

# Institutional Overlaps and Agency Autonomy: Examining Ministerial Influence on National Agencies' EU Affairs

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## Abstract

Administrative integration across levels of government has raised questions about how it might affect political control over national agencies. This study asks what the key mechanisms are that might facilitate or impede ministerial influence over subordinate agencies' implementation of EU rules and regulation. It argues that institutional overlaps, understood as coinciding organisational properties in agencies and ministries, leads to increased ministerial control. It tests the effect of three types of overlaps: administrative capacity, demography and site. With the benefit of a large-N dataset on Norwegian agency officials (N=1031) supplemented with qualitative interview data, the study examines how these organisational overlaps may account for ministerial influence over national agencies. The analysis reaffirms the explanatory value of organisational overlaps, but does not show significant effects of demography and site. Additionally, it suggests that involving agency officials in ministerial working groups might be an effective means to exert influence.

Keywords:  
administrative integration,  
public administration,  
organisation theory,  
multilevel administration,  
agencies,  
European integration

## Introduction

In October 2019, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare agency (NAV) became embroiled in what has become known as one of the biggest scandals in the history of Norwegian public administration. NAV had been misinterpreting EU rules for several years, incorrectly assessing at least 2,400 cases. As a consequence, at least 80 citizens were wrongly convicted of benefit fraud, with over 30 cases including imprisonment<sup>1</sup>. The Norwegian social security scandal comprises a deterrent example of how administrative malpractice may go undetected for several years, even for the responsible ministry. It epitomises a central challenge in multi-level administrative systems, notably how to ensure sufficient ministerial control of subordinate agencies' handling and practicing of EU legislation. At the same time, another concern relates to the potential of 'run-away' bureaucracies, that is, a situation where national agencies become co-opted and influenced by supranational institutions, thereby curtailing control from the parent ministry. For public administration scholars, this debate translates into key questions on the role of institutions in the governance process (March and Olsen 1989, 1995). In the context of multi-level administration (MLA), a main empirical focus has been placed on the interplay between executive institutions at the national and supranational level. In particular, administrative integration through sector-specific agency cooperation has raised questions about the balance of power and influence between domestic agencies and their parent ministries (Bach and Ruffing 2013; Egeberg and Trondal 2009b; Danielsen and Yesilkagit 2014).

This study seeks to identify how organisational variables might affect the extent to which domestic ministries influence subordinate agencies in their execution of EU/EEA/Schengen-related tasks. It proposes a theoretical

framework based on the idea that ‘institutional overlaps’ increase ministerial influence on agencies. Institutional overlaps are understood as certain agency variables mirrored or paralleled in the parent ministry. The study combines a quantitative (N=1031) and a qualitative (N=11) dataset of Norwegian officials in order to probe the relative effects of overlapping administrative units, overlapping demographic profiles and overlapping geographic locations. The study makes three main contributions: Theoretically, it adds to the literature on the relative effects of organisational variables on public governance. More specifically, it builds on the idea of overlaps or *duplication* (Egeberg and Trondal 2011a) as mechanisms of inter-organisational control. These observations might also address an organisational design perspective by highlighting how certain variables may be applied as design instruments in the policy-making process (Egeberg and Trondal 2018). Moreover, while empirical studies have documented independent effects of all three variables, they have hitherto not been tested conjointly to assess their relative explanatory power. Empirically, it contributes to an understanding of conditions that determine degree of ministerial influence specifically on national agencies’ implementation of EU/EEA/Schengen legislation. Implicitly, it thereby assesses the general EU-related steering capacity of Norwegian ministries. Methodologically, it contributes a mixed methods approach through cross-verification from two different data sources. Before proceeding, a caveat is in order concerning conceptualisation and analytical model, as the study regards ministerial influence as an indicator of agency autonomy: In this context, *autonomy* is understood as an agency’s ability to manage and implement EU legislation without substantial or significant interference from the parent ministry.

MLA literature puts a spotlight on executive integration across levels of governance with the aim of illuminating the extent to which organisational factors may intervene and shape the policy-making process (Trondal and Bauer 2017). The empirical justification for this literature derives from the prevalence of what has been labelled “direct” administration, alluding to direct links between the EU executive apparatus (Commission DGs and EU agencies) and domestic agencies, in which the latter may become co-opted and employed as a source of administrative capacity for supranational institutions (Egeberg 2006). Notably, this process often takes place in stealth mode with little involvement from the domestic ministries, thus disrupting the representative chain of command where ministries would serve as a natural point of initial contact. Empirical initiatives rooted in the MLA literature have thus largely been directed at examining aspects of the relationship between European executive institutions, notably DGs and EU agencies, and their national counterparts - domestic agencies and ministries.

MLA literature focuses on the organisational dimension of politics with an overarching goal of advancing a research agenda that sheds light on the implications of organisation on public governance (Egeberg and Trondal 2018). Organisationally, “direct” administration has been catalysed by an increase in semi-autonomous agencies that are structurally situated at a distance from the ministries (vertical specialisation). This expansion, much of it courtesy of New Public Management reforms to ensure regulatory independence, is widely associated with good governance and administrative best practice (Jackson

2014). Concomitantly, independence enables agencies to attach themselves more strongly to other organisational configurations, notably the European executive apparatus (Egeberg 2006). Cross-level agency cooperation is also being supported by the continuous expansion of EU agencies as well as increased powers at the executive centre, equipping the Commission with effective tools for policy coordination at the national level too. Domestic agencies ultimately become pivotal building blocks of both administrative spheres and have to balance steering signals from two authorities (Egeberg and Trondal 2011b). This also holds true for affiliated non-EU member-states such as Norway. Through multiple agreements, most notably the EEA, Norway is warranted similar levels of administrative integration as member states. In practice, this means that Norwegian officials are engaged in both the making and implementation of EU regulations and policies. In this study, we apply the Norwegian case to illustrate the effect of organisational variables. We assume that the theoretical mechanisms discussed are generalisable beyond the case at hand and are applicable to similar cases across time and space.

The Norwegian central administration is organised into core-executive ministries with a political leadership (the minister) and subordinated agencies with a permanent director. Whilst the ministries serve as secretariats for the political leadership with a main focus on planning and coordinating functions (Christensen and Lægveid 2009), agencies are mainly responsible for advising the ministries and being technical helpers. Additionally, they play an important role in the political process by preparing, implementing and administering policies. Hence, the majority of EU policy is filtered through the agencies from the initial stages of agenda-setting and all the way to policy implementation. This creates both opportunities and challenges for nation states. It comprises an important route to the EU and hence, a possibility to push national agendas in the early stages of policy cycle. This is especially important for countries like Norway that is not politically represented at the EU level. At the same time, there is often little political incentive to coordinate national positions on specific policy areas. In consequence, officials frequently enter the European policy-making stage with ambiguous political mandates, leaving them to rely extensively on their discretionary capacities and powers. Administrative dominance of this type could ultimately imply that the *modus operandi* of agencies increasingly becomes conditioned by EU-level norms, rules and perceptions. Moreover, as illustrated by the social security scandal, it may also entail that agencies develop misguided practices that go unnoticed by their parent ministry. To counter EU influence and ensure that agency practices meet political preferences, national governments frequently engage in reform - and coordinative efforts (Kassim et al. 2000; Jensen 2017). This study adds to this literature by arguing that organization variables should also be considered effective tools in ensuring political influence of domestic agencies.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, it introduces the concept of agency autonomy as a dependent variable. It proceeds by outlining the theoretical model based on the relative explanatory power of three independent organisational variables. Next, the data is presented and analysed and finally, the core findings are summarized in a concluding discussion.

## Perspectives on Autonomy

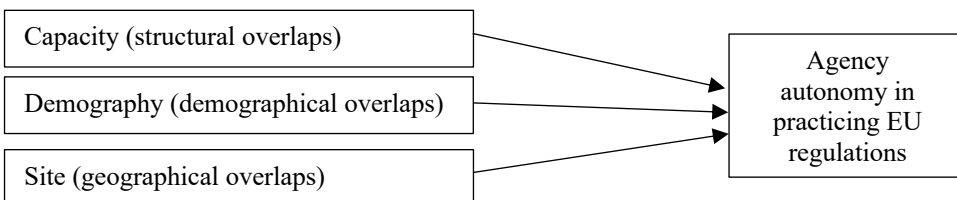
A recurring puzzle in public administration literature has been the relationship between de jure (formal) and de facto autonomy (Groenleer 2009; Verhoest et al. 2004), which refers to autonomy with and without legal recognition respectively. Scholars have been concerned with scrutinizing how, why and under what conditions the latter deviates from the former as well as the implications thereof. Implicitly, bureaucratic autonomy for public sector organizations may encompass several dimensions, such as legal, financial or structural independence (Verhoest et al. 2004; Yesilkagit and van Thiel 2008). Most commonly, bureaucratic autonomy alludes to some type of independent policy-making power (Carpenter 2001; Verhoest et al. 2010) and references the extent to which administrative decision-making behaviour is constrained by the interests and actions of other actors, like the political leadership, media or international organizations (Egeberg 1998). Correspondingly, autonomy may be operationalized by examining the extent of involvement from other actors in a policy-making process. In this case, the respondents (agency officials) have been asked to estimate the influence of their parent ministry in their agency’s practicing of EU legislative acts (table 1). The data shows that a vast majority of agency officials report that their parent ministry is highly influential when it comes to practicing EU legislative acts.

*Table 1. Ministerial influence on agency’s practicing of EU legislative acts. Agency officials, 2016 (percent)<sup>2</sup>*

	<i>Very much</i>	<i>Much</i>	<i>Somewhat</i>	<i>Little</i>	<i>Very little</i>
2016 (N=596)	57	25	10	5	3

Empirical studies highlight several sources of agency autonomy, such as formal structure (Bach 2014), task profile (Christensen and Læg Reid 2006; van Thiel and Yesilkagit 2014) and national context (Pollitt et al. 2004). Substantiated by a positive relationship between organisational duplication and political attentiveness, Egeberg and Trondal (2011a: 675) argue that loss of political control deriving from vertical specialization may be partly compensated for by “strengthening relevant organisational units in respective ministerial departments (organisational duplication).” In this study, the idea of such overlaps is expanded to also include demography and site. The study thus generally assumes that there is an inverse relationship between agency autonomy and three types of institutional overlaps (figure 1).

*Figure 1. Analytical model, agency autonomy with three independent variables.*



### Structural sources of autonomy: the role of administrative capacity

The concept of administrative capacity has been widely applied across a variety of fields within political science literature. Equally, its usage and meaning has varied accordingly with little cross-references across various sub-disciplines (Allison 2009). As such, administrative capacity has been seen both as a solution and an answer of both processes and outcomes. Notably, capacity has been central to literature on political development and state-building (Almond 1965; Carpenter 2001; Mann 1984). Other lines of scholarship include studies of capacity as an intervening factor in policy implementation (Falkner et al. 2004; Hille and Knill 2006), as a product of governance (Rhodes 1994) or as a shaper of public policy (Hecl 1974). Mann (1984), for example, contends that the ability of a state to act autonomously largely derives from strong infrastructural power that is vested in its administration. Such ideas are largely echoed by Carpenter (2001), who cites administrative capacity in agencies as instrumental in gaining de facto independence from political actors in forging bureaucratic autonomy in the policy process. Similar findings are observed by Verhoest et al. (2010), who report a positive relationship between size of an agency (capacity) and autonomy. Correspondingly, organisational scholars presume that problem-solving and problem-attention are highly dependent on the degree to which such activities are underpinned by organisational capacity (Egeberg et al. 2016: 34). This is based on Herbert Simons (1957) concept of bounded rationality which maintains that decision-making behaviour is limited by available information and subsequently, that behaviour is guided by local attention, rationalities and experiences. Hence, the more agency capacity, the more agency attention.

In particular, studies have found that ministerial influence on agencies can be increased by creating organisational capacity in form of overlapping positions, units or departments (duplication) (Egeberg and Trondal 2009a; Verhoest et al. 2010). Ministries thereby become better equipped to monitor and discern ongoing activities in the agencies. As such, duplication pulls agencies closer to the political leadership and narrows their room for discretionary behaviour. Capacity in this study is operationalized by examining the degree of organisational duplication between agencies and ministries. Organisational duplication refers to overlaps of departments, sections and positions. From this, it may be inferred that more administrative capacity at the ministerial level equals more influence vis-à-vis subordinated agencies.

*H1: Agency officials who report more ministerial administrative capacity (organisational overlap) are likely to report less agency autonomy.*

To substantiate H1, Table 2 gives an overview of the percentage of officials that report organisational duplication in our study.

*Table 2. Percent of agency officials that report organisational duplication<sup>3</sup>, 2016.*

	<i>Departments</i>	<i>Sections</i>	<i>Positions</i>	<i>No overlap</i>
2016 (N=1016)	33	33	12	22

## Demographical sources of autonomy: the role of expertise

The relevance of demography in shaping public policy has been a cornerstone in literature on representative bureaucracy. The premise of this scholarship is that a demographically diverse public workforce (passive representation) will result in outcomes that are beneficial for all groups that are represented (active representation) (Selden 1997). Put differently, these assumptions hold that background factors bias actor's decision-making behaviour toward outcomes that are favourable for external groups that share the same traits. Similar ideas are found in organisational scholarship. This line of research asks how or under what conditions different dimensions of organizations that curb or amplify the effect of demographic variables. A core puzzle has been to examine the relationship between pre- and post- recruitment factor and under what circumstances one takes greater precedence than the other in a decision-making situation (Trondal et al. 2016).

Studies that aim to assess the explanatory value of structural versus demographic factors have been conducted at different levels of government. Some scholars have been concerned with examining the effect of demography on national level institutions, primarily agencies and ministries (Egeberg and Stigen 2018), while others have asked if background variables become of greater relevance once an official operates at the supranational – or international - level (Murdoch et al. 2016). Both debates are akin to social constructivist ideas about socialization that suggests that, through interaction, officials adopt norms and attitudes of a given organization (Checkel 2005). Central to these debates has been the relative effect of background characteristics on decision-making behaviour, yet they have emphasised a variety of causal mechanisms. Generally, empirical studies of western democracies have found only minor effects of background variables (Egeberg and Trondal 2018; Suvarierol 2008). One exception is the effect of the educational background of government officials (Egeberg 2012; Lægreid and Christensen 2009). Similar to organizations, higher education institutions provide a certain set of standards and procedures that are likely to ultimately affect decision-making behaviour by directing attention towards certain problems and solutions rather than others (Egeberg and Trondal 2018). For example, a legally trained attorney is likely be preoccupied with legal procedures, whereas a pharmacist is likely to be more concerned with the actual components and effects of a given medication. It follows that officials with similar educational backgrounds are more likely to “speak the same language” and share a common professional understanding of field-specific technicalities. Similar mechanisms are found when examining horizontal specialization: officials that are involved in the same policy sector are more likely to cooperate and share similar perceptions of solutions and problems within the policy sub-field. This study thus asks if ministries and agencies officials that are dominated by a specific educational background more likely to interact, ultimately reducing agency officials' perception of behavioural autonomy.

To measure the impact of demographical overlaps, this study distinguishes between officials with educational backgrounds in legal studies and officials with educational background in natural sciences and examines the proliferation at both the agency and the ministerial level<sup>4</sup>. The rationale behind this distinction is twofold: firstly, practicing of EU-legislative acts is generally the domain of the

legal profession, and secondly, there is a relatively higher degree of overlap of these professions in agencies and ministries. On the contrary, officials with educational backgrounds in natural sciences do not have as much direct relevance to EU legislation and, moreover, there is a relatively lower degree of educational overlap. It is thus assumed that ministerial officials with legal background will be in a better position to evaluate and influence agencies both because it speaks to their field of expertise and also because this is a dominant professional group in both institutions.

*H2: Agency officials with educational backgrounds in legal studies are likely report less autonomy than agency officials with educational backgrounds in natural sciences.*

As reflected in table 3, the distribution of officials with educational backgrounds in legal studies is closer at 18 to 26 percent (8 percent difference), whereas there is a fairly significant gap in the distribution of officials with educational background in mathematics or natural sciences - with 30 to 9 percent (21 percent difference).

*Table 3. Educational backgrounds of ministerial - and agency officials, 2016. (percent).*

	<i>Agency</i> (N=777)	<i>Ministry</i> (N=1167)
Educational background in legal studies *	18	26
Educational background in mathematics/natural sciences*	30	9

\*Dichotomous variables with values 0=no, 1=yes

### Geographical sources of autonomy: the role of site

While the effect of organisational placement (structure) has been well documented in literature (Vestlund 2015), the effects of physical location on policy outcomes has been rather limited and inconclusive (Pfeffer 1982). Moreover, literature examining the physical dimensions of organisational life has often been concerned with examining the effects of architectural design or artefacts on attitudes and behaviour (Davis 1984; Goodsell 1977; Kotter 1982). More recently, such ideas have been expanded to include effects of physical location of an organization and contact patterns with other actors. Our argument draws on insights from previous studies that stress the importance of enabling ad-hoc encounters and social interaction. Physical distance is hence essential in facilitating in particular unplanned meetings that take place because officials share the same immediate space, such as the canteen, the print room, or the local coffeeshop. Physical location may also be of importance with regards to planned meetings because longer distances entail greater transaction costs in terms of time and financial costs (Egeberg and Trondal 2018). An interrelated aspect of physical proximity is the preservation and development of roles and identity. March (1994) contends that concentration in space increases the likelihood of diffusion of role perception and identities. Similar ideas are found in social constructivist literature that emphasize the importance of social interaction as a

determinant of roles and identities, ultimately materializing in policy outcomes (Checkel 2005).

A study undertaken by Jacobsen (1989) found that *relocation* of ministerial departments closer to other ministerial departments had positive effects on mutual contacts, coordination and influence. By contrast, relocation of government agencies *away* from their parent ministries led some scholars to ask if contact patterns would be equally affected. A study by Egeberg and Trondal (2011) on ministry-agency relationship did not find any effects of agency site in terms of agency autonomy. This study was based on a survey undertaken in 2006, in the immediate aftermath of reforms that resulted in the relocation of several Norwegian agencies out of the capital (Hommen 2003; Kiland and Trondal 2009). There have only been minor changes to agency location in the past decade.

This study replicates the research design by Egeberg and Trondal (2011) and probes the effect of site on ministerial influence. If any, it might be that effects of geographical location take time to materialize and thus, the survey conducted in 2016 may be more eligible to test these effects. Officials have been grouped according to the location of their agency. 17 of the 44 agencies included in this study are located outside the capital, while all ministries are located in the capital. This variable is, however, fairly unevenly distributed with 72 percent of officials located in the capital, and 28 outside.

*Table 4. Agency site, 2016\**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Agency officials located in Oslo	713	72
Agency officials not located in Oslo	277	28

\* Includes 44 agencies in total, of which 17 are located outside Oslo (includes Head Quarters only).

*H3: Agency officials that are located in the political centre (Oslo) are likely to report less autonomy than agency officials located in the periphery (outside Oslo).*

**Control variables**

Rank, politicization of policy field and participation in working groups, committees, advisory boards etc. in the parent ministry are applied as control variables. Due to structural proximity to both political and administrative leadership in parent ministry as well as other affiliated organizations, higher ranked officials often view themselves as more closely aligned with the core values and goals of their organization (Carnevale and Wechsler 1992; Egeberg and Sætren 1999). They interact more frequently across organisational borders at the national level of governance and are thus exposed to broader flows of information than their subordinates. Conversely, lower level officials are often more loosely coupled to political leadership in the parent ministry and have a rather narrow task-profile. Studies have shown that lower level officials are more frequently involved in administrative cooperation across levels of governance, making them more likely to attach themselves more strongly to the organisational configurations at the European level. This is likely to bear



consequences for the extent to which they are influenced by the parent ministry when executing their tasks. Second, empirical studies have shown significant effects of political salience (Dudley 1994; Pollitt 2006; Egeberg and Trondal 2009a; Christensen and Yesilkagit 2016), indicating that politicized task-profiles are more likely to be subjected to ministerial steering. Finally, participation in working groups in the parent ministries may also imply increased ministerial influence.

## Data and Methods

This study applies a mixed methods approach using statistical analysis to illuminate overall patterns, whereas semi-structured interviews are applied to complement these findings as well as contribute to a greater in-depth understanding of how the three independent variables relate to each other. The main data source derives from a large-N survey conducted in all Norwegian agencies in 2016 (N=1031). Surveys were distributed to one third of “A-level”<sup>5</sup> agency officials with a minimum of one year in office. The response rate is approximately 60 percent. Given that this study probes the importance of structural, demographical and geographical duplication with regards to agency officials’ *practicing of EU legislative acts*, only officials that report being affected by EU/EEA/Schengen are included in the analysis. Table 5 shows that 1031 officials meet this criterion, comprising 75 percent of the total number of respondents (total N=1374).<sup>6</sup>

*Table 5. Officials that report being affected to EEA/EEA/Schengen\**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent of total N</i>
Affectedness of EU/EEA/Schengen	1031	75

\* Includes values 1-4 on the following five-point scale: (1) To a very large extent (2) To a large extent (3) To some extent (4) To a small extent (5) Not at all

Additionally, these surveys have been supplemented by 11 semi-structured expert interviews conducted in two Norwegian agencies between December 2018 and February 2019. Four interviews were conducted at the Norwegian Communications Authority (Ncom), and seven interviews were conducted at the Norwegian Medicines Agency (NoMA). The respondent sample consists of A-level agency staff at various levels (adviser/senior-adviser, special advisers, section chief). All respondents had some degree of involvement with EU institutions by being involved in the implementing and practicing of EU-regulations. Involvement ranged from full-time to averagely occupied with EU-related tasks. All of the respondents had attended at least a few meetings at the EU level the past years. The two agencies differ in that Ncom is situated outside the capital, whereas NoMA is situated in the capital. Another important difference is that respondents from NoMA are dominated by professions from natural sciences, such as pharmacists and medical doctors, whereas respondents from NoMA have more diverse backgrounds, primarily engineering or law. Moreover, Ncom has approximately 160 employees, whereas the NoMA employs around 270 in total. The interviews were taped and transcribed. To

preserve the anonymity of interviewees, each was assigned a unique interview code (see also table 9).

Four criteria were applied to operationalize ministerial influence (autonomy) in the qualitative dataset: Ministerial influence has been evaluated as “high” when a minimum of 3 criteria were referenced in the interviews, and “medium”/” low” when referencing 2 and 1-0 of the criteria. Admittedly, this scheme does not differentiate between the different measurements in the sense that one is seen as being more influential as the other (table 6).

*Table 6. Operationalization of ministerial influence from qualitative data.*

Influence from parent ministry in agency’s practicing of EU legislation*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regularly attends meetings with ministry officials to discuss EU-related matters</li> <li>• Regularly attends meetings at the EU-level with ministry officials</li> <li>• Regularly contact with ministry officials over EU-related matters (e-mail correspondence, phone)</li> <li>• References political signals from ministry (such as the allocation letter, instructions)</li> </ul>
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\* Number of criteria that must be fulfilled in order to be evaluated as: «high» = 3-4, «medium» = 2, «low» = 1-0

The main challenge to the research design has been to measure the effect of demographical overlaps. The study takes a broad approach by comparing agencies and ministries across policy-fields instead of individually matching actors and/or agencies with the expertise in corresponding units or contact points in the ministries. Hence, this variable comes with this limitation that should be considered when assessing the results. Nonetheless, the qualitative dataset may partly offset the limitations in the qualitative dataset. A second limitation to the study is that it measures autonomy *perceptions* and thus subjective experiences rather than any objective measures of autonomy. Finally, the number of respondents, especially from Ncom, could ideally be larger. However, the combination of datasets is assumed to ensure sufficient overall validity.

## The Relative Importance of Capacity, Demography and Site

The dependent variable of this study is ministerial influence of agency’s practicing of EU legislation. Multivariate regression analysis is applied to test the effects of three independent variables, controlled for participation, position and rank. Additionally, the patterns observed in the statistical analysis are analysed with a view to the interview data collected in the two Norwegian agencies. First, relationships between the variables are tested in an inter-correlation matrix below.

*Table 7. Inter-correlation matrix, agency autonomy and institutional overlaps, with control variables, persons r.*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Ministerial influence		.20**	-.06	-.07	.00	.17**	.02	.20**
2. Administrative overlap			.01	-.14**	.14	-.18**	-.06	.23**
3. Geographical overlap				.05	-.18**	.03	-.02	-.10**
4. Demographical overlap: legal studies					-.31**	.03	-.02	-.03
5. Demographical overlap: natural sciences						.07	.00	.11**
6. Participation in parent ministry							-.17**	.15**
7. Rank/position								-.11**
8. Politicization								

\*  $p < 0.05$  / \*\*  $p < 0.01$

1. Ministerial influence is five-scaled: (1) Very much (2) Much (3) Somewhat (4) Little (5) Very little

2. Organisational duplication is four-scaled: (1) Departments (2) Sections (3) Positions (4) No overlap

3. Agency site is a dichotomous variable with values (0) Not located in Oslo and (1) Located in Oslo

4./5. Educational background is a dichotomous variable with values (0) No and (1) Yes

6. Participation in working groups, boards etc. in the parent ministry is three-scaled (1) Several times (2) One time (3) Never

7. Rank is four-scaled (1) Head of department or above (2) section chief (3) special adviser (4) adviser or senior adviser

8. Politicization of policy areas is five-scaled: (1) Very much (2) Much (3) Somewhat (4) Little (5) None

Table 7 indicates a correlation between ministerial influence and overlap of administrative units (organisational duplication) at .20, as well as participation (.17) and politicization (.20). Furthermore, it suggests that the latter is also associated with higher ranked officials (-.11) and participation in parent ministry (.15). It does not indicate any relationship between ministerial influence and the two remaining independent variables (demography and site).

*Table 8. Relationship between ministerial influence and capacity, site and demography. Agency officials, 2016. Multivariate regression analysis with standardized beta coefficients*

	Ministerial influence on agency's practicing of EU legislative acts	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Organisational duplication (capacity)	.14**	.14**
Agency location (site)	-.16	-.06
Educational background in legal studies (demography)	-.16	-.06
Educational background in natural sciences (demography)	-.15	-.07
Participation in working groups, boards, etc. in parent ministry (control)	.22**	.17**
Position/rank (control)	-.11	-.09
Politicization of policy field (control)	.12*	.12*
N		450
R2		0.0900
Adjusted R2		0.0756
F-statistic/F		6.24
Significance F		0.000

\*  $p < 0.05$  / \*\* $p < 0.01$

1. Ministerial influence is five scaled: (1) Very much (2) Much (3) Somewhat (4) Little (5) Very little
2. Organisational duplication is four-scaled: (1) Departments (2) Sections (3) Positions (4) No overlap
3. Agency site is a dichotomous variable with values (0) Not located in Oslo and (1) Located in Oslo
- 4./5. Educational background is a dichotomous variable with values (0) No and (1) Yes
6. Participation in working groups, boards etc. in the parent ministry is three-scaled (1) Several times (2) One time (3) Never
7. Rank is four-scaled (1) Head of department or above (2) section chief (3) special adviser (4) adviser or senior adviser
8. Politicization of policy areas is five-scaled: (1) Very much (2) Much (3) Somewhat (4) Little (5) None

Table 8 largely corroborates patterns emerging in table 7. Organisational duplication is significant with a beta coefficient of .14 suggesting that influence is closely linked to administrative capacity in the ministry. The more capacity, the more likely to influence agency's practicing of EU legislation. Administrative capacity enables officials in the ministries to direct more attention to the subordinate agencies and subsequently also be in a better position to follow-up on various policy questions. On contrary, the analysis shows no significant effects of location or demography. From this it may be concluded that capacity has a relatively stronger impact than demography or site.

Secondly, the analysis reveals that participation (.14) and political salience (.12) are also significant in affecting ministerial influence. Most notably, effect of participation suggests that ministries may benefit from establishing part-time structures that includes agency officials. This could increase control and secure influence without the cost of establishing additional overlapping administrative units.

These observations resonate with the qualitative data collected in the Ncom and the NoMA. Table 9 gives an overview of the respondents, including degree of ministerial influence as well as organisational duplication, educational background and geographical location.

*Table 9. Summary of interview data conducted in the Norwegian Communications Agency and the Norwegian Medicines Agency, dependent and independent variables.*

<i>Informant</i>	<i>Agency</i>	<i>Ministerial influence</i>	<i>Organisational duplication</i>	<i>Educational background*</i>	<i>Location</i>
A	Norwegian Communications Authority (Ncom)	High	Yes	Soft science	Outside capital
B		High	Yes	Hard science	
C		Medium	Yes	Hard science	
D		High	Yes	Soft science	
E	Norwegian Medicines Agency (NoMA)	Low	No	Hard science	In capital
F		Medium/low	Yes	Soft science	
G		Low	No	Hard science	
H		Low	No	Hard science	
I		Low	Not specified	Hard science	
J		Low	Not specified	Hard science	
K		Low	No	Hard science	

\* To preserve the anonymity of respondents, the categorization does not specify educational background but instead uses the categorization “soft” sciences and “hard” sciences, where the former denotes humanities, social sciences or legal studies and the latter denotes natural sciences including medicine, pharmacology etc.

Of the two agencies, all respondents in the Ncom reported some degree of organisational duplication, whereas only one of seven reported the same in the NoMA. The interviews clearly indicated that officials reporting organisational duplication appeared to be more regularly in contact with the parent ministries. These officials often consult their peers in the ministries and also report a relatively higher degree of direct interference in their handling of EU legislation:

*“(...) We inform the ministry about our recommendations in regard to a certain policy field. Sometimes the recommendations are returned along with a note saying, ‘we would like you to take a closer look at this and this’ or ‘you should consider re-evaluating this and this.’ Then we have to look at it again, and perhaps make some changes. I guess*

*this can be viewed as a direct attempt from the ministry to influence our work. At the same time, we have to maintain our professional integrity and would not do changes that cannot be justified. Yet, if possible, we try to make the extra efforts to accommodate the requests from the ministry.”*  
(Informant B)

It follows that officials from the Ncom report significantly higher involvement of the parent ministry than what was the case in the NoMA, despite the fact that the latter is geographically located in capital and thus close to the parent ministry. As also indicated in table 7, the relative importance of location appears to be rather insignificant in the context of agency-ministry relations. Though some remarks were made in Ncom concerning the distance and the subsequent increased travel time to the meetings in the capital, there were no indications that the distance directly affected their relationships to the parent ministry.

On a broader note, however, agencies and their parent ministries generally constitute the closest and most robust inter-organisational relationship in the public sector. It is likely that any prioritization impelled by geographical (re-)location would be targeted at maintaining this relationship. Thus, any negative effects of site are perhaps better understood if examining the impact on other stakeholder relations, such as for example industry or organizations in other sectors. No clear conclusions can be drawn on demographical overlap as the interviews did not include an inquiry into the backgrounds of officials in the respective parent ministries. However, the interviews indicate that officials with a ‘soft’ science background are more likely to be influenced by the ministry than officials with a ‘hard’ science background. It is however unclear how much of this can be attributed to overlap in administrative units (duplication) or overlap in competences.

A majority of NoMA officials report that contact with the ministry is channelled through the agency leadership and that they have little to no contact with ministerial officials. On contrary, Ncom officials are frequently in contact with ministerial officials, both formally and informally. Though formal hierarchy and agency leadership is emphasized by Ncom officials, contact patterns with the ministry are more complex, involved more actors and occurred more frequently across organisational boundaries. Ncom officials also report attending meetings at the EU-level together with officials from their parent ministries. Hence, organisational duplication, in addition to safeguarding ministerial influence, also to some extent affect intra-organisational hierarchies:

*“(...) I have worked closely with officials in the ministry for a long time. I get a lot of questions from them – you know, not through the formal hierarchy, but more informally (...) It does not necessarily run through the leadership, but sometimes we help them with different EEA or EU-related issues.”*  
(Informant D)

Organisational duplication is thus an effective tool for ministerial influence, but at the same time it opens up a two-way street that also ensures more agency influence in the parent ministry. Literature has primarily framed administrative

duplication as an instrument for the ministries, but less effort has been directed at studying how preferences and ideas from agencies are uploaded to ministries. Debates on European influence on national institutions often put less emphasis on the possibility that the entry point for “Europe” in agencies implies a bottom-up path of influence to the ministries. Though it is surely the case in many instances, it may be misleading to assume that organisational duplication equals ministerial influence alone (in practicing EU legislation) because this presupposes that the ministries have fixed preferences and secondly, that these preferences are conveyed to the agencies. Rather, the data material in this study suggests that organisational duplication evokes more consultation and input from both organizations. Ministerial positions are often vague and ambiguous, leading officials to confer with the agencies. This also aligns well with studies that emphasize agencies as “building blocks” of the common administrative space. Implicitly, when it comes to EU-related tasks, agencies may often be in a better position to advise ministries than the other way around:

*“(…) The ministry often likes to discuss new policy dilemmas with us in order to fully understand the issues at stake. So, then we are able to explain to them what we believe is the most suitable response.” (Informant C)*

An important point here is the effect of political salience. Table 8 reaffirms the significant effect of this variable at .12. In other words, the more politicized the policy area is, the more the ministry is likely to interfere. Respondents were also asked about the relationship between politicization and ministerial attention. Most officials reported little political salience in their task-portfolios and did subsequently not have sufficient ground to draw on own experiences. However, some officials alluded to the importance of political salience during their interviews. For instance, several officials in NoMA mentioned medicines shortages as an important issue for the leadership<sup>7</sup>, exemplified in the quote below:

*“There is some contact between the Head of Sections and the ministry and perhaps a few others, but I do not really have any contact. I would assume that the people working on medicines shortages are more likely to talk to the ministry” (Informant I).*

The interviews did not clarify the extent to which officials participated in other working groups etc. in the parent ministry and how this may affect influence.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the effect of institutional overlaps of administrative capacity, competences and site on ministerial influence on agency's practicing of EU legislation. The argument put forward and tested in this study is the general assumption that certain organisational characteristics may impede or facilitate certain governance processes. We apply the case of the Norwegian central administration to illustrate these mechanisms, however, we assume that these

observations are generalisable across time and space provided that the discussed organisational characteristics are present. This implies that we may also assume that such observations hold true both for various types of inter-organisational relationships within and across levels of governance, as well across policy fields and cases. Hence, the observations from this study add to the broader literature on how organisational factors affects ministerial influence and forms of autonomy within the public sector (Egeberg and Trondal 2018).

The study shows that overall ministerial influence is high as regards national agencies practicing of EU legislation. Moreover, statistical analysis confirmed the explanatory effect of organisational duplication but did not show any significant effects of demography or site. These findings were confirmed by the qualitative dataset, hence, H1 is confirmed, whereas H2 and H3 are rejected. The first main conclusions drawn from this study hence confirms the explanatory effect of organisational capacity in regard to ministerial influence of agency's practicing of EU-regulation. Supplying the ministries with sufficient administrative resources that mirror specific task-profiles in the agencies, may thus be an efficient means to increase political control over EU-related tasks and policies. At the same time, this was slightly refined by the interviews that suggest that organisational duplication also implied a bottom-up channel of influence for the agencies. The implicit assumption that ministerial officials have a clear political agenda or preference that is being conveyed by means of duplication, is thus interrogated. Rather, organisational duplication opens up for more decision-making complexity in that it also promotes deliberation and input from the agencies. Thus, a second main conclusion drawn from this study concerns the versatile effects of organisational duplication. Thirdly, the study did not establish any effect of overlap in demography or site. However, this may also be due to the mentioned limitations of the study. Finally, the effect of participation and politicization was confirmed. The former could only be tested in the quantitative data material, while the latter was evident in both the statistical analysis as well as in the interview data.

The study substantiates that participation can be subjected to organisational design and that this comprises an alternative route for ministerial influence. From this it can be inferred that if a ministry seeks to increase influence on subordinate agencies, it could establish part-time structures rather than permanent administrative units. This features a design element for administrative policy in which governments may augment political steering and control by the creation of part-time structures. Future studies should also provide broader empirical probes on the effect of part-time structures for public governance in general and agency governance in particular.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a timeline and official documents, see for instance:

<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/pensjon-trygd-og-sosiale-tjenester/feilpraktisering-av-eos-sin-trygdeforordning/id2675673/>

<sup>2</sup> Original question: 'To what extent is your agency's practicing of EU legislation influenced by [your parent ministry]?'

<sup>3</sup> Original question: «In the parent ministry, are there departments, sections or positions that overlap with your own policy field? »

<sup>4</sup> Data from the ministerial level has been provided by a parallel survey conducted amongst ministerial officials in 2016 (N=2322)

<sup>5</sup> «A-level» officials include advisers and above and usually requires a university degree.

<sup>6</sup> Data does not include missing values

<sup>7</sup> Medicine shortages has received a substantial amount of attention in the media, leading to increased involvement of the Norwegian Minister of Health.