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Article

Finnish Civil Servants on Harmonization in the Asylum System: A Study in Horizontal Europeanization

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Abstract

This article presents a Finnish perspective on harmonization within the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The article analyses results from a study of the judgments and experiences of Finnish civil servants concerning the harmonization of the CEAS. The year 2015 constitutes a shift in asylum policies in many European countries, and a key question is how this shift has influenced the process of harmonization of asylum policies and practices. Senior civil servants working in the state administration of asylum and migration issues in Finland were interviewed anonymously as part of a comparative European research project (CEASEVAL). The interviews indicate that EU-wide administrative cooperation has developed into a broad and diverse cooperation in recent years. The interviewees in Finland generally found harmonization of the asylum system to be necessary, which was connected to a need for greater predictability of the outcomes of the system. The results of the study suggest that Finnish asylum administration is developing toward harmonized practices involving transnational and supranational administrative cooperation in the field of asylum. The results support the conclusion of previous research that there is a process of horizontal Europeanization in which administrative practices develop organically within national asylum administration, independently of political disagreements at the EU level. This is relevant both to the framing of political issues and to research on Finnish migration and asylum policies, which need to take into account the ongoing European harmonization of policies and administrative practices.

Keywords

asylum policy; Common European Asylum System; Finland; horizontal Europeanization; public administration

Issue

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1. Introduction

National asylum policy changes and administrative arrangements in Finland have increasingly become intertwined with policy developments at the EU level. The Common European Asylum System (CEAS) constitutes a key development in the European harmonization of asylum policy and administration since the late 1990s. The CEAS has provided a common legal framework for the EU member states and the goal has been to establish a common asylum system for all EU member states (European Commission, 2022). However, the practical implementation of agreed common asylum policies has often faced challenges, which became obvious dur-

ing the increase in the number of asylum seekers in 2015. Furthermore, the introduction of common asylum policies has encountered domestic political disagreement in many member states. In general, solidarity among the member states, as declared in the Treaties of the EU, has not been very evident in the area of asylum. There have been profound political disagreements and challenges among the member states in finding ways to share responsibilities among the states. The year 2015 constitutes a shift in asylum policies in many European countries, and a key question is how this shift has influenced the process of harmonization of asylum policies. Not surprisingly, much previous research and public debate on the CEAS has focused on the legal aspects and political

challenges of the CEAS. This focus readily conveys a picture of a crisis in the CEAS (e.g., Lavenex, 2018; Scipioni, 2018; Zaun, 2020). Less research has been done on the national administrative practices and bureaucracies that implement the common asylum system (e.g., Lahusen & Wacker, 2019). This article maintains that a research focus on public administration can provide significant information on the actual development of common asylum policies and practices. The article argues that there is a process of “horizontal Europeanization,” whereby many asylum policies and practices become harmonized. The argument is based on results from a study of the judgments and experiences of Finnish civil servants concerning the harmonization of the CEAS. The article analyses anonymous interviews with seven civil servants who mostly held senior positions in the state administration of asylum and migration issues in Finland. The civil servants worked with asylum issues on a daily basis and had significant insights into the harmonization of Finnish asylum policies and practices. Thus, this study of the Finnish case contributes to a better understanding of the harmonization of asylum policies and practices after 2015.

2. Harmonization and the Common European Asylum System

In this study, the process of harmonization is understood as a broad process involving both legal and political aspects, but also practical and institutional changes (cf. Wagner et al., 2019). The CEAS provides a framework of agreed rules for the EU member states. The aim of the CEAS has been to establish common procedures for international protection, harmonize asylum systems in the EU, reduce the differences between member states on the basis of binding legislation, and strengthen practical cooperation between national asylum administrations and the external dimension of asylum (European Commission, 2022). The legal framework of the CEAS includes the Dublin Regulation, which determines which EU member state is responsible for the examination of an asylum application; the EURODAC Regulation, which set up a common fingerprints database; the Reception Conditions Directive, ensuring fundamental accommodation conditions for asylum seekers; the Asylum Procedures Directive, which sets minimum procedural guarantees during the asylum procedure; and the Qualification Directive, which sets out minimum standards for qualification as persons in need of international protection. The legal implementation of the CEAS has not been a political issue in Finland: The necessary changes to Finnish laws have been rapidly introduced and accepted by the Finnish Parliament (European Migration Network [EMN], 2015). In general, Finland has supported the harmonization of asylum policies, and Finnish national policies have largely followed EU migration policies (Tuominen & Välimäki, 2021; Wahlbeck, 2019b). In the aftermath of 2015, new and more restrictive asylum legislation came into force in Finland, which

the government argued was introduced to clarify the system and bring Finnish legislation in line with EU legislation (Pirjatanniemi et al., 2021).

The practical implementation of the CEAS is, however, a more complicated issue than the legal aspects of the CEAS. Among the member states, the harmonization of policies and the implementation of the CEAS has been a long and still ongoing process. The different national administrative systems and legal traditions of the member states may create some divergence among the states in how the system works. However, there has clearly also been an ongoing harmonization of many reception practices (Caponio & Ponzio, 2022). Many observers have pointed out the danger of a “race to the bottom,” in which states strive to avoid having a more favorable system than other states, and thus avoid “attracting” asylum seekers. However, the system has also improved the standards for asylum seekers in member states that previously did not have established systems (Zaun, 2017). The CEAS does not prescribe specific institutional or administrative arrangements at the national level, but the practical work that is expected has often led to a de facto harmonization in this respect as well. In the Finnish case, the establishment in 2008 of the Finnish Immigration Service (MIGRI), with broad responsibilities within the Ministry of the Interior, can be interpreted as a European harmonization of the Finnish migration and asylum administration. The responsibilities of this central state agency were broadened to include not only decision-making on residence permits and asylum applications, but also a general coordination of asylum reception and migration issues (Wahlbeck, 2019a). One of the stated reasons for this broadening of responsibilities was to follow the same structure as immigration state agencies in the other Nordic countries (Norrback, 2008). Since Finland has previously received relatively small numbers of asylum seekers, international cooperation in the area of asylum policy has often been considered valuable (Tuominen & Välimäki, 2021; Wahlbeck, 2019b).

In the EU, the ultimate test of the CEAS was the increase of asylum applicants in 2015, which clearly displayed fundamental weaknesses and, in some respects, a failure of the EU to advance a common policy (e.g., Lavenex, 2018; Zaun, 2020). It involved a partly uncontrolled arrival of migrants in the member states and a failure to find suitable ways of sharing the responsibility among the member states, involving fundamental disagreements concerning a relocation of asylum seekers. Furthermore, national electorates mobilized by right-wing populist parties significantly influenced the positions taken by governments at the EU level (Wahlbeck, 2019b; Zaun, 2018). This politicization has changed the debate concerning the CEAS and made it increasingly difficult for national governments to agree on a revision of the CEAS (Zaun, 2020). Furthermore, the developments of 2015—and later the Covid-19 pandemic—led to new border controls in the Schengen area. Rather than a Europeanization of policies, there has

been a “renationalization” of migration policies in many European states (e.g., Brekke & Staver, 2018). Ultimately, the failure to find common policies on migration also challenges the Schengen area of free movement (Börzel & Risse, 2018; Nikolić & Pevcin, 2022). In Finland, the tenfold increase in the number of asylum seekers was considered a challenge for the reception system in 2015 (Wahlbeck, 2022). In Finnish media debates, other countries and the EU were blamed in various ways for not handling the migration flows properly. In newspaper reports and parliamentary debates, an often-repeated argument was that the asylum seekers should have been taken care of by somebody else before they reached the Finnish border (Pyrhönen & Wahlbeck, 2018). This argument related to the fact that most asylum seekers in Finland in 2015 had traveled through numerous EU member states before they arrived in northern Finland across the border with Sweden (e.g., Koikkalainen et al., 2020).

A key question this article addresses is whether the above-mentioned developments in Europe since 2015 have also had a negative effect on the harmonization of asylum policies and practices among the member states. The developments have somewhat obscured the fact that a de facto harmonization of asylum policies and practices may still take place irrespective of other challenges faced by the CEAS. In contrast to the research that focuses on the problems facing various legal and political aspects of the CEAS, this article maintains that a harmonization of asylum policies can continue in practice. This article argues that, despite the apparent problems facing the CEAS, the results from the Finnish case testify that there is an ongoing process of horizontal Europeanization whereby many of the aims of the CEAS are realized.

3. Harmonization and Horizontal Europeanization

As already indicated above, the analysis of harmonization in this article builds upon a broad understanding of harmonization, involving both the establishment of common standards and the practical implementation of the standards. Thus, in this study harmonization is not only a question of the implementation of common legal frameworks, but can be understood as connected to broader societal processes whereby national practices, discourses, and institutions become increasingly “Europeanized.” In political science, the concept of Europeanization often refers to the interactions between the EU and its member states to describe how domestic policy areas become increasingly subject to European policymaking (Börzel, 1999, p. 574). Research has also differentiated between “soft” and “hard” mechanisms of Europeanization (e.g., Knill, 2001, pp. 214–225). Soft Europeanization is a slow process of institutional change, often supported by national politicians, while hard Europeanization, for example, a top-down implementation of regulations, is more likely to encounter criticism among national politicians. However, Europeanization

is a broad term, which can describe processes including institutions, policies, discourses, and ideas (Faist & Ette, 2007; Featherstone & Radaelli, 2003; Knill, 2001; Lavenex, 2001; Vink & Bonjour, 2013). Thus, it is argued that Europeanization consists of:

Processes of (a) construction (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, “ways of doing things” and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU public policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies. (Radaelli, 2002, p. 106)

This definition of Europeanization entails that it can be studied both in the vertical “uploading” of policy preferences by member states to the EU level and in the vertical “downloading” of EU regulations to the national level (Börzel, 2002; Featherstone & Radaelli, 2003). The latter “top-down” perspective can also address how EU policies more generally affect the domestic policies, politics, and politics of the member states (Börzel & Risse, 2003).

However, in addition to the vertical dimension of Europeanization, there is also a process of *horizontal* Europeanization (Heidenreich, 2019; Radaelli, 2002). The horizontal dimension involves processes of European integration that occur in the interaction between administrations, organizations, and individuals across member states. These horizontal mechanisms “look at Europeanization as a process where there is no pressure to conform to EU policy models. Instead, ‘horizontal’ mechanisms involve different forms of adjustment to Europe based on the market or on patterns of socialization” (Radaelli, 2002, p. 120). Thus, a horizontal Europeanization may occur independently of the vertical dimension of Europeanization. It is important to study the process of horizontal Europeanization since it reveals much about the practical judgments on and everyday experiences of European harmonization. A study of harmonization that only studies formal legal developments and their implementation will not be able to identify significant processes, including changes in institutions, discourses, and ideas, which can be grasped from the perspective of horizontal Europeanization.

Concerning asylum policy, a horizontal Europeanization refers to processes by which administrative practices and policies develop organically within national asylum administrations. One example of horizontal Europeanization comes from the administrative cooperation of the Dublin system. The Dublin Regulation has created a Europe-wide system for Dublin requests and transfers of asylum seekers, which relies on extensive cooperation and trust among the participating national asylum administrations. Thus, the Dublin system is today a well-established transnational bureaucratic field created in a process of horizontal Europeanization (Lahusen, 2016; Lahusen & Wacker, 2019). However,

much suggests that this horizontal Europeanization of asylum administration now has developed far beyond the Dublin system. The results from the Finnish case presented in this study provide evidence that European cooperation among civil servants is much broader and more far-reaching than the Dublin system alone.

Results from the major comparative European research project CEASEVAL, involving interviews with a large variety of stakeholders in ten EU countries, indicate that there is broad European cooperation in the field of asylum. For example, practices of responsibility sharing have increased significantly with the establishment of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO; see Baumgartner & Wagner, 2018; Perumadan & Wagner, 2019). There has been a clear strengthening of both the mandates and budgets of this EU agency, which in 2022 will transform into the European Agency for Asylum (EUAA). Similarly, the mandate and budget of Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, have been strengthened. The support activities that EASO provides to member states have the explicit aim of strengthening the harmonization of national asylum practices and decision-making. As confirmed by the expert interviews for the CEASEVAL project, stakeholders acknowledged the powerful potential of EASO to facilitate the convergence of national practices in the field of asylum (Wagner et al., 2019, p. 26). In general, harmonization seems to receive broad support among the stakeholders interviewed in the CEASEVAL project, although the meaning and goals of harmonization were not always considered sufficiently clear (Wagner et al., 2019). This all suggests that there is reason to study the process of horizontal Europeanization of asylum administration more closely, since it seems to be the significant driver of harmonization of asylum policies and practices across Europe today. With this aim in mind, this article focuses on the asylum administration in Finland. As one of the smaller member states, geographically situated far from the core of the EU, but with a developed, professional, and extensive public administration, the case of Finland can reveal much about the extent of harmonization of asylum policies and practices in the post-2015 period.

4. Methods

The study aims to analyze the judgments and experiences of harmonization among civil servants in the asylum administration in Finland. These civil servants have been studied since they deal with issues that are covered by the CEAS in their daily work and can therefore be expected to have good insight into the harmonization of asylum policies and practices after 2015. The interviewees were asked to provide answers and reflect on the questions from the perspective of their work. Thus, the aim is to obtain knowledge of the interviewees' own judgments and experiences of harmonization from the perspective of their professional position in the asylum system. The study relies on interviews originally performed

for the major European comparative research project CEASEVAL. This project produced broad and diverse data, and this article focuses on civil servants to study the process of horizontal Europeanization of the public administration. This article utilizes the interview results from Finland, since the country has a highly developed public administration, and the Finnish interviews that were conducted by the author provide rich data on the process of horizontal Europeanization. Thus, this article will analyze the Finnish interview data in greater depth than was possible in the CEASEVAL project.

The interviews utilized a questionnaire with both structured and open questions on the process of harmonization, with the aim of mapping the process of creating similar rules and approximating practices in the field of asylum. There were also open questions about the experiences and assessments of the interviewees concerning the various networks they participated in. Furthermore, separate questions were asked about their understanding of the concept of solidarity (Wagner et al., 2018). The interviews also discussed responsibility sharing and asked for concrete examples of the responsibility sharing that the interviewees were involved in. The specific objectives of this part of the project were to take stock of responsibilities to be shared in the intake, care, and procedures for asylum; to identify good practices on sharing of responsibility; and to analyze the lessons learned (Baumgartner & Wagner, 2018; Perumadan & Wagner, 2019; Wagner et al., 2019).

This article analyses interviews held with seven civil servants working in state agencies in Finland in 2018. Most of the seven interviewees were relatively senior, working in high-ranking positions in the public administration of national asylum issues. In Finland, this administration is a centralized state administration that involves the Ministry of the Interior and the Finnish Immigration Service, which is a state agency that operates under the Ministry of the Interior. The interviewees were all either employees of the Ministry of the Interior or the Finnish Immigration Service. The interviewees were found through direct contacts with senior civil servants. Ten civil servants were approached for an interview, but three of them never found time to participate. However, the seven interviewees cover all the main areas of activity of the migration and asylum state administration in Finland.

At the time of the interviews in 2018, asylum issues were widely debated issues in highly polarized and heated public debates. Therefore, anonymity was essential to gain access to the experiences of the interviewees. After receiving detailed information on the CEASEVAL project, all the seven interviewees gave their consent to be interviewed. Some of the interviewees also agreed to be identified by name, but to protect the anonymity of the remaining interviewees all participants must remain anonymous. The civil servants often explicitly emphasized that they were only allowed to provide information on asylum practices and not to provide political opinions, which I interpret as a reflection of the politically sensitive

nature of asylum issues in public discourse in Finland, and a wish to provide information that reflected their professional role rather than their personal opinions.

The interviews were based on semi-structured interview guidelines and were conducted face-to-face. The interviews were conducted in the Finnish language and the average length of the interviews was one hour and ten minutes. The quotations in this article have been translated from Finnish to English by the author. Thus, the empirical data used in this article consists of anonymous interviews with civil servants in the administration of asylum and migration issues in Finland. Together with an analysis of Finnish public documents and policy papers, these interviews provide detailed information on the Europeanization of the public administration of asylum issues and how the processes of harmonization are experienced in the daily work of civil servants.

5. The Harmonization of Asylum Practices

All interviewees were asked standardized questions concerning their experiences of the extent of harmonization in various areas of practice, but they were also provided an opportunity to give open answers to the questions and freely discuss harmonization from the perspective of their work. Regardless of their position and work tasks within the Finnish national administration, the interviewees felt harmonization of the asylum system was necessary in the EU. They felt this need for harmonization regarding asylum procedures, status determination, and reception practices. However, it was felt that harmonization in the EU had occurred mostly in asylum procedures and especially in the determination of responsibility (i.e., the Dublin system), while, in comparison, the interviewees found that status determination and reception practices displayed greater variation among the member states. Furthermore, the area of second instance asylum jurisprudence was found to be less harmonized, partly because of the independence of the courts of law. One of the interviewees explained the need for harmonization from a Finnish perspective in the following way:

Harmonization is a large, fundamental, and very important question....Harmonization of asylum systems is necessary because of the free movement of people and the Schengen agreement. Large policy deviations among the member states cannot be part of the picture because of the common external border of the EU. In the case of Finland, we must follow Sweden in particular, since changes in asylum policy in one country will immediately be reflected in the other. Finland closely and continuously follows and reacts to changes in European asylum systems. Finland is part of the development. (WP26_uh_E002_P)

The need for harmonization was connected by the interviewees to a need for greater predictability in the out-

comes of the system. For example, the interviewees expressed a need for predictability in terms of numbers of applicants and in the outcome of decisions on asylum applications. Finland had experienced a large fluctuation in the number of asylum seekers in 2015, when the number had increased tenfold compared to 2014. This increase in the number of asylum seekers, mainly arriving across the border with Sweden, had put a strain on the reception system, which was still fresh in the memories of all the interviewees. It was felt that Finnish public administration needed information on the number of people to be expected in the asylum system. Information sharing among European countries was seen as crucial for the ability to plan the measures to be taken in Finland. If the procedures and the outcome of the determination process were similar all over Europe, the effect of the migration flows on the Finnish reception system could be better predicted.

However, concerning the judgments on the extent of harmonization of *reception practices* in the EU, the answers provided were more mixed. Many judged the reception conditions in Finland as relatively good compared to those in other countries. Some even pointed out that, from the perspective of individual member states, it was not necessarily in the interest of the state to have a good reception system, or at least not a system that was better or more attractive than the system in other states. A couple of the interviewees expressed that Finland would need to avoid having “attractions” in its asylum system. Such answers reflect a tendency towards what has been called “a race to the bottom,” in which states aim to have asylum systems that are not more generous than the systems in other states:

Harmonization in the CEAS involves similar practices and regulations. We cannot have a situation of asylum shopping in which the attraction and the services provided to asylum seekers are different in different receiving countries. Of course, there will be variations in the attraction, and there are several things involved, but the application procedures must be the same and the practices similar. The Dublin system was needed to prevent applicants from traveling around Europe and making recurring applications. The human rights agreements state the right to apply for asylum, but there is a need to agree on how this is done in the EU. And it is efficient if applications are processed in one country and not processed several times. Thus, there are both matters of principles and practical issues that form the background of harmonization. The system presupposes a harmonization of asylum policies and will not work without a harmonization. The credibility of the whole system suffers if the processes are not harmonized....The development in my country has been in the direction of harmonization. This development has been going on since the 1990s. [Previously] it was thought that it did not matter if the regulations were more liberal in

Finland, but the year 2015 was a wake-up call. After that, it has been felt even more strongly that the rights should not be better in Finland. Thus, gradually, harmonization has increased. This has also politically become a more important issue.

ÖW: So, 2015 was a turning point?

Gradually things have changed, but 2015 was a more decisive turning point. But these are of course also political questions, which I only follow from the side. (WP26_uh_E004_P)

As expressed in the interview quoted above, the civil servants expressed strong support for a European harmonization of asylum practices. This support was clearly expressed, despite the interviewees showing an unwillingness to comment on political issues. The experienced need for a harmonization of policies was especially evident in relation to the neighboring country of Sweden, which, as described below, constituted a key reference point for Finland in migration and asylum policy issues.

6. Cooperation and Contacts Among Member States

The interviewees were asked about their cooperation with international organizations in the field and their contacts involving other EU member states. A well-established contact for the civil servants is the UNHCR. The asylum administration in Finland is in this respect similar to stakeholders in other countries: In the CEASEVAL project, the vast majority of stakeholders mentioned having contact with the UN Refugee Agency (Wagner et al., 2019, p. 33). In the case of Finland, UNHCR was clearly important for the sharing of information. The interviewees emphasized the role of the UNHCR Nordic regional office in Stockholm: “UNHCR is a standard and well-established contact. This involves the UNHCR office for the Nordic countries in Stockholm” (WP26_uh_E006_P). In addition, the international contacts also involved other international agencies and organizations; the interviewees mentioned the EMN, EASO, the Nordic Council, the Intergovernmental Consultations on Migration, Asylum and Refugees (IGC), and the International Organization for Migration: “The IOM [Regional Office for the Baltic and Nordic States] is in Helsinki, so we meet a lot” (WP26_uh_E005_P). When asked about what the international cooperation entailed, information sharing was mentioned as the top priority:

Information sharing is the most important. We need to get information about regulation and practices in other countries. Since the Dublin agreement defines the country in charge of the application, this also means that the outcome of this process should not vary depending on where the application is processed....Finland cannot have divergent policies and

practices in comparison to other countries. To compare Finland with Sweden is especially important. (WP26_uh_E004_P)

Thus, the civil servants found the various contacts with networks outside of Finland to be very important in gaining information on policies and practices in other countries. This information was important since it was needed for the harmonization of Finnish policies and practices. The interviews revealed that Nordic regional cooperation was important for getting information on the neighboring countries: “The Nordic countries have old and well-established contacts in many various fora and contexts. There are plenty of meetings. [In terms of asylum policy] it is Sweden that we mostly follow” (WP26_uh_E006_P). The extensive Nordic cooperation involved both informal and formal cooperation and many of the contacts related to the neighboring country of Sweden. The formal cooperation involved information sharing within the framework of the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers. The Nordic Council has a permanent committee for refugee and immigration issues in the Nordic passport-free area, the Nordiska utlänningsutskottet (Nordic Immigration Committee), which has existed since 1957. One of the interviewees (WP26_uh_E004_P) explained that, overall, Nordic cooperation is very practically oriented, involving information sharing and discussions of practical issues. In addition, there is Nordic political cooperation at a higher ministerial level, which the civil servants were not part of. This included the Nordiska samrådsgruppen på hög nivå för flyktingfrågor, often translated as the “Nordic Council for Refugee Affairs,” where ministers and government representatives of the Nordic countries meet for regular consultations on matters of overall policy. The Nordic countries include Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, but also Iceland and Norway, which are not members of the EU. One of the interviewees was specifically asked about the EU member states that the interviewee had contacts with, in the framework of the work of the EU and the European Commission, and also mentioned Nordic cooperation in this context:

Nordic cooperation is central for Finland. The countries we are in regular contact with vary, but the Nordic countries are the key partners and the countries we have most contacts with. Sweden of course, but all the Nordic countries. Norway and Iceland are of course not members of the EU, but it has to be remembered that they are members of agreements and cooperation in the EU, Schengen, Dublin. Thus, we have much in common with all the Nordic countries. There is strong Nordic cooperation which is related to our shared administrative traditions....This is a cooperation of the like-minded. Who you are in contact with depends on the issue. The country you are in contact with may vary. But it easily ends up with a Nordic cooperation. You prepare issues in smaller

groups with like-minded countries, and this is usually a group of the Nordic countries. (WP26_uh_E002_P)

As described in the quotation above, the Nordic civil servants also seem to find common ground in the contacts within the EU framework, but the contacts within the EU have also extended the cooperation to new countries. In recent years, the Nordic cooperation has to some extent been replaced, or at least expanded, by cooperation at the EU level. In the case of Finland, this widening of the cooperation into a European rather than a Nordic cooperation is a significant change, which clearly testifies to the power of the ongoing horizontal Europeanization of the asylum administration. From the perspective of the interviewees, a key recent development has been European cooperation within the framework of EASO, which has played a growing role in recent years. In this new framework, the contacts of the civil servants are EU-wide. EASO provides frequent contacts for information sharing and has also been significant for staff training and other guidance:

There are plenty of contacts in EASO and joint projects with other countries. In general, the countries in Western and Northern Europe are followed closely by Finland....The EASO is the key agency, it includes information sharing. This contact is very regular and active. EASO also provides training modules. (WP26_uh_E007_P)

EASO is currently the cooperation that demands a lot of work from us, and much of our resources are used to support EASO. Despite the work involved, the cooperation is very beneficial....The EASO training modules are important and are utilized by us in all staff training. These have provided substantial benefits. Without the training modules, I do not know how we would have managed the training of new staff in the rapid expansion of staff after 2015. (WP26_uh_E004_P)

As outlined in the quotations above, European cooperation involving information sharing was considered important. The role of EASO seems to be especially significant in the work related to status determination, since EASO has provided both information and staff training relating to this work task. Furthermore, EASO has clearly had a large impact on the harmonization of products for “country of origin information” (COI). This harmonization undoubtedly creates a common discourse in the field of asylum, involving a similarity in vocabulary, points of view, and interpretations of information. In addition, the EU-wide EMN network has played a key role in information sharing through the information requests that are shared in the network:

We work together and share work. There is an exchange of information. The COI researchers take

part in EASO workshops and share information. We make requests for information and receive information, as well as get information from good sources. This has developed a lot in recent years. (WP26_uh_E005_P)

EMN is very important. Information sharing is very important. There are other networks for policy and politics, but for [the agency of the interviewee] contacts for information sharing are the most important activity. Information sharing provides plenty of benefits, but sometimes demands quite a lot of work from us. (WP26_uh_E004_P)

7. Sharing of Responsibilities, Solidarity, and Good Practice

The interviews included questions concerning the interviewees’ experiences of sharing responsibilities among EU member states, the meaning of solidarity in a European context, and examples of good practice in relation to their own work. The meaning of the concepts and the difference between the activities that these relate to, is, however, not clear cut, which was reflected in the answers provided. As one interviewee expressed: “I actually find it slightly difficult to distinguish responsibility sharing from solidarity; to share responsibilities is a way to show solidarity among the member states” (WP26_uh_E005_P).

The respondents found that the Finnish authorities were involved in many diverse activities that could be considered responsibility sharing. The examples mentioned included resettlement of refugees, relocation of asylum seekers, sharing of financial costs and EU resource allocation, the EASO asylum support teams, staff training cooperation (involving the EASO training modules), visits to other member state migration agencies, in addition to sharing of information (involving both COI and other types of information). The Dublin system was mentioned as a significant, well-established, and extensive cooperation. Furthermore, according to the interviewees, the EMN, EASO, and the Nordic sharing of information already worked extensively, and providing replies to requests for information was considered a sharing of responsibility. Three of the interviewees also explicitly mentioned the joint Frontex return flights, which Finnish authorities had also made use of (this was mentioned although the interviewees did not include the police force, which is the Finnish authority that carries out the return of foreign nationals after the decision has been made by other authorities). In summary, the activities of the Finnish civil servants included extensive and varied forms of administrative cooperation at both the regional (Nordic) and the EU level, which the interviewees considered to be examples of both responsibility sharing and good practice.

The interviews included questions on what the informants found to be the greatest obstacle to EU-wide

harmonization and solidarity. The answers provided reflected the fact that “member states cannot agree” (WP26_uh_E006_P). In other words, the interviewees found that national interests often turned out to play a larger role than European solidarity at the EU level. Thus, the interviewees also expressed an awareness of the lack of political agreement on solidarity and responsibility sharing among the member states. The challenges to harmonization and cooperation that were identified by the interviewees tended to be part of the intergovernmental political sphere of the EU, i.e., the EU level of decision making where national governments often found it difficult to find political agreement. On the contrary, the examples that the interviewees gave of good practice and their experiences of successful cooperation among EU countries tended to relate, either directly or indirectly, to administrative cooperation among national migration agencies, supranational features of the EU (e.g., EASO and Frontex), and agencies of the international governance of asylum (e.g., UNHCR).

These results indicate that the Finnish asylum administration is deeply embedded in various types of cooperation and international responsibility sharing. These activities may be small in scale, but they still constitute fundamental and necessary parts of the daily work of the civil servants. The cooperation in the Dublin system is well established, but the EU-wide administrative cooperation among civil servants in the national asylum administration is today much broader than in the Dublin system alone. The answers that the Finnish civil servants provided can be interpreted as reflections of the ongoing European development towards a common European asylum system, involving horizontal cooperation and practical responsibility sharing, but also supranational institutional arrangements at the EU level. This is an actual ongoing development, with, for example, the development of a larger role for the EU asylum agency EASO in the areas of asylum admission and information sharing.

8. Concluding Discussion

The results of the study suggest that Finnish asylum administration is following a general development in the EU towards harmonized practices and transnational or supranational cooperation in the field of asylum. The interviewees seemed to support this development because it provided greater predictability of the European asylum system, a predictability that the civil servants in this study found was of crucial importance for the functioning of the system and their daily work. Thus, there was broad support for harmonization since harmonization supported smooth cooperation among the countries involved and the easy sharing of information needed in the daily work of the civil servants. Likewise, to receive information from other countries was found to be of crucial importance since it was necessary for harmonizing Finnish policies and practices. Thus, the sharing of information and the process of harmonization sup-

ported each other.

In Finland, there is a long history of international cooperation, involving both the UNHCR and regional Nordic cooperation, in migration issues. This cooperation has now been complemented with EU-wide administrative cooperation in asylum issues. The Dublin system involves a well-established and extensive administrative cooperation, which forms a European field of public administration (Lahusen, 2016; Lahusen & Wacker, 2019). The Finnish civil servants are clearly part of this field. However, this study highlights the fact that the EU-wide administrative cooperation has now developed into a much broader and more diverse cooperation than has previously been the case. The work of EASO is a significant step towards transnational and supranational cooperation, but there are also other forms of European administrative cooperation, diverse projects, and extensive practical sharing of responsibilities that can be seen as part of an ongoing horizontal Europeanization. This development can be considered a broad process of Europeanization involving “formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things,’ and shared beliefs and norms” (Radaelli, 2002, p. 106).

The results outlined in this article indicate that the harmonization of the CEAS, at least at the moment, seems primarily to be occurring as a “horizontal Europeanization” (Heidenreich, 2019; Radaelli, 2002), where common administrative practices and asylum policies develop organically within national asylum administration. This is in contrast to a hard Europeanization prescribed top-down (vertically) by the EU, which generally tends to face strong political opposition among the member states. Thus, the results of this study indicate that a *de facto* harmonization of asylum policies and administrative practices occurs, despite possible political disagreements concerning the future of the CEAS at the EU level. The research focusing on the—often problematic—legal and political aspects of the CEAS may somewhat obscure the significance of the process of horizontal Europeanization. This process is relevant to both the framing of political issues and research on European migration and asylum policies, which need to take into account these on-going developments at a horizontal level, rather than solely focusing on the national level or the EU level.

The results support the argument that the EU-wide developments of asylum administration involve the emergence of a new transnational bureaucratic field (Lahusen & Wacker, 2019). The interviews reveal that Finnish civil servants are broadly involved in both transnational networks and supranational cooperation at the EU level. This development of new bureaucratic fields has significant political and practical implications. A challenge is that, unlike centralized bureaucracies, an organically developed system driven by a process of horizontal Europeanization lacks clear centralized political control. Thus, a future challenge is the governance of

this new European bureaucratic field. How is it regulated and how can it be politically controlled, either by national governments or by the European Commission?

This article has outlined the experiences of the civil servants, who were asked to reflect on the issues from the perspective of their work. It must be noted, however, that this perspective is not the same as the perspective of the asylum seekers. The question that remains—and it must be answered by other research projects—is how the interest of asylum seekers relates to the ongoing developments of the European asylum system. A harmonization of asylum practices, a transnational horizontal Europeanization of asylum administration, and a supra-national governance of asylum may or may not be in the interest of asylum seekers: The latter is the case especially if it involves similar restrictive policies in all EU member states. Thus, there is reason for research to follow these developments closely, since much suggests that national asylum systems will be increasingly embedded into a common European system in the future.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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