

Common standards via the backdoor : the domestic impact of asylum policy coordination in the European Union

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Valorisation addendum

The PhD thesis *Common standards via the backdoor – the domestic impact of asylum policy coordination in the European Union* investigates how governments of EU member states coordinate their asylum policies with each other, and in how far this coordination impacts the actual policy-making process at the domestic level. This appendix addresses the knowledge valorisation of the PhD project. According to the Dutch National Valorization Committee, knowledge valorisation refers to ‘the process of creating value from knowledge, by making knowledge suitable and/or available for social (and/or economic) use and by making knowledge suitable for translation into competitive products, services, processes and new commercial activities.’¹⁷⁰ While I consider it important that PhD candidates are required to think about the societal relevance of their project, such considerations should not determine whether a PhD project is pursued and/or financed.

Throughout the thesis, it became clear that many decision-making processes happen behind closed doors: informal asylum policy coordination is by definition informal, and thus not accessible for anyone not belonging to the group. Such groups consist of officials and/or elected politicians but provide minimum or no access to observers, including NGOs. In the same vein, decisions on safe country of origin policies are taken behind closed doors and outside of public scrutiny. More than often, such policies are taken ad-hoc and are difficult to comprehend because there is no information available on which safety-assessments (of so-called safe countries of origin) are based. This is even more worrying if one considers the profound criticism accompanying these policy measures. My thesis is thus relevant for society because it uncovers such policy-making processes. In what follows, I will explain how I engaged with society, and more specifically what I have done to disseminate my knowledge to a broader, non-scientific audience.

Informing the public debate

With the PhD thesis, I aim contributing to a balanced public debate on asylum policy. The word ‘balanced’ is key here because, in my opinion, much of what is reported via local or national media, is biased. If relating to the events studied in this thesis, many newspaper reports and tv programs fall short of addressing the human rights-aspect of

¹⁷⁰ Maastricht University (2013), Regulation governing the attainment of doctoral degrees, appendix 4, p.51.

asylum policy, and the international obligation of governments in that regard. By informing the public debate, I hope to contribute towards a more nuanced picture of the asylum matter in general, and of some issues in particular (such as Roma being under general suspicion to not be in need of international protection).

First, I conducted an interview with the German radio station *dradio wissen*: on 19 September 2014, the German government revised the asylum law related to the safe country of origin notion. While it had not touched the initial provision of 1992 (and subsequent designations of countries as safe in 1993 and 1996), in the coalition agreement of autumn 2013, the Christian-Democrats and the Social-Democrats decided designating three further countries of origin as safe: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Serbia. Given my visibility in the German asylum research community (I am a member of *Netzwerk Flüchtlingsforschung*), the German radio station *dradio wissen* asked me for an interview on this very revision.¹⁷¹ During the live interview, I was asked to explain the revision of the German asylum law that was about to be adopted on the very same day. I was also asked to give an insight into arguments of both sides, those proposing the designation of the three Western Balkan countries as safe, and those opposing. In addition, I was asked to put the German policy changes in a European context: have similar policies been adopted by other member states, and if yes, do the lists converge or diverge? Eventually, the interview did not only allow me to inform a broader public audience about the intended changes, but also to give my opinion on the issue. This, I considered of great value. Given the highly politicized debate on the matter, there are too few opportunities for researcher to present a balanced view on asylum issues. After the interview was conducted, I was able to spread it via my networks (via twitter (see further down), facebook and linkedin), and thus reaching not only academics but a generally politically interested audience.

Second, I use twitter to disseminate results of my thesis as well as contribute to the asylum policy debate in general:¹⁷² for example, I extensively commented on the above-mentioned policy-making process, and discussions in the German Bundestag and Bundesrat in particular. Figure 9.1 provides an example of such a tweet:



Figure 9.1: Example of tweet contributing to current asylum debate in Europe

¹⁷¹ This is the link to the interview: http://ondemand-mp3.dradio.de/file/dradio/2014/09/19/dradiowissen_asylrecht_gespraech_20140919_ac7e47a5.mp3

¹⁷² Via my twitter account <https://twitter.com/cengelma>

Given that I extensively studied the processes leading to safe country of origin designations in Germany and other member states, it was a natural thing to follow up on these developments via twitter. Many of my comments have been retweeted.

I also commented on the role of Malta in the aftermath of the Lampedusa tragedy. When 200 migrants died in the Mediterranean Sea in October 2013, the Maltese government was accused of being complicit in not helping the migrants as well as not investigating the tragedy properly. Given that my research partly focused on Malta, I could contribute by pointing out the difficult situation in which Maltese policy-makers find themselves. However, I also critically stressed that such a difficult situation (no resources, external borders, no help from bigger member states) does not excuse the Maltese government from properly investigating the deaths of migrants at sea.

Third, I blog about the results of my research: the first blog post will be published in February 2015 as part of a network of asylum scholars in Germany (*Netzwerk Flüchtlingsforschung*). The blog explicitly aims at informing the wider public debate and making current asylum research accessible to media and the public. My post addresses safe country of origin policies in Europe in a comparative perspective. It primarily aims at informing NGOs for their advocacy work on SCO-related policy decisions. When governments intend to designate countries of origin as safe, they often do so with arguing that similar policies have been adopted elsewhere. My research shows that this similarity (regarding designations) is only partly true, and relates only to a small number of countries of origin.

I am currently planning a second blog post which will address the differences in collecting country of origin information across EU member states. It also aims at highlighting the big differences between national asylum administrations. While public opinion is always quick to judge on countries such as Malta, one tends to forget that the very limited resources those countries possess coupled with the large number of asylum seekers, very much determine (and limit) the possibilities of policy-makers from such countries. With informing about the differences between national asylum systems, I want to highlight the disproportionate burden hold by some (Malta, Luxembourg, or Belgium) and the relatively small burden hold by others (Germany in particular). With such a post, I aim to inform media and advocacy work of NGOs.

Informing policy-makers

Next to informing the public debate, I also aim at informing policy-makers. Several initiatives have been undertaken in this regard. I attended several events during which scholars and practitioners met to exchange their views on current topics. These events were no academic conferences but explicitly targeted towards fostering the exchange between scholars and practitioners. Most of these events took the format of scholars briefly presenting their current work followed by a discussion on its practical relevance for policy-makers. The events are listed below and one is explained in more detail.

- 18-19 June 2012 (Berlin, Germany): conference on the future of the Dublin II Regulation with scholars and practitioners from various asylum-related fields (case officers, politicians, judges, NGO representatives)
- 15 May 2012 (The Hague, Netherlands): discussion between PhD candidates of Dutch universities and representatives from the Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations, Department of Migration Policy
- 5 March 2012 (Maastricht, Netherlands): discussion between migration scholars from Maastricht University and representatives from the Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations, Department of Migration Policy
- 20-21 October 2011 (The Hague, Netherlands): workshop with researchers from Dutch universities and practitioners from various Dutch ministries on governance in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice after the Lisbon Treaty

In what follows, my contribution during one event is further specified: on 15 Mai 2012, I was invited to present my research during the *Art of the State – State of the Art* discussion at the Dutch Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations. The event aimed at fostering dialogue between PhD candidates and ministry officials on the relevance of academic research for policy. The invitation explicitly focused on PhD candidates working in the field of asylum, migration and integration. Participating ministry officials were from the Department of Migration Policy. In what follows, a short summary of my project's valorization, as presented to Dutch ministry officials, is quoted:

The PhD project is relevant for public policy because it looks at a crucial aspect of both refugee status determination and asylum policy-making, namely country of origin information. The future of COI cooperation might be a side-by-side of EASO (its creation being very much pushed for by some states, including the Netherlands) and an informal COI exchange between asylum authorities of Northern and Western European member states already practiced for nearly 20 years.¹⁷³

After the presentation, several ministry officials approached me individually to discuss the Dutch engagement in COI cooperation. My presentation and subsequent discussions made ministry officials aware of what their counterparts in other EU member states do (i.e. collecting COI in Germany; making COI-related policy decisions in Luxembourg) and thus related to the broader political implications of their daily work. Since then, I am connected with several of these people via linkedin and twitter, and there is thus a chance that they keep on following my work.

In sum, with the above-mentioned means of disseminating the results of my research, I intend to inform policy-makers about similar work (as theirs) being conducted in other countries; and NGOs about policy-making processes that are not easily accessi-

¹⁷³ Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (2012). *Art of the State – State of the Art. Asiel immigratie en integratieonderzoek. Samenvatting van PhD-onderzoek ter gelegenheid van de Promovendmiddag, 15 mei 2012.* The Hague.

ble. Most importantly, I aim to contribute to a balanced public debate in the field of asylum policy.