hill, and Aurèlien Buffat, eds., *supra* note 3.
[8] Peter Hupe, "Dimensions of Discretion: Specifying the Object of Street-level Bureaucracy Research," *Der Moderne Staat – Zeitschrift für Public Policy, Recht und Management* Vol. 6, No. 2 (2013).
[9] Michael Lipsky, *Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service* (Russell Sage Foundation, 1980); Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy, 30th Ann. Ed.: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2010).
[10] Tony Evans, *supra* note 7; Aurèlien Buffat, *supra* note 2.
[11] Evelyn Z. Brodkin, "Bureaucracy redux: Management reformism and the welfare state," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* Vol. 17, No.1 (2007) //https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muj019; Evelyn Z. Brodkin, "Policy Work: Street-Level Organizations Under New Managerialism," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* Vol. 21, No. 2 (2011) // https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muq093.
[12] Evelyn Z. Brodkin and Gregory Marston, *Work and the Welfare State: Street-Level Organizations and Workfare Politics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013).

influences the daily behaviour of street-level bureaucrats. Riccucci has analysed the effect the managerial factors have on the behaviour of street-level bureaucrats.[13]

The topics of standardization and standards' application processes are not rare in academic literature.[14] In the public sector, many standards are created on the basis of quality management systems. This means that laws and general rules are not enough as they do not cover the procedural level; thus, public managers need to employ managerial measures to guide the civil servants' behaviour and decisions. Decisions in such cases are not so simple because of the complexity in implementation of policies in the area of public services, often because of the lack of resources, environmental impacts, and many other factors. When fulfilling the agency's objectives, managers often seek for certain civil servants' "discipline" (sometimes they want certain behaviour, attitude conformity, and sometimes bigger professionalism during the decision making) when interacting with customers.[15] Evidently, among such tools, standards are able to guarantee the "discipline." In public administration literature, standardization typically refers to the improvement of quality in decision-making processes.[16] Lampland and Star noted that standards are used relatively unevenly in the practice of organizations, and they define ethics and values that are important to the customers.[17] Standards encompass not only the technical part of everyday decision-making process that ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery but also include ethics and values that matter to individuals.[18] Moreover, standards make face-to-face interactions with customers more predictable and can discipline the behaviour of civil servants.

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[13] Norma M. Riccucci, *How Management Matters: Street-Level Bureaucrats and Welfare Reform* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2005).

[14] Vaughan Higgins and Wendy Larner, "From Standardization to Standardizing Work"; in: Vaughan Higgins and Wendy Larner, eds., *Calculating the social: Standards and the reconfiguration of governing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) // https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230289673; Ole Hanseth and Bendik Bygstad, "Flexible generification: ICT standardization strategies and service innovation in health care," *European Journal of Information Systems* Vol. 24, No. 6 (2015) // https://doi.org/10.1057/ejis.2015.1; Paul Henman and Mitchell Dean, "E-government and the production of standardized individuality"; in: *Calculating the social: Standards and the reconfiguration of governing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) // https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230289673; Stefan Timmermans and Steven Epstein, "A world of standards but not a standard world: toward a sociology of standards and standardization," *Annual Review of Sociology* Vol. 36 (2010) // https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102629; Maria Røhnebæk, "Standardized Flexibility: The Choreography of ICT in Standardization of Service Work," *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* Vol. 4, No. 4 (2012) // https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.124679.

[15] Duco Bannink, Frédérique Six, and Eelko van Wijk, "Bureaucratic, market or professional control? A theory on the relation between street-level task characteristics and the feasibility of control mechanisms": 205-206; in: Peter Hupe, Michael Hill, and Aurèlien Buffat, eds., *Understanding street-level bureaucracy* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015) // https://dx.doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447313267.001.0001; Robert B. Denhardt, Janet V. Denhardt, and Tara A. Blanc, *Public administration: An action orientation* (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013).

[16] Louise Bringselius, *supra* note 1.

[17] Martha Lampland and Susan L. Star, *Standards and Their Stories: How Quantifying, Classifying, and Formalizing Practices Shape Everyday Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2009), 589.

[18] Louise Bringselius, *supra* note 1: 545; Martha Lampland and Susan L. Star, *supra* note 17, 589.

Several studies show that the skills of civil servants are standardized;[19] therefore, standardization reduces the discretion of civil servants and other employees in the public sector.[20] Other studies reveal that the discretion of the civil servants, while working with customers, despite stricter rules and control, does not completely disappear.[21] Several researchers have argued that, because of standardization, civil servants have fewer face-to-face interactions with customers and this has led to less discretion.[22] Some other researchers have criticized the argument that discretion disappears because of standardization.[23] In addition to this, customer services are standardized when one of the purposes is to limit the de jure discretion of street-level bureaucrats. However, standardization does not necessarily diminish the de facto discretion of civil servants when dealing with customers.[24] One can observe that the influence of standardization on the discretion of civil servants while interacting with the customers is not assessed unambiguously in the academic literature. It can be assumed that some factors such as comprehensiveness of standards, managerial attention, and control may influence the de facto discretion.

Scholars have frequently analysed how standardization is implemented and how it affects the behaviour of street-level bureaucrats.[25] Comparatively less attention has been given so far to the use of customer service standards as a specific managerial tool and its effect on civil servants' de facto discretion. One type

[19] John Wallace and Bob Pease, "Neoliberalism and Australian social work: Accommodation or resistance?" *Journal of Social Work* Vol. 11, No. 2 (2011) // https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017310387318; Evert Vedung, "Autonomy and street-level bureaucrats' coping strategies," *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy* Vol. 1, No. 2 (2015) // https://doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.28643.

[20] David Wastell, Barbara S. White, Matt K. Broadhurst, Sue Peckover, and Andrew Pithouse, "Children's services in the iron cage of performance management: street-level bureaucracy and the spectre of Švejkism," *International Journal of Social Welfare* Vol. 19, No. 3 (2010) // https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2397.2009.00716.x; Evelyn Z. Brodkin, "Bureaucracy redux: Management reformism and the welfare state," *supra* note 11; Peter Hupe and Michael Hill, "Street-level Bureaucracy and Public Accountability," *Public Administration* Vol. 85, No.2 (2007) // https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2007.00650.x.

[21] Hans-Tore Hansen, Kjetil Lundberg, and Liv J. Syltevik, "Digitalization, Street-Level Bureaucracy and Welfare Users' Experiences", *Social Policy & Administration* Vol. 52, No. 1 (2016) // https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12283; Mirko Noordegraaf, "Risky business: how professionals and professional fields (must) deal with organizational issues," *Organization Studies* Vol. 32, No. 10 (2011) // https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840611416748; Pål Nygaard, "Professional autonomy versus corporate control," *Professions and Professionalism* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2012) // https://doi.org/10.7577/pp.v2i1.164.

[22] Mark Bovens and Stavros Zouridis, "From Street-Level to System-Level Bureaucracies: How Information and Communication Technology Is Transforming Administrative Discretion and Constitutional Control," *Public Administration Review* Vol. 62, No. 2 (2002) // https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-3352.00168.

[23] Aurèlien Buffat, *supra* note 2.

[24] *Ibid*.; Maria Røhnebæk, *supra* note 14.

[25] Erica G. Foldy and Tamara R. Buckley, "Re-creating street-level practice: The role of routines, work groups, and team learning," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* Vol. 20, No.1 (2010) // https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mun034; Nils Brunsson, Andreas Rasche, and David Seidl, "The dynamics of standardization: Three perspectives on standards in organization studies," *Organization Studies* Vol. 33, No. 5 (2012) // https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840612450120; Vaughan Higgins and Wendy Larner, *supra* note 14; Louise Bringselius, *supra* note 1.

of customer service standard is especially worthy of attention: namely, customer interactions standards. These are written guides on good interaction (face-to-face or via various ICT channels) with the customers.

2. METHODOLOGY

Based on the literature, the analytical framework (Figure 1), which encompasses the main factors in the interconnection between de facto discretion and customer service standards, can be demonstrated as follows:

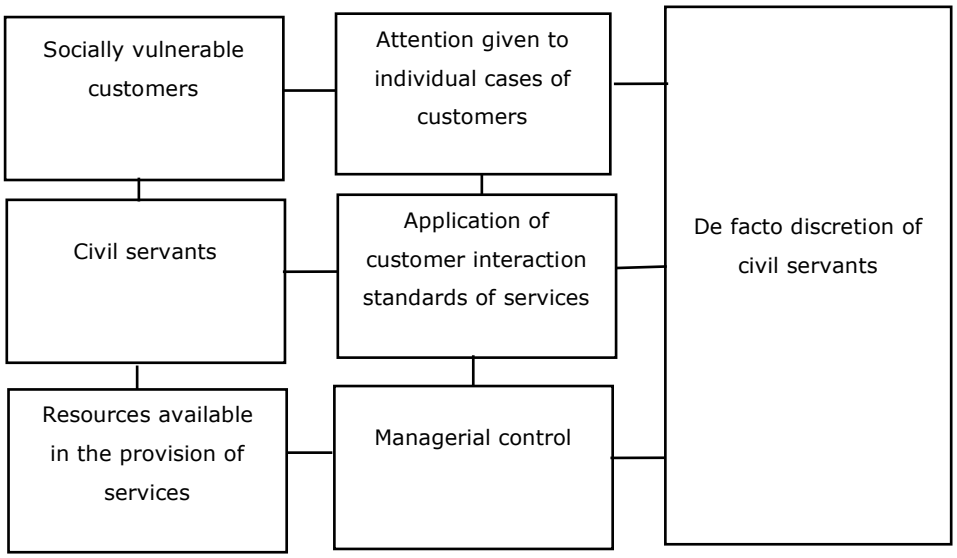


Figure 1. Analytical framework

This study uses a qualitative case study approach. The three largest state agencies in Lithuania, working in three different service provision areas, were selected for the empirical research: state tax collection, state social insurance, and state employment support. These three agencies are the State Tax Inspectorate (hereinafter – STI), State Social Security Agency (hereinafter - SSSA), and State Employment Agency (hereinafter – SEA). All three agencies have geographically-territorially distributed subdivisions throughout Lithuania with the purpose of offering customer service near their place of residence. The main function of SSSA is to ensure the implementation of state social insurance legislation. STI is responsible for tax administration, and SEA is responsible for the employment support policy measures for the unemployed and other jobseekers.

Two main research methods used were semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Primary and secondary empirical data sources were employed for the analysis of how customer service standards influence discretion used by civil servants in interactions with their customers. Document analysis was carried out to be later supplemented and expanded with the interview data analysis. Customer

service standards, including all their versions from their introduction up to the present, were analysed. Such documents as legal acts, agencies' activity reports, descriptors of services, agencies' internal rules of procedures, and orders of the agency heads were analysed. Subsequently, interview questions based on academic literature and document analysis were developed. The interviews covered such issues as the development of customer service standards, civil servants' attitudes to the prescriptions of customer service standards, and the main benefits and limitations of customer service standards.

In total, 44 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Five groups of respondents were interviewed: 1) those directly interacting with customers in the receptions; 2) those working in specialized departments, and are not dealing with customers directly, but do consulting if necessary; 3) those with managerial positions in customer service subdivisions; 4) those interacting with customers via the telephone in the so-called information centres; and 5) heads of the agencies. In addition to different groups of respondents, the territorial criteria – cities, medium-sized cities, subdivisions of rural area – was also employed in selecting respondents. During the period of 2016-2017, interviews were conducted in six different subdivisions of the STI and 11 different subdivisions of the SSSA. In 2018, interviews were conducted in two different territorial subdivisions of the SEA.

The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder, and later transcribed. Duration of the interviews was from 20 minutes to 80 minutes, with an average interview duration of 30 minutes. The data was analysed based on these principles: multiple reading and rethinking of data, coding of data, grouping of codes into categories, and dividing data according to certain thematic categorizations prepared in advance (service delivery for vulnerable customers, the requirements of customer service standards, benefits and limitations of customer interaction standards, resources in customer services, focus on individual situations of customers). Respondents are marked with a literal-numerical code in the article, by indicating the abbreviation of the agency and the serial number given to the respondent.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARDS IN THE LITHUANIAN STATE AGENCIES

STI and SSSA were the first state agencies in Lithuania to apply the customer service standards.

STI's customer interaction standard

In 2005, the STI confirmed the methodological recommendations for customer service to tax-payers.[26] For the first time, they formalized the aspects of communication with the customers.

> When the tax-payer enters the cabinet, the employee has to greet [them] pleasantly under his/her own initiative with the words: 'Good day' (it is forbidden to use such abbreviations like e.g., 'hi,' 'hello,' etc.) <...>. The civil servant has to smile, to ask, looking at the tax-payer: 'How can I help you?' 'I'm listening to you,' etc. During the whole communication, the civil servant's facial expression has to be sympathetic. He/she should speak in a calm tone. It is obligatory to use respectful addresses: 'Sir/Madam' <...>. When saying farewell to the tax-payer, to use such words as 'Goodbye', it is not suitable to use such abbreviations as 'Bye,' 'See you'.[27]

By introducing this standard, STI was formally seeking several things: 1) to improve its image; 2) to unify the service provision processes; and 3) to encourage effective service (the aspects of the need for identification and conflict management were distinguished). Thus, the standard meant the primary centralization and unification of service provision processes (the dimension of management development can be clearly noticed), and behaviour orientation.

It is important to note that the application of the standard was combined with two quality measurement means: undercover customers and additional measures (STI_16). According to the standard, quality is measured in an intense manner. Since 2015, the standard became one of the elements integrated into the process management or formally included into the risk and quality management systems.

As one respondent reflected (STI_16), the written standard lost the status of an innovative measure after a while. The standard changed with the documents guaranteeing procedural and quality management (for example, procedure handbook). However, it remained and is understood as an important measure for internal usage.

SSSA's customer interaction standard

The customer interaction standard of SSSA and their system of customer service quality monitoring were initiated in 2004.[28] The basis for this was the provisions of the SSSA customer service strategy, the main tasks of which were

[26] *Regarding the methodological recommendations of tax-payer servicing in the State Tax Inspectorate*, State Tax Inspectorate (2005, LAR. No. 1052055ISAK000VA-77).
[27] *Ibid*.
[28] Leonilija Perminienė, "Social insurance – guarantee to the future. Tax news" (March 2006) // http://www.mzinios.lt/lt/2006-03-31/straipsniai/temide/socialinis_draudimas_garantija_ateiciai.html.

oriented toward the creation of qualitative and timely service while simultaneously increasing the availability of services. The heads of SSSA hoped that the implementation of the strategy would improve customer relations by "demanding higher servicing quality and efficiency from the employees." When assessing the changes, one can also notice the exposure of SSSA's service culture dimension. Culture was not only the element of documentary rhetoric; uniform preparation and the artifacts (attributes, stylistics of references and document symbols) were also related to it. To strengthen the service culture, SSSA approved "the handbook of united style".[29] The standard echoed the processes of changes (for example, service unification in territorial subdivisions, management centralization, etc.) and also improved the initiatives of standard updating (The standard was updated several times: in 2010, 2013, and 2014).[30] The introduction of procedure handbooks was also important to service standardization. It was an original introduction of the process management model with the supportive measures of the ICT and e-service systems. They partially automated the service provision.

SEA's customer interaction standard

In 2009, SEA confirmed the document that regulates the rules of service provision.[31] The approved description of the order is oriented toward the service structure and essential principles of service provision – collaboration, complexity, encouraging independence, rationality, equal possibilities, and non-discrimination. The aforementioned principles were rather general; therefore, they were implemented by every civil servant differently. In 2013, the "real" standard was approved, defining the quality of mediation in the employment and consultation service provision, and describing the requirements of direct interaction with the customers. Specific rules of communication with customers were introduced in the customer interaction standard, which described the required behaviour of civil servants in the beginning of a conversation, behaviour during conflicts, communication with other civil servants while directly interacting with customers and guaranteeing the confidentiality of customer and a safe interaction environment.[32] Since 2017, SEA began implementing a new customer service

[29] *Regarding the approval of the United style handbook, 2005*, State Social Security Agency.
[30] *Regarding the approval of the customer service standard of the State Social Insurance Fund administration institutions, 2010*, State Social Security Agency; *Regarding the approval of the customer service standard of the State Social Security Agency institutions, 2013*, State Social Security Agency; *Regarding the approval of the customer service standard of the State Social Insurance Fund administration institutions, 2014*, State Social Security Agency.
[31] *Regarding the approval of the description of employment market service provision and order*, State Employment Agency (2009, TAR. No. 1092230ISAK00A1-476).
[32] *Regarding the approval of quality standards of mediation in employment and consultation service provision and the main customer service rules*, State Employment Agency (2013, TAR. No. 11322DBISAK000V-197).

model, the aim of which is to guarantee a more efficient service provision oriented toward customers.

In general, it can be observed that SEA's process of standardization became intense only in recent years. The aim of institutional reorganization and process standardization is basically to unify the provided services and, at the same time, improve the quality and development of the service provision: "<...> it is the aim to make a modern agency and modern organization as we implement ISO standards and lean methodology in the whole system, this automatically requires standardizing the processes, procedures, establishing the hosts, and unifying the service again <...>" [SEA_01].

Table 1 gives a comparative overview of the customer interaction standards of the three state agencies.

Table1. Requirements of the customer interaction standards

	State Tax Inspectorate	State Social Security Agency	State Employment Agency
Customer interaction process:			
Greeting	+	+	+
Contact in verbal, non-verbal communication	+	+	+
Establishment of the customer's needs	+	+	+
Information and consultation	+	+	+
Demonstration of the desire to help	+	-	+
Keeping a respectful relationship with the customer	+	-	+
Not showing pre-advanced attitudes and not reacting emotionally	+	-	-
Using correct language	+	-	-
Possibility for the customer to change the civil servant they are interacting with	+	+	-
Saying good-bye	+	+	+
Interaction with disabled customers	+	+	-
Customer sitting in a wheelchair	-	+	-
Customer who is assisted by a deaf interpreter	-	+	-
Customer who uses crutches	-	+	-
Customer with a mental illness	-	+	-
Customer with impaired vision	-	+	-
Customer with impaired hearing	-	+	-

Interaction with customers belonging to a specific group	+	+	-
Pregnant women	+	+	-
Customers with weak health	+	-	-
Elderly customers	+	-	-
Customers with small children	+	+	-
Intercommunication among civil servants			
Limit the intercommunication in the presence of the customers	+	+	+
Not to discuss about the customers with colleagues in the presence of other customers	-	-	+
Civil servants' behaviour during conflict.	+	+	+

Sources: State Social Security Agency (2014); State Tax Inspectorate (2017); State Employment Agency (2013)[33]

Customer interaction standards of all three agencies describe in detail how the customer interaction process should take place. The standards describe how the civil servants have to greet and say farewell, contact in verbal and non-verbal language, and ascertain the customer's needs. They also determine the information provision and consultation procedures and specify the behaviour of civil servants during a conflict. Standards allow civil servants to refuse service to customers if they are aggressive or drunk or have used other psychotropic materials. Regarding the main differences, the standards of the SSSA and STI include the requirements for dealing with disabled customers; however, SSSA's standard, in this case, is the most detailed, as it specifically names the nature of the disability (customers in wheelchairs, customers with crutches, and so on). Meanwhile, other specific groups are defined more broadly in STI's standard than in SSSA's, listing pregnant women, customers with small children, customers with weak health, and elderly customers (Table 1). The standard of SEA in comparison with the other two state agencies is more general, as it does not distinguish the customer groups according to specific features. This standard is different from that of SSSA and STI in the sense that it requires civil servants not to discuss about customers with colleagues in the presence of other customers and, like the STI's standard, to guarantee respectful behaviour toward the customer (Table 1). When summarizing the content of standards provided in Table 1, it can be stated that the SSSA's standard is the most

[33] *Regarding the approval of the customer service standard of the State Social Insurance Fund administration institutions, 2014*, State Social Security Agency; *Regarding the methodological recommendations of tax-payer servicing in the State Tax Inspectorate*, State Tax Inspectorate (2005, LAR. No. 1052055ISAK000VA-77); *Regarding the approval of quality standards of mediation in employment and consultation service provision and the main customer service rules*, State Employment Agency (2013, TAR. No. 11322DBISAK000V-197).

detailed and formally reduces civil servants' discretion the most. It can be supposed that comprehensive descriptions of the requirements in these standards do not guarantee their full observance by civil servants during interactions with a customer. Therefore, the question as to whether comprehensive or concise descriptions of the requirements are more valuable remains to be discussed. In other words, it is probable that a comprehensive description of the requirements does not guarantee a civil servant's required behaviour in specific situations.

3.2. THE ATTITUDE OF FRONTLINE CIVIL SERVANTS TOWARD STANDARDIZATION AND CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARDS

The objective of this empirical study was to identify the attitudes of civil servants toward standardization. The aim of customer service standards is to unify service provisions. Clearly, it cannot be stated that the use of written standards and the control of their application cardinally changed the roles of frontline specialists and the tasks assigned to them, but during interaction with customers there were changes in the structure of the time of direct interaction with customers and in the service culture itself. The introduction of written standards seemingly restricted or reduced "communication," specifically unnecessary communication. In a certain sense, standards became handbooks for the civil servants that indicate how specialists have to greet their customers, and when and what information to give. However, the respondents emphasized that standards are constantly being developed and regularly updated according to the suggestions of civil servants based on their practice. Adaptation to the individual customer in certain cases can be more important than formal procedural things and formal official communication styles. As Røhnebæk has noted, an adjustment of services and decision-making based on discretion is more important than the rules and procedures. Those public services, which are based not only on formal procedures, but also on individual situations of customers, can take the form of "standardized flexibility".[34]

Table 2 summarizes the main benefits of customer interaction standards as they were described by the respondents. These benefits identified by the respondents are typical, because they are often mentioned in the academic literature analysing standardization processes.[35]

[34] Maria Røhnebæk, *supra* note 14: 696.
[35] Peter A. Busch, "The Role of Contextual Factors in the Influence of ICT on Street-Level Discretion"; in: *Proceedings of the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (2017); Duco Bannink, Frédérique Six, and Eelko van Wijk, *supra* note 15: 205-206; Robert B. Denhardt, Janet V. Denhardt, and Tara A. Blanc, *supra* note 15.

Table 2. Main benefits of customer interaction standards

Reduce wastage of time	*There was much more communication. We communicated differently until the introduction of the standard. Of course, there was always the ascertaining of the needs [of the customer] and the end of the conversation. How we have to greet, or thank people is now regulated. We have done that previously but not so properly, as it was not regulated then* [STI_08]. *Standards are OK; there are some limits to which you are obligated, and you do not enter into excessive discussions with customers because [sometimes] you are just there as a listener to their problems* [SSSA_11]. *The course of the consultation becomes structuralized, the civil servant knows how much time he/she has to assign for which part of the consultation, what to do in the beginning, how to greet the customer, how to ascertain the customer's needs, how to identify the problem, how to provide information, and, finally, that every service guarantees the feedback of the customer* <...> [SEA_01].
Provide basic structure/framework to the interaction process with customers	*Customer interaction standard is a certain frame in which you can play* [SSSA_14]. *When you know what is required from you, then you would know how you have to work. If there are no standards, then everyone works as he/she wants as if everyone is right* [STI_09]. *There are customer interaction standards so that we do not get into conflict with [the customers]. You do not raise your voice. Everything is regulated* [SSSA_16]. *Instructions regarding what is necessary to say and do – that is what must be included into the standard* [SSSA_20]. *This is not a standard that is applied 100 per cent <…>. We apply only certain standards where we need them. We have to listen, understand, ask, thank, and choose*

	words depending on the customer, and what to tell him/her at that time [SSSA_13].
Serve as a handbook, providing clear instructions for the newly recruited civil servants who are just beginning to work with customers	*Newcomers need more explanations, because there is a large amount of information. Therefore, there must be some standards so that [customer interactions] do not go in the wrong direction* [SSSA_06]. *They are necessary for a new employee (who needs training and preparation). Of course, every situation is individual, and you cannot always communicate with the customer "according to the protocol" point by point. But, initial documents and instructions with what, when, and how to say and do should be there* [SEA_01]. *Indeed, I think that it helps as these are thoroughly prepared documents, but they are alive. If we see that something does not work or is bad, there is always the possibility to provide suggestions for their improvement, but basically, these are guidelines for the specialist, and I think that they are helpful* [SSSA_10].

Some limitations of standards that cannot describe all exceptional cases were emphasized. While consulting the customers, civil servants are confronted with various situations of the customers' lives, and the solution cannot always be provided by legal acts, behaviour handbooks, or other regulations. It then becomes especially important that the civil servant has the ability to make decisions relying upon gained competences (SSSA_18). Schuppan's research also revealed that the

customers sometimes are unpredictable and the interaction with them cannot be entirely standardized.[36]

Respondents perceived the standards as documents that are "imposed by higher positions onto the lower ones," thus forming an organizational culture (SSSA_20). The standards and certain behaviour rules are understood and described in the document, which indicates, for the civil servants, the sequence of actions during the process of interaction with customers. Respondents in management positions particularly emphasized that standards are important for new civil servants to properly prepare them for work. In academic literature, this phenomenon is described in terms of "standardization of work processes" (interactions of street-level bureaucrats with customers are coordinated by the imposition of standards) and "standardization of skills" (when the skills of street-level bureaucrats are regulated by standards before they began the interactions with customers).[37] Thus, the main benefit of the customer service standards is the orientation of certain behaviour by indicating how the civil servants have to behave when interacting with customers for the purpose of avoiding certain procedural faults. Besides, customer service standards are related to a specific kind of support in conflict situations. Respondents, however, noted that standards should be of a more universal nature, which would help in creating a positive contact, because there is a transition to the interaction with a customer in the later phase of consulting, during which the priority is an individual customer and not the extended requirements of the standards (SSSA_20). This provides support for the argument that state agencies need organizational standards that enable street-level bureaucrats to deliver not only effective and efficient services, but also meaningful ones for customers.[38]

3.3. THE INFLUENCE OF CUSTOMER INTERACTION STANDARDS ON THE DISCRETION OF CIVIL SERVANTS

Relying on the interviews conducted, it can be said that the limits for the implementation of certain customer interaction standards can be noticed when standards do not provide how to behave in individual situations. Standards do not help when it is necessary to make decisions during an interaction with a customer based on the principle of justice. The attempts to satisfy the customer's

[36] Tino Schuppan, "Service workers on the electronic leash? Street-level bureaucrats in the emerging information and communication technology work contexts": 256; in: Peter Hupe, Michael Hill, and Aurèlien Buffat, eds., *Understanding street-level bureaucracy* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015) // https://dx.doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447313267.001.0001
[37] Henry Mintzberg, "Structure in 5's: A Synthesis of the Research on Organization Design," *Management Science* Vol. 26, No. 3 (1980): 324 // https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.26.3.322.
[38] Mirko Noordegraaf, *supra* note 21: 1364.

expectations and provide suitable services are related not with written rules and service culture but with the employee's competence: learning from personal experience and intercommunication with their colleagues. In certain cases, the behaviour of the civil servant is dictated by certain specific aspects of the customer (education, age, etc.). On the one hand, the civil servant has to follow all the procedures provided in the standards and other organizational documents; on the other hand, providing professional service and satisfying customer needs keeping strictly within the standards is not enough. Other things become just as important: e.g. empathy, benevolence, and customer individualization (SEA_02; STI_08).

A few respondents openly justified the civil servants' behaviours that do not overstep the discretionary limit of the basic formal requirements but extensively rely upon de facto discretion. This data confirms the findings of the other research that street-level bureaucrats successfully adapt the standards, but in the everyday practice they use coping strategies and orient to the customer's individual situations within the limits of their discretion.[39] The literal following of standards and procedural service is less important than the needs of socially vulnerable individual customers (SSSA_15). This fits well with the research literature stating that the content of service delivery, while civil servants interact face-to-face with customers, cannot be detailed and specified by standards.[40]

Other respondents emphasized factual flexibility that cannot be avoided in customer service: "Clearly, we have rules to be followed not to go out of the frames, but we try to be flexible" [STI_10].

"And when we have human service, you cannot apply standards for everyone. Yes, you can have a general standard, when you say your name, surname, position, or something else; in any case <...> you cannot plan. We have people and we cannot just leave the situation as it is" [SEA_04].

Table 3 shows the main factors from the civil servants' explanations about the rather wide use of discretion even today, despite the existing customer service standards.

[39] Evert Vedung, *supra* note 19: 16.
[40] *Ibid*.:18.

Table 3. Discretion under the influence of customer interaction standards

Non-standard individual cases	*We, as working in customer service, have to be like "chameleons." If necessary, I can be very attentive, and if the person is angry or irritated, my voice will be corresponding. To communicate directly or on the telephone, we have to have the sense to feel the customer* [STI_09]. *Another thing is that you will not write all things in standards. There is a human factor here and you orient how to behave; there are people with physical and other disabilities* [STI_01]. *Every situation is individual, and you cannot always apply "the same protocol" to different customers. It is important who the client is, his/her mood, communication culture, wishes, and many other factors* [SEA_02].
Non-standard (socially vulnerable) customers	*Customers of Social Security are sensitive and socially vulnerable. I believe that they have to get attention, be listened to, and be provided information. These are really specific clients. These are not only those who want to be insured. These are social groups, people receiving allowances, and pensioners. You have to be very emphatic. You cannot be held to the official "machine"* [SSSA_04]. *Our district is rural. You have to communicate with a person in a "rural manner" and then the customer reacts differently. I am not saying that there are no intelligent people. But, it is necessary to simply speak with people, to joke, and to listen to what they are saying* [SSSA_05]. *The servant has to be able to know the client's need. He/she has to know how much information the client perceives and what level it has to be provided in. The same level cannot be used for providing information to a person with primary education and one with a master's degree, as perception levels differ* [SEA_01].

Meanwhile, civil servants of the STI are especially restricted by certain indicators of service provision when the purpose of their work is to service as many customers as possible within a certain period of time. The respondents from the STI

noted several criteria for determining the limits of discretion: consultation duration and consultation content (STI_09, STI_10).

The data of the empirical research revealed that the implementation of standardization partially facilitated the work for civil servants. The servants at all the three state agencies analysed in the study tried not only to follow the standards in customer service but also certain values: empathy, listening, support, and individualization. Most civil servants stated that standards cannot provide and define every customer's individual situation; therefore, one often has to rely on one's own experience, the experience of colleagues, and, in certain cases, the behaviour of civil servants is dictated by factors dependent on the customer. In certain situations, civil servants aim to identify themselves with the customers to show empathy referring to their individual situations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study analyses the influence of the de facto discretion of civil servants on the application of customer service standards in three Lithuanian state agencies. Based on the analysis, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

First, the analysis of documentary sources has shown that the preparation of written customer service standards in the State Tax Inspectorate and State Social Security Agency of Lithuania was a similar, and even coinciding, process related to the objective of assuring service quality. In the State Employment Agency, written standards were adopted later.

The analysis of the interview data revealed that the introduction of standards partially restricted the communication between civil servants and customers by delineating a certain sequence of actions and behaviour norms during the processes of service provision and direct interaction with customers. In line with the research literature,[41] the respondents saw the benefit of a standard implementation in the emergence of the civil servants' required behaviour, allowing for the avoidance of procedural faults and certain support in cases of conflict situations. However, written standards, in the opinion of civil servants, should be of a more general nature and not very detailed, as the priority is not the standard's requirements but the customers themselves when dealing with non-typical situations.

Customer interaction standards have some elements that restrict the de facto discretion of civil servants: the length, structure, and content of the interaction with customers. There are no established indicators for measuring the overall quality of the interaction. When customer feedback is not requested, service quality is

[41] Peter A. Busch, *supra* note 35; Duco Bannink, Frédérique Six, and Eelko van Wijk, *supra* note 15: 205-206; Robert B. Denhardt, Janet V. Denhardt, and Tara A. Blanc, *supra* note 15.

evaluated by the civil servant. Therefore, customer interaction standards are often applied taking into consideration the subjective experience of civil servants. The behaviour of civil servants is conditioned by experience, cooperation with colleagues, and the behaviour of customers. Despite the fact that written standards prescribe the civil servants to follow concrete requirements, they nonetheless rely on the values of empathy, individualization, and benevolence while interacting with customers. Similarly, Noordegraaf has pointed out that professional services need the standards for civil servants to not only deliver efficiently and effectively but also provide meaningful and legitimate services for customers.[42] This is all the more true because written standards do not envision all the possible exceptions needed within the reality-based interactions with customers (see also Schuppan).[43]

The analysis of the research data also revealed that written standards are applied with a rather high degree of creative compliance by civil servants in all the three state agencies. Although standards are "imposed by the higher positions onto the lower ones," the control of this implementation is not carried out systematically, which contributes to the outcome that customer service standards do not reduce the de facto discretion of civil servants. This does not mean that standards are useless, since they serve as guidelines and behaviour references.

Written standards only partially affect the de facto discretion of civil servants. Customer interaction standards define only some of the actions of the civil servants, and not the whole content of the communication they have with customers. Application of written standards must have some relaxation, especially in atypical situations. The customer service standards cannot restrict the actions of civil servants when they focus on customer problems. The priority is empathy, listening, support, and individualization of customers, and not the requirements of the standards, as these are especially important when dealing with socially vulnerable customers. This view on standards is similar to the findings of Røhnebæk, who discusses "standardised flexibility," when civil servants not only follow legal principles and standards, but also make decisions based on discretion and assess individual situations of customers. [44]

None of the three of the Lithuanian state agencies addressed in this research thoroughly follow the requirements of written standards; therefore, the application of customer service standards does not reduce the de facto discretion of civil servants. This can be partially attributed to inadequate managerial attention. Research data also reveals that customer interaction standards become especially problematic to apply in non-standard cases, especially in dealing with socially

[42] Mirko Noordegraaf, *supra* note 21: 1364.
[43] Tino Schuppan, *supra* note 36: 256.
[44] Maria Røhnebæk, *supra* note 14: 696.

vulnerable customers. The description of special needs for such customers, as it is provided in the standards, is not sufficient in reality. Recommendations for more de facto discretion based attitude toward customers can be given in the standards instead of merely listing the special needs of several customer groups. As research in other countries has shown, the spread of ICT in a street-level bureaucracy does diminish the amount of direct interactions. However, the role of a street-level bureaucrat as assistant and helper becomes even more important (see Pors).[45] Non-standard cases are better dealt with through the changed role of the street-level bureaucrat.

The research results reported here should be considered in the light of several limitations. First, the research focused only on Lithuanian state agencies. An extended comparison of the three state agencies studied is not possible as only qualitative data were collected. The other limitation is that this study focused on de facto discretion in the general sense, without differentiating its dimensions or types. However, on the basis of this study some directions for further research can be given. Analysis of the application of customer service standards by state agencies in other countries could provide important comparative insights. The impact of customer interaction standards on the discretion of civil servants could be studied more systematically using quantitative data. Moreover, the application of standards could be more thoroughly researched focusing on other different forms of discretion (managerial discretion, etc.). Further research could also give more attention to how customer service standards are applied in the interaction with the socially vulnerable customers.

Relying upon the research data allows one to recommend that the state agencies complement the application of written comprehensive customer service standards with the professional standards or tools based on experience and discretionary awareness of street-level bureaucrats (Best practice recommendations, Codes of Conduct, etc.). This recommendation is relevant not only in the Lithuanian case but also in the broader Central European context.

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