

The adaptive coordination and administrative resilience: lessons from European Union (EU) migration governance

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Abstract

Purpose – This article examines how repeated coordination practices contribute to administrative resilience in multilevel systems undergoing formal institutional change. Focusing on European Union (EU) migration governance, it asks how coordinated action continues when responsibility remains divided and crisis pressure recurs.

Design/methodology/approach – The study uses a qualitative, longitudinal single-case design covering 2015–2024. Ten Commission, agency, audit, and legislative documents are analysed chronologically by actors, timing, task allocation, and procedural formalisation. The design traces operational change rather than measuring policy performance or testing causal effects.

Findings – Formal reforms expanded mandates, resources, and coordination structures but did not determine daily cooperation. The analysis identifies four overlapping stages: disruption, improvisation, stabilisation, and preparedness. Disruption exposed registration gaps and unclear roles. Improvisation made the centrally designed hotspot framework workable through practical clarification of responsibilities and procedures. Stabilisation followed as agencies organised support, deployment planning, and information exchange through recurring plans and structures. Preparedness emerged as monitoring, early warning, and advance planning began before full crisis activation. Resilience therefore rested on interaction between institutional capacity and repeated operational cooperation, not on either formal redesign or informal practice alone. The evidence indicates an emerging but uneven capacity for earlier coordination, rather than a completed or uniformly effective system.

Originality/value – The article develops an adaptive coordination cycle centred on implementation rather than policy design. It distinguishes operational resilience from policy success and explains how repeated interaction can make coordination more predictable before it is fully formalised. The framework applies conditionally to multilevel systems with shared competence and limited hierarchical control.

Keywords Adaptive coordination, Administrative resilience, Multilevel governance, Crisis governance, Migration administration, Operational continuity, European Union

Paper type Research article

Introduction

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has rarely operated under normal administrative conditions. Financial instability, the 2015 migration movements, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not occur as separate episodes. Each crisis followed another before administrative routines had time to stabilise. As a result, crisis response gradually became part of everyday governance rather than an exception. The literature describes this situation as a polycrisis or a state of permanent emergency (Boin and Rhinard, 2023; Ladi and Polverari, 2025).



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For public administration research, this creates a practical question. Administrative systems are traditionally designed for predictability: competencies are allocated, procedures are defined, and coordination is expected to follow formal channels. Yet crisis governance shows that effective response depends on detection, rapid mobilisation, and acceptance of decisions under uncertainty (Boin and Rhinard, 2023). If such conditions persist, the administration cannot rely solely on predefined rules. Something in the way institutions cooperate must change.

The EU is a useful setting to observe this transformation. It combines multiple national administrations with supranational bodies but lacks a central executive authority comparable to that of a state. From a formal perspective, this fragmentation should complicate joint action. Nevertheless, the Union has repeatedly managed to organise collective responses across policy areas and over time (Ferrera *et al.*, 2024). Existing explanations usually focus on political compromise or integration dynamics. Less attention has been given to the administrative practices that allow cooperation to continue when rules alone no longer suffice.

Recent research describes a form of earlier and often informal coordination between EU institutions and national authorities during crises, referred to as coordinative Europeanisation (Ladi and Polverari, 2025; Ladi and Wolff, 2021). This literature focuses primarily on decision-making and the rapid development of policy solutions. It says less about implementation: how authorities with distinct mandates work together after a response has been adopted, and how repeated operational contact becomes a more durable administrative capacity. The present analysis focuses on this operational level.

This article approaches the EU as a multilevel administrative system operating under recurrent pressure. Formal rules remain important because they allocate authority, provide resources and establish the structures within which cooperation takes place. They do not, however, determine every aspect of administrative interaction. The argument is not that resilience developed in the absence of institutional reform. EU migration governance underwent substantial legal and organisational change after 2015, particularly through the successive expansion and reorganisation of the mandates of Frontex and the European Union Agency for Asylum (European Parliament and Council, 2016, 2019, 2021). The narrower claim is that formal redesign alone does not explain how authorities learned to coordinate their work in practice. That capacity developed as new mandates and procedures were interpreted, adjusted, and gradually stabilised through repeated interaction.

The migration crisis offers a suitable setting in which to observe this relationship. The sudden increase in arrivals in 2015 exposed the operational limits of the existing arrangements. Responsibilities remained legally allocated, but national capacities differed, information was incomplete and coordination was initially fragmented. The response combined formal institutional change with new operational arrangements, including the hotspot approach, agency-supported deployments, standard operating procedures, and more regular planning (European Commission, 2015, 2020; European Court of Auditors, 2017; European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024). The case therefore allows us to examine how institutional reform and repeated administrative interaction worked together under sustained pressure.

The analysis does not evaluate the overall success of EU migration policy. It examines how administrative cooperation changed and how those changes contributed to operational continuity. The article therefore asks: how do repeated coordination practices contribute to administrative resilience in a multilevel system undergoing formal institutional change? The central proposition is that legal reform creates mandates and coordination structures, while recurrent interaction helps turn them into an operational capacity. Disruption creates the need for adjustment; practices used repeatedly may become more stable and, over time, support earlier coordination and preparedness.

In this context, competence conflict refers not to a formal legal dispute but to situations in which several authorities share partial responsibility, and none can act independently. Administrative activity must therefore continue without a definitive authority allocation. Building on the understanding of resilience as a capacity for collective action when extreme

events disrupt normal operating conditions (Comfort *et al.*, 2010, p. 33), this article defines administrative resilience as the sustained continuity of coordinated action among interdependent public authorities under persistent uncertainty. It is treated as an operational condition produced through the interaction of institutional capacity and adaptive coordination, not as a measure of policy effectiveness or institutional robustness. The article situates administrative resilience within crisis governance literature, presents the analytical framework, explains the research design, analyses the evolution of migration governance, and discusses broader implications for public administration.

Crisis governance and administrative resilience

Research on public administration has long treated crises as exceptional situations. Administrative systems were expected to operate under stable conditions and to shift only temporarily into emergency mode when routines failed. Much of the literature, therefore, focused on preparedness plans, contingency procedures, and decision hierarchies designed to restore normality after disruption (Boin *et al.*, 2009).

Over the past decade, this assumption has become less convincing. Repeated transboundary crises suggest that public authorities no longer move from stability to crisis and back again but operate under persistent uncertainty. Crisis management studies increasingly emphasise continuous threat detection, rapid resource mobilisation, and decision-making under time pressure (Boin and Rhinard, 2023; Boin *et al.*, 2017). Under such conditions, a return to stable administrative equilibrium is no longer guaranteed.

European integration scholarship approached the issue from another angle. The endurance of the European Union during successive crises has been explained through institutional flexibility, negotiated compromise and the structural properties of a dispersed political centre (Ferrera *et al.*, 2024). These explanations clarify why the system persists, yet they say little about how administrative cooperation functions in practice when competences overlap, and authority remains divided.

More recent research finds that crises lead to earlier and faster interactions between governance levels. This has been described as coordinative Europeanisation, a form of decision-making in which national and supranational actors exchange information and adjust positions before formal procedures unfold (Ladi and Polverari, 2025). Coordination in this sense precedes legal decision rather than following it. However, these practices are still commonly treated as temporary adaptations to emergency conditions.

From a public administration perspective, the question is whether repeated coordination remains exceptional or becomes structural. Administrative routines are usually associated with stability, predictability, and clearly defined competences (March and Olsen, 1989). Yet repeated crisis interaction may generate another type of routine — one based on continuous adjustment rather than predefined allocation of authority. This distinction matters for the concept of resilience. In policy literature, resilience often refers to a system's ability to absorb shocks and maintain its functions (Comfort *et al.*, 2010). Applied to administration, it is frequently interpreted as robustness of institutional design. In multilevel governance systems, however, robustness alone cannot explain sustained performance, because authority allocation itself becomes contested during crises. What preserves functionality is the capacity to coordinate despite incomplete rules.

The argument developed treats resilience as a procedural outcome: the continuity of coordinated administrative action under conditions of uncertainty (Comfort *et al.*, 2010; March and Olsen, 1989). Formal reform and operational practice are not competing explanations. Legal and organisational changes define mandates, resources and structures, while repeated interaction affects how these elements are used in practice. Over time, cooperation may become more predictable in information exchange, operational roles, and mutual assistance. Resilience, in this sense, develops through the interaction between institutional arrangements and accumulated administrative experience.

The 2015-2016 migration crisis offers a suitable empirical setting in which to observe this process. The initial disruption exposed the gap between the formal allocation of responsibility and the capacity to carry it out under pressure. The subsequent response included both institutional reform and the development of shared operational arrangements. Analysing their interaction makes it possible to connect crisis governance research with multilevel administration and to examine how coordination moves from an emergency response towards a more stable administrative practice (European Court of Auditors, 2017; Scipioni, 2018; Tsourdi, 2017).

Conceptual framework: the adaptive coordination cycle

The previous discussion suggests that resilience in multilevel administration cannot be understood solely through institutional design. Formal competences, legal mandates, and organisational structures explain how authority is allocated, but they do not fully explain how administrations continue to function when those allocations are repeatedly challenged. Crises often create uncertainty precisely about who is responsible for acting and how coordination should occur (Boin *et al.*, 2017).

In such contexts, administrative behaviour tends to shift from rule application to problem solving. Organisations initially rely on existing procedures, but when these prove insufficient, they begin to improvise forms of cooperation. Crises also generate political and administrative contestation over how disruption is interpreted and which responses should follow (Boin *et al.*, 2009). At the administrative level, repeated operational interaction may subsequently reduce uncertainty and create expectations regarding information sharing, mutual assistance, and operational roles.

To capture this process, the article proposes the concept of an adaptive coordination cycle. The concept describes how recurrent disruption can lead to practical adjustment, repetition, and earlier coordination. It does not assume that formal institutions remain unchanged. Institutional reform may expand authority, resources, and administrative capacity, while repeated interaction influences how these changes are translated into everyday practice. The cycle therefore concerns the operational development of coordination within an evolving institutional framework.

The cycle consists of four stages.

Disruption

A crisis exposes the limits of established allocation rules. Responsibilities become unclear in practice; actors interpret mandates differently, and coordination slows. The problem is not the absence of regulation but its insufficiency under unexpected conditions. Crisis research repeatedly shows that early phases are characterised by ambiguity rather than immediate collective action (Boin and Rhinard, 2023).

Improvisation

Administrative actors adjust cooperation within a newly introduced framework whose operational details remain incomplete. Information is exchanged through emerging channels, tasks are redistributed pragmatically, and working procedures are clarified during implementation. Such practices do not replace formal rules but make the formal framework workable where it does not prescribe every aspect of cooperation. Improvisation therefore refers to practical adjustment within an existing or newly introduced framework, not to the spontaneous creation of a policy response.

Stabilisation

If improvised practices prove workable, they are reused in subsequent situations. Actors develop shared expectations about who should act, when coordination should begin and which

channels are effective. Interaction becomes faster as uncertainty decreases. At this stage, routines exist even if they remain only partially codified. Institutional scholars describe this as the emergence of behavioural regularities preceding formal institutionalisation ([March and Olsen, 1989](#)).

Preparedness

Repeated stabilisation produces a new operational baseline. Administrations anticipate future disruption and activate coordination mechanisms earlier. What initially emerged as improvisation becomes embedded in preparedness structures. Resilience, therefore, appears not as resistance to change but as the capacity to function through continuous adjustment ([Comfort et al., 2010](#)).

Table 1 summarises the four stages and the documentary markers used to identify them in the migration case.

The stages may overlap and recur rather than follow a strictly linear sequence. Resilience is presented as the procedural outcome of the cycle, not as a fifth stage.

The adaptive coordination cycle does not replace policy learning, institutionalisation, network governance or coordinative Europeanisation. Policy learning concerns changes in beliefs or policy content following experience; institutionalisation concerns the stabilisation of behaviour through rules and structures; network governance explains coordination through inter-organisational relationships; and coordinative Europeanisation concerns early coordination in developing policy responses. The cycle focuses on a different object: how authorities coordinate implementation after a response has been adopted and before every aspect of cooperation is fully formalised. These processes may coexist, but they do not explain the same administrative change ([Ladi and Polverari, 2025](#); [Ladi and Wolff, 2021](#); [March and Olsen, 1989](#); [Provan and Kenis, 2008](#)).

The movement between stages is conditional rather than automatic. Disruption creates conditions for improvisation when delay produces immediate operational costs and authorities

Table 1. The adaptive coordination cycle in EU migration governance

Stages/ Outcome	Administrative condition	Coordination pattern	Case marker	Implication
Disruption	Procedures difficult to execute under pressure	Parallel action; incomplete role alignment	Registration gaps; unclear task-force roles	Loss of operational alignment
Improvisation	Hotspot framework requires adjustment during implementation	Roles and procedures clarified in practice	Shared hotspot setting; evolving working procedures	Formal framework becomes workable
Stabilisation	Support organised through recurring plans and structures	Regular planning, deployment, and information exchange	EUAA plans; preparedness network; Frontex planning	More predictable coordination
Preparedness	Monitoring and planning precede full crisis activation	Early warning, shared awareness, and advance planning	Periodic meetings, training, and exercises	Earlier activation of coordination
Resilience – outcome	Authority remains divided; implementation gaps persist	Formal capacity combined with recurring cooperation	Continuity despite unresolved disputes	Operational continuity, not policy success

Source: Authors' analysis based on [European Commission \(2015, 2020, 2024a\)](#), [European Court of Auditors \(2017, 2019\)](#) and [European Union Agency for Asylum \(2024\)](#)

have the capacity to act within, or adapt, existing mandates. An improvised practice is more likely to stabilise when it reduces coordination effort, can be repeated without unacceptable legal or reputational costs, and is retained in plans or procedures. Stabilisation may support preparedness when recurring actors, information channels, and planning cycles preserve organisational memory across episodes. Where these conditions are absent, a practice may remain situational or disappear.

The mechanism is therefore repetition under conditions of continued interdependence. Repeated contact reduces uncertainty about others' behaviour and gradually supplements procedural certainty with behavioural certainty. Institutional arrangements remain necessary because they provide authority, resources, and organisational settings, but they do not fully determine how daily cooperation is organised. The cycle identifies a plausible sequence observed in one case, not an inevitable progression or a tested causal law.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, longitudinal single-case design to examine how coordination arrangements changed within EU migration administration between 2015 and 31 December 2024. The purpose is not to measure the overall effectiveness of EU migration policy, but to trace whether coordination moved from improvised responses towards more stable and anticipatory administrative arrangements. The document set was closed at the end of 2024. Developments associated with the Pact's application after that date fall outside the empirical corpus; the 2024 Common Implementation Plan is included only as evidence of the direction of formalisation at the end of the period examined.

The case was selected because migration governance places national administrations, the European Commission and EU agencies in a condition of sustained operational interdependence. The pressures experienced after 2015 repeatedly required these actors to exchange information, allocate tasks, and mobilise personnel under conditions in which no single authority controlled the entire response. This makes it possible to observe successive changes within the same administrative field rather than compare institutions facing fundamentally different problems. Following the logic of within-case analysis, the study reconstructs the sequence through which particular coordination practices appeared, were adjusted and, in some cases, became more regularised (George and Bennett, 2005).

The core documentary corpus comprises ten institutional documents. It includes four European Commission documents: the 2015 communication introducing the hotspot approach (European Commission, 2015), the 2020 Recommendation establishing the EU mechanism for preparedness and management of migration crises (European Commission, 2020), the 2024 evaluation of the European Border and Coast Guard Regulation (European Commission, 2024a), and the 2024 Common Implementation Plan for the Pact on Migration and Asylum (European Commission, 2024b). It also includes two European Court of Auditors reports, published in 2017 and 2019 (European Court of Auditors, 2017, 2019); three regulations that altered the mandates and organisational capacities of Frontex and the European Union Agency for Asylum (European Parliament and Council, 2016, 2019, 2021); and the EUAA Asylum Report 2024; European Union Agency for Asylum (2024). Academic studies situate these developments in the literature and interpret their institutional significance, but they do not replace administrative documents as evidence of operational change.

Documents were included when they provided information about at least one of four matters: the actors involved in coordination; when coordination began; the distribution of tasks and information; or the degree to which an arrangement was formalised and expected to recur. General political declarations were not treated as evidence of administrative practice unless they introduced, modified or evaluated a concrete operational instrument. This distinction matters because a commitment to greater cooperation does not, by itself, demonstrate that routines, responsibilities or planning arrangements changed.

Each document was read chronologically and examined along four analytical dimensions: the configuration of actors, the timing of intervention, the allocation of operational responsibilities and the degree of procedural formalisation. The findings were recorded in a document matrix that allowed practices described in one period to be compared with later mandates, procedures, and evaluations. The four stages used in the article — disruption, improvisation, stabilisation, and preparedness — were not treated as fixed historical periods. They were used as analytical markers for identifying changes in how administrative interdependence was managed.

The analysis applies a deliberately cautious evidentiary standard. A measure announced in a single document is treated as an institutional intention or an illustrative practice, not as evidence of a stable administrative routine. A practice is treated as institutionalised only when it appears across more than one stage of the period examined and is supported by different types of documents, such as a legal instrument together with an audit, implementation report or agency assessment. Anticipatory coordination is identified only where the documents show that planning, deployment arrangements or information exchange were organised before the immediate escalation of pressure rather than assembled entirely after it.

The method has its limitations. Documentary evidence can show formal responsibilities, recorded implementation problems and changes in administrative design, but it cannot fully capture informal negotiations or the perceptions and motivations of the officials involved. Institutional reports may also present reforms more positively than their implementation warrants. Independent audit findings are therefore used, where available, to assess the claims made in Commission and agency documents. Even so, the study cannot isolate the effect of coordination from changes in legal authority, staffing, financial resources or the scale and geography of migration flows. The resulting analysis identifies a plausible sequence of administrative change rather than offering a causal test. The stages indicate changes in coordination practices; they do not demonstrate that the system had fully overcome its operational weaknesses.

Disruption: the 2015 situation

The increase in arrivals recorded in 2015 did not immediately produce a coordinated administrative response at the European level. Existing procedures continued to be applied as written. Registration, identification, and allocation of responsibility were expected to follow the Dublin system, which placed the primary obligation on the first-entry state. In practice, however, the volume and speed of arrivals made it difficult to maintain this sequence ([Carrera and Guild, 2016](#)).

The following description focuses on recurring forms of interaction rather than a detailed chronology. Individual events are presented only where they illustrate stable administrative behaviour. National authorities at the external border remained responsible for control, registration, and fingerprinting, but their processing capacity was rapidly exceeded. The available evidence shows that these obligations were implemented only partially during the initial phase. In Greece, the registration rate was reported at 8 percent in September 2015. In Italy, registration and fingerprinting covered approximately 60 percent of arrivals during the first half of that year ([European Court of Auditors, 2017](#), paras 71 and 72). These figures show the gap between the system's formal requirements and the administrative capacity available under operational pressure ([Tsourdi, 2017](#)).

This situation generated uncertainty beyond border administrations. Authorities in destination states relied on incomplete or delayed registration data, while reception and movement decisions still had to be made. Responsibility allocation became contested in practice because the procedure required a factual basis that was missing. Crisis governance literature describes such conditions as decision-making continuing despite insufficient information ([Boin et al., 2017](#)).

Attempts to restore the formal sequence proved difficult. Border administrations prioritised immediate processing, while inland authorities prioritised accommodation and mobility management. The same legal framework, therefore, produced divergent operational priorities across administrations. Instead of coordinated sequencing, authorities acted in parallel according to local constraints ([European Court of Auditors, 2017](#)).

Coordination structures were also incomplete. European agencies were already involved in supporting national authorities, but their operational position within the emerging hotspot framework was not yet fully settled. The European Court of Auditors found that dedicated Commission and agency staff, together with regional task forces, facilitated coordination, while also noting that the role of those task forces required further clarification and that standard operating procedures were needed to define responsibilities more clearly ([European Court of Auditors, 2017](#), pp. 5-6). The initial problem was therefore not the complete absence of European involvement, but the lack of sufficiently established arrangements for organising that involvement.

The events of 2015 can therefore be understood as a breakdown of operational alignment rather than regulation. The allocation of competences remained formally intact, yet its execution required a level of synchronisation the system had not previously developed. This gap created the conditions for new forms of cooperation that emerged in subsequent phases.

Improvisation: adapting the operational framework

The empirical record reflects this distinction between institutional design and operational adjustment. The European Commission introduced the hotspot approach in 2015 to support Greece and Italy in identifying, registering, and channelling arriving migrants. Its initial operational framework was set out in a Commission explanatory note and subsequently restated in COM(2015) 490. It was therefore not a spontaneous arrangement created by local administrations, even though its implementation required responsibilities and working procedures to be clarified in practice ([European Commission, 2015](#); [European Court of Auditors, 2017](#), paras. 12-13).

Its implementation changed the conditions under which national authorities and EU agencies worked together. Frontex, EASO, Europol, and national services operated within a shared setting and performed distinct but interdependent functions. The European Court of Auditors describes registration and fingerprinting as a series of consecutive actions and identifies the responsibilities assigned to the participating authorities ([European Court of Auditors, 2017](#), paras. 13 and 70 and Annex II). The evidence therefore supports a move from fragmented implementation towards more structured coordination, but not a general replacement of sequential processing by simultaneous action. The auditors also record that registration and fingerprinting in Italy rose to an average of 97 percent in 2016 following the extension of hotspot procedures to further ports of disembarkation ([European Court of Auditors, 2017](#), para. 72).

Co-location and more direct interaction did not remove the legal distinction between tasks, but they enabled national authorities and EU agencies to coordinate more closely within the shared operational setting ([European Court of Auditors, 2017](#), para. 70 and Annex II).

The role of European agencies was both formal and adaptive. Their mandates and the Commission framework defined the support they could provide, while implementation revealed areas in which operational responsibilities and coordination procedures still required clarification. Repeated participation made agency support more familiar and provided experience that could later be incorporated into standard operating procedures and more regular deployment arrangements ([European Court of Auditors, 2017](#); [European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024](#); [Tsourdi, 2017](#)).

These adjustments did not eliminate conflict between administrations, nor did they resolve legal disagreements. They did, however, allow procedures to continue despite unresolved allocation issues. The evidence suggests that direct coordination supplemented formal lines of

responsibility while allocation issues remained unresolved. Some of these adjustments later appeared in procedures, operational plans, and more regular forms of cooperation. Improvisation was therefore not an alternative to formal design, but part of the process through which that design became workable ([European Court of Auditors, 2019](#); [European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024](#)).

Stabilisation: from practice to routine

After the first period of operational adjustment, cooperation gradually became less situational. Authorities no longer reacted only when pressure increased. They began to organise procedures, assuming that several actors would be involved from the start. By 2023, EUAA support to frontline and other Member States was organised through ongoing operational plans rather than only through one-off requests. The Agency's report records ongoing operational plans with Greece and Italy, among other Member States, and links these arrangements to evaluation, structured communication, and follow-up mechanisms ([European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024](#), Section 5.3.1).

The 2020 Migration Preparedness and Crisis Blueprint also formalised an earlier coordination logic. As a Commission recommendation, it is not legally binding; it sets out an operational framework rather than legal obligations. It provided for a permanently active monitoring and preparedness stage, regular information exchange among designated points of contact, early warning, and periodic meetings of the EU Migration Preparedness and Crisis Management Network ([European Commission, 2020](#), recommendations 4 and 7, and Annex, Section 2).

Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency) operational support became more structured through annual and multiannual planning, the gradual establishment of the Standing Corps and a growing number of joint operations. The Commission's 2024 evaluation nevertheless found that the planning cycle remained cumbersome and identified continuing problems concerning deployments, command structures, and coordination with national authorities ([European Commission, 2024a](#)).

These arrangements also changed the expectations surrounding administrative cooperation. Coordination was increasingly organised through recurring structures and planning instruments rather than renegotiated entirely in response to each episode of pressure. In institutional terms, this indicates the formation of behavioural regularities, although it does not demonstrate that roles were uniformly understood or implemented in every operational setting ([March and Olsen, 1989](#)).

These developments did not remove legal or operational disagreement. The evidence supports a more limited conclusion: agency support and information exchange became more regularly organised, while implementation problems remained visible in audit and evaluation documents ([European Commission, 2024a](#); [European Court of Auditors, 2019](#); [European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024](#)).

This phase can therefore be understood as stabilisation. Arrangements that had proved workable were retained and organised through recurring plans, so that coordination was less often assembled anew for each episode. The documents do not show that it had become uniform across operational settings. At the end of the period examined, the 2024 Common Implementation Plan continued this direction of formalisation by organising preparation for the Pact around ten interdependent building blocks covering legal, administrative, and operational implementation ([European Commission, 2024b](#)).

Preparedness: anticipatory coordination

In the later phase, coordination was no longer conceived only as a response assembled after pressure had increased. Monitoring, information exchange, and advance planning were progressively incorporated into the administrative framework. The stages should not,

however, be understood as strictly sequential periods. Reactive, adaptive, and anticipatory forms of coordination may overlap or reappear at different moments.

The clearest documentary evidence of this change is found in the 2020 Migration Preparedness and Crisis Blueprint. The mechanism provides a permanently active monitoring and preparedness stage, early warning, regular information exchange, and advance assessment of preparedness and contingency planning. It also provides for periodic meetings during the monitoring and preparedness stage and includes staff training and exercises in the crisis-management workflow (European Commission, 2020, recommendations 4 and 7, and Annex, Sections 2 and 3).

This framework changes the expected timing of coordination. Information exchange and common situational assessment are intended to begin before migratory pressure reaches the level requiring full crisis activation. The document therefore shows that anticipation was incorporated into the formal coordination architecture. It does not, by itself, establish that every participating authority implemented the mechanism in the same manner or with the same degree of effectiveness (European Commission, 2020).

A similar development can be observed in agency planning. EUAA support was organised through multiannual operational plans, while Frontex developed annual and indicative multiannual planning for the Standing Corps. The Commission's evaluation nevertheless found that deployment planning remained slow and did not always reflect changing operational needs at particular border sections (European Commission, 2024a; European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024).

Shared situational awareness also became an explicit part of the coordination framework. The Migration Preparedness and Crisis Management Network was designed to produce a coordinated situational picture, facilitate early warning and ensure the regular exchange of information among Member States, EU institutions and agencies (European Commission, 2020). This represents a move beyond separate national assessments, even though it does not eliminate differences in administrative capacity or interpretation.

The evidence therefore does not justify treating preparedness as a completed or uniform condition. It shows that monitoring, advance planning, and recurring information exchange became part of the administrative framework, while significant implementation gaps remained. Preparedness here describes an emerging capacity for earlier coordination, not the absence of disruption or disagreement (European Commission, 2024a; European Court of Auditors, 2019).

This phase therefore represents preparedness in a qualified administrative sense. Coordination was no longer organised only after pressure had intensified; it was also supported through permanent monitoring, planned deployments, and advance communication. The shift lies in the timing and structure of coordination, not in a claim that the system had fully overcome its operational weaknesses.

Mechanisms of administrative resilience

The mechanisms described below explain how adaptive coordination produces resilience as its operational outcome. Existing research commonly attributes resilience to institutional capacity, leadership or resource availability (Boin *et al.*, 2017; Comfort *et al.*, 2010). The analysis presented here focuses on a different level: routine administrative interaction. The identified mechanism does not depend primarily on the concentration of authority or strategic decision-making, but rather on repeated operational cooperation that stabilises expectations between organisations.

The previous sections describe a gradual change in both the institutional framework and the organisation of cooperation. Agency mandates, resources, and coordination structures were strengthened, while administrative interaction also became more regular and predictable. Formal change created additional capacity, but it did not by itself determine how authorities would cooperate in daily operations. The case therefore suggests that administrative resilience developed through the interaction between institutional reform and repeated operational

practice (European Commission, 2020, 2024a; European Parliament and Council, 2016, 2019, 2021; European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024).

Four mechanisms can be identified.

Anticipatory coordination

Anticipatory coordination refers to the earlier activation of information exchange and planning before pressure requires a full crisis response. The Blueprint provides documentary evidence of this shift in timing, while the case does not establish uniform implementation across participating authorities (European Commission, 2020).

Functional task distribution

The allocation of legal responsibility remained contested, yet operational roles became clearer within the formal division of responsibility. Actors performed differentiated tasks according to their mandates and operational capacity, allowing procedures to continue even while broader political disagreement persisted. Similar patterns appear in EU administrative cooperation where implementation produces a clearer practical differentiation of roles across institutions (European Court of Auditors, 2017, Annex II; Tsourdi, 2017).

Procedural flexibility

Authorities did not simply abandon existing procedures when they proved difficult to apply under pressure. They adjusted working arrangements, clarified responsibilities and developed more direct coordination between the actors involved. These changes remained connected to the formal framework but made its implementation more workable. Procedural flexibility therefore consisted in adapting the organisation of cooperation, not in suspending the applicable rules (Boin *et al.*, 2017).

Shared situational awareness

Repeated cooperation created common expectations about operational conditions. The 2020 Migration Preparedness and Crisis Blueprint set out this objective by calling for a coordinated situational picture and regular information exchange among Network members (European Commission, 2020). This arrangement provided a shared informational basis for coordination, but it does not demonstrate that separate national assessments or operational disagreements disappeared. In institutional terms, it illustrates how behavioural expectations may become more stable through repeated interaction (March and Olsen, 1989).

Taken together, these mechanisms explain why formal reform alone does not account for operational continuity. The system did not become fully centralised, and competence disputes did not disappear. At the same time, legal and organisational changes provided structures within which repeated cooperation could become more predictable. Resilience therefore rested on both institutional capacity and the ability to adjust coordination while disruption persisted.

The case suggests a broader implication for multilevel administration. Where authority cannot easily be centralised, the allocation of competence establishes what authorities may do, but not how they will work together. Operational expectations built through repeated cooperation supplement the legal framework and allow institutions to act while agreement remains incomplete.

Resilience in this sense should not be equated with effectiveness or policy success. The mechanism explains continuity of administrative operation, not necessarily optimal outcomes. Authorities may continue functioning while substantive policy problems remain unresolved.

Discussion

The case discussed above did not involve replacing shared administration with a unified hierarchy. Formal mandates, resources, and organisational structures changed substantially,

but authority remained distributed across national and European levels. The way administrations worked within this evolving framework also changed. Over time, cooperation became more regularly organised, even though the underlying legal and political disagreements were not fully resolved.

Alternative explanations

Two competing explanations must be considered. The first attributes operational continuity to institutional redesign: Frontex, and EUAA received wider mandates, additional resources, and more structured operational capacities. This explanation captures a substantial part of the case and is not rejected here. It does not, however, specify how task sequencing, information exchange and daily cooperation were adjusted within those mandates. The second is failing forward, which explains successive reforms as responses to incomplete earlier solutions (Scipioni, 2018). The adaptive coordination cycle addresses a different interval: how administration continues between formal reforms. The argument would be weakened if coordination practices appeared only after new mandates prescribed them. The evidence points to overlap rather than a simple sequence: hotspot working arrangements were adjusted during 2015 and 2016, while Regulation (EU) 2016/1624 and the later agency mandates progressively consolidated the agencies' operational role (European Court of Auditors, 2017; European Parliament and Council, 2016, 2019, 2021).

The material examined here suggests that administrative clarity may exist without full legal clarity. Actors can anticipate each other's actions even when competence disputes remain unresolved. Institutional scholarship describes this as stability created through repeated behaviour rather than formal agreement (March and Olsen, 1989). What matters is not that responsibilities are perfectly allocated, but that they become operationally understood.

Boundary conditions

The framework is most relevant where competences are shared, actors are operationally interdependent, pressure recurs and rapid centralisation is unavailable. It is less relevant under unified command or in short emergencies resolved through immediate legal clarification. Similar conditions may be present in decentralised oversight of digital resilience, where national and European authorities coordinate across intersecting mandates. This is a setting in which the cycle could be tested, not evidence that it already applies.

The single-case, documentary design does not permit causal testing or the measurement of administrative performance. Further research could be focused on evaluating the cycle in other multilevel policy areas characterised by operational interdependence.

Conclusion

The starting point of this study was a simple observation: during repeated crises, the EU continued to operate even when the practical allocation of responsibility remained contested. This continuity cannot be attributed exclusively either to institutional redesign or to informal cooperation. Formal reforms expanded mandates and administrative capacity, while repeated interaction helped authorities develop more stable ways of working within the changing framework.

The migration situation illustrates this interaction, with the longitudinal analysis of 2015–2024 revealing four overlapping stages: disruption, improvisation, stabilisation, and preparedness. The arrangements in place in 2015 proved difficult to implement once pressure increased, as disruption exposed registration gaps and unclear roles. The response included new legal and organisational measures, as well as practical adjustments through which improvisation made the centrally designed hotspot framework workable by clarifying responsibilities and procedures. Stabilisation followed as agency support, deployment planning, and information exchange were organised through recurring structures, while

preparedness emerged as monitoring, early warning, and advance planning began before full activation. As these arrangements were repeated and clarified, cooperation became more regular and increasingly oriented towards readiness. This suggests a procedural reading of administrative resilience. Institutional capacity remains necessary, but it becomes operational only through patterns of cooperation that allow actors to work across organisational and jurisdictional boundaries. Repeated interaction can reduce uncertainty about roles, information exchange, and the timing of coordination, even when political or legal disagreement continues.

The broader implication is limited but relevant. Complex administrative systems remain functional not only because rules allocate authority, but also because institutions learn how to cooperate within those rules under changing conditions. The migration case therefore presents resilience as an achievement produced by the interaction between institutional design and administrative practice. Importantly, this adaptive coordination cycle centres on implementation rather than policy design, distinguishing operational resilience from policy success. The evidence indicates an emerging but uneven capacity for earlier coordination rather than a completed or uniformly effective system. As such, the framework applies conditionally to multilevel systems with shared competence and limited hierarchical control, where repeated interaction can make coordination more predictable before it is fully formalised.

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