

Briefing: Quantitative Review of Common European Asylum System Literature

by Reinhard Schweitzer, Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex

Introduction

In the now nearly 20 years since its official foundation, a lot has been written about the Common European Asylum System (CEAS); not only in academic journals and books, but also in the form of working and opinion papers, policy reports and evaluations. Our in-depth review of this literature primarily focuses on academic work that was published since the year 2000, but also takes into account some of the more recent “grey literature” produced by non-academic organisations.

The aim of this review was to systematically collect, organise, and analyse – both quantitatively and qualitatively – this vast body of existing knowledge, in order to inform the field research soon to be carried out as part of the [CEASEVAL project](#). One thing we found, is that much of the existing literature about the CEAS is not necessarily based on findings of (original) empirical research but discusses or merely describes its failure or partial success at a rather theoretical and often quite superficial level. CEASEVAL therefore aims to provide a more comprehensive and critical evaluation of the CEAS, by taking into account the various roles and perspectives of state as well as non-state actors and looking at developments at the European, national as well as local levels.

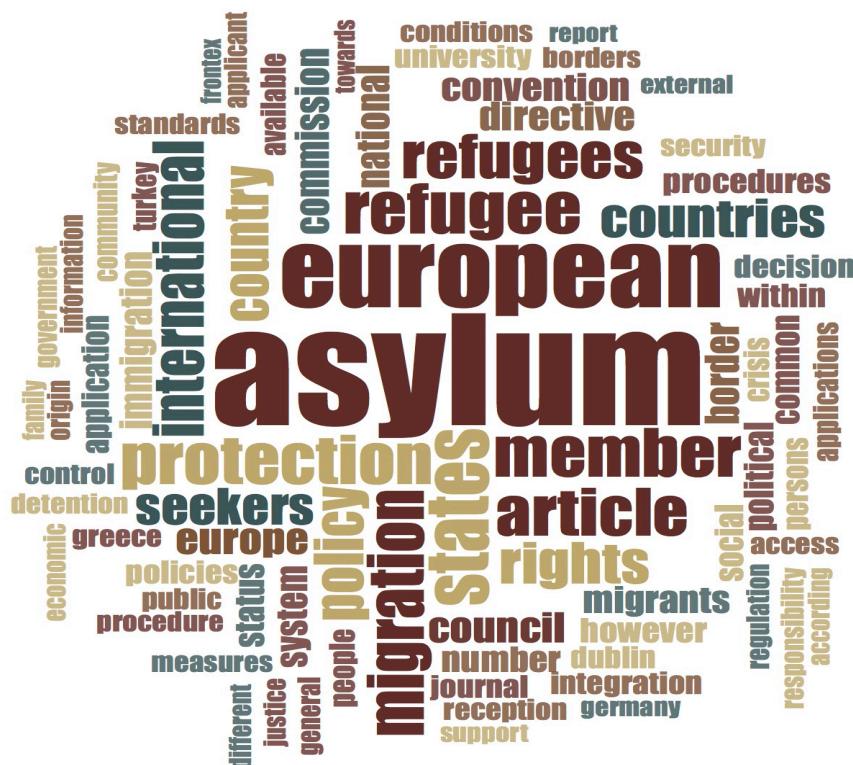


Figure 1: Words most frequently used in the reviewed literature

The present analysis covers a total of 400 pieces of literature that have been carefully selected according to their specific relevance in relation to the central themes to be explored in the different work packages of the CEASEVAL project. Electronic full-text versions of these 400 items have been compiled, thematically coded, and are now available to project partners via an online cloud-storage platform provided by the University of Sussex. **Figure 1** presents the most frequently used words in the form of a word-cloud produced with NVivo.

The remainder of this briefing describes the strategy we employed to identify, select, organise, and compile the literature covered by our analysis (section 2) and presents some preliminary quantitative results of this exercise (section 3).

Literature search strategy and selection procedure

In order to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing literature our strategy followed the logic and initial steps of a systematic review¹.

First of all, we conducted a systematic search of two major databases for academic literature – *Scopus* and *Web of Science (Core Collection)* – using various combinations of search terms, which are listed in **Table 1**, and applying the filter “published since 2000”.

Search terms	No. hits in Scopus	Aggregate	No. hits in WoS	Aggr.
“common european asylum system”	74		56	
eu AND (asylum OR refuge*) W/10 (system OR regime)	130	157	90	115
eu AND (asylum OR refuge*) AND (burden-sharing OR responsibility OR solidarity)	88	218	63	156
eu AND (asylum OR refuge*) AND (policy OR law) AND (evaluation OR fail* OR reform OR change OR convergence)	167	340	115	241
eu AND (asylum OR refuge*) AND (illegal OR irregular OR undocumented OR unlawful) W/5 (immigra* OR migra* OR entry OR crossing)	95	400	65	282
(eu OR europe) AND asylum W/5 (determination OR procedure)	68	449	39	312
(eu OR europe) AND (asylum OR refuge*) AND (reception OR politicization)	116	529	74	362
eu AND (asylum OR refuge*) AND (border* W/5 control)	62	546	45	380
Total aggregate after excluding 261 duplicates	665			

¹ See Dixon-Woods, M., et al. (2006). How can systematic reviews incorporate qualitative research? A critical perspective. *Qualitative Research* 6 (1). pp. 27–44; Petticrew, M. & Roberts, H. (2006). *Systematic reviews in the social sciences: a practical guide*. Blackwell Pub.

Table 1: Combinations of search terms and number of hits; Searches were conducted on 7 Feb 2018.

Both aggregated lists were exported as BibTex files and subsequently imported into the reference management programme *Mendeley* in order to detect and delete any duplicates. The titles and abstracts of the remaining 665 items were then independently pre-screened by two reviewers who excluded another 182 items given their apparent lack of relevance. This resulted in an alphabetically ordered list of **483 references**.

In a second step, and in order to diversify the search results beyond the purely academic, another search was conducted in *Google Scholar* (on 9 Feb. 2018), using a combination of search terms² and applying the filter “2000-2018”. Of the 242,000 hits (sorted by relevance) both reviewers independently screened the first 100, of which 15 had also come up in the previous searches, 62 were deemed irrelevant, and 23 were added to the existing list, thus increasing the overall number to **506 references**.

In addition, we also included the input we had received from our project partners based in twelve different countries, each of who suggested up to ten references that they regarded as particularly relevant from each country perspective. They were asked to thereby focus on grey literature and also include works published in languages other than English³. Adding also these items to the list (and removing 16 duplicates) resulted in an overall number of **607 references**.

Of these, **476** were available as full-text PDF versions and could thus be collected and uploaded to a shared folder on *Sussex Box*, to which the whole project team at the University of Sussex has access. There, each item was tagged using a common set of thematic codes that was established with regard to the central themes and topics addressed in the various CEASEVAL work packages. This coding process also involved a more detailed screening for relevance, which led to the exclusion of 76 items that were not closely enough related to any of the central themes.

The result of this whole exercise is an **online data-set comprising a total of 400 pieces of literature**, access to which – including full-text online previews – can be easily shared by email. The tags can be used as filters to quickly identify the literature most pertinent for exploring a certain topic or answering a specific research question. Since this data-set also constitutes the basis for our own further analysis, the same set of files has been imported into the text analysis software NVivo, which supports more specific word frequency and content analyses. Some preliminary results will be presented in the following section, as well as a separate briefing⁴ focusing on research methods, common themes and central concepts that dominate the existing literature about the Common European Asylum System and the challenges it currently faces.

Presentation of preliminary results

Two of the aspects that interested us in particular were (i) the timing and (ii) geographical focus of the publications that we had selected into our sample (n=400) on the basis of their perceived relevance for the project. The former is presented in **figure 2**, which illustrates the

² The search term used here was: “(eu OR europe) AND (asylum OR refugee) AND (system OR regime OR policy) AND (evaluation OR fail OR reform OR change OR convergence)”

³ See CEASEVAL Deliverable 1.1: Annotated Bibliography, for a complete list of the suggested literature.

⁴ See CEASEVAL Deliverable 1.5: Briefing on qualitative analysis of methods and concepts.

number of relevant publication for each year since 2000, and until 2018 (this figure only comprises anything published before February).

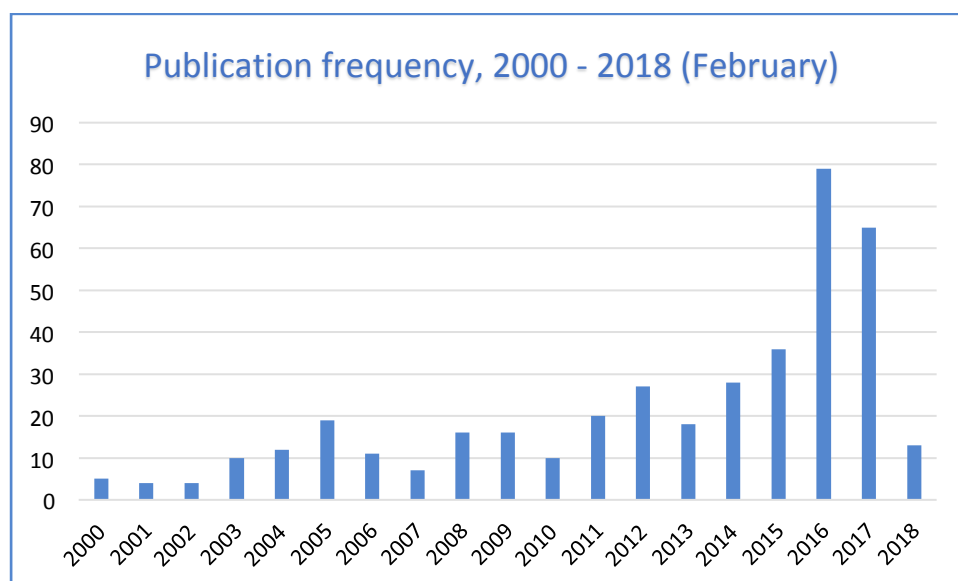


Figure 2: Number of relevant academic and non-academic works (n= 400), by year of publication

On one hand, the graph clearly (and unsurprisingly) reflects the sudden increase of academic interest and other work done in relation to the CEAS that was triggered by the events of summer and autumn 2015, often referred to as the “European Refugee Crisis”.

On the other hand, it can be noted that earlier (and far less dramatic) peaks in the number of relevant publications – specifically around the years 2005 and 2012 – coincided with crucial steps in the legal-political development of the CEAS: The initial adoption of those EU directives and regulations that until today form the legislative core of this system closely corresponds to the first peak in 2005; while 2012 marks the end of the so-called “second phase” of the CEAS, which culminated in the adoption of a new set of (recast) EU directives and regulations in 2013⁵.

Also regarding the second question – **what is the geographical focus of the selected bibliographic material?** – a clear relationship exists between research interest and developments on the ground. While half (54%) of the analysed literature looks at Europe or the EU as a whole – which is unsurprising given that much of it consists in legal or policy analyses focussing on developments at the supranational level, a significant number of studies looks at specific national contexts. Whereas some of these (around 6% of the total) focussed on more than one EU Member State (EU-MS) and thereby often employed a comparative perspective, others have examined the implementation or effects of (certain aspects of) the CEAS in one specific country. **Figure 3** illustrates the number of studies focussing on individual countries (n=147).

⁵ See Chetail, V. (2016). The Common European Asylum System: Bric-a-brac or System? In: Chetail, V and DeBruycker, P and Maiani, F (ed.). Reforming the Common European Asylum System: The new European Refugee Law, pp. 3–38.



Figure 3: Geographical focus of relevant studies that looked at single countries

Notably, most of this recent attention was focussed on countries along the major routes of travel used by asylum seekers and refugees since 2015, as well as some of the main destination countries. A particular concentration can be noticed in those countries that were most directly affected by, or themselves involved in, the apparent failure of the CEAS, i.e. Greece, and to a lesser degree Italy, as well as Hungary and Germany; while Turkey has been the major focus beyond the EU's external borders.

Given the main topics according to which the reviewed literature has been selected, a high number of studies focussing on a particular country can also indicate a particularly high level of politicisation around issues of migration and asylum⁶. This might explain the relatively strong focus on the UK even though the country has so far received a comparatively small number of asylum seekers.

These preliminary quantitative results will be refined and complemented through further and more in-depth analysis of the collected bibliographic data, which will be carried out over the coming weeks⁷.

⁶ For more information on the issues of politicisation, public opinion and discourses, see CEASEVAL Deliverable 1.3: State-of-the-art report on public attitudes, political discourses and media coverage on the arrival of refugees, as well as EU and Member States responses

⁷ See CEASEVAL Deliverable 1.6: Working paper reviewing quantitative and qualitative analysis of publications (to be published at the end of June 2018) for further details.