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Harmonisation via Socialisation: The Role of EU Agencies' Staff in Stimulating Convergence of EU Internal Security Practices

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Abstract

European Union (EU) agencies like Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), Europol (the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation) and the EUAA (the European Agency for Asylum) developed a substantial policy-influencing, operational, regulatory, and implementation-influencing capacity.

By developing standards and benchmarks, by training security staff all across the Union, as well as by overseeing that common rules and policies are implemented correctly, EU security agencies are more and more included in pinpointing political priorities, shaping security cultures, and developing foundational concepts (like those of risk and threat) upon which common interior policies are based. This Article explores the potential of EU agencies' staff to socialise practitioners and decision-makers to certain security standards and practices and their perceptions of what public good they pursue (e.g., security vs. liberty).

The Article argues that socialisation should be understood not simply as the transmission of EU norms to national officials, but as a mechanism through which administrative practices, professional expectations and understandings of appropriate conduct can become increasingly shared across jurisdictions. In the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (AFSJ), where political sensitivity and national responsibility constrain the scope for uniform legislation, interaction between agency staff and national practitioners can therefore constitute an alternative pathway towards administrative convergence. At the same time, its effects depend on the incentives and political priorities of national practitioners.

Keywords: EU agencies, socialisation, AFSJ, administrative convergence, harmonisation.

Introduction

The European Union faces a myriad of internal security challenges, ranging from terrorism and organised crime to irregular migration and cyber threats. Given the transnational nature of these issues, individual Member States' efforts to address them are often insufficient. Harmonisation of security practices is thus critical for an effective and unified response.

The EU has faced significant challenges in harmonising security practices through legislation due to the high sovereign sensitivity and politicisation surrounding issues of national security and migration. EU governance hence focused on harmonising administrative practices, increasing trust, and boosting cooperation on a practical level playing field (Halilovic, 2024). EU agencies play pivotal roles in this process.

Research on agencies has demonstrated that they can acquire influence through expertise, networks, agenda setting and interactions with national administrations (Majone, 1997; Egeberg & Trondal, 2011; Wood, 2018; Guaschino, 2022; Ruffing, 2022). As regards this latter dimension, the literature on socialisation contributes to understanding these less evident channels through which EU agencies exercise influence, especially as regards the interactions and informal exchanges with national administrations. Studying socialisation dynamics sheds light on how repeated interaction may alter the practical repertoire through which national officials understand and perform their tasks, rather than asking only whether an agency possesses formal powers or influence over a national authority. The interactions between EU agencies and national bureaucracies are particularly significant in policy areas where implementation depends heavily on professional judgement and operational coordination, like the AFSJ.

While harmonisation conventionally entails the approximation of laws or formally prescribed standards, socialisation is a process through which actors acquire, reproduce or modify understandings of appropriate behaviour through interaction. Prolonged socialisation may also contribute to harmonisation. Checkel (2005) identifies strategic calculation, role-playing and normative suasion as distinct mechanisms through which international institutions may socialise (national) actors. A national official may participate in an agency's training because doing so provides useful expertise or improves operational capacity; subsequently, repeated interaction may make particular European practices appear professionally appropriate; over time, those practices may become routine even without a formal obligation to reproduce every aspect of the agency's approach.

This perspective also avoids treating national practitioners as passive recipients of Europeanisation. Socialisation is potentially reciprocal. National officials bring existing professional knowledge into agency networks, participate in the development of common curricula and operational practices, and can transmit national experiences back into European administrative settings. EU agencies can consequently operate as sites in which professional practices are negotiated as well as transmitted. The resulting process is closer to mutual adjustment than unilateral top-down harmonisation. This is consistent with research showing that European administrative integration can produce "compound" rather than purely national or European patterns of administrative behaviour (Trondal et al., 2021).

Socialisation Theory and its Application

Socialisation theory explains how individuals and groups internalise norms, values, and practices through interactions and experiences within their social environment (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Berger & Luckmann, 1979; Giddens, 1984; Parsons, 1951). In the context of EU security agencies, socialisation theory helps to understand how staff from different Member States come to adopt common security standards and practices. This Article brings empirical insights to the existing literature on socialisation processes within EU security agencies: the scholarship has so far discussed how EU agencies influence national practices and norms (Egeberg & Trondal, 2011; Mitsilegas, 2016), usually socialising national security actors to security-informed (rather than liberty-informed) standards—hence also securitising national practices and norms (Balzacq, 2008; Bossong, 2013; Léonard, 2010; Wolff et al., 2009).

The literature on socialisation suggests, however, that the concept should not be reduced to the simple "internalisation" of a European norm. Checkel (2005) stresses that socialisation can proceed through different mechanisms and that actors do not necessarily abandon existing identities or preferences. In the context of EU agencies, this means that convergence can arise through repeated exposure, professional incentives and role adaptation without requiring national practitioners to develop an exclusively European identity. Indeed, the institutional setting of EU agencies may encourage officials to operate according to several overlapping logics simultaneously: national administrative obligations, professional standards, organisational expectations and EU objectives.

This observation is particularly relevant for the AFSJ. Security and migration officials are not simply policy recipients. They are professionals whose work is often governed by highly specialised knowledge, operational routines and professional communities. Where an agency supplies training, analytical methodologies or operational coordination, it can therefore affect what officials perceive as competent or appropriate professional behaviour. National officials themselves also participate in professional and administrative networks –and often under the aegis of EU agencies- in which norms, standards and understandings of appropriate practice are developed and circulated. The significance of agencies lies precisely in their ability to occupy the intermediary space between an EU-level organisation and national professional communities.

For this study, data were gathered through semi-structured, anonymised interviews conducted in 2023 with Frontex, Europol, and EUAA staff, who are referred to in text by alphanumerical codes (e.g., Interview 1, Europol, Interview 2, Frontex).

Socialisation Through Training and Operational Coordination

The potential of EU agencies' staff to socialise practitioners and decision-makers to certain security standards and practices is significant. Through training programs and operational coordination, agencies influence the perceptions and actions of security personnel and policymakers across the EU.

For instance, assistance to Member States through training is a long-established function of Frontex, the EUAA and Europol, welcomed by the Member States in the early mandates of the agencies. By pooling expert resources from the Member States and developing their own expertise, these agencies help redistributing know-how across the EU especially to the benefit of smaller or less resourceful Member States.

Europol's legal framework expressly provides for specialised training and assistance to Member States in organising training, while its mandate includes the development, sharing and promotion of specialist knowledge on crime prevention, investigative procedures and technical and forensic methods (Regulation (EU) 2016/794, Art. 4(1)(g), (i)). The agency therefore occupies not merely an informational position but a professionalising one: it participates in shaping the knowledge and techniques through which national law enforcement authorities perform their tasks. Within Europol, one interviewee highlights that:

> Europol has been very instrumental in setting analytical standards across the EU Member States and many analysts in EU Member States have been trained by Europol. […] We also always run analytical courses and they are always much in demand, they are more in demand than the ability to service them it is a quality of training that is rarely available at national level. Italy, Germany, France have training capabilities that include training analysts, but a lot of the smaller countries, they do not have the breadth of expertise… if you go to Europol you would get very good analysts from very many Member States who will speak about the process of analysis and how it works and how they work together on agreed common standards, common phrases, so that people understand what their task is in relation to analysis (Interview 3, Europol).

Next to efficiency gains, training by the agencies also contributes to fostering a common administrative style of managing asylum, migration and policing across the Union (Kassim, 2003). By promoting common practices and standards, it makes national systems more alike and interoperable, smoothing differences in staff capabilities, working techniques and procedures. National administrations are thus apt to become increasingly Europeanised.

In the case of Frontex and the EUAA, the formal legal architecture supports this interpretation. The Frontex Regulation requires Member States to integrate the Frontex common core curricula into national training for border guards and staff involved in return-related tasks, while also expressly linking training to the development of a common European culture (Regulation (EU) 2019/1896, Art. 62, paras. (3), (6)). The Frontex case illustrates especially well how training can operate as a mechanism of professional socialisation. Horii (2012) argues that Frontex training has had an integrative effect through socialisation and professionalization, contributing to shared views among border guards and the development of a European professional community. This finding is important because it shifts attention away from the formal status of the training materials and towards their effects on professional practice. A common curriculum matters not only because it establishes common content, but also because it places officials from different national systems within a shared professional vocabulary.

The EUAA Regulation similarly requires Member States to base appropriate national training on the European asylum curriculum and states that agency training should promote greater convergence of administrative methods, decisions and legal practices (Regulation (EU) 2021/2303, Arts. 8(3)–(4)). The EUAA provides an even clearer illustration of the link between professionalization and administrative

convergence. Its European asylum curriculum covers not only substantive asylum law but also interview techniques, evidence assessment, country-of-origin information, reception conditions and the treatment of vulnerable applicants. The curriculum therefore reaches into the practical techniques through which asylum administration is performed. The importance of this is not that the EUAA can dictate the outcome of individual national asylum decisions; the regulation expressly preserves the independence of national courts and tribunals. Rather, the agency can influence the professional environment within which national officials make and justify those decisions.

These provisions demonstrate that training is not merely an ancillary capacity-building activity: it is institutionally designed as an instrument through which administrative practices can converge. The common curricula by the EUAA and Frontex provide a concrete institutional mechanism for this process of socialisation. The curricula travel through national institutions; their effect is consequently mediated by national training systems, instructors and professional practices. This makes the process neither pure centralisation nor conventional legal harmonisation. It is a form of administrative convergence produced through the coupling of EU standards with national implementation structures.

It is interesting to note that the capacity, skills and training of staff in the Member States is one of the elements that is monitored by the EUAA under its monitoring mechanism, and by Frontex in its Vulnerability Assessment. The fact that training is included in monitoring procedures that might escalate into forcing Member States to live up to set standards signifies that these agencies not only promote a common European asylum and border management culture, but can also enforce training practices and standards.

In the case of Frontex, there is an additional mechanism through which EU practices and standards exert influence in the Member States. As part of the integrated planning process for border management and return, Member States adopt national capability development plans outlining, *inter alia*, their policies for the recruitment and training of border guards and return specialists. Frontex establishes the methodology and procedure for such plans after consultation with the Member States and assesses them yearly as regards the capacity to perform border control, under the Vulnerability Assessment. While the plans remain formally national, they are deeply connected to Frontex' own resource planning and integrated in the larger EU planning of the IBM policy, requiring extensive consultations between the national administrations and the agency for their respective plans to be in line with one

another. Hence, the procedure for their drafting interjects national border guards' recruitment and training planning—of high potential of affecting national autonomy.

The significance of this arrangement is that EU influence does not depend upon replacing or openly directing national training institutions. Instead, Frontex can affect the premises according to which national institutions organise training while leaving the formal organisation of those institutions intact. This is an important distinction for understanding Europeanisation in sensitive policy fields. National administrations can remain institutionally autonomous while becoming increasingly embedded in a European professional and administrative environment.

In addition to training, the operational deployment of staff and the conducting of joint operations might help socialising national practitioners to EU standards and practices. An interviewee from Frontex brings an example:

> If you have law enforcement, like any area, but maybe law enforcement in particular, if you want to introduce change - you can train, you can incentivise, but it's typically a slow process because you have seniority, you have the younger people being trained by the older, and you very often have a slow change because the senior people are still in the decision making process and it's difficult to introduce big changes. Cultures in particular are difficult to change in that sense. What a manager of border guards with a long experience told me […] is: I try to make Frontex staff work with my youngest officers, because that way they get exposed to new ways of thinking. If we think about the EU not only as providing a service, but to speed up reform and improve professionalization of the law enforcement, in this case border management, it's really revolutionary. We skip generations, completely (Interview 2, Frontex).

Moreover:

> You have teams of border guards coming from several countries, which are not at all connected to the society, to the politics. Even if you have, if I stereotype, if we have a Bulgarian and a Romanian border guard in the Netherlands, at a harbour in Rotterdam, they might not be better than the Dutch… these are stereotypes, right? But just the fact that they are there from two other countries, there are no interests in Dutch politics, they are not involved in the societal pressure that could be there, so by the mere fact that they come from different countries than the Netherlands, helps to raise to objectivity. Maybe a more plausible scenario would be if I turn that around and I say Swedish and Dutch border guards in Greece, but I think you get the message, the external perspective is very healthy and ensures I think objectivity and what I see in the

> two good years that I have been here, is that this actually is the case. They are better, they come with this objectivity, but also by the mere fact that they are competing in a way with different countries, they want to show their best, you know. So, in Bulgaria we do it like this, in Romania we do it like that, in Germany we do it like that, in the Netherlands… and this is a healthy and helpful way of improving border management (Interview 2, Frontex).

These accounts illustrate a further mechanism that is less visible in formal descriptions of agency mandates: socialisation through professional interaction. The point is not simply that an officer receives information about a European standard. Rather, officials encounter colleagues trained in different administrative systems and are required to perform together. Joint operations can therefore expose practitioners to alternative understandings of how a task can be performed. This mechanism corresponds to the role-playing dimension of socialisation identified by Checkel (2005): actors learn appropriate behaviour partly through occupying roles within an institutional environment. In this setting, the role is not necessarily "EU official" but that of a border guard or security practitioner participating in a European operational environment.

This also helps explain why agency staff can be consequential even where agencies lack extensive coercive powers. The authority of an agency can emerge through its capacity to convene practitioners, circulate expertise and establish standards that become useful to national professionals. Wood (2018) describes this broader phenomenon as political entrepreneurship: agencies can build authority through the dissemination of information and ideas and through engagement with their political environments. Agency influence is consequently not exhausted by formally delegated powers. It can develop through repeated interactions that make agency-produced knowledge and practices useful, credible or professionally desirable to national actors.

From Socialisation to Administrative Convergence

Taken together, these examples suggest that socialisation can be understood as one mechanism of administrative integration. The process operates through at least three connected stages. First, agencies generate or codify professional knowledge in the form of curricula, analytical methodologies, guidelines or operational standards. Second, agency staff circulate this knowledge through training, networks, deployments and repeated interaction with national officials. Third, national practitioners adapt, reproduce or contest these practices within their domestic administrations.

Socialisation should consequently be understood as relational rather than unidirectional. National practitioners can upload knowledge and preferences into agency processes just as agencies can transmit standards to national administrations (Suvarierol et al., 2013**)**. This is particularly visible where common curricula are developed through consultation or where operational practices are constructed through participation by experts from several Member States. The resulting standards may therefore reflect a negotiated professional consensus rather than an exclusively supranational preference.

The resulting convergence is not equivalent to centralisation. EU agencies may contribute to integration precisely by connecting national administrations more closely to one another and to EU-level bodies. Research demonstrates that officials embedded in integrated administrative systems can simultaneously face multiple and sometimes competing organisational premises (Trondal et al., 2021). The consequence is not necessarily the disappearance of national administrative identities but the emergence of more complex patterns of administrative behaviour.

The recent literature on EU agencies also cautions against assuming that information provision, enforcement and socialisation are mutually exclusive strategies. Blauberger and Heindlmaier (2025), for example, show in the case of the European Labour Authority that agencies may pursue enforcement, information and socialisation simultaneously, while socialisation can be particularly important where direct enforcement capacity is limited. This observation is relevant to the AFSJ because the agencies considered here frequently operate in institutional environments in which national authorities retain substantial responsibility. Socialisation can therefore complement formal oversight rather than simply substitute for it.

The socialisation of security practitioners and convergence of administrative practices can improve coordination and information-sharing and provide national authorities with access to shared expertise, resources and intelligence (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). This can facilitate more cohesive responses to transnational security threats, while also strengthening cooperation and trust among Member States (March & Olsen, 2004). At the same time, however, the diffusion of common standards introduces a degree of administrative standardisation across the EU, resulting in a *de facto* harmonisation of practices that affects the discretion and autonomy of national administrations. The greater the extent to which training, professional standards and operational practices converge around EU-level norms, the less scope national authorities may have to depart from established approaches or tailor their responses to specific domestic contexts. In this sense, agency-driven

standardisation may contribute to a degree of denationalisation of policy implementation (Zhelyazkova, 2024; Börzel & Risse, 2000).

The relationship between Europeanisation and national autonomy should nevertheless not be understood as a simple zero-sum relationship. Research on EU implementation demonstrates that the constraining effects of EU policies depend on domestic political salience and the institutional context in which implementation takes place (Börzel & Risse, 2018). Socialisation may similarly narrow some dimensions of administrative discretion while leaving others largely untouched. A national administration, for example, may adopt common training standards while retaining considerable discretion over institutional organisation, resource allocation and the practical prioritisation of competing policy objectives. The significance of agency influence therefore lies not necessarily in replacing national decision-making, but in reshaping the professional and administrative conditions within which such decisions are made.

This process also raises a more fundamental question concerning the formation of security priorities. When definitions of appropriate practice, risk and security are developed through cross-jurisdictional socialisation and administrative cooperation, they may emerge through the practical interactions of security professionals rather than through explicit political deliberation. Perceptions of security needs and the public good can consequently become embedded in professional standards, operational routines and shared forms of expertise before they are subject to political contestation. This is particularly significant in the AFSJ, where agency-led practical coordination can produce forms of *de facto* harmonisation in (constitutional) areas where formal legal harmonisation is explicitly ruled out and remains constrained by sovereign sensitivities and political complexity (Peers, 2011).

The legitimacy implications of this process require a differentiated assessment. The problem is not simply that agencies exercise influence without direct electoral accountability. EU agencies are also expected to provide specialised expertise precisely because national and EU political institutions may lack the technical capacity to perform certain tasks themselves. Yet expertise does not automatically confer legitimacy. Research on the public legitimation of EU agencies demonstrates that technical expertise is only one possible basis of legitimacy, while demands for political control become particularly salient for agencies operating in politically sensitive fields (Fjørtoft & Michailidou, 2022). This distinction is especially important for Frontex, Europol and the EUAA, whose activities directly affect migration, asylum and security.

The central concern, therefore, is not that socialisation necessarily produces illegitimate outcomes, but that practices with significant distributive and rights-sensitive consequences may acquire authority through professionalization rather than through explicit political contestation. When practitioners come to understand particular definitions of risk, threat, vulnerability or appropriate intervention as professionally self-evident, those categories can structure subsequent administrative choices without appearing as political choices. Indeed, the more successful socialisation becomes, the less visible the process through which the underlying assumptions were established may become.

This also complicates the idea of depoliticization. Agencification may remove some decisions from direct political bargaining while simultaneously relocating political choices into professional practices, standards and processes of knowledge production. The relevant question is therefore not simply whether agencies are political or administrative actors, but how political preferences become embedded in apparently technical administrative practices and how those practices subsequently circulate between EU and national administrations.

Conclusion

The TFEU's restrictions on the harmonisation of national laws in the AFSJ highlight the political and legal complexities of achieving uniformity in sensitive areas of national sovereignty. However, *de facto* harmonisation can be achieved via soft, operational mechanisms of practical coordination.

Socialisation is one of the mechanisms through which this *de facto* harmonisation takes place. This Article has shown that the staff of Frontex, the EUAA and Europol connect European standards to national professional communities through training, operational interaction, expertise and repeated cooperation. Over time, national administrations are socialised to the standards transmitted by the EU agencies, resulting in practice in an effective alignment of national practices. EU agencies can thus contribute to a gradual convergence of administrative practices even where Member States retain formal responsibility for the organisation and implementation of security, border and asylum policies.

While socialisation can generate convergence, national officials retain agency and may selectively adapt, reinterpret or resist EU practices. Future research should therefore examine more systematically when socialisation produces durable changes in administrative behaviour at the national level.

It should also be noted that the norms, standards and practices transmitted by EU agencies are not always politically neutral. AFSJ agencies operate under mandates that must balance competing public goods and interests, e.g., balancing security and liberty. This balance is reflected in their operational priorities, risk assessments, and strategic goals, which effectively shape the broader discourse on EU internal security and can have significant implications for the autonomy of Member States in implementing security and border policies.

The analysis above shows how EU administrative influence can operate through agency networks and interactions with national practitioners. Staff become carriers of standards, professional practices and understandings of appropriate conduct. Through them, administrative convergence can occur over time without legal harmonisation or formal centralisation. The importance of harmonisation via socialisation lies precisely in this capacity to operate below the threshold of formal legal uniformity.

The sensitivity of migration, asylum and internal security does not prevent harmonisation; it changes the form through which it occurs. Where political agreement on common rules is difficult, EU actors may instead build convergence through professional networks, shared expertise, common training and operational interdependence. The resulting form of Europeanisation is less visible than legislative harmonisation, but it may be equally consequential for how EU policies are ultimately implemented.

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