The Role of EASO in the European Asylum System

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1. Introduction

In 2011, the European Commission and the European Parliament created the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) as a support structure for the implementation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). CEAS was designed to ensure the protection of asylum seekers and refugees in Europe. The main task of EASO is to help EU member states fulfil their obligations by facilitating and coordinating their cooperation in keeping with CEAS standards and regulatory mechanisms. With this in mind, we analysed the supportive role of EASO to evaluate its influence on the organisations working in the area of asylum seekers and refugees.

1.1 Structure of EASO

According to Regulation (EU) 439/2010,[1] EASO was established as an independent European body to support EU member states in meeting their obligations with regard to asylum seekers and refugees within the framework of CEAS (EASO 2014).[2] The agency is currently under the guidance of the Executive Director Jose Carreira, who is the legal representative of EASO and is responsible for the implementation and day-to-day management of the programme. The Executive Director is elected by the Management Board, which consists of representatives of the EU member states and associate countries, the European Commission and a representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which together constitute the agency's planning and monitoring organ (EASO 2014 b). As shown in Figure 1, the internal structure of EASO consists of four main units – General Affairs and Administration; the Centre for In-

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1 More information about this regulation can be found online at http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=URISERV%3Ajl0022.
2 For more information, see https//www.easo.europe.eu/about-us.

formation, Documentation and Analysis; the Centre for Operational Support; and the Centre for Training, Quality and Expertise – each of which has a well-defined focus. The head of each unit supports and consults with the Executive Director, the Accounting Officer and the Executive Office (EASO 2014: 7).

Figure 1: Structural organisation of EASO
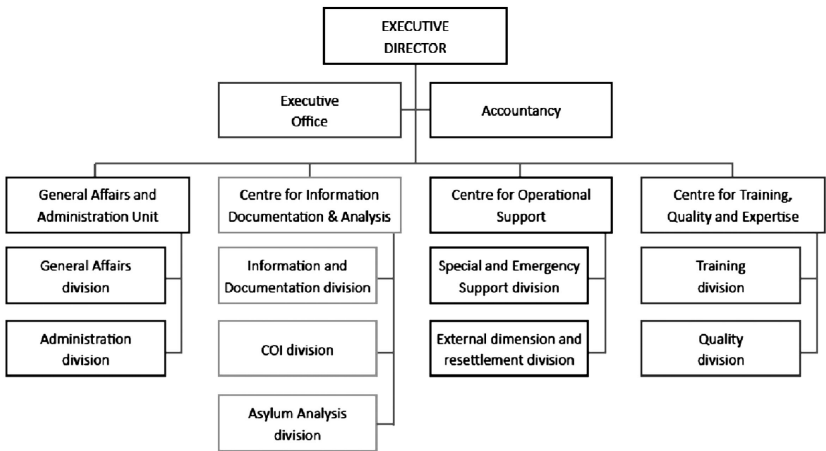
Source: EASO 2014: 7.

1.2 Mandate

The mandate of EASO includes three goals:

- to strengthen and intensify cooperation among EU member states on asylum matters in order to encourage the exchange of information, ideas and expertise;
- to assist EU member states that are particularly affected by the influx of asylum seekers and refugees; and
- to advance the practical implementation of CEAS by supporting member states in fulfilling European obligations with regard to asylum matters, by bundling proven practices in the form of guidelines and by

publishing an annual report on the asylum situation in Europe and co-operation with third countries.[3]

To ensure that its mandate will be fully realised, EASO offers various types of support to member states, making adjustments depending on their specific needs and the state of their asylum systems. Long-term assistance is offered in two ways: (1) through permanent support in the form of training sessions – either face to face by providing training material or via e-learning platforms – to ensure adherence to uniform standards in the asylum process (EASO 2014: 2); and (2) through information and analysis, with the aim of sharing the results and assessments at the EU level and providing information by means of regular reports (e.g. the annual report) (ibid. :2). If necessary, EASO will offer assistance tailored to member states' specific needs and individualised tools for quality control (ibid. :2). For member states particularly affected by high inflows of asylum seekers and refugees, EASO will coordinate emergency aid in crisis situations, providing operational assistance by creating an operational plan and deploying expert teams from other member states to bolster the affected countries' asylum systems. EASO will tender third-country support to countries that are not EU members, with the additional aim of strengthening the external dimension of CEAS in terms of capacity building, information exchange (e.g. regarding the relocation of refugees and asylum seekers from third countries) and establishing partnerships to reach common solutions (ibid. :2).

1.3 The Theoretical Framework of Neo-institutionalism

To embed the research in a theoretical framework, the tradition of neo-institutionalism was chosen as the context in which to analyse the collected data. Neo-institutionalism refers to the process by which organisations adapt to their organisational field (For a detailed explanation of the approach see the first chapter of this book). Such adaptation can be reflected in the development of cooperation networks associated with an organisation and how these entities influence one another. In this study, we will examine whether EASO as an organisation is adapting to other organisations in its environment and, conversely, will attempt to illuminate the in-

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3 See access to legal content in Eur-lexj1022 2014.

fluence of EASO as an important agency on organisations in its own environment.

For our analysis of the status of EASO's cooperation network and its influence on its cooperation partners (more specifically, on the cooperation partners' networks), we chose a research approach in line with the hypothesis introduced by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) in their paper on institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in the organisational field (For additional information on this subject, see the first chapter of this book). According to these authors, *"The greater the extent to which the organizations in a field transact with agencies of the state [i.e. show more homogeneity], the greater the extent of isomorphism in the field [of organisations] as a whole"* (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 155). In this case, EASO affects the member states and asylum-related actors on a supranational level, but it does not act directly as a state agency. However, DiMaggio and Powell's thesis is still useful for our approach, because it relates the isomorphic processes to a legal and political top-down influence and a dependency that results from an authority implementing a certain standard for a field (ibid.). This relationship remains the same with EASO as a European institution that supports the member states with their processes of implementing the CEAS, which inherits common standards for the asylum system. Therefore, one might expect that the field of asylum-related organisations will be increasingly dominated by political actors and organisations, and that NGOs, for example, will cooperate to a greater extent with state actors as the asylum system becomes more and more institutionalised and lifted to the European level, which might also lead to more cooperation on the European level. Applying DiMaggio and Powell's thesis to our research, we developed the following hypotheses:

> *Hypothesis 1*: As the political agency supporting the member states in implementing CEAS, EASO causes isomorphic change for the networks of asylum-related actors in Europe; that is, they tend to cooperate with actors of a certain type.
> *Hypothesis 2*: The actors cooperating more closely with EASO show a greater tendency towards isomorphism and therefore towards more homogeneous networks than do actors with loose cooperation.

To test Hypothesis 2, it is necessary to differentiate between the types of cooperation that organisations have with EASO. Because this differentiation could not be made without the results of the interviews we conducted in 2016, thus connecting the theoretical basis of the analysis with our findings, we will present and examine our results later, in Section 2.2.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983: 150–152) identify three mechanisms of institutional isomorphic change that may lead to increased homogeneity, two of which we used in analysing the data collected. Concerning EASO, these mechanisms need to be examined on different levels. The aim was to see how far EASO can and does model itself after similar organisations in their field by either adopting or not adopting the best practices of these other organisations. Based on these considerations, we developed two more hypotheses.

> *Hypothesis 3*: By copying best practices of other organisations, EASO is mimicking organisations in its environment in order to increase its efficiency and legitimacy.
> *Hypothesis 4*: Being a European agency, EASO is relying on academic credentials in choosing staff members, in keeping with normative isomorphism processes.

In connection with the other chapters in this book, this approach was broadened by the addition of two more general hypotheses, hypotheses (5) and (6). The EU member countries being studied as part of the MAREM project include Italy, Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Germany and Malta. Members of the groups studying each of these states (i.e. the authors of the remaining chapters in this book) have focused on the supposed influence of CEAS on the work of asylum- and refugee-related organisations in developing the profound legislative framework of national asylum systems. EASO must be regarded as an organisation that acts on behalf of CEAS by encouraging its implementation and establishing it as the first point of contact for member states when they encounter difficulties with its implementation into national law. Our research emphasises the role of EASO as an accelerator for the implementation of CEAS and attempts to assess the influence both of CEAS and of EASO as its support agency on the work of asylum- and refugee-related organisations in Europe. On this basis, two more hypotheses will be tested:

> *Hypothesis 5*: EASO contributes to the common ways of working among the member states in the asylum system by collecting and sharing best practices.
> *Hypothesis 6*: The establishment of EASO has promoted the implementation of CEAS.

1.4 Data

Diverging from the approach taken in the other chapters of this book, our study addresses the influence of a single organisation on the asylum system and the actors within it, rather than with the dynamics and developments of the field as a whole. Still, all the project members have used the same methods for data collection and analysis (For further information, see the first chapter of this book). All six of the other groups used the same questionnaire when conducting the interviews in Malta, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Greece and Germany, so the results for the individual countries could be more readily compared. For our examination of EASO, however, a slightly different questionnaire was designed. Questions were added to learn more about this agency's precise role and its influence on the asylum-related organisations and on this field in general.

One of the research aims was to determine whether EASO as a political actor influences the asylum-related organisations and their networks within their environment (Hypotheses [1] and [2]). The egocentric network (for the definition of this term, see the first chapter of this book) of EASO was connected to the egocentric networks of its cooperation partners and will be analysed in Section 2.2. Only those organisations with egocentric networks based on data from the MAREM project rounds 2014–2016 will be evaluated and linked to the hypotheses.

During the field research, interviews were conducted at the EASO office in Valletta, Malta, on 9 March 2016. The interviewees were Jadwiga Maczynska, who was working as the Information Analysis Coordinator at the Centre for Information, Documentation and Analysis, and Killian O'Brien, who was employed as Training Officer at the Centre for Training, Quality and Expertise and was responsible for the professional development of members of courts and tribunals (see EASO 2016). For the purposes of the MAREM project, EASO was interviewed only once.

2. Results

2.1 Cooperation

EASO engages (at least) in three distinctive types of cooperation. One is the cooperation with EU member states; another is the one with EU+

countries and thirdly it cooperates with the civil society within Europe in the form of the annual Consultative Forum.

The structure of EASO's cooperation on the level of the EU member states has changed since the agency was created and continues to develop. Maczynska describes the nature of this cooperation during the first years of EASO's existence as an

> *exchange of experience and discussing together and kind of sharing prac-
> tices. And now it has increasingly become about working together to produce
> something together, like a common report, like common training material or
> common guidance. So it is becoming practical in terms of output, in terms of
> [the] tools we create (EASO 2016).*

Such cooperation is becoming more regular and more operational:

> *At the member state level or the country level individually, I guess the role of
> EASO is increasingly practical and becoming more and more operational, as
> we call it. We can't just go and tell member states what they should be doing.
> We work hand in hand with them, also by deploying member state experts
> from the different countries. On that level, cooperation is very practical, kind
> of like on a daily basis, with regard to actually doing the work asylum officers
> are doing, processing cases and training the officials and doing all [the]
> other activities (EASO 2016).*

The above statement also reflects the mutual development of cooperation between EASO and the member states in an application-orientated form. This change represents a response to the discussions, exchange of experiences and sharing of practices (EASO 2016).

These developments indicate a major shift in the cooperative behaviour of the actors involved in CEAS. Concerning EASO and its role in assisting the EU member states that are under particular pressure, EASO is developing a specific operational plan that defines the area, the site of the mission and the modus operandi, goals and duration of the mission and deploys asylum support teams that are given specific tasks.[4] With regard to the specific form of cooperation and practical assistance on the part of EASO, Killian O'Brien sees an increased acceptance of the office's legitimacy and its work. Member states that are facing problems are now approaching EASO as a first step towards solutions. O'Brien also highlights the fundamental role of the member states in the asylum system:

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4   Access to legal content: Eur-Lex jl022.

> *The member states are still the people in charge of the process and driving it forward. But in the 18 months that I have been working here, it would probably be fair to say that there has been an increased recognition of EASO's role, and EASO is almost becoming a first stop for many queries that member states have. A member state recognises a problem [or] an issue and often one of their first steps is to get in touch with us and see whether we already have relevant information or whether we can suggest a solution (EASO 2016).*

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, cooperation also takes place on a third-country level and includes partnerships, working agreements and information exchange, all of which ensure common solutions and the protection of people in need (EASO 2014; Access to legal content: Eur-Lex jl022 2014: 1). Maczynska indicates the persistence of common politics with this approach:

> *There is the European Union or EU+ kind of approach because we also have cooperation and working agreements with countries outside of the EU. There is cooperation at this level. The aim is to make sure that CEAS is indeed common in the way that there are uniform consistent policies. So, basically, if a person is coming to the EU+ with a protection claim, we can ensure that the claim will be processed with a common understanding of how we define a need of protection (EASO 2016).*

Thus, EASO regards itself more as an institutional framework for cooperation among the EU member states rather than between the European member states and the EU+ countries, where cooperation also takes place and is enhanced:

> *It is also very much about having member states or EU+ countries work together and us joining the group. [...] It should be [as if] the countries are talking to each other while EASO is also there. It is more like triggering or providing a forum for the cooperation rather than having one-on-one exchanges, which was maybe the practice in the past (EASO 2016).*

Cooperation with civil society takes the form of an annual Consultative Forum (CF), which provides a platform for the exchange of information and expertise between the civil society and EASO (EASO Consultative Forum).[5] The CF was established in 2011 soon after EASO came into being, and it is open to dialogue with various actors from civil society who are involved in the asylum- and refugee-related field *"on the widest possible basis"* (ibid.), which includes NGOs, universities and legal authorities

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5 For further information, see https://www.easo.europa.eu/civil-society/easo-consultative-forum.

(EASO 2014: 7). Maczynska explains the broad approach of cooperation with civil society by the fact that every actor in the asylum-related field can contribute specific information because of their specialised work experience and therefore their different levels of expertise and points of view:

> *Yes, we believe that civil society is very important, because it is important to have different perspectives (and they definitely bring you different perspectives), and that is why we are interested in working with them specifically. Also, when it comes to expert input, it is not just kind of bouncing ideas around, learning from people who come with a different kind of agenda, with a different kind of background. It is also about their specific expertise based on their practical work with refugees or asylum seekers (EASO 2016).*

In another statement, Maczynska reiterates that cooperation with (broad) representatives from civil society makes an important contribution to EASO's work, and she also highlights the shift towards a more practical level that continues to develop:

> *So, we try to increasingly cooperate with basically everybody who has something relevant to say about the CEAS. And again, coming back to the regulation: you can see that 'practical cooperation' is absolutely a keyword that will come up in different contexts (EASO 2016).*

NGOs in particular are ascribed a fundamental role in the cooperation between civil society and EASO:

> *Actually, I would be very concerned if NGOs stopped criticising us, because that would mean that something is really not working out very well [...]. They come with a certain agenda, and I mean that in a positive way. They come with a strong mandate, with a strong belief, norm or value system, and they criticise us. If they do it from that perspective, it is healthy and is part of how the system should work [in] that we have different roles (EASO 2016).*

Again, EASO is emphasising its role as an institutional basis for cooperation – in this case, to avoid overlapping and to focus on the actual state of the research:

> *We try not to overlap and not to do something that has already been explored or researched. When there is input from other stakeholders, members of civil society or anybody else, we try to include it in our products rather than reinventing the wheel and doing the work again. So again, it is more about creating a forum for cooperation (EASO 2016).*

A strong relation was also observed between EASO and the UNHCR, because this collaboration is included in the EU Directive in which the establishment of EASO is decided (Regulation [EU] No 439/2010: 2). Within

this regulation, the commitment of the UNHCR on the management board of EASO is also regulated (Regulation (EU) No 439/2010: 2).[6]

2.2 Network Analysis

Based on the data collected in our study, we examined Hypotheses (1) and (2) and created visualisations that display the types of organisations involved, their spatial reach, their norms, values and cooperation partners. The following is an overview of the results of our analysis.

For Hypothesis (1) to be verified, a high degree of homogeneity should be evident in the networks of all organisations that cooperate with EASO. In addition, the majority of cooperation partners should be political actors. In this case, further analysis of the type of cooperation is not important, because our aim is to test only whether or not the state of the network assumed in the hypothesis is given.

In order to test Hypothesis (2), further differentiation is required. Based on information derived from the MAREM project interviews conducted in 2016, the organisations were divided into two types according to the extent of their cooperation with EASO (see Table 1). This distinction was made by analysing the organisations' websites and documents, and only those organisations for which the type of cooperation could be defined and empirically proven were included in the analysis.

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6 "Given its expertise in the field of asylum, UNHCR should be represented by a non-voting member of the Management Board so that it is fully involved in the work of the Support Office" (Regulation [EU] No 439/2010: 2).

Table 1: Asylum-related organisations in Italy, Spain, Malta and Greece and the type and extent of their cooperation with EASO

ORGANISATION	COUNTRY	TYPE OF COOPERATION	
UNHCR	Italy	Working Arrangement	STRONG TIE / Greater extend of cooperation
MFHS	Malta	Staff members trained by EASO	
Cruz Roja Madrid	Spain	Staff working for EASO	
IOM	Italy	Consultative Forum, Cooperation in relocation	
CEAR	Spain	Consulted by EASO once or twice per year	WEAK TIE / Lower extend of cooperation
PRAKSIS	Greece	Cooperation in relocation, no partnership	
Aditus	Malta	Monitoring EASO (EASO Monitoring Blog)	
JRS	Malta	Unknown	
CIR	Italy	Unknown	

Source: Adapted from expert interviews and website analyses as part of the MAREM project 2014–2016. JRS = Jesuit Refugee Service; CIR = Compagnie Industriali Riunite.

Table 1 shows that the actors were divided into organisations with ties to EASO that were either 'strong' or 'weak'. As a rule, in social network analysis, this relation refers to interpersonal ties, but in this case it will be used to describe inter-organisational ties. The following definition by Granovetter was borrowed to present a classification that could be used to rank the organisations: *"the strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie"* (Granovetter 1973: 1361). Because this book is concerned with ties among organisations,[7] the factor 'emotional intensity' was not used in classifying the types of ties.

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7 In his definition, Granovetter focuses on interpersonal ties, which is why the criteria for his characterisations of strong and weak have been adjusted for the purpose of this analysis. In addition, his focus on the particular strength of weak ties is not important here, because our analysis is based on the paper by DiMaggio and Powell; the definition by Granovetter is simply being borrowed.

As shown in Table 1, four organisations were classified as cooperation partners with 'strong' ties. In this case, 'strong' ties means being in contact often and on a regular basis, sometimes even regulated by a contract. According to this definition, the first organisation that was classified as having a 'strong' tie to EASO was the UNHCR. The working arrangements between these two organisations have existed since 2013 and have even been laid down in the EASO Regulation.[8] It is important to note that out of the four MAREM countries displayed in the table, EASO mentioned only the UNHCR Italy as a cooperation partner. Not all national offices of the UNHCR cooperate with EASO, and cooperation depends on the situation and necessity of cooperation in each country. Next, the Ministry for Home Affairs and Social Security (MHAS) of Malta can be considered to have strong ties to EASO, its staff members having been trained by the institution in line with the establishment of CEAS*: "We do work with EASO. […] But we still cooperate with them on a good basis, especially as regards participation in training initiatives, which are of course positive"* (MHAS 2016). The third organisation to be classified as a cooperation partner with a strong tie to EASO is Cruz Roja Madrid, which has staff members rotating once a month to work for EASO continuously: *"We have a system, and every month we change the person who is working there; we go there and support them, sharing best practices"* (Cruz Roja Madrid 2016). In addition, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Italy participates in several EASO activities: *"IOM is a member of EASO's Consultative Forum. IOM has recently cooperated with EASO in its support to Greece and has participated in EASO expert meetings on relocation and resettlement"* (EASO 2014). Cooperation with IOM has been intensified over the past two years, especially when it comes to relocation – a field in which IOM has a high level of expertise.

Three other organisations may be considered cooperation partners with 'weak' ties to EASO. Here, 'weak' refers to irregular, loose contact that does not occur much more often than once or twice a year. In this case, a cooperation partner with a weak tie to EASO is to be understood as a technical term, as described above; for our purposes, the descriptor 'partner' should not be overstated. The first organisation so categorised is the

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8 *"The Support Office should also act in close cooperation with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and, where appropriate, with relevant international organisations in order to benefit from their expertise and support"* (Regulation (EU) No 439/2010: 2).

Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado (CEAR) in Spain, which is occasionally consulted by EASO; however, the two groups do not cooperate on a regular basis: *"CEAR is working with EASO; there are no projects together, but they consult CEAR once or twice a year, they draft a report and CEAR [appears] in the acknowledgement"* (CEAR 2016). Second, the Greek NGO Programs of Development, Social Support and Medical Cooperation (PRAKSIS) states that it cooperates with EASO in relocation, but it clearly stressed that this cooperation cannot be called a 'partnership', which is why they were classified as a cooperation partner with a weak tie to EASO:

> *[The relation to] EASO is not a partnership. We work with them because we get referrals from EASO for people who joined the relocation programme because we have a programme that accommodates relocation applicants and we provide supporting services. So we are not involved in any of the registration processes; it's just to cover the basic needs of people who join, apply for asylum, apply for relocation (PRAKSIS 2016).*

Finally, the Maltese NGO Aditus states that it has occasionally participated in the CF and used to run the EASO Monitor,[9] a blog for making the work of EASO more transparent:

> *[…] when EASO was set up, it was very closed. There was not so much information on what EASO was, what it was doing, what they were discussing. So the idea was more to monitor the actual organisation. Trying to make it more transparent, trying to know what their discussions were about (Aditus 2016).*

Because this organisation mainly monitored the EASO office from the outside but denied regular cooperation with EASO during the MAREM interview, Aditus was considered to have a weak tie to EASO, especially because they indicated that the work of EASO had not led to many changes in the Maltese asylum system and does not have much influence on the work of Aditus: *"Not so much, I would say. I mean, we monitor what they do, but otherwise not so much"* (Aditus 2016).

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9 For more information, see http://easomonitor.blogspot.de.

Figure 2: Types of organisations

For the last two organisations listed in Table 1, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and Compagnie Industriali Riunite (CIR), we found no accessible information about what kind of contact they have with EASO. Still, their egocentric networks are known. Because they could not be classified as either cooperation partners with a weak or a strong tie to EASO – a premise for the proper assessment of Hypothesis (2) – they have been included only in the analysis concerning Hypothesis (1).

We will now analyse the networks in detail to determine whether our hypotheses can be verified. Each network visualisation will be analysed separately for each hypothesis, which is followed by an interpretation of our findings and conclusions concerning the hypotheses.

In addition to EASO, Figure 2 shows a total of 106 organisations, of which 21 are cooperation partners identified by EASO, two named EASO as their cooperation partner and 83 make up the egocentric networks of EASO's cooperation partners. The organisations have between 5 and 21 cooperation partners, with an average of 13 cooperation partners.

Concerning Hypothesis (1), let us assume that, as the political agency that supports member states in implementing CEAS, EASO causes isomorphic change in the networks of asylum-related actors, which leads to homogeneous cooperation networks with political actors as their core cooperation partners. We can see a high degree of heterogeneity with regard to the actor type of cooperation partners. Except for the Spanish organisation CEAR, all organisations whose egocentric networks are visualised – regardless of type – cooperate with a variety of different cooperation partners. If we take a closer look at the possible dominance of political actors in the field, the expected effect is not evident. For example, the NGOs (Aditus, PRAKSIS and JRS) cooperate with at least the same number of nongovernmental actors as governmental actors.

Figure 3: Spatial reach and cooperation partners of the organisations

Using the previously introduced classification of strong and weak ties, we analysed Figure 2 displaying the type of organisations. In accordance with Hypothesis (1), we would expect that actors who exhibit strong cooperation with EASO would have more homogeneous cooperation network than would the actors with weak ties. This would be the case if the influence DiMaggio and Powell (1983) described in their hypothesis is as strong as expected: as a relevant, state-like agency, EASO would homogenise the field of asylum-related actors. At first glance, the egocentric networks of actors with strong ties to EASO show that, contrary to the assumption, all four actors (MHAS Malta, UNHCR Italy, IOM Italy and Cruz Roja Madrid) cooperate with many different types of organisations and therefore have heterogeneous cooperation networks. If we look at the cooperation partners who have weak ties to EASO, we see exactly the same pattern: Aditus and PRAKSIS, with the exception of CEAR, cooperate with a variety of actor types. Of CEAR's five cooperation partners, four are NGOs. Still, with respect to the type of organisation, a higher level of homogeneity is not clearly evident in the cooperation networks of actors with a strong tie to the EASO.

Figure 3 shows the spatial reach of the organisations. From this perspective, when compared with Figure 2, the egocentric networks of all the organisations displayed show a much higher degree of homogeneity. It is also possible to see trends of cooperation: for example, the two Maltese NGOs (Aditus and JRS) cooperate primarily with organisations that work on the national level. The Greek organisation PRAKSIS cooperates mainly with global actors, as do the UNHCR and IOM Italy. Cruz Roja Madrid cooperates to a much greater extent with national actors than it does with other types of actors. Again, CEAR is an exception in that it cooperates with nearly the same number of national actors and global actors. Based on these findings regarding spatial reach, all organisations except CEAR display a clear tendency towards homogeneous egocentric networks and a lack of cooperation with organisations working on the EU level.

Figure 4: Norms and values of the organisations

Concerning Hypothesis (2) and the assessment of Figure 3, the strong-ties cooperation partners of EASO show a high degree of homogeneity in terms of the levels on which their cooperation partners work: MHAS Malta, as well as UNHCR and IOM Italy, cooperate with a much larger number of actors that work on the global level than it does with actors who work on the national or European level, whereas Cruz Roja Madrid cooperates mainly with national actors (see Figure 3). If we look at the organisations with weak ties to EASO, we see the same effect as was evident in the network(s) displaying the types of organisation in Figure 2: there was no difference in the degrees of homogeneity and heterogeneity among the actors' cooperation partners regardless of whether the ties to EASO were strong or weak. Aditus Malta cooperates primarily with organisations that work on the national level, whereas PRAKSIS Greece cooperates more with organisations that work on the global level. Therefore, confirmation of Hypothesis (2) seems unlikely for Figure 3 as well.

Figure 4 shows the norms and values of the organisations that cooperate with EASO and of their cooperation partners. Here, we see the same result as in the analysis of Figure 2, which showed the actor types in the organisations. We can see a small difference when we look at the egocentric networks of the Greek NGO PRAKSIS and the Maltese NGO Aditus, which cooperate with a slightly larger number of human rights–based organisations than with actors that have other norms and values. However, if we sum up all the networks, we see that the organisations cooperate primarily with different types of actors in terms of norms and values, which means that the cooperation networks are relatively heterogeneous.

With regard to Hypothesis (2), Figure 4 shows slightly different results when compared with the two previous visualisations. First, when looking at the organisations with strong ties to EASO, we see fairly heterogeneous cooperation networks. IOM and UNHCR Greece, as well as MHAS Malta and Cruz Roja Madrid, cooperate with nearly the same numbers of actors that are orientated towards human rights, political issues, religious motivations and objectivity, and other rationales. In comparison, all three of the organisations with weak ties to EASO (Aditus, PRAKSIS and CEAR) have relatively homogeneous networks: they too cooperate with different types of actors, but unlike the organisations with strong ties to EASO, they cooperate predominantly with human rights–orientated actors. Therefore, the figure displaying the norms and values of the organisations can be used to falsify Hypothesis (2), which suggests a higher level of homogeneity among the cooperation networks of organisations that have strong ties

to EASO, because the networks of the organisations with weak ties to EA-SO show an even greater degree of homogeneity in their cooperation part-ners with respect to their norms and values.

Table 2: State of homogeneity or heterogeneity displayed in the egocentric networks of EASO's cooperation partners

Characteristics of the organisations	Networks of all actors
Actor type	Heterogeneous
Spatial reach	Homogeneous
Driving norms/values	Relatively heterogeneous
Total	Relatively heterogeneous

Source: Adapted from expert interviews and website analyses as part of the MAREM project 2014–16.

Table 3: State of homogeneity or heterogeneity displayed in the egocentric networks of EASO's strong and weak cooperation partners

Characteristics of the organisations	Networks of actors with strong ties to EASO	Networks of actors with weak ties to EASO
Actor type	Heterogeneous	Heterogeneous
Spatial reach	Homogeneous	Homogeneous
Driving norms/values	Heterogeneous	Relatively homogeneous
Total	Relatively heterogeneous	Relatively heterogeneous

Source: Adapted from expert interviews and website analyses as part of the MAREM project 2014–16.

Hypothesis (1) states that EASO, as the political agency that helps mem-ber states implement CEAS, causes isomorphic change for the network of asylum-related actors, as evidenced by their homogeneous cooperation networks. However, as discussed previously, this deduction cannot be ver-ified. The visualisation of egocentric networks focusing on type of organi-sation (Figure 2) and the visualisation of their norms and values (Figure 4) reflect heterogeneous networks, that is to say the organisations cooperate with a variety of different partners. Contrary to the hypothesis based on the theory of DiMaggio and Powell (1983), the influence of EASO as a state-like agency and thus homogenising the field of organisations (which would, for example, be evidenced by the domination of state actors in the field) is not seen among the interviewed and displayed organisations. Those NGOs for which egocentric networks are displayed tend to cooper-

ate more with NGOs than with political or state actors, and this occurs more on the national level than on the European level and more with human rights–orientated actors than with political actors. We do not see a shift in the field towards a more institutionalised level with CEAS and EASO as its institutions.

One explanation of this outcome may be that the influence of EASO is not as strong as was expected – a likely explanation considering that EASO only recently began operation, in 2011. It is supported by the results of MAREM 2016, in that the Maltese NGO Aditus described EASO as a very young, evolving agency, and some of the organisations and actors (e.g. in Spain) know very little about EASO. During her interview, Ángeles Cano Linares, a Spanish professor at King Juan Carlos University, stated that *"No one in Spain talks about EASO. I use it a lot for the statistics, but I haven't seen anything else"* (King Juan Carlos University 2016). This aspect will be analysed in greater depth in the other chapters of this book. Keeping this in mind, the results for Hypothesis (2) will be included and discussed before we can determine the extent to which these findings can falsify the hypothesis formulated by DiMaggio and Powell.

As noted previously, actors that cooperate more closely with EASO do not show a higher degree of isomorphism (i.e. more homogeneous cooperation networks) than do actors that cooperate with EASO less closely; in fact, the opposite seems to be true. Just as the results for Hypothesis (1) tested the hypothesis of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) regarding the expected effect of isomorphism on the field of asylum-related actors, this finding clearly falsifies their assumption. Again, one possible explanation for this conclusion is that EASO is relatively new and may not yet be strong enough. However, other reasons must be taken into account as well. The networks that were analysed previously indirectly suggest a simplicity of the organisations' networks and their relations to one another, because they display only a few characteristics and omit others that may be relevant to a cooperative relation. This approach was an attempt to clarify the types of cooperation between the organisations and EASO and for this purpose was successful and sufficient. Still, the working field consists of multiple factors that influence the way the organisations work, the way they are structured and, of course, with whom they cooperate. Even if EASO has a strong influence on the organisations, they are also influenced by other actors with whom they cooperate. This possibility may cancel out the influence of the European institution and may explain why the expected effect was not evident in the field of asylum-related organisations.

The data gathered during the MAREM project, along with the present analysis, reveal only a small segment of the processes that influence the asylum system, so it is difficult to make a general statement about the way EASO influences the field of asylum-related actors. Nevertheless, several statements can be made based on the results presented above:

> *Statement (a)*: Many different factors can influence the kinds of actors with which an organisation cooperates, and these would need to be researched and assessed on at least as many different levels.
> *Statement (b)*: Until now, EASO has had hardly any influence on the work and cooperation of asylum-related actors in the European member states.
> *Statement (c)*: EASO is a very young agency, which is why its influence may increase over the next few years and lead to more changes in the field of asylum-related organisations.
> *Statement (d)*: Because greater homogeneity in a field does not necessarily lead to greater efficiency, the heterogeneous state of the cooperation networks in the field of asylum around EASO can be assessed as positive for the asylum system.

In support of Statement (d), one might refer, for example, to the special role of NGOs in the asylum system. Not only can we recall EASO's statement from earlier in this chapter (Section 2.1), but we can also cite studies on the important role of NGOs, especially in the politics of human rights. Schmitz (1997) notes that human rights organisations can be understood as a *"response to a constant discrepancy between the commitment, made rhetorically, to comply with and promote human rights and the actual human rights situation"* (p. 30, transl. from the German by the authors). According to Schmitz, NGOs help close the gap in politics between taking on obligations and actually fulfilling those obligations. This was confirmed by the Greek NGO PRAKSIS, which mentioned this specific role of the NGOs and the inability of the Greek government to fill these gaps:

> *I can talk about the role of an NGO. We are definitely filling important gaps right now. The state does not have the capacity to cover all the necessary spaces for accommodation or for other first needs. We are trying to cooperate closely with the asylum service, and we do have regular meetings on how we will enable people's access to such services. Our driving principle is the best interest of these people (PRAKSIS 2016).*

The Greek NGO Antigone also indicates that the NGOs play an important role in the asylum system as a whole:

> *We cannot have a picture of the work of all the NGOs, but of course they play a very important role, because as you know, there is an absence of government initiative in this area, except for the food, which the Greek Army provi-*

des every day; for all the rest, it's the NGOs that give the humanitarian assistance, and without them the situation would be much worse. That's just a general comment about the situation (Antigone 2016).

The Italian organisation A Buon Diritto mentions that NGOs even run official centres where asylum seekers and refugees are accommodated: *"NGOs have an important role. For the SPRAR and the other centres, both, they run them, and the other organisations can help them to improve the system"* (A Buon Diritto 2016).

2.3 Mimetic Isomorphism/Exchange of Best Practices

In the field of asylum, organisations sometimes try to increase their legitimacy and efficiency by mimicking organisations in their environment. In the case of EASO, with its special role as a European body, this modus operandi of copying best practices must be addressed from three different *perspectives*: (a) the extent to which EASO itself copies best practices from other organisations when it comes to their internal workings; (b) the special role of the organisation as a catalyst for cooperation and the exchange of best practices among the member states and asylum-related organisations; and (c) the extent to which these collective practices are being used by the agency itself when it comes to the practical work related to asylum seekers and refugees.

Perspective (a)
In examining the extent to which EASO adopts practices of other organisations in its own internal working procedures, we find that the prospects of this support office has to be quite restricted. As a European institution, the office must act in accordance with default rules and structures and with the clear mandate emerging from EASO Regulation (EU) No. 439/2010, which leaves the institution itself with little scope for improving those procedures:

> *In terms of good practices on the sort of organisational, administrative side of things, we have very clear structures and rules that are more or less given to us. Procurements are procurements no matter where you are within the EU system (EASO 2016).*

On the basis of this factual and legal position, an improvement of practices must be introduced through audit procedures, and these have only recently been carried out:

> *We have recently had private companies who [improved] certain structures and the way we do certain things around here. And that has been very useful. We have had the internal audit service of the Commission specifically looking at our training activities. [...] They noticed a few things that we had inherent weaknesses in systems where [...] something for example was relying on the input of one person who maybe was going to be ill or was on leave or whatever reason [...]. So there needed to be some improvement of those structural things (EASO 2016).*

Such statutory processes made it basically impossible for EASO to adopt the best practices of member states' governmental and nongovernmental organisations for their own internal procedures. This eliminates the chances of isomorphism in EASO's cooperation partners. On the other hand, it determines the mimetic isomorphism processes of EASO and other European bodies while reducing the support office's need for an exchange of best practices to improve their efficiency and legitimacy. In terms of efficiency, well-established structures and practices were handed to them right from the beginning and are being continuously improved by the European Commission, just as a basic level of legitimacy has been afforded EASO by the European Union.

Perspective (b)

The role that EASO assumes for CEAS as an institution can be considered quite special: the office functions as a catalyst for cooperation and the exchange of best practices among the member states and asylum-related organisations. Part of EASO's mandate is to establish a platform for the several actors and countries obligated to implement CEAS: *"It is more like triggering or providing a forum for the cooperation of the member states rather than having one-on-one exchanges, which may have been the practice in the past"* (EASO 2016). According to EASO, this role has led to a different kind of cooperation – one that is increasingly multilateral rather than bilateral. As noted under Perspective (a), they do not copy best practices from those actors themselves, but they actively contribute to an exchange of those practices among their cooperation partners: *"EASO's primary role, [...] when you look at the regulation again, is more to be a catalyst of this practical cooperation among member states"* (EASO 2016). With the possibility for NGOs to participate in the CF, which also serves the purpose of collecting and exchanging best practices, this statement refers to cooperation not only among state institutions but also among NGOs. As was concluded with regard to the network analysis, this may increase the degree of exchange of best practices and enhance mimicking processes among the organisations as the influence of EASO con-

tinues to grow. This influence on cooperation gains a practical component, because at the end of the consulting and discussion processes among the actors involved, it will lead to jointly developed tools that will then be given to the member states and organisations involved in the asylum process for use in their own work.

Perspective (c)

In order to determine the extent to which EASO uses these jointly developed practices and tools – in this case meaning practices that will, as a part of CEAS, be used in the asylum system (processing asylum applications, age assessment procedures, etc.), not practices for their internal working procedures – one must take a closer look at recent developments within the remit of the support office. As the refugee crisis is continuing, the agency has increased the number of its staff members; it also has assumed additional responsibilities and in several member states is becoming increasingly involved in practical work on the ground:

> *One thing that is important to understand is that we now are – to a certain extent and increasingly – all getting involved in a very practical way as the EASO people. Our colleagues go out into the field and they [...] provide information to migrants or register people who want to be relocated and are eligible to be relocated, so we are getting increasingly involved in practical things (EASO 2016).*

In doing this kind of work the staff members of the support office try to apply the newly adopted best practices themselves. As mentioned before, this approach is limited to their work in the field and is not applied to their internal working procedures. Therefore, this information is of no value when it comes to making a statement about the isomorphic processes that occur when organisations mimic one another, and it cannot be used to verify or falsify Hypothesis (3).

2.4 Normative Isomorphism

To work for EASO, a minimum of a third-level education is required:

> *I think that it is pretty broadly mixed. I mean, everyone who is a staff member here has at least a third-level education. So that is one of the minimum requirements, which in some member states is not necessarily the case; you would have first-instance decision-makers who may not necessarily have a third-level education (EASO 2016).*

Only a few examples were given of specific courses that EASO staff members have studied, which include didactics, adult education, law, international relations, politics, Slavic studies and mathematics (EASO 2016). This shows that despite the minimum requirement of a third level education, the entrance requirements are highly varied. Although a high level of expertise is required in the field of work, and thus there is an obvious reliance on academic credentials in choosing personnel, one cannot act on the assumption that isomorphic processes will occur among organisations in the field. The staff members still have very different educational backgrounds. Thus, Hypothesis (4) cannot be verified.

2.5 Expectations of the Environment Towards EASO

The expectations its environment places on EASO can be said to increase with the scope of the office's tasks. The office having been established in 2011, its role is becoming increasingly specific with further development of CEAS and its implementation:

> *I think that the expectations are growing, which is a good thing. EASO was created so to say in response to an identified need to have an EU agency to work with those issues. You might be familiar with the Green Paper, which was published by the Commission when the idea of EASO was first explored, and then it was formulated in a certain way. And now with the challenges we told you about I think that the expectations of what EASO can practically do are growing every day […] (EASO 2016).*

Killian O'Brien explains that EASO is expected to work efficiently while at the same time expanding as an organisation:

> *What people expect from EASO is absolutely huge at the moment. […] But one of the difficulties for us is to try to increase the operational capacity and keep everything as it was. […] So to keep all of that going as well as increasing, I don't know, it is hard to quantify but it is at least ten times the operational support that we are doing specifically on the ground. That is one of the biggest expectations. To keep those plates spinning, as they were, at the same time (EASO 2016).*

It is likely that those expectations will change with changes in EASO's mandate (ibid). For example, in April 2016, the European Commission has proposed that EASO should be transformed into a *"EU-level first-instance decision-making agency, with national branches in each member state"* (COM 2016). Such a change would include a large number of addi-

tional responsibilities and tasks and also may lead to entirely new and even greater expectations.

2.6 State of CEAS Implementation

The CEAS regulations and directives are extremely important to the work of asylum-related organisations. To analyse the influence of CEAS, one must determine how the different organisations assess the state of its implementation. This has been done for the organisations separately by each of the MAREM country groups – as has the comparison of the different perceptions of the state of implementation within each of the countries – and of course must be reflected at EASO, which is responsible for implementing CEAS.

Because CEAS must be regarded as the fundamental structure of the asylum policy in Europe and of the work being done in the asylum- and refugee-related field, and because it not only functions on the legal level but also causes many practical changes within this field, it is difficult to identify suitable criteria for evaluating its implementation. The critical situation in Europe in 2015/16 and the rapid inflow of migrants also make an appraisal difficult: *"I mean, obviously, in broad terms, in terms of numbers, how do you assess CEAS? There is huge, huge pressure on it. It is huge pressure on everything that goes with it, with Schengen and all"* (EASO 2016).

The following statements highlight the distinction between the legal and practical dimensions of CEAS. Jadwiga Maczynska cautiously considers that the legal setting of CEAS is about to be finalised:

> Again, it depends on which dimension you take. If you look at the level or advancement [of] the legal framework, one might risk stating that it is very advanced because after there was a recast process whereby the legal instruments building the legal framework of the CEAS have been kind of finalised [...] that we are now moving more to the practical element of it. So the legal framework has been more or less agreed on. That comes with a huge development of the on-going crisis which is now affecting many, also legal, elements of the system (EASO 2016).

Pursuing this distinction, she states that the legal launch of CEAS has made considerable progress and by now *"it is all about the practical implementation"* (EASO 2016). In order to assess the state of CEAS, it is important to note that it is highly processual; changes in its regulations

and directives are made not out of thin air but only after they have been run through certain stages of assessment.

There may be issues in the procedures and decisions that CEAS has not yet covered in full, especially concerning the crisis in Europe, but with the on-going realisation of CEAS such issues will be revealed, first on a legal level and then on a practical level. These cases must be assessed by the European Court of Justice, whose decisions may result in further adjustments to CEAS. Because this is a process that by its nature takes a certain amount of time, the legal implementation can hardly ever be regarded as completed but rather needs to be regarded as a circle of continuing harmonisation:

> *You will see an increase in the harmonisation in terms of the understanding of the various directives and regulations, simply because we are now seeing more and more cases arriving at the Court of Justice, specifically about asylum issues. [...] They are now sort of trickling through, a lot of them are still relevant. But now, again, there will most likely be decisions coming through on new stuff, and that is going to be really important. You will see further harmonisation in the coming years… It will be a process. And obviously, at the moment, the Court of Justice takes about 16 months to come up with a decision. It will take a couple of years at least before you will see some progress (EASO 2016).*

2.7 Major Challenges

EASO is confronted with various challenges and must resolve a number of difficulties. The on-going crisis situation is posing an obstacle to the establishment of consistent policies, as reflected in these two statements from EASO:

> *One of the biggest challenges for us as an organisation is the fact that the situation is changing so quickly, the situation changes day to day, and the single action of one member state or even non-member state can have incredible knock-on effects. You have seen it most recently with the closing of certain borders (EASO 2016).*
> *From my perspective, the immediate challenge right now has of course to do with the on-going migration/asylum crisis Europe is experiencing. And this is definitely and in many ways something that is unprecedented. It is a strong logistical and operational challenge, not to mention the humanitarian and human factor dimension (EASO 2016).*

These statements also show the difficulties faced in maintaining the day-to-day business and the continuous development of EASO. O'Brien em-

phasises this fact by pointing out the steady growth of CEAS in response to the continuing crisis:

> *In terms of our organisational structure, we are experiencing growing pains at the moment in that we are moving from a relatively small organisation to a much larger organisation and expanding because the current situation has become more and more relevant on a political scale, and obviously we need to be able to react to that (EASO 2016).*

Maczynska also indicates the possibility of progressing the work as an agency and of expanding cooperation and the relationship with the different partners:

> *That (the crisis) puts us – as EASO – in a very challenging position also giving us opportunities to develop and to improve our work. Since we have been operational as an agency for close to 5 years now, we are also still in the phase when we are adjusting in the way we see our role and the way we cooperate with stakeholders. So for me those would be the main challenges right now: the ongoing crisis and the need for EASO to find the best way to explore its mandate under these challenging circumstances (EASO 2016).*

3. Conclusion

One of the main results of this chapter is that EASO plays a special role within the asylum system, because it functions as a catalyst for cooperation among the member states and, in part, among civil society organisations. By collecting and sharing best practices, this office contributes to a more common way of working among the member states and thereby helps CEAS to become more common as well. However, EASO influences governmental actors to a much greater extent than it influences non-governmental organisations. Whether it would be more beneficial for the asylum system, if the cooperation with NGOs and civil society was increased or approached differently shall in this framework be left up to the matter of opinion. With the growing influence and increasing clarity of its mandate however, – especially as far as the acceleration and improvement of cooperation are concerned – EASO has helped to move the process of implementing CEAS forward steadily, as well as cumulatively on a practical level. Obviously, this conclusion holds only to a degree, because it is based on statements made by EASO itself.

Our analysis of EASO's influence on its cooperation partners and their networks showed at its best a tendency towards homogeneity, meaning that the hypothesis concerning homogeneity in its cooperation partners'

networks could not be verified. In addition, actors with either strong or weak ties to EASO showed nearly the same level of homogeneity, or rather heterogeneity of their networks. Even those organisations with weak ties to EASO appeared to have networks with a higher degree of ho-mogeneity (thus contradicting our hypothesis), which underpins this con-clusion. As also indicated by the EASO itself, the visible heterogeneity in the networks of organisations operating in the field of asylum can be rated as thoroughly positive, allowing the system to more effectively address the needs of asylum seekers and refugees.

CEAS provides a framework for a highly complex field that includes manifold actors and levels, and these must be taken into account in order to assess the actual state of CEAS. This assessment is likely to turn out to be at least slightly different for each country in which it is implemented, and it is almost impossible to make final conclusions, because the situa-tion is constantly changing – just as the political and migratory situation.

For a more critical assessment that reflects the actual situation in the member states, it would be necessary to include their opinions about the role and influence of the office to determine, whether EASO's assessment of its role, as presented here, matches the reality. This perspective to some extend will be illuminated in the other chapters on each of the MAREM countries studied, especially concerning NGOs opinions on the role of the EASO.

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A Buon Diritto
Aditus
ANTIGONE
CEAR
Cruz Roja Madrid
EASO
IOM Italy
King Juan Carlos University
MHAS
PRAKSIS