In this brief volume, Gerhard Sabathil and his collaborators offer an extremely rich, comprehensive insight into the functions, structure, and personnel of the contemporary European Commission. Despite the complexity of such a task, the authors succeed in their stated goal of relaying this information in a straightforward, accessible manner. This book is absolutely ideal for anyone wishing to understand who does what where in Brussels nowadays.

The book contains eight chapters, which at various points deal with the European Commission’s position within the institutional constellation of the European Union as whole, the twenty-seven commissioners, the Directorates General, the General Services, Internal Services, and then a useful final section (in six pages no less!) detailing the web and telephone contacts of important connections in and around the commission as an institution. I have not yet seen such a large and encyclopedic collection of information on the commission in one single volume—a most impressive feat.

Despite its strengths, there are a number of drawbacks to the volume. Firstly, in some places, the translation from the original German is somewhat halting. We are forced to consider syntax such as “only when this does not happen... the issue is the European Council referred to” (p. 16), or sentence structures like: “the Schengen Agreement facilitates the free movement of people without border controls in all EU Member States except Great Britain and Ireland, which are not full members of the Schengen Agreement, and all participating Member States, which can end their border controls only after a long period of transition” (p. 114). These infractions are minor, but should have been eliminated at some stage of the publishing process that precedes production of a first-class volume like this one.

Secondly, for any reader looking to understand the theoretical dimension of the institutional interplay between the commission and the other supranational bodies, this is not the place to come. The authors do an admirable job in explaining the complex decision-making processes involved in European legislation, but this information is limited to the factual and empirical. References in this area to external sources are limited to the treaties and their articles, not to existing literature examining the power constellation of the commission, council, parliament, and court.

Thirdly, and perhaps most critically, when seen from a certain light, the volume is almost self-defeating. As stated, the authors provide an unquestionably substantial amount of information about the workings and internal functions of the commission, yet at the same time qualify it with the statement that “the Commission is subject to near-permanent restructuring” (p. 47). Clearly, a volume like this, particularly with its level of detail, will have a limited shelf-life for understanding the commission’s structure. With the consequences of the Reform Treaty
on the institutional functioning of the European Union still uncertain, the authors were—understandably—not able to take its provisions under consideration. Therefore, one might say that this volume will serve its purpose as an encyclopedia on the commission for the time being, but that it will quickly be out of date. However, it will then gain a second, equally important status as a historical document, or time capsule even, depicting how the commission worked during the first decade of the 2000s.

All in all, this volume is excellently researched, an offering rich and complex in quantity and quality. Despite its apparently short potential lifespan, I can recommend it fully as a desktop reference of first resort for students and faculty alike.

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