

Do They Matter? The Perceived Impact of European Administrative Networks

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Abstract

European administrative networks (EANs) are presented as key parts of the European Union's (EU) institutional architecture to monitor the national implementation and enforcement of EU legislation. However, their national impact remains little explored. In this article, we examine network members' perceptions of EANs's ability to improve the national enforcement of EU legislation and which factors may explain variation between member states. Our analysis focuses on the application of EU legislation on health and safety at work monitored by the Senior Labour Inspectors Committee. Based on unique survey data and interviews with key respondents, we find that the network is generally perceived as very important for different functions, including for improving the application of EU legislation back home – albeit to different degrees. We show that the position of individual members in the network as well as domestic resources matters for the perception of network impact.

Keywords: enforcement; European administrative networks; implementation; Occupational Health and Safety; perceived impact; social network analysis

Introduction

The enforcement of European Union (EU) legislation is key to establishing a level playing field between EU member states. The European Commission is well recognised for its role as the 'guardian of the Treaties', using the infringement procedure to enforce EU law (Börzel, 2021; Cheruvu, 2022; Tallberg, 2002). However, the EU has added additional instruments to its enforcement toolbox. EU agencies have gained a more prominent and operational role in rule enforcement (Freudlsperger et al., 2022; Scholten, 2017). In addition, European administrative networks (EANs) are part of the institutional architecture for improving the implementation and enforcement of joint policies. EANs are networks in which representatives from national administrative units, that is, civil servants from ministerial departments and/or agencies, interact to improve national implementation and/or enforcement of EU law (Martinsen et al., 2022a, p. 1530). Through pooling resources such as information and expertise, exchanging knowledge, developing best practices and facilitating joint action, EANs have been presented as potentially important institutions emerging within the EU landscape (Börzel and Heard-Lauréote, 2009; Van Boetzelaer and Princen, 2012; Vestlund, 2017).

Despite a growing literature on EANs and their functioning (Martinsen et al., 2022a), one of their core features remains little explored: whether they are able to achieve their intended purposes. The ultimate policy objective of EANs is to improve national implementation and/or enforcement of EU legislation (Mastenbroek and Martinsen, 2018).

But do they do so? The theoretical discussion presents different views. On the one hand, there is a certain scepticism concerning EANs' ability to deliver. Parts of the literature have presented them as 'toothless' or purposely weak instruments designed by member states to maintain control over implementation and enforcement competences (Coen and Thatcher, 2008; Kelemen and Tarrant, 2011). On the other hand, scholars highlight the functional advantages of EANs, emphasising that the pooling of expertise and knowledge leads to shared understandings and practices (Börzel and Heard-Lauréote, 2009; Eberlein and Grande, 2005). However, empirical studies investigating the impact of EANs remain scarce.

This article addresses this gap by analysing the perceived impact of the Senior Labour Inspectors Committee (SLIC) on the enforcement of EU Occupational Health and Safety (EU-OSH) legislation. Despite its technical nature, the health and safety of workers as a policy area constitutes a cornerstone of EU social policy, being at the same time closely linked to the functioning of the single market (Hartlapp and Heidbreder, 2017). Furthermore, EU-OSH is the most regulated area within the EU's social policy domain (Martinsen, 2020). The legislation is based on Article 153 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, and the area is mainly regulated by the OSH framework directive 89/391/EEC (Council of the European Communities, 1989), outlining the minimum requirements member states have to comply with. Additionally, there is a wide range of issue-specific directives setting out the health and safety standards to be fulfilled, covering aspects such as work equipment usage, road transport safety, standards in the classification, labelling and packaging of chemical agents, the health and safety aspects of the REACH regulation and other OSH-related matters. The practical application of OSH legislation is carried out by European enterprises and employers, with national labour inspectors responsible for monitoring and enforcing EU-OSH rules (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2023). Yet, factors such as limited budgets and resources have been identified as significantly weakening national labour inspectors' capacity to carry out their tasks (Hartlapp, 2014). From its outset, the SLIC network has aimed to establish more consistent enforcement practices across member states as uneven enforcement could lead to both weak social protection for workers and unfair competition between European enterprises. In order to establish more even enforcement practices, civil servant experts here meet regularly, sharing information and experiences on OSH matters in plenary meetings, working groups and thematic days. In these meetings as well as by means of bilateral exchanges between peers, sensitive data and insights on capacities and insufficiencies of national institutions are exchanged. In addition, the network has developed concrete tools to promote harmonisation of national practices as, for example, the online knowledge sharing systems (KSS), through which peers exchange general or specific information about OSH practices and EU compliance. Furthermore, SLIC members develop common principles for how to conduct labour market inspection, which comply with EU rules. National practices will then be evaluated against these common principles, with the purpose of gradually pushing national authorities towards more harmonised practices.

This article engages with the question of network impact. We ask *whether and how network members perceive the SLIC network to improve national enforcement of EU health and safety legislation and what explains impact differences across member states*. We focus on the impact as perceived by network participants, thus constituting our proxy

for impact. We work with this proxy because there is no standardised method or data to measure and compare how EU OSH standards may impact national practices in OSH, that is, make changes as a result of EU legislation (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2023). In addition, we find that network members, in our case national labour inspectors, possess first-hand knowledge of the extent and the ways in which the network impacts the national enforcement – or not. They are thus primary sources of how EU rules impact in practice and key respondents as to whether or not EU rules trickle down at the national level.

To address the research question, this article combines unique survey data and interviews with SLIC members. The survey data lay down the extent to which network members find the network to have an impact on certain functions. The survey data are supplemented by 16 semi-structured interviews conducted with SLIC members to gain further insights into how network participation may – or may not – impact the national enforcement of EU rules. Social network analysis is applied to the survey data to uncover the structure of the SLIC and to identify the individual positions of member states within the network. In addition, we investigate a selection of factors that may explain differences in impact by means of an ordered logistic regression.

Below, we first present our theoretical expectations regarding network impact and the factors that may influence it. We then provide an overview of the SLIC and its activities. Subsequently, our research design is presented and the analysis conducted. Finally, we conclude on our findings.

I. Expectations on Impact

EANs have gained increasing scholarly attention given their growing role in facilitating the exchange of information and expertise, best practices and advice between national regulators (Mastenbroek and Martinsen, 2018; Vantaggiato et al., 2021). The literature has captured diverse purposes for regulators to engage in EANs such as enhancing their autonomy (Bach and Ruffing, 2013; Yesilkagit, 2011), increasing national regulatory powers (Maggetti, 2014) and pooling resources such as expertise (Vestlund, 2017). Furthermore, as EANs support ongoing co-operation and collaboration, they have been closely tied to processes such as trust-building and learning (Blauberger et al., 2023; Hobolth and Martinsen, 2013). They, however, differ in functions and functioning, depending on the competences assigned and which tools the network has at its disposal. A functional continuum displays the different types of networks, spanning from relative loose *information-sharing networks*, over *data-exchanging networks* where important resources are exchanged such as sensitive data, methods or evidence onto *problem-solving networks*, which have dispute resolution authority or take administrative decisions (Martinsen et al., 2022a). The functional continuum presents that co-ordination and interactions in EANs matter but by different means and to different degrees.

However, a gap remains in our understanding of EANs' impact on national implementation and enforcement of EU rules. Theoretically, the literature is divided between those regarding EANs as weaker institutional choices, deliberately constructed as largely non-binding institutions to prevent supranational delegation of power and thus having little impact (Kelemen and Tarrant, 2011; Tarrant and Kelemen, 2017), and those presenting EANs as powerful and effective institutions in their own right (Blauberger

and Rittberger, 2015; Martinsen et al., 2022a). The theoretical disagreement may stem from the fact that empirical evidence on EANs' effect on fostering national institutional change remains scarce – mainly due to lack of data.

Only a few studies have engaged with the topic (i.e., Hobolth and Martinsen, 2013; Maggetti and Gilardi, 2011). Both studies rely on specific data connected to the impact of an EAN on national regulators' performance – namely, the domestic adoption of standards as developed by the Committee of European Securities Regulators (CESR) (Maggetti and Gilardi, 2011) – and the combination of original survey data and data provided by the Commission on the resolution rates of national SOLVIT centres (Hobolth and Martinsen, 2013). This type of data is unavailable for most EANs. More recent studies have turned to using the perceptions of EAN members to analyse whether these networks fulfil their intended purposes (Soares, 2023; Vantaggiato et al., 2021). Rather than constituting second best measures, it is argued that key respondents' views on impact constitute a very relevant insight into the extent to which and how networks deliver on their stated goals 'because convergence is likely to occur in the practice of regulation, rather than in the politically costly modification of existing laws' (Vantaggiato et al., 2021, p. 575). Network members are the ones both applying the rules in practice and participating in network discussions. They are thus primary sources, providing first-hand insights (Soares, 2023). This article's empirical analysis takes the same approach, using network members' perceptions as our proxy for impact.

Although previous studies confirm that EANs impact nationally, the impact's extent is found to differ between member states. As noted by Maggetti and Gilardi (2011), the willingness of national regulators to adopt the standards developed and approved at the network is shaped by their individual positions in the network exchanges. Whilst their analysis of the dynamics in the CESR shows that over time all network participants adopt the network standards at the national level, those that were more central within the network adopted them quicker (p. 843). This can be attributed to their higher exposure to the communication and information flows within the network. A similar finding is presented by Vantaggiato et al. (2021), who discuss the importance of EANs' institutional architecture when discussing network impact and usefulness. They show that the greater the extent to which EANs provide national regulators the opportunity to set or influence agendas through network interactions, the more likely they are to co-operate and perceive the network as more effective. In other words, members more intensely involved in the exchanges of knowledge and best practices within an EAN, which frequently are those occupying central positions, regard the network and its outputs as more important and/or useful. Whilst there have been empirical findings corroborating this expectation in individual EANs, more evidence is needed to affirm whether there is a relationship between network centrality and perceived network impact.

H1: The centrality of network members is positively associated with the importance attributed to the network regarding national enforcement of EU legislation.

One of the ways through which EANs are expected to improve national implementation and enforcement is by disseminating knowledge across member states (Mastenbroek and Martinsen, 2018). Furthermore, networks lower transaction costs by pooling resources that would otherwise not be available to individual national regulators (Andonova

and Tuta, 2014). In the case of EU-OSH legislation, where national inspectorates vary significantly in terms of organisation, competences and functioning (Hartlapp, 2014), the importance of utilising the instruments provided by the network is amplified. The SLIC KSS is one of such instruments as it facilitates knowledge exchange and pools information and expertise. When regulators pose questions in the KSS, they strategically utilise network resources and supplement or spare their own resources from being used by gaining insights into issues that might already have been solved elsewhere. In sum, we expect that national regulators that use network instruments such as the KSS will perceive the network as more important.

H2: The more frequent use of network tools is positively associated with the importance attributed to the network regarding national enforcement of EU legislation.

The organisational capacity of the responsible national administrative authority has also been noted as an important factor influencing network participation and impact (Martinsen et al., 2022a; Schrama et al., 2022; Vantaggiato, 2019). As mentioned previously, participating in network activities demands considerable human resources and time. Consequently, a national ministerial unit or agency with a larger staff is better equipped to partake in network discussions and working groups' activities (Schrama, 2023). Furthermore, as regulators deliberately allocate resources towards having an active presence in the network, this can be seen as an indicator of their perception of the network as an important asset. This would lead us to expect that members coming from well-staffed national agencies find the network more important than their lower staffed network peers (Vantaggiato, 2019). At the same time, one could argue that national regulators that have more resources available may not need to engage extensively in the network as they have vast in-house expertise and knowledge (Vantaggiato, 2019). Therefore, the potential benefits of the network may be outweighed by the costs of establishing and maintaining relationships in them. Given these opposing expectations, we expect staff size to matter for the perception of network impact but leave its direction open.

H3: Staff size of the responsible national authority is associated with the importance attributed to the network regarding national enforcement of EU legislation.

In addition to the staff size, the capacity of the national authority dealing with inspections on the ground is likely to matter. National labour inspectors are the key actors in identifying non-compliance and enforcing EU-OSH rules within national enterprises, mainly through the conduct of inspections. Whilst sanctioning capacity of national labour inspectorates varies across member states (Hartlapp, 2014), changes in the number of inspections at the national level also serve as indicators of national inspectorates' capacity to deal with enforcement issues. In particular, the decrease in the number of OSH labour inspections could point to a weakened national enforcement system. This scenario seemingly resonates with the context of EU-OSH standards, as the SLIC has previously reported that several inspectorates face substantial challenges stemming from limited resources – that is, budgetary restrictions – and from the scarcity of inspectors possessing the required expertise (Committee of Senior Labour Inspectors, 2015).

Therefore, it could be the case that participating in the network provides access to resources that are not available back home such as guidelines or training materials. Consequently, if national enforcement capacity is weakened, the network may be perceived as more important, in part compensating for the lack of national resources (Vantaggiato, 2019).

H4: The decrease of national labour inspections is positively associated with the importance attributed to the network regarding national enforcement of EU legislation.

Finally, it is important to consider who national inspectorates are in contact with beyond the network. Whilst EANs facilitate the contact between national regulators, there will eventually be a moment in which they need to turn to other actors for clarification or advice (Egeberg and Trondal, 2009; Schrama et al., 2022). Contact with supranational actors, in particular, has been recognised as providing an information advantage and for embedding members in policy-making at the EU level (Newman, 2008). In other words, contact with the Commission can cement a member's position in EU networks.

On the other hand, one could argue that as the Commission becomes a 'reference point' for clarification and advice regarding enforcement, engaging and exchanging expertise in EANs becomes less important. In other words, national regulators also co-operate closely with actors such as the Commission when it comes to the application of EU legislation. And they may have less incentive to dedicate resources to participate in an EAN if they are able to acquire insights directly from the Commission, which is ultimately responsible for monitoring and ensuring the application of EU policy across member states. We assume contact with the Commission to matter for impact perceptions but leave its direction open.

H5: Frequency of contact with the European Commission is associated with the importance attributed to the network regarding national enforcement of EU legislation.

II. The SLIC

In 1982, labour inspectors from several member states started to gather informally to share and exchange experiences regarding inspection methods and the enforcement of EU health and safety legislation (Hartlapp, 2014; European Commission, 2004; Interview 1). In 1995, a Commission decision formalised the network into the SLIC.¹ The SLIC network thus constitutes one of the oldest EANs with a relatively long track record (Mastenbroek et al., 2022).

The SLIC consists of two representatives from each member state's labour inspection services – one principal and one alternate. Representatives from the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries can participate in the network as observers. The network meets up in different formations. Twice a year, plenary and thematic sessions are held, where all members participate. Additionally, members meet in permanent and ad hoc working groups, addressing a wide array of topics, from general enforcement aspects

¹Commission decision of 12 July 1995 setting up a Committee of Senior Labour Inspectors (95/319/EC).

(WG GEA) and strategic considerations (WG STRATEGY) to specific OSH issues regarding machinery (WG MACHEX) or chemicals (WG CHEMEX), amongst other themes. The frequency of working group meetings varies but often exceeds twice a year (Interview 1). The SLIC bureau, composed of a Commission chairman and a troika from the member states holding the European Council presidency (past, present and future), organises meeting agendas and activities, with support from a Commission-provided secretariat. The plenary is chaired by the current European Council presidency, whilst the chairs of the working groups are nominated by the EU member states.

The SLIC has various instruments at its disposal to improve enforcement. In particular, five instruments stand out: the development of common principles for labour inspections, national labour inspection evaluations, the Knowledge Sharing System (KSS), labour inspector exchange and training programmes and thematic days. First, the common principles for labour inspections in OSH aim to promote a shared approach for the enforcement of the EU rules. SLIC members discuss and come to terms with shared principles of how to conduct OSH labour inspection. They allow more systematic comparisons between inspectorates in terms of their practices and strategies and serve as agreed-upon benchmarks for evaluating inspection systems and their compliance with EU standards (Hartlapp and Heidebreder, 2017).

Second, the practical application of the common principles is examined through SLIC evaluations. In these evaluations, a team of labour inspectors from selected member states conducts a peer evaluation of another member state's enforcement system and assesses its alignment with the common principles developed by the SLIC (European Commission, 2004). Approximately two to three states are evaluated per year. Following the evaluation, a detailed report is written, offering recommendations for improvement. This report thus instructs the evaluated country on how to apply the common principles for labour inspections (European Commission, 2004). At the same time, members of the evaluation team gain first-hand insights into different inspection systems and into other member states' experiences in applying EU-OSH legislation.

Third, the SLIC has developed a KSS. The KSS is an electronic system designed to facilitate rapid exchange of OSH-related information. A question is asked by one country and others respond by sharing their way of doing things. The information may be related to the enforcement of specific parts of the EU-OSH legislation, good practices in inspections or newly experienced risks (Committee of Senior Labour Inspectors, 2019). Fourth, the SLIC organises activities geared towards enhancing national capacity-building such as inspector exchanges and training programmes. During inspector exchanges, individual labour inspectors visit another member state to get practical knowledge and expertise in their inspection practices and techniques (Committee of Senior Labour Inspectors, 2014). The 'train-the-trainer' events and training guidelines published by the SLIC seek to align the practices of inspectors with the common principles and common training standards (Committee of Senior Labour Inspectors, 2019).

Fifth, alongside plenary meetings, the SLIC organises thematic days focusing on OSH-related challenges, such as carcinogens at work (2018) and health- and safety-related risks in new forms of work (2017). National labour inspectorates and observers are invited to compare and broadly discuss their experiences concerning inspection policies and practices on a specific theme (Committee of Senior Labour Inspectors, 2014). In addition to these instruments, SLIC members may opt to conduct

joint inspections. These, however, typically happen in bordering countries (Hartlapp, 2014). Finally, the SLIC has also conducted inspection and communication campaigns together with the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (OSHA-EU) on specific issues of shared OSH concerns.

In various ways, the above-mentioned instruments are tools for the exchange of knowledge, data and evidence and to ensure the application of the common principles for labour inspections. They thus seek to contribute to more uniform and efficient enforcement of EU-OSH legislation. Placed on the above-mentioned functional continuum, the SLIC is more than the loose information-sharing network type. It is endowed with the same range of competences as a data-exchanging network but does not have the competences of a problem-solving network to issue administrative decisions or resolve disputes. When we compare the SLIC network with other EANs in the field of EU internal market, health, environment and social policies, we see that the SLIC displays a relatively high density score (Martinsen et al., 2022b). The density score shows the proportion of possible exchange relationships that are actually present in the network. The high density score shows the SLIC as a case where participants are in close proximity and engaging in interaction with each other (Centola, 2010). The SLIC is thus a case in point to draw out dynamics and perceptions likely also to apply to a larger universe of cases. It is mature, established back in 1982; it has diverse functions and tools, making it more than a simple site of information sharing; and its members are connected to a relatively high degree, showing that members are willing to engage. But it is not a problem-solving network, which constitutes a more likely case of impact given its explicit competence to resolve disputes (Hobolth and Martinsen, 2013). The characteristics of the SLIC are shared with other EANs situated in between on the functional continuum and the findings thus inform us beyond the more likely cases of perceived impact.

III. Research Design

Our research design contains two analytical steps. First, we explore to what extent and how network members perceive the impact of their participation on different functions related to the enforcement of EU-OSH rules. Second, we analyse different explanations for the variation of network members' perceptions of the extent to which network participation improves the national application of common principles in labour inspections. We use a mix of methods and data to fulfil these steps.

For the analyses, we collected most of our data through a survey amongst SLIC members. Survey responses were collected between May and August in 2022. Our response rate was 100%,² meaning that one network member from all 27 member states responded, which is more than sufficient to perform our analyses and to accurately simulate the network structure (Borgatti, 2006). Still, with 27 respondents, the number of observations for our regression analysis is limited, requiring us to restrict the number of independent variables. In addition, we conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with SLIC members from different member states. Two interviews were conducted in October 2021 to prepare

²Whilst all SLIC members participated in our survey and provided responses to the majority of the questions, it is worth noting that not all respondents answered every question.

for the survey. Another 14 interviews were conducted between January and February 2023, that is, after the survey. Interviewees corresponded to a wide diversity of SLIC members, covering representatives from northern and southern European countries and continental and eastern European member states, with different national enforcement systems. The interview questions focused mainly on the content of exchanges within the SLIC (e.g., what sort of information and best practices are exchanged in the network?) and on the importance of the SLIC for national enforcement of EU-OSH legislation. We utilise interview data to provide more qualitative insights into network impact and whether the use of network tools matters for realising the goal of the network, that is, to improve the enforcement of EU-OSH legislation.

Dependent and Independent Variables

Our dependent variable for the study of impact is the degree to which network members say the SLIC is important for *improving application of common principles for labour inspections in their member states*. This serves as a proxy for network impact. The importance for improving application is measured as 0 = *not at all important*, 1 = *slightly important*, 2 = *moderately important* and 3 = *very important*.

To examine H1 on the centrality of national regulators, we create an independent variable on the *degree centrality* of SLIC members based on our survey data. *Degree centrality* is calculated as the number of direct ties SLIC members have when exchanging best practices. In other words, it assesses the total number of connections a network member is involved in when exchanging best practices (i.e., how many times it has been named by others as being an exchange partner).

To examine H2 on the use of network tools, our survey included a question about the use of the KSS. Specifically, we asked our respondents how many times their organisation sent questions via the KSS system over the past 2 years. *KSS use* is measured as 0 = *none*, 1 = *between 1 and 5 times*, 2 = *between 6 and 10 times*, 3 = *between 11 and 15 times*, 4 = *between 16 and 20 times* and 5 = *over 20 times*.

To address H3, we asked survey respondents how many staff members in their organisation are in one way or another involved in the activities of the SLIC. *Staff size* is measured as 1 = *less than one full-time employee or equivalent*, 2 = *one to two full-time employees or equivalent*, 3 = *two to three full-time employees or equivalent* or 4 = *at least four full-time employees or equivalent*.

In order to examine H4, we gathered data on the *conduction of labour inspections* from the International Labour Organization (ILO) database.³ These data are based on member states' annual reports on labour inspections. We measured the decrease in inspections by taking the difference from the years 2019 and 2010. This way, we avoid a potential bias from the year 2020 where the COVID-19 pandemic impacted operations. In cases where data for these years were unavailable, data from the closest year were taken.

Finally, concerning H5, survey respondents could indicate how often they, as a national representative in SLIC, were in contact with the *European Commission* concerning matters addressed in the SLIC. Contact here refers to general discussions, exchange of views and informal advice concerning matters of EU health and safety at work as

³ILO Data Code: [LALVIST_NOC_NB].

discussed in the SLIC. Frequency of contact is measured as 0 = *never*, 1 = *a few times a year*, 2 = *a few times a month*, 3 = *nearly every day*, 4 = *once a day*.

IV. Analysis

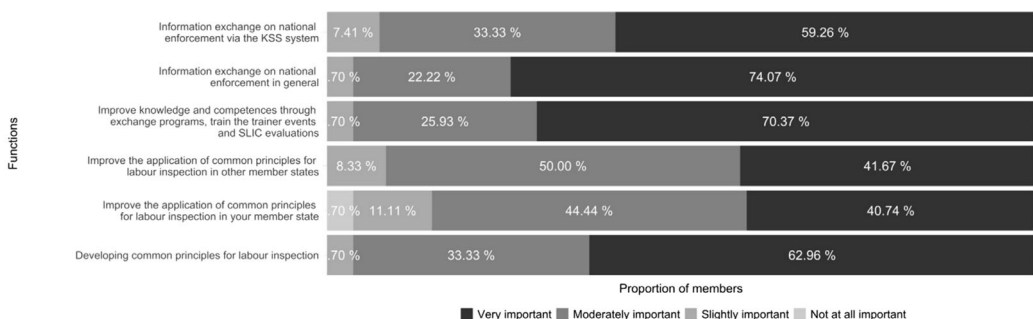
We start our analysis by addressing the more explorative part of the research question: whether and how network members perceive their participation in the network to improve the national enforcement of EU health and safety legislation. We do so by providing an overview of the importance attributed by SLIC members to the network for diverse purposes on the basis of our survey. The results are complemented by the insights from interviews, which allows us to further explore the rationale of SLIC members when assessing the importance of the network. We then proceed by examining network interaction for the exchange of best practice by means of social network analysis. We hereby identify the structure of the network as well as network members' degree centrality, allowing us to examine H1. Finally, we turn to the explanatory part of the analysis, addressing the last part of our research question, that is, what explains perceived impact differences across member states.

Importance Attributed to SLIC

In order to understand the functional impact of the SLIC as perceived by its members, our survey asked respondents to what extent they found the SLIC important for its different functions, which ranged from exchanging information on enforcement of EU-OSH policy in general to improving the national application of common principles for labour inspections. Respondents could choose between finding a function 'not at all important', 'slightly important', 'moderately important' or 'very important'.

Figure 1 shows that the large majority of members find the SLIC 'very important' or 'moderately important' for all its functions. This perception has also been largely echoed throughout the interviews. In general, respondents find that the SLIC delivers in

Figure 1: Overview of Survey Responses Concerning the Degree of Importance of the SLIC Network for Diverse Functions. Notes: KSS, knowledge sharing system; SLIC, Senior Labour Inspectors Committee.



accordance with its purpose and that engagement in the network brings forth more harmonised standards:

Yes, we benefit a lot [from working together in SLIC] but we also work very hard to have and to live up to those benefits, which is a trade-off. I mean, we are all here learning and exchanging, because when we compare ourselves, we have inspection levels with some specificities and with very different resources. But, over the years and along the path that SLIC has taken, the standards have been increasingly harmonized. And the expected path for the network is one of greater harmonization and increasing harmonization and compliance with minimum standards to protect (Interview 16).

However, it is clear that some functions are considered more important than others. The SLIC scores highest amongst its members for the exchange of information on national enforcement of EU-OSH legislation in general, with 74% of respondents indicating that they find it very important. SLIC members have emphasised the importance of these exchanges, particularly in the context of the issue-specific SLIC working groups (Interviews 7, 9 and 10). This active exchange of best practices and knowledge between network members constitutes the base to the development of guidelines within their issue area and concerning new risks on how to enforce EU-OSH legislation on the ground:

And these working groups develop guidelines for collecting good practices on several issues, always regarding enforcement, always regarding enforcement of the labour inspection and always related to occupational safety and health. And that is the constants - occupational safety and health, labour inspection and enforcement, that are the cornerstones so-to-say of SLIC (Interview 4).

Furthermore, the working groups can send out questionnaires to national inspectorates on more general or specific aspects of enforcement. The information gathered allows for comparison and establishes ground for improving national practices:

So, you've got a very good overview of, and I suppose, a benchmark of the level of enforcement. Is it consistent? Is it higher? Is it lower? And then you might be able to explore that a little bit further in respect of if you're higher or lower or outside the norm with other member states [...] and that's why it's very important (Interview 14).

The importance of the SLIC as a venue for exchanging information regarding the enforcement of EU-OSH legislation is also highlighted with the use of the KSS tool. Whilst only 59.26% of the respondents considered it very important, the KSS was frequently mentioned during the interviews as an effective tool to get a view into how other member states enforce the rules and to improve their own enforcement practices (Interviews 3, 4, 5, 6, 11, 14 and 15). Although member states are not obliged to respond to KSS queries, many do – and they do so relatively quickly (Interviews 4 and 9):

SLIC has the opportunity through the knowledge sharing site (KSS) for every member state to ask questions when they come up against a problem, for whatever reason. And generally speaking, the feedback to the questions asked is always very positive. I mean, and in our case [...], we have asked several questions over the years, and we never had less than or received less than something like 20 replies. So twenty replies from 27 member states is a very good result (Interview 10).

There has also been a gradual increase in the usage of the KSS by member states, culminating in a total of 34 questions posed in 2022 (Interviews 1 and 4).

Furthermore, 70% of the respondents consider the network very important for improving knowledge and competences of labour inspectorates through exchange programmes, 'train-the-trainer' events and SLIC evaluations. These constitute concrete tools that, in different ways, make the SLIC have an impact on national enforcement practices (Interviews 5, 7, 9, 10, 14, 15 and 16). The exchange programmes, for example, have been met with considerable enthusiasm by national inspectors as they enable learning and the dissemination of new information at their national level: [...] inspector may have one specific focus, but they will touch upon other processes and other work that that member state might be doing. And I would know that the inspector can come back to say [...]

'I'm sharing their experiences internally, and we can look at how we do it and can we make changes' (Interview 12).

Our survey reveals that, over the last 5 years, representatives from national inspectorates have, on average, visited at least two other member states through the SLIC exchange programme, which shows the high engagement of SLIC participants in this activity. Furthermore, the 'train-the-trainer' seminars, organised by the working groups, are considered central to equipping national labour inspectors with knowledge on how to enforce EU-OSH legislation along the general common principles and when addressing new risks (Interviews 6, 7 and 9). The seminars function as venues to pool resources:

And in SLIC, we are doing together this same training programs and some applications to support that. So it's easier and it saves our resources that we are doing it together' (Interview 7).

SLIC evaluations are also highlighted as important instruments for developing a shared approach (Interviews 5, 7, 9, 10, 14 and 16). When up for evaluation, the evaluated country has to prepare for the visit, not only at the managerial level but also at the local inspector level. National authorities within the same country have to prepare for the visit together and thus come to share information and practices with each other. Evaluations thus also foster co-operation internally in the member state examined:

When we experienced the evaluation of our system in 2019, [...] we were somehow forced to get all the information from the other authorities. So, what we had with them were meetings. And so it was helpful in this sense. [...] It's not easy for us to have exchanges with our colleagues from other authorities, for each of the [topics] and throughout the years. So when there is the occasional ... kind of, you have a target and you have to be evaluated so all of them are involved. The SLIC helps because it has forced us to work together (Interview 5).

Also being part of the evaluation team is noted to bring new knowledge:

It's also a time where you can learn a lot from the other countries, and how they are operating, and what kind of structures and of legislation there is in place, and what kind of cooperation is happening inside the country. And maybe you can learn something for your own country also (Interview 7).

Additionally, 62% of respondents expressed that SLIC is very important for developing common principles for labour inspection. This contributes to the development of a shared approach to the enforcement of EU-OSH legislation. Over time, national practices are noted to have become more similar and overall national enforcement to have improved:

[...] I think many of the other countries in Europe now are rising up in this race, and we are together more equal today than we have been back in 10 and 20 years' (Interview 15).

Still, the perceptions of the network's importance are more varied when it comes to improving enforcement of EU-OSH legislation – both in respondents' own member state and in other member states. When asked if the SLIC is important for improving the application of common principles for labour inspection in other member states, 50% of respondents consider the SLIC moderately important, and 40% consider it very important. Meanwhile, for improving the application of common principles for labour inspection in their own member state – the function that constitutes our dependent variable⁴ – respondents perceive SLIC as either moderately important (44%) or very important (40%). This is also the only function where a very small part of the network (3.71%) does not view the network as important at all. This means that SLIC members present diverse perceptions on the importance of the SLIC when it comes to improving the national enforcement of EU-OSH legislation, which is one of its central purposes. Our exploratory analysis below examines which factors can explain these different perceptions.

The Structure of the Network

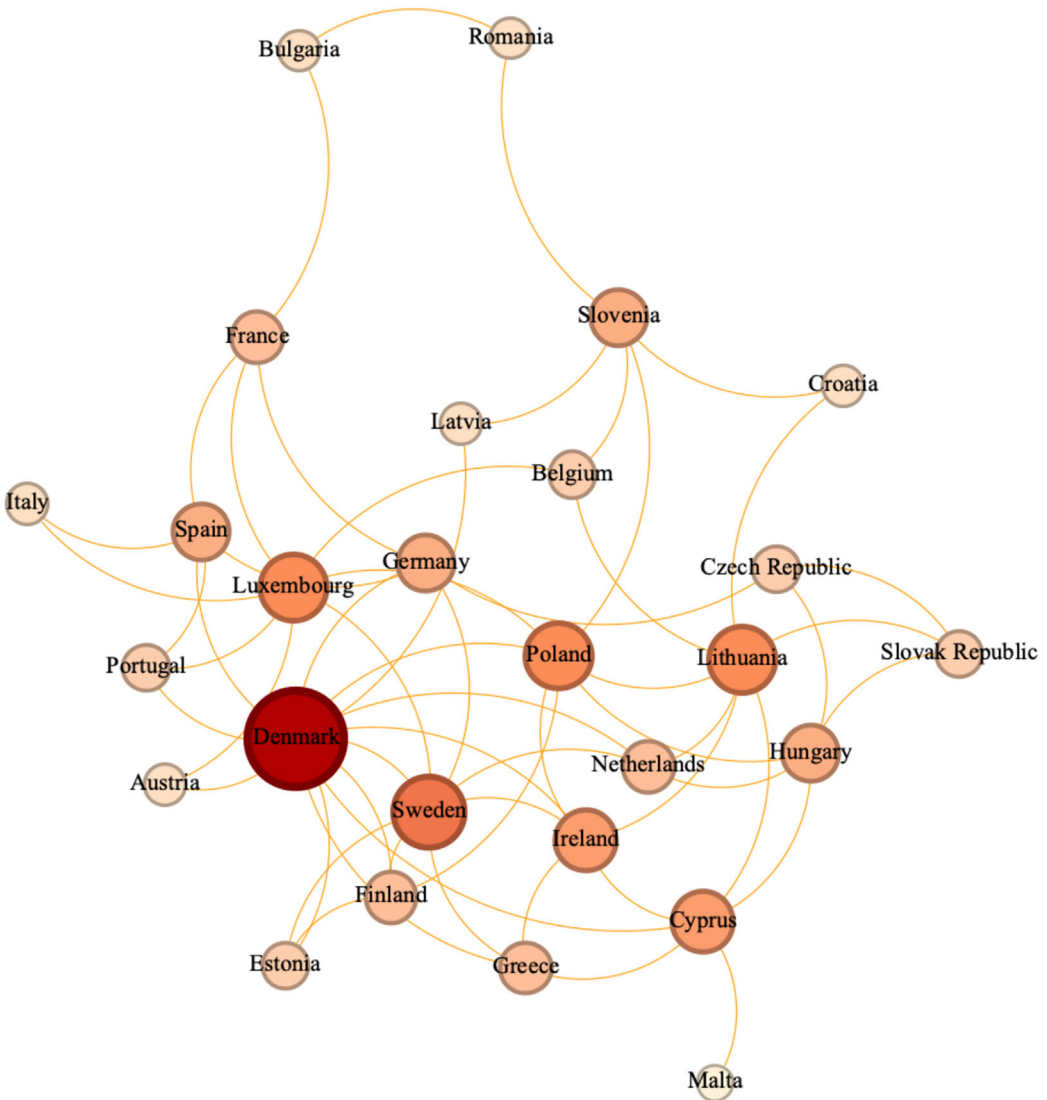
Social network analysis is used to present the structure of the network. By graphing who exchanges best practices with whom, we can visualise how integrated or sparse the network structure is. This analysis also allows us to not only identify the individual positions but also examine the centrality of certain participants. The results are portrayed in Figure 2.

The network analysis shows that several network members possess direct and indirect ties to each other. On average, each participant exchanges best practices (most frequently) with four of their network peers. Furthermore, the distance through which best practices must travel from one end of the network to reach the other is five network participants. This short distance benefits communication within the network and makes the diffusion of practices across members rather dynamic and rapid.

The analysis also shows that certain national labour inspectorates are particularly central to the network, as others in the network frequently turn to them for the exchange of best practices. Notable examples include Denmark, Sweden and Poland. Denmark, in particular, stands out as highly central in the network and is considerably more approached for the exchange of best practices than its counterparts. Meanwhile, several national inspectorates, such as those from Malta, Romania and Bulgaria, remain at the periphery of the network when it comes to the exchange of best practices. This dynamic reflects a core–periphery network structure, where the exchanges of best practices are more frequent and concentrated amongst those at the centre of the network.

⁴It is important to note that not all respondents have assigned a level of importance to the SLIC in this particular function.

Figure 2: Network Graph of Senior Labour Inspectors Committee Members Exchanging Best Practices. Notes: The larger and darker the node, the more frequent other members turn to that member for the exchange of best practices. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Explaining Different Impact Perceptions

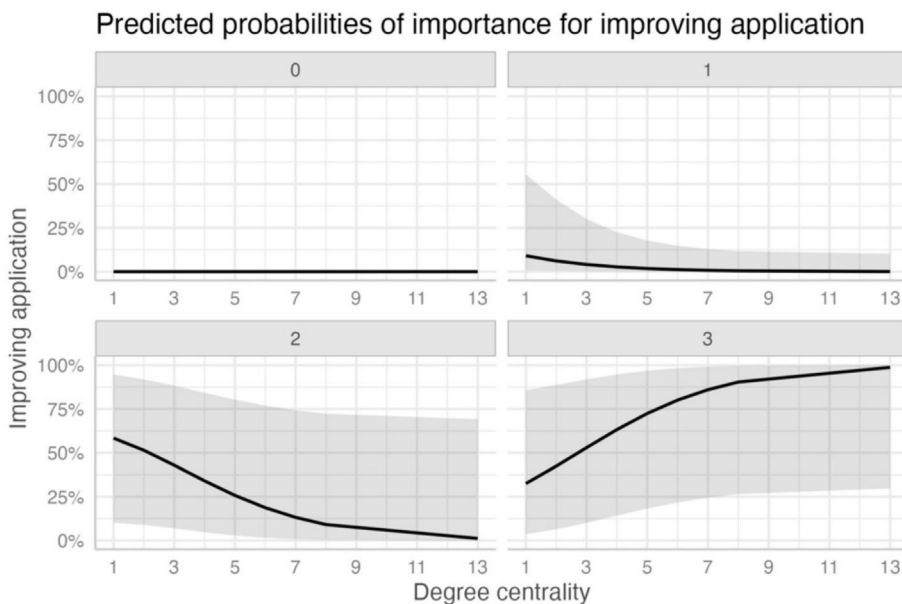
Turning to the inferential part of the analysis, we include the variables of interest as mentioned in the expectations on impact – namely, degree centrality in the exchange of best practices, the use of network tools (i.e., KSS), staff size, decrease in national inspections and Commission contact. The conducted network analysis identified Denmark as a

Table 1: Ordered Logistic Regression on Perceived SLIC Importance to Improve Application.

	<i>Dependent variable</i>	
	<i>Improving application (perceived importance)</i>	<i>Improving application (perceived importance) – excluding Denmark</i>
	(1)	(2)
Degree centrality	0.424* (0.243)	0.664** (0.334)
Staff size	0.489 (0.453)	0.349 (0.457)
Decrease in inspections (%)	0.029** (0.012)	0.034** (0.014)
Commission contact	-2.377** (1.129)	-1.883 (1.224)
KSS use	-1.232 (0.789)	-1.289 (0.815)
Observations	21 ^a	20

^aMissing values for Germany and France regarding KSS use; missing values for Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia and Romania regarding Commission contact. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; and *** $p < 0.01$.

Figure 3: Predicted Probabilities of Perceived Importance for Improving Application by Degree Centrality.



considerably more important actor in the network structure as it exchanges best practices with 13 other member states, which is much more than its network peers. Denmark is thus not only a lead actor but also an outlier compared to other states. Therefore, we conduct the inferential analysis both with and without Denmark's score to ensure that the results are not mainly driven by one individual country. Table 1 presents the log odd coefficients for the inferential analysis.

First, examining H1, we see a significant effect of the degree to which member states share best practices with other member states on their perceived importance of the network in improving application. Those central in the network attribute significantly more importance to the SLIC than those in the periphery. Figure 3 shows that the predicted probabilities of respondents perceiving the network as very important for the application of common principles for labour inspections (panel 3) are 33% for those that share best practices with only one other. However, it rises to 99% for those that share best practices with 13 others.

Turning to H2, we do not find that the use of the KSS instrument affects members' perceptions of network impact. More frequent use of the KSS does not result in more importance attributed to the SLIC regarding national enforcement. Furthermore, we cannot confirm H3. Members with low staff level do not attribute more importance to the SLIC than their better staffed counterparts – nor do higher staffed members attribute more importance to the network.

However, for H4, we do see a significant effect of the decrease in inspections when comparing 2010 to 2019. Figure 4 shows that the predicted probabilities of respondents indicating that they perceive the network as very important for improving the application

Figure 4: Predicted Probabilities of Perceived Importance for Improving Application by Decrease of Inspections (%).

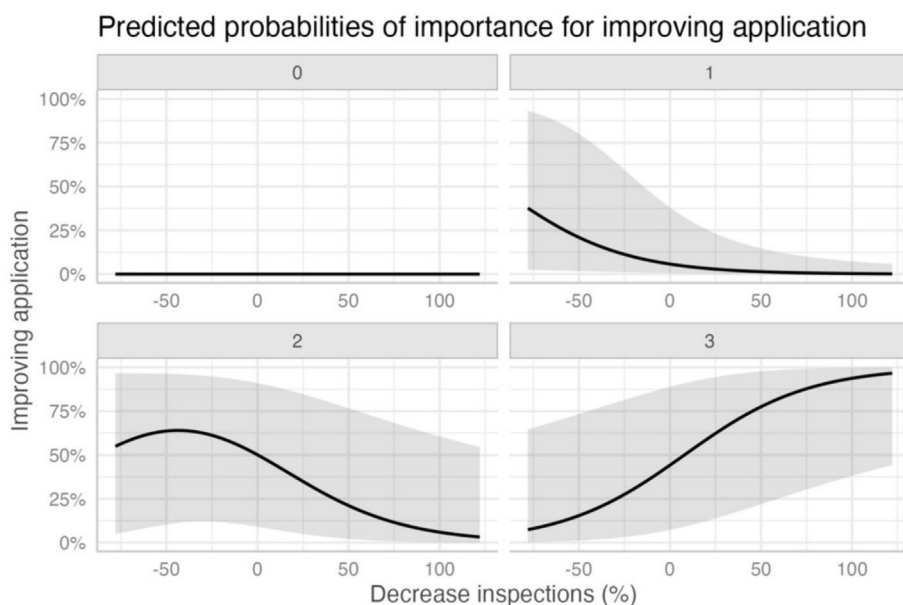


Figure 5: Predicted Probabilities of Perceived Importance for Improving Application by Frequency of Commission Contact. Notes: Frequency of Commission contact takes on the values of 1 = *a few times a year*, 2 = *a few times a month* and 3 = *nearly every day*.

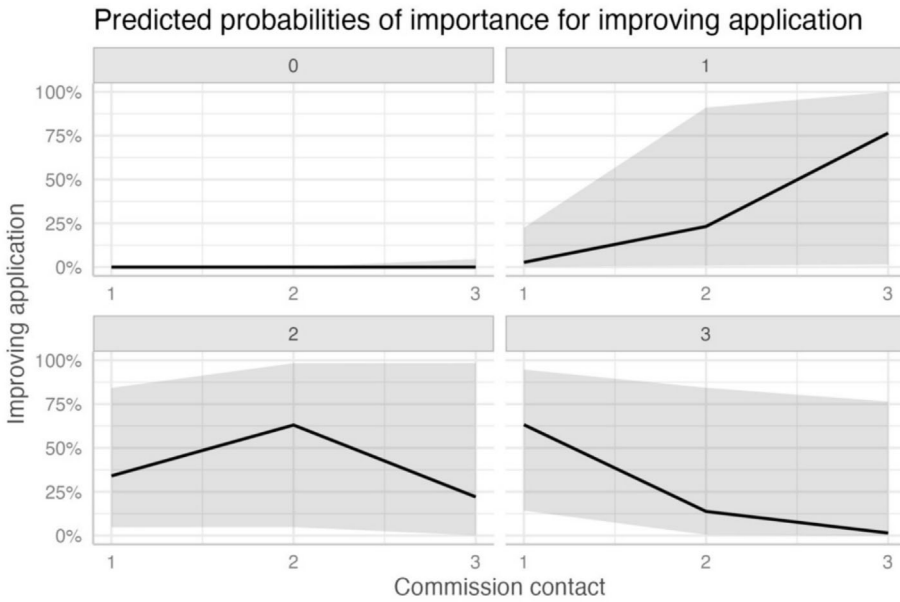
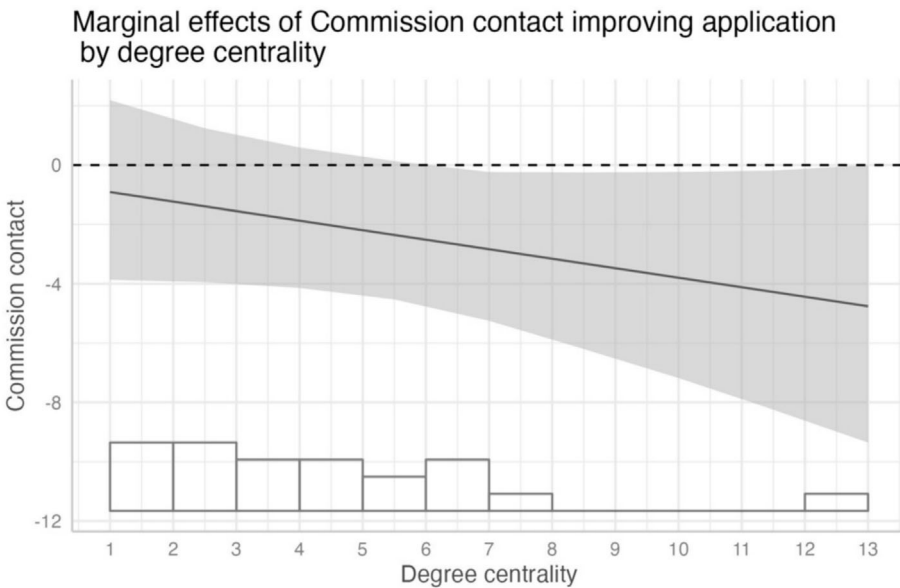


Figure 6: Marginal Effects of Commission Contact on Perceived Importance for Improving Application by Degree Centrality.



of common principles for labour inspections in their member state (panel 3) increase the higher the decrease of number of labour inspections. Those that perceive the SLIC as only slightly important (panel 1) are less likely to do so when their labour inspections decrease. Meanwhile, with a decrease of 122% of labour inspections, the probability of respondents considering the SLIC as very important is about 97% (panel 3). For respondents that either increased their labour inspections or that maintained the same level of inspections, this probability lies between 7% and 46%, respectively. This finding indicates that the deteriorating regulatory context at the national level increases members' perceptions of the SLIC's impact on improving the application of common principles for labour inspections at the national level.

Finally, when examining H5 on Commission contact, we encounter mixed results. We see that the more frequently member states are in contact with the Commission, the less important they perceive the network for improving application. Figure 5 provides more insight into this effect. Those that are in contact with the Commission nearly every day have almost no probability of perceiving the network as very important for improving application (panel 3). Meanwhile, this probability is around 63% for those that are in contact with the Commission only a few times a year. Therefore, whilst we found that Commission contact is positively associated with involvement in the exchange of best practices, contact with the Commission is also most intense for those that have more limited faith in the SLIC's effectiveness.

To further disentangle the relation between Commission contact, exchange of best practices and the perceived impact of the SLIC on national application, we modelled the interaction effect between Commission contact and degree centrality. When visualising the interaction effect (see Figure 6), we see that the negative effect of Commission contact is significant only when degree centrality is high. This effect is mainly driven by Denmark, which as noted above is somewhat of an outlier, being much more central than its peers for the exchange of best practice. Denmark is in contact with the Commission nearly every day but considers the SLIC as only moderately important for improving national application. Indeed, when we exclude Denmark from the analysis (see second model in Table 1), the negative effect of Commission contact disappears.

Conclusion

EANs have evolved into key components of the EU institutional architecture to monitor the national implementation and enforcement of EU legislation. Existing literature highlights their value as structures for the exchange of information, best practices and advice and for empowering their participants in their relations back home with other actors (Bach and Ruffing, 2013; Maggetti, 2014; Vestlund, 2017; Yesilkagit, 2011). Their impact on improving national implementation and enforcement of EU legislation, however, remains little explored. In this article, we addressed this gap and asked if EANs are perceived to matter for what they are set up to do.

We examined this overall puzzle for the administrative network SLIC, comprising national labour inspectors who exchange knowledge and expertise to improve the enforcement of EU legislation on health and safety at work. More concretely, we asked if the members of the network considered it to impact at the national level and what would explain different perceptions hereof. By examining network participants' own perceptions

of impact, we are bringing in the views of those closest to the actual ‘lived rules’ of Europe (Versluis, 2007). These are valuable insights as they are the primary sources to know when national practices are changed and how EU legislation is applied.

Our findings show that, in general, the SLIC network is considered important for the national enforcement of EU legislation – albeit to varying degrees. It foremost matters for the exchange of information regarding enforcement. The network facilitates the spread of knowledge on national ways of applying EU legislation. It is also found to be important for improving national competences and for developing common principles on how to enforce EU legislation. We found most variation when asking about national impact, understood as the network’s ability to improve the application of the common principles for labour inspection in the individual member states.

In our interviews, network members emphasised that participating in the EAN is more than sitting down together. The network is operational and has concrete tools at its disposal. These tools bring a unique added value for network participants. At least four such instruments are identified: (1) the working groups that develop principles and guidelines, which are then to be applied nationally; (2) rapid and voluntary information exchange facilitated by concrete tools such as the KSS; in this way, the comparison of national practices is instrumentalised, (3) exchange programmes and training events that provide education for those responsible for applying EU legislation on the ground, which allows member states to save resources and contribute to a shared approach across national inspectorates; and (4) peer evaluations of national enforcement practices and systems, subjecting the practical application of EU-OSH legislation to a form of peer-to-peer scrutiny.

Our social network analysis demonstrated that some members are more central than others. The SLIC network has a core–periphery structure, where some members sit at the centre of interactions. These actors are more frequently approached for the exchange of best practices and thus important for the definition and dissemination of shared practices (Schrama et al., 2022; Soares, 2023; Versluis and Tarr, 2013).

Finally, when turning to the inferential results of our analysis, we can confirm two of our hypotheses. As assumed in H1, the members with more central positions in the network, that is, higher degree centrality, also perceive the network as more important for improving national enforcement of EU-OSH legislation. Thus, the network matters most for those that are more engaged. Additionally, we find support for H4, indicating that member states that had experienced a decrease in national labour inspections tend to attribute more importance to the network for improving national enforcement of EU legislation. Therefore, the network in part compensates for a decrease of national resources on the ground.

However, whilst these results are consistent with our theoretical expectations, it is important to note that the causality cannot directly be inferred from these correlations. It could be that those that perceive the network as more important also become more involved in the network, ultimately leading to a more central position. Furthermore, we find no support for H2 and H3; neither the use of the network’s KSS instrument nor staff size affects the perceived effectiveness of the network. Moreover, we do not find robust support for any effect of Commission contact (H5) on the importance attributed to the network by its members.

In sum, our analysis shows that, for a majority of member state representatives, the SLIC network is perceived as a very important institution for improving the enforcement of EU legislation. According to those applying and enforcing the EU rules in practice, EANs matter for creating a level playing field and, in our case, for ensuring more equal health and safety standards for workers in the EU member states. In particular, the network is deemed very important by the network core, but also the national dimension weighs in. When the resources of national administrators are cut, EANs emerge as crucial compensatory institutions to facilitate the implementation and enforcement EU legislation the ground.

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