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The political drivers of information exchange: Explaining interactions in the European Migration Network

Ellen Mastenbroek\textsuperscript{a}, Reini Schrama \textsuperscript{a} and Dorte Sindbjerg Martinsen\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Institute for Management Research, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands; \textsuperscript{b}Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

**ABSTRACT**

European administrative networks (EANs) are groups of national administrative organizations which are established to improve national-level implementation of European Union (EU) law. This paper addresses a key question concerning these networks: what drives interactions within them? To this end, the paper adds a dynamic political perspective to institutional hypotheses. It tests the resulting hypotheses using a most likely case, interactions in the European Migration Network (EMN) in the wake of the 2015–16 refugee crisis. Using social network analysis, it shows that two domestic political incentives are associated with interactions: the problem pressure experienced by member states following the 2015–16 refugee crisis and post-2015 declines in popular support for immigration. Our analysis also reveals that interactions occurred among member states with similarly high levels of government effectiveness. In sum, we show that EANs can provide significant added value for their members in politicized policy areas, although their utility may vary between network members.

**KEYWORDS** European administrative networks; European Migration Network; European Union; migration; social network analysis

**Introduction**

The European Union (EU) is characterized by a gap between regulation and implementation (Eberlein & Newman, 2008, p. 6). To bridge this gap, it has established numerous European administrative networks (EANs): groups of national administrative organizations, such as agencies and ministries, tasked with the national implementation and/or enforcement of EU law. By enabling the exchange of skills and expertise, these EANs are argued to...

A key question, therefore, concerns EAN functioning: to what extent and under what circumstances do EAN members interact? In answering this question, several authors have focused on the macro level, theorizing the impact of a network’s policy context, such as the degree of interdependence (Van Boetzelaer & Princen, 2012) and distributive conflict (Eberlein & Grande, 2005; Kelemen & Tarrant, 2011). Others have prioritized meso-level characteristics like the level of trust between participants and network members’ independence (Coen & Thatcher, 2008, p. 67; Eberlein & Grande, 2005; Eberlein & Newman, 2008).

However useful, these accounts overlook the fact that network functioning often varies between network members. A recent strand of literature has therefore focused on EAN interactions at the micro level (Efrat & Newman, 2018; Maggetti & Gilardi, 2011; Martinse n et al., 2020a, 2020b; Van der Heijden, 2019; Van Boetzelaer and Princen, 2012; Vantaggiato, 2018). Its consensus is that interactions depend on similarities in network members’ institutional characteristics, such as national policy values (Martinse n et al., 2020a; Vantaggiato, 2018), market position (Eberlein & Grande, 2005, p. 104), administrative tradition (Van der Heijden, 2019, p. 6), and geographical and cultural stance (Papadopoulos, 2017, p. 12). This insight is consistent with the broader study on policy networks, which has amassed strong evidence for this ‘homo- phily’ effect (Ingold & Fischer, 2014).

Although useful for explaining interactions in rather stable settings, this institutional perspective may not suffice to explain the functioning of EANs in more turbulent times or in less-established policy fields. Crucially, member states’ stances towards EU law or its implementation can change as a consequence of exogenous shocks and changing domestic political incentives (Mastenbroek & Kaeding, 2006; Zaun, 2017, 2020). This may give network interactions a more dynamic character than previously found. This also follows from the broader social network literature: interactions may reflect members’ preferences (Ingold & Fischer, 2014, p. 93) and exogenous shocks (Provan & Lemaire, 2012).

In the present paper, therefore, we develop a dynamic theoretical perspective on network interactions, taking account of network members’ changing political incentives in the face of an exogenous shock, while controlling for institutionalist factors. We test this theory by analyzing interactions in the European Migration Network (EMN) in the period following the EU refugee crisis of 2015-2016. We have three key reasons for selecting this case.
Firstly, the EMN is a crucial, most likely case for testing our dynamic political approach, as the field of migration and asylum is thoroughly politicized (Boswell, 2008, p. 481; Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2018; Schmälter, 2018; Zaun, 2017). This is a scope condition for testing the effect of political incentives. Secondly, the 2015–2016 refugee crisis posed a severe exogenous shock (Biermann et al., 2019; Zaun, 2020), which is likely to have affected network interactions. Thirdly, the EMN is an intriguing case because it displays active interactions on EU implementation (Ernst & Young, 2015), although it was never tasked formally with harmonizing or improving national implementation.

Below we present our case in further detail, theorize the dynamic aspect of EMN interactions and introduce our methods and data collection. Our empirical analysis provides support for our mixed theoretical approach: EMN interactions were driven by problem pressure and declining popular support for immigration in the wake of the 2015–16 refugee crisis. Our key institutional variable, similarities in government effectiveness, also played a significant role.

The European Migration Network: establishment, mandate and development

The establishment of the EMN dates back to 1994, when the idea of establishing a research network on migration attached to the Commission was circulating (Boswell, 2009, p. 204). The proposal gathered momentum at the 2001 Laeken Convention (Boswell, 2009, p. 204; Feldman, 2011, p. 64). The EMN was established by Council Decision 2008/381.

Initially, the EMN was to analyze government data, monitor migration and asylum in the EU, and inform the public (Boswell, 2009, p. 204). This broad mandate was quickly refined: the consensus among the Commission and the member states was that the network should also feed into EU policymaking (Boswell, 2009, p. 209). According to decision 2008/381 (article 2), the EMN’s main objective is ‘to meet the information needs of Community institutions and Member States’ authorities and institutions on migration and asylum (…), with a view to supporting policymaking in the European Union in these areas.’¹

Over time, the structure and functioning of the network reflected constant struggles for control between the Commission and the member states (Boswell, 2009). Although the Commission exerted an influence on network development, the member states’ interests proved the key factor: the EMN’s structure, mandate and functioning show evidence of the development of a predominantly intergovernmental network² (Boswell, 2008, 2009; Geddes & Scholten, 2015, p. 51), as is the case in the broader setting of EU asylum cooperation (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2018; Zaun, 2020, p. 4).
The Commission originally proposed that the network be composed of independent experts (Boswell, 2009, p. 206). However, the member states wanted to maintain control over this highly sensitive policy area and proposed a more intergovernmental network, composed by national government officials (Boswell, 2009, p. 206; European Migration Network, 2018: 1). The backbone of this intergovernmental structure is formed by the National Contact Points (NCPs). These are typically positioned in Ministries of Interior or Justice or in government agencies specializing in migration (ibid). In a small number of member states, the NCPs are hosted by research institutes or the national offices of the International Organisation for Migration (ibid).

The central role of national governments also transpires from the network’s operations. Originally, the EMN’s bimonthly meetings were chaired by a scientific coordinator (Feldman, 2011, p. 65). However, the member states objected to this construction, refusing ‘to treat migration and asylum as technocratic policy domains’ (Boswell, 2009, p. 207). The network’s official meetings ended up being strongly intergovernmental in nature, resembling Council committee meetings (Boswell, 2009, p. 207). The EMN’s intergovernmental character also stems from the dominant role of horizontal interactions, either in small groups or bilaterally (Feldman, 2011, p. 68; Geddes & Scholten, 2015, p. 51). These exchanges are supported by a range of formal tools: an information exchange system that provides a clearing house for national migration policy documents (Feldman, 2011, p. 66) and a glossary that provides common definitions and understandings (Feldman, 2011, p. 65). The network uses numerous communication channels—such as annual reports, informs and flashes, bulletins, and status reports—to target a wider audience.

Another key tool for information exchange are ad-hoc queries (European Migration Network, 2018: 3; Ernst & Young, 2015, p. 147): policy-related questions submitted by an NCP or the Commission. These queries must be answered by other NCPs within a short time frame, thus enabling members to quickly obtain relevant policy information from their peers (Ernst & Young, 2015, p. 112). Both NCPs and national policy makers perceive the ad-hoc queries as very useful (Ernst & Young, 2015, p. 134; Geddes & Scholten, 2015, p. 52). Of all the EMN’s instruments, it has ‘the most direct and tangible impact on supporting policy making’ in the member states’ (Ernst & Young, 2015, p. 147).

However, the utilization of the ad-hoc query instrument varies between member states. According to a 2015 evaluation, a large number of queries was posed by a small set of countries (Estonia, Netherlands, Slovakia and Norway) and responses were unevenly distributed between member states (Ernst & Young, 2015, pp. 112–113). These findings are consistent with the observation that network functioning may vary at the micro level (Efrat &
Newman, 2018; Maggetti & Gilardi, 2011; Martinsen et al., 2020a, 2020b; Vantaggiato, 2018). This begs the question what drives interactions in the EMN.

**Theorizing information exchange in the EMN**

Our starting point for explaining member-level variance in interactions is that limited resources drive network members to be selective (Van Boetzelaer & Princen, 2012; Vantaggiato, 2019: 1541). Given these limited resources, interactions depend on network members’ incentives (Efrat & Newman, 2018; Maggetti & Gilardi, 2011; Martinsen et al., 2020a, 2020b; Van der Heijden, 2019; Vantaggiato, 2018). A key of incentive is institutional in nature: network members select actors with similar policy orientations to interact with (Efrat & Newman, 2018; Martinsen et al., 2020a, 2020b; Vantaggiato, 2018). This finding has proven robust across cases, e.g., cross-border healthcare governance (Martinsen et al., 2020b), social policy (Martinsen et al., 2020a), the prosecution of criminal offences (Efrat & Newman, 2018), and securities regulation (Maggetti & Gilardi, 2011).

However, this institutional focus may not suffice to explain variance in network interactions. Crucially, member states’ policy preferences may change as a consequence of exogenous shocks that disrupt the national policy status quo (Mastenbroek & Kaeding, 2006; Zaun, 2017; 2020). We therefore propose a more dynamic perspective on network interactions, grounded in the rationalist literature on EU migration and asylum policy making (Biermann et al., 2019; Lavenex, 2018; Zaun, 2017, 2018, 2020). This approach captures strategic incentives in a direct way instead of assuming these to have been encapsulated in domestic institutional trajectories.

At first sight, the rationalist literature does not lead us to expect many interactions concerning national implementation. Member states have not much of an incentive to learn from each other, because national implementation of EU rules mostly reflects the outcome of past power struggles and deeply embedded national policy values (Zaun, 2017, p. 6). Changing EU implementation would mean reopening previously settled national policy debates and possibly increase migration influx (Zaun, 2017, pp. 211–212). Member states thus typically attach great value to the policy status quo when implementing EU migration and asylum law (Zaun, 2017). At the same time, member states’ policy stances vis-à-vis EU law can change (Mastenbroek & Kaeding, 2006), as a result of exogenous policy shocks or changes in domestic political incentives (Zaun, 2017, 2020).

Firstly, an exogenous shock may lead to the updating of information among key policy makers, both with respect to facts that were previously ignored or overlooked, and with respect to public opinion (Zaun, 2017, p. 6). In such instances, member states become more receptive to policy change, which affects their stance in EU decision making (Biermann et al.,
and/or the implementation of existing EU policies (Zaun, 2017, p. 233). The 2015–16 refugee crisis constituted exactly such an exogenous shock: the huge influx of asylum seekers had strong redistributive effects and revealed the asymmetrical interdependence between member states based on geographic location and attractiveness to newcomers (Biermann et al., 2019; Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2018; Zaun, 2020). This variant problem pressure for member is expected to affect members’ utilization of the EMN. It can be seen as contingent on the number of asylum applications relative to population size (Biermann et al., 2019, p. 255; Zaun, 2017, p. 30).

Hypothesis 1a (problem pressure): the higher the relative number of asylum applications in key destination states, the higher the tendency to engage in information exchange on implementation through the EMN (H1a).

Arguably, the mere number of asylum applications is a rather crude way of viewing problem pressure, as asylum applications are only one effect of migration influx. The impact of the refugee crisis was felt mainly in destination states and states of first arrival, while geographically remote states and transit states were not affected (Biermann et al., 2019, p. 255). The refugee crisis pitted these three key groups of states against each other (Biermann et al., 2019; Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2018; Zaun, 2020). Arguably, it provided them with variant incentives for exchanging information on national implementation through the EMN.

Key destination states, firstly, were presented with an increased influx, which partly consisted of secondary movements from Southern and Eastern member states. These secondary movements were rooted in non-compliance of Common European Asylum System (CEAS) rules in these states, which systematically ‘waved through’ unregistered migrants (Biermann et al., 2019, p. 254; Zaun, 2020, p. 5). As a result, they came to rethink their own implementation of existing EU law to prevent becoming unnecessarily attractive. Sweden, which had always been very liberal in its implementation (Zaun, 2017), reverted back to minimal implementation in order to reduce its attractiveness to refugees (Zaun, 2018, p. 53). Similarly, Germany and Austria introduced more restrictive policies (Zaun, 2018, p. 52). The EMN may have posed a useful venue for obtaining inputs for such policy changes.

Furthermore, to even out differences in attractiveness, popular destination states pushed for better implementation of existing rules by first arrival states. They favored EU-level capacity-building through the proposed EU Asylum Agency, which was part of the 2016 ‘responsibility package’ (Zaun, 2020, p. 10). Also, destination states like Germany, Austria, France, Norway, Sweden and Belgium sought to curb secondary movements by unilaterally suspending Schengen and reintroducing border controls (Biermann et al., 2019, p. 254; Lavenex, 2018, p. 1197; Zaun, 2020, p. 10). Furthermore, they made
better enforcement of CEAS measures their top priority (Zaun, 2020, p. 11). In sum, their focus on better implementation to reduce secondary movements may have provided destination states with another incentive to posing and answering ad-hoc queries, as they may serve to scrutinize and improve national implementation abroad.

The picture is different for the first arrival states. On the one hand, the suspension of Schengen by key destination states exerted great pressure on first arrival states (Biermann et al., 2019, p. 14; Zaun, 2020, p. 10). Yet, the latter countries resisted improved implementation in their territory, as evidenced by their opposition to the so-called responsibility package (Zaun, 2020, p. 11). Instead, they focused on solidarity, and advocated refugee relocation. In addition, although the European Commission for long had been reluctant to enforce CEAS rules (Schmälter, 2018), this approach changed in autumn 2015, when it announced an infringement package (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2018, p. 188). This stronger supervision may have made these states cautious of alerting the Commission to further potential weaknesses in implementation through posing ad-hoc queries. This reluctance also has an ideational component: they criticized destination states’ problem analysis revolving around secondary movements (Zaun, 2020, p. 11). Such a strongly ingrained belief is likely to reduce the openness to exchange (Papadopoulos, 2017, p. 11).

In sum, the refugee crisis provided destination states with an incentive to update the status quo of EU policy implementation within their borders and by states of first arrival. The EMN could provide destination states with a useful venue to this end. First arrival and non-affected states, however, had no incentive to improve their implementation and engage in the EMN.

Hypothesis 1b (problem pressure): NCPs in key destination states have a higher tendency to engage in information exchange on implementation through the EMN than non-affected states. This is not the case for states of first arrival (H1a).

A second pathway to policy revision is through changing domestic political incentives (Zaun, 2017, p. 221; Mastenbroek and Kaeding, 2006). This factor cannot be completely detached from the previous one, because exogenous shocks can lead policymakers to update their information on electoral preferences (Zaun, 2020, p. 6). As a case in point, the 2015–16 refugee crisis led to a decline in popular support for immigration (Zaun, 2018, p. 47). This may have provided national governments with an incentive to update their implementation of EU policies, and tie this to new electoral preferences. In sum, governments that saw dwindling public support for immigration may have been incentivized to change their implementation of EU law. The EMN could provide a suitable forum for obtaining best practices to this end. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:
Hypothesis 2 (decrease in popular support): NCPs from member states where popular support for immigration fell after the 2015/16 refugee crisis tend to exchange information in the EMN more often.

A third explanation is more institutional in nature, in line with the previous literature on EAN interactions (Efrat & Newman, 2018; Martinsen et al., 2020a, 2020b; Vantaggiato, 2018). As argued by Zaun (2017: 31), migration pressure is only one way of categorizing member states. Another key element is the effectiveness of governments: this is a necessary condition for the development of strong regulatory frameworks and has been linked to governments’ effective operation in EU decision making (Zaun, 2017). We expect this strong regulation to allow member states to pose and answer queries, which is a rather technical matter taking place under great time pressure. Strong regulators have more to contribute than weak regulators, just like is the case in decision making (Zaun, 2017: 42). Furthermore, teacher-student relations are less likely in this a politicized field characterized by non-compliance by a subset of actors (Papadopoulos, 2017: 11-12). We thus expect interactions to take place, primarily, between highly effective member states.

Hypothesis 3 (similarity in government effectiveness): NCPs from member states with high levels of government effectiveness tend to exchange information with each other in the EMN.

The account presented above must be qualified in two ways. Firstly, transaction costs may restrict network interactions (Vantaggiato, 2018). Both submitting and responding to ad-hoc queries in the EMN takes time, and not every NCP in the network has equal capacity for this (Ernst & Young, 2015: 131). We therefore expect NCPs with higher personnel capacity to be more active in EMN query interactions.

Additionally, organizational similarity is known to effect network interactions (Van Boetzelaer & Princen, 2012). In the context of the EMN, the key institutional variable is the NCPs’ organizational positioning (Ernst & Young, 2015: 81). Most are hosted by national governments, typically the ministry of the interior. Others are positioned within an external entity, such as a university, research institute, or international organization. A third group are hybrid, involving collaboration between governmental and external entities. These differences between NCPs can be expected to drive interactions, given the widespread tension between politics and evidence in EU migration policy (Boswell, 2008, 2009). We would expect similarly positioned NCPs to exchange information with each other through the EMN.

Finally, we controlled for queries and interactions during the years 2016 and 2017, which were more numerous (2017) and likely to differ from queries and interactions in later years, due to the uncertainties brought about by the refugee crisis, which reached its peak in 2016 (Biermann et al., 2019).
Method

Research design

To describe and explain network interactions, we used social network analysis. This approach allowed us to determine interaction patterns and the factors leading to these. Our dependent variable was the number of interactions between two NCPs in the form of public ad-hoc queries on matters relating to the implementation of EU immigration and asylum law. Each query interaction consisted of a question and an answer. As the NCPs are free to submit and respond to queries, both the number of interactions among NCPs and the numbers of queries submitted varies (Ernst & Young, 2015: 113). We refined our scope to the topics most directly related to the refugee crisis: queries relating to return and protection submitted in the period 2016–2019. These themes constituted the lion’s share of ad-hoc queries (see figure 1 and table 2, online appendix I). The period 2016–2019 was chosen to reflect the impact of the 2015–16 asylum crisis.

Data collection and operationalization

We collected the public ad-hoc queries from the EMN website using automated text analysis to ascertain which NCP had submitted the query and which NCPs had responded. We created a subset of queries on implementation of EU law, following two steps. First, we selected all the queries that referred to identifiable EU law, the existence of which is a logical precondition for EU implementation. We searched for the following keywords: directive, regulation, decision, case law, treaty, and ‘European Court of Justice. Next, we checked queries from the period 2016–2019 manually to determine whether they indeed referred mentioned the national transposition,
application, implementation or enforcement of EU law, either in general terms or in specific instances.\textsuperscript{8,9}

Of the 72 queries dealing with EU law, 85 per cent fulfilled the second criterion, resulting in a total of 61 queries. Each answer to a query posed by another member constitutes a tie.\textsuperscript{10} Our dependent variable was the sum of these ties. The more frequently members answered queries from another member, the higher the value (ranging from 0 to 11). To capture problem pressure (H1), we accounted for both the number of asylum applications and the qualification of member states as destination state (1), first arrival state (2) or non-affected state (0) (Biermann et al., 2019). First, the number of asylum applications was taken from Eurostat\textsuperscript{11} and calculated for every 100,000 inhabitants. We classified Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden as destination states. Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Italy and Malta were classed as first arrival states.

We operationalized declining popular support for immigration (H2) by establishing the decrease in tolerance towards immigration among the population since the refugee crisis, using Eurobarometer data on public attitudes towards immigration from outside the EU. The decrease in popular support for immigration was the difference in popular tolerance between the years 2015 and 2016. The values on this variable were inversed so that a negative difference indicates a positive value.

In line with Zaun (2017), government effectiveness (H3) was taken from the Worldwide Governance Indicators dataset, which measures the mean perception between 2015 and 2018 (World Bank, 2020). Positive values indicate higher governmental effectiveness. We also created a dummy variable for effective versus non-effective governments to gauge whether effective governments are particularly prone to interact with one another. We coded the first two quantiles (−0.325–2.179) as low capacity states, and the latter two quantiles (2.180–3.800) as high capacity states.

As we had no reliable data on the personnel capacity of individual NCPs, we used the number of answers to an e-survey for the 2015 evaluation report (Ernst & Young, 2015) as a proxy. We operationalized positioning of NCPs as either government-based (0), external (1) or hybrid (2). We collected these data from the 2018 EMN information leaflet (European Migration Network, 2018). To take account of the increased number of queries and interactions during the peak and direct aftermath of the refugee crisis, we controlled for the years 2016 and 2017 by including a dummy variable that coded dyads as 1 when a query interaction existed in that year and 0 if not. Tables 1 and 3 in online appendix I provide more details on operationalization and descriptive statistics.

Finally, we considered several dependency structures often found to influence network interactions. To control for the tendency of triadic closure (Berardo & Scholz, 2010), we included two types of effects. First, a
hierarchical transitive triad effect accounted for transitivity, which is the general tendency to interact with actors that one is indirectly connected with through others. Second, a non-hierarchical cyclical triad effect was included to measure the degree to which interactions in triads go in one direction. By including both types of triadic closure, we also accounted for hierarchy structures in the network, i.e., some members are used ad-hoc queries more actively than others. Furthermore, reciprocity is considered to control for the tendency of network members to respond to each other’s queries (Berardo & Scholz, 2010).

**Social network analysis and modeling**

To test our hypotheses, we developed an Exponential Random Graph Model (ERGM), a type of model that is designed especially to handle valued ties (Krivitsky, 2012). Since networks have an inherently relational structure, ERGMs are appropriate statistical models to model the interdependence of network interactions (Handcock et al., 2008). Moreover, our dependent variable is the sum of query interactions, so we can consider the likelihood of interaction by and among certain members as well as the value (sum) of those interactions.

**Results**

**Ad-hoc query patterns**

As shown in figure 1, the ad-hoc query has been used regularly for matters relating to the implementation of EU immigration/asylum law. In the period 2009-2019, the member states submitted an average number of 14 queries on implementation in the domains of return and protection, the themes central to our study. This led to an average of 277 answers per year. This tells us that the ad-hoc query instrument is frequently used to gather input, and that responses to these queries were widespread. This is a remarkable finding because the EMN has no formal role in promoting the national implementation of EU law (regulation 2008/381).

Still, the number of queries and answers fluctuated over time. 2014 and 2017 saw peaks in the relative number of queries posed and the number of queries went down from 2018 onwards. These figures loosely mirror the development of the CEAS reforms: the relatively high numbers in 2014–2017 followed EU legislative activity, i.e., the adoption of the Asylum Procedures Directive (2013/32/EU), Reception Conditions Directive (2013/33/EU) and the third Dublin Regulation (604/2013/EU) in 2013. A further impetus may have come from the EU refugee crisis (2015-2016) and plans to reform the CEAS. The sharp fall in queries in 2018 seems to coincide with the legislative stalemate in this reform period, and the fact that the
refugee crisis had abated by then – while asylum application figures for 2017 were close to the figures for 2014 (Eurostat, 2021).

**Descriptive social network analysis**

Before testing our hypotheses, we prepared a graphic showing the query interactions to obtain a better understanding of the network structure of ad-hoc queries. Figure 2 shows that query interactions are rather dense. On average, member states interacted with 17 others. The exchange of information through ad-hoc queries thus is widespread and brings together many of the EMN’s members.

However, both the frequency and degree of interaction varied considerably. In the center of the graph we find the members that were connected to many others and through a high number of query interactions, such as Finland, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. These member states are key destination states (Biermann et al., 2019, p. 257) and strong regulators. However, other destination states feature less prominently: Austria, Bulgaria, France, Luxembourg and Sweden.

Further from the center we find two types of states. On the one hand, we find that the non-affected member states are less integrated in the network. Lithuania, Czech Republic, Ireland, Slovak Republic and the United Kingdom are connected to fewer peers, even though there was frequent interaction with them. Both Portugal and Slovenia did interact with many peers, but

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2** Network graph showing query interactions (2016-2019). The thicker the line, the more frequent the interaction. The larger the node, the more active the member was in submitting queries (weighted out-degree). The darker the node, the more active the member was in responding to queries (weighted in-degree).
only on a limited number of queries. Romania did not interact in any query related to the national implementation of EU migration and asylum law in the period 2016-2019. The limited query interactions of these members suggests that knowledge exchange on implementation practices is not as relevant for non-affected member states. On the other hand, we see that states that actually were highly affected by the refugee crisis as countries of first arrival, such as Italy, Greece, Spain, Cyprus and Malta are not central in the pattern of query interactions either. We will take a closer look at this in the explanatory analysis.

Moreover, as represented by the size of the nodes, we found variation in the degree to which EMN members submitted queries. Finland was a particularly active user (11 queries), followed by the Netherlands (7 queries), Norway (6 queries) and Germany (5 queries). Sweden’s reported score (0 queries) was also remarkable: even though Sweden is a destination state and a strong regulator, it never used the instrument to submit queries on implementation in the period under study (2016-2019).

Finally, the darkness gradient of the node represents the extent to which EMN members responded to queries. Here, we see far less variation: most members responded to the queries posed by their counterparts, although particularly Mediterranean and some Eastern European member states were less active responders.

**Explanatory analysis**

We tested our hypotheses by modelling the network of query interactions using valued ERGMs, as reported in table 1. Model 1 is our main model, including the continuous variable measuring similarities in government effectiveness. Model 2 includes a dummy variable of government effectiveness instead, to see whether particularly high capacity states seek each other out (H3). Overall, the modeled network structural tendencies reveal that interaction in queries was transitive, hierarchical and reciprocal. The significant positive coefficient of transitivity tells us that the interactions were dense and that there was a tendency to interact with those members with which an indirect connection existed. In addition, the significant negative coefficient of cyclical triads demonstrates that interactions tended to be hierarchical, with some members sending out more queries than others. This confirms the picture shown in the network graph above, which indicates a group of highly active countries surrounded by a group of less active ones. Furthermore, as shown by the significant positive effect of reciprocity, member states tended to answer queries submitted by those members that also respond to theirs.

Concerning hypothesis 1a, we find that migration influx was associated with a significant increase in EMN interactions. For each additional asylum
application (per 100,000 inhabitants), a member was 0.05 per cent more likely to interact in EMN, all else being equal. To put this in context, member states with the highest number of asylum applicants interacted 66 per cent more than member states with the lowest. Furthermore, members representing destination states made particularly frequent use of EMN queries. Compared to non-affected member states, members from destination states interacted twice as much. Instead, our main model demonstrates no significant difference between first arrival states and non-affected member states. This is in line with our hypothesis 1b, which was based on the observed resistance among first arrival states to improve policy implementation within their borders (Zaun, 2020, pp. 11–12).

Our findings also provide evidence for changing popular support (hypothesis 2). The relevance of the EMN increased when tolerance levels for immigration in a member state’s population decreased. Holding other effects constant, the decline in tolerance in a member state’s population since the refugee crisis in 2015 was associated with an increase in the number of query interactions of that member state by 2 per cent. This may seem slight, but the decline in tolerance ranged from −7.6–13.6, meaning that member states with the largest decline saw an increase of 53 per cent in

### Table 1. Valued Exponential Random Graph Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Query interactions (sum)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Estimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Network structure</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum of ties</td>
<td>−4.708***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitivity</td>
<td>0.720***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cyclical triads</td>
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<td>Reciprocity</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Explanatory variables</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of asylum applications (H1a)</td>
<td>0.0005***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destination state (H1b)</td>
<td>0.667***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First arrival state (H1b)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in domestic political pressure (H2)</td>
<td>0.021***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government effectiveness dissimilarity (H3)</td>
<td>−0.090**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low capacity state matching (H3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High capacity state matching (H3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCP personnel capacity</td>
<td>0.069***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional similarity</td>
<td>0.087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2016</td>
<td>0.607***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2017</td>
<td>1.481***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akaike Inf. Crit.</td>
<td>−6,170.787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bayesian Inf. Crit.</td>
<td>−6,110.623</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Levels of significance:
* *p < 0.05;  
** **p < 0.01;  
*** ***p < 0.001;  
Variance inflation factors (VIF) < 20; no evidence of problematic collinearity. For goodness of fit diagnostics see figure 3, online appendix I.
the number of interactions compared to member states where tolerance had remained constant. This effect is in line with Zaun’s (2017, 2020) observation of governmental updating of information in the wake of the refugee crisis, to reflect changing electoral preferences concerning migration.

With respect to hypothesis 3, we found that member states with high levels of government effectiveness interacted significantly more with one another. In model 1 we hold other member characteristics constant and see that with each unit decrease in the similarity in two governments’ effectiveness there is a 9 per cent increase in interactions. This suggests that states with a similar capacity were more likely to interact and that overall there was no significant exchange between lower and higher-capacity members in order to improve regulatory capacity. Moreover, model 2 reveals that this effect is due to the tendency of high capacity states to interact with one another, while low capacity states tend to mix more. This finding indicates that just as is the case in decision making, strong regulators drive interactions in the EMN network and contribute more than weak regulators (Zaun, 2017).

In addition to our explanatory variables, we controlled for NCPs’ personnel capacity and positional similarity. Although personnel capacity was indeed significantly associated with EMN interactions, similarly positioned NCPs were not more likely to interact than dissimilarly positioned NCPs. Whether or not the NCPs were government-hosted, externally positioned or had a hybrid form, did not affect the level of interaction. Finally, we found that the years 2016 and 2017 were indeed a significant driver of EMN interactions in our model, which is in line with our expectation that the interactions were a function of the ‘exogenous shock’ constituted by the refugee crisis.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper has analyzed and explained patterns of interaction in the European Migration Network at the member level, utilizing the rationalist literature on EU migration and asylum policy. Our descriptive analysis has revealed a dense knowledge exchange network based on ad-hoc queries. At the same time, both the frequency and degree of interaction varied between the network members.

Our explanatory social network analysis provides evidence for both dynamic and more structural explanations. First, we found a particularly strong effect for problem pressure: those member states that were more affected by the 2015–16 refugee crisis were much more likely to exchange information on the national implementation of EU migration law. The effect was strongest for destination states, which played a prominent role in the network throughout the crisis.

Second, post-2015 declines in public tolerance of migration incentivized member states to engage in information exchange, which is consistent
with the idea of information updating on electoral preferences in the wake of
the refugee crisis (Zaun, 2020). Third, in line with earlier studies on EAN inter-
actions (Efrat & Newman, 2018; Maggetti & Gilardi, 2011; Martinsen et al.,
2020a, 2020b; Vantaggiato, 2018), we found evidence for institutional homo-
phily: states with more effective governments tended to respond to each
other’s queries. The agency-based perspective adopted in this paper is thus
a complement rather than an alternative to the existing institutionalist
approach.

The control variable of personnel capacity also had a significant effect on
interactions. This reflects the fact that submitting and responding to ad-hoc
queries is a time-consuming process. However, we found no evidence for
institutional similarity: similarly positioned NCPs were not more likely to inter-
act than dissimilar ones. Finally, the turbulence of the refugee crisis and its
aftermath were clearly visible in the higher number of EMN queries in the
years 2016 and 2017 compared to later years.

Our paper produces a number of insights into the functioning of the EMN
and EANs more generally. First, the EMN serves its purpose as an information
network, even in an area of ‘core state powers’ (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs,
2018). Member states engage extensively by submitting and responding to
queries on implementation. Our study thus provides evidence of the impor-
tant role that EANs can play in highly sensitive policy areas like migration and
asylum. Crucially, member states appear to engage actively with each other
on matters of national implementation because of their sensitive nature,
rather than in spite of it. This paper thus refines the argument advanced by
Kelemen and Tarrant (2011), which holds that EANs are less effective in
areas of high distributional conflict. Our findings indicate instead that net-
works may in fact provide a useful source of information under conditions
of changing national policy preferences. Finally, this study shows the utility
of the EMN to member states, or at least a selection of them. It therefore
complements existing work done by Boswell (2008, 2009), which sought to
understand the establishment and functioning of the EMN from the
vantage point of the Commission. However, we also found that network
engagement may not be equally relevant for all member states. Interactions
are fairly limited to strong regulators (Zaun, 2017): states with high govern-
ment effectiveness experiencing high problem pressure. This limits the net-
work’s function for learning and socialization across the board.

This study sets the stage for follow-up work on the functioning of EANs.
First, we have limited our analysis to the drivers of interactions, rather than
considering the effect of information exchange on national implementation
(cf. Maggetti & Gilardi, 2011). In line with our theory, we would expect EMN
interactions to serve as a useful knowledge base for participants seeking to
change the national implementation of EU migration and asylum law. The
questions of whether this occurs and whether it results in improved
implementation or a ‘race to the bottom’ should be studied separately. Second, this study has captured domestic political incentives indirectly by using data on migration pressure and a typology of states. We hope to conduct a follow-up survey on this subject that seeks to capture member states’ needs and strategies more directly. Third, we have analyzed a most likely case for a more dynamic account of network interactions. In future work, it would be worthwhile to incorporate more dynamic political explanations in less likely cases, i.e., networks in relatively stable policy fields. Even here, endogenous political developments, such as changes in domestic governments, could alter interaction patterns. Finally, this study is based on a snapshot of interactions within a limited time period. Future work could study temporal variance in network interactions using panel data. By testing the effect of additional external events, such as the adoption of new legislation or the exit of key network members, we could further enhance our insights into the temporal development of interactions within European administrative networks.

Notes

1. An additional objective for the EMN is to provide the general public with information on these subjects (article 3). This objective does not receive further attention in this paper.
2. The network also has a supranational element: the Commission chairs the steering board and network meetings, and the steering board uses majority voting (Decision 2008/381 article 4(3)).
3. NCPs have been established in the EU-27 minus Denmark, which is an observing member. Norway is an associate member, although it cannot apply for EU funding within the framework of the EMN (Ernst & Young, 2015: 103).
4. We only included publicly available ad-hoc queries, although a small proportion of queries are not made public. It should be noted that our preparatory interviews with EMN members did not indicate these non-public ad-hoc queries were more politically sensitive than national ones, so that we do not expect this to bias the analysis.
5. Unfortunately, the structure of our data does not allow for a longitudinal analysis of interaction patterns. The data on interaction patterns are based on aggregated queries from one member states to an array of responding member states, providing us with sufficient variation in tie weight across queries. For this reason, we could not compare interactions pre and post 2016, leaving us too little variation for a longitudinal analysis with a temporal ERGM. Instead, we control for potential structural effects by including two key structural variables: similarity in government effectiveness (H3) and organizational positioning. The inclusion of dummy variables for the years 2016 and 2017 as well as the inclusion of endogenous network structure effects prevent that we falsely ascribe network interactions to our dynamic variables (H1 and H2).
7. See table 2 in online appendix I for the complete overview of queries.
8. For examples of an included and excluded query, see box 1 in online appendix I.
9. Our focus on queries that explicitly mention EU implementation causes a risk of falsely excluding cases that deal with EU implementation without explicitly mentioning this. Yet, we preferred this over the false inclusion of other types of queries, for instance relating to comparison of national policies or gathering inputs for EU decision making. Including such queries would have introduced bias in our analysis, as these are not covered by our theory, which focuses on EU implementation specifically. Furthermore, there is ample scope for queries dealing with national policies or their implementation, given the fact that immigration is a shared competence, which entails a large scope for national policies and practices.
10. This is the technical term for an interaction between two network members. See online appendix II for a selection of ad-hoc queries and corresponding answers.
12. Please refer to the ergm package in R (Handcock et al., 2014)
13. See also figure 2 in online appendix I (left panel).
14. See also figure 2 in online appendix I (right panel).
15. In social network analysis, this is commonly called a ‘core-periphery’ network structure. The terms core and periphery, however, do not denote a country’s geographical position or its centrality in the 2015/16 migration crisis.
16. Model 2 does show a slight significant effect of first-entry states interacting more than non-affected states, but this effect might be attributed to the included dummy on government effectiveness and the fact that most high capacity states are also destination states.

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Notes on Contributors

Ellen Mastenbroek is Professor of European Public Policy at Radboud University.
Reini Schrama is Assistant Professor at Radboud University.
Dorte Sindbjerg Martinsen is Professor at the University of Copenhagen.
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