

Book Reviews

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The European Commission and Interest Groups: Towards a Deliberative Interpretation of Stakeholder Involvement in EU Policy-making,
by Irina Tanasescu.
Brussels: V.U.B. Press, 2009, 285 pp.,
€38.50, Paperback.

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The interaction between organised interests and the European Union institutions has been subject to increasing study and analysis in recent years, and the relevance of this increasingly important research agenda has been highlighted by political scandals and developments in 2011. How exactly should the European Institutions interact with third parties (and vice-versa)? Is there a theoretical model that can respond to the needs of the EU Institutions as they consult stakeholders – to maximise the quality of the input they get? Dr Irina Tanasescu tackles this complex situation in a novel way – by approaching EU interest group representation to the European Commission through the lens of deliberative democracy. Her objective is to move beyond an understanding of how interest groups form, what strategies they use and their different access points, to look at what happens in specific cases of Commission driven consultation. The book's main research question is "*to what extent Commission-shaped stakeholder consultation formats can be considered to comply with a set of four normative inspired deliberative criteria (openness and equal participation, transparency, argumentative com-*

munication and binding decisions)".¹ As the author states in her Introduction this research question is not just a theoretical abstraction but a serious issue that the European Commission has to confront on a daily basis in its interactions with third parties. This book is a valuable and interesting contribution to both the academic literature and also for practitioners and civil servants who have deal with consultation (for those needing to consult and those being consulted).

To answer the ambitious research question the book firstly analyses the concept of deliberative democracy and its applicability to the modern-day situation of the European Commission. Here the main tenants of deliberative democracy are mapped out and then applied to the context of the EU and interest representation. The chapter also elaborates the internal thinking of the Commission about how to interact with civil society which is an essential building block for the next chapters – especially as the Commission took deliberative democracy theory into account when formulating its consultation practices.

The second chapter builds on the theoretical underpinning by looking at the evolution of consultation practices at the EU level. The chapter starts with a consideration of the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of Regions and the European Parliament before moving to address the role of the Commission as the "*most important target for lobbying activities*".² Here the chapter gives a detailed historical digest of the development of Commission consultation thinking, practices (which are not always the same) and tools. The chapter highlights the lack of a unitary and legalistic approach to consultation and interaction with interest groups – making the use of case studies all the more important to get a better understanding of how the Commission's consultation practices work in reality.

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1 See p. 12.

2 See p. 55.

From this basis the book moves to its core substance – three detailed cases studies. Here the author compares the four deliberative criteria of her main research question against the reality of Commission consultation in the cases of Integrated Product Policy (IPP), Eco-Design of Energy-Using Products (EuP) and the Impact Assessment (IA) guidelines. The cases are built on a series of interviews, extensive research and inside knowledge of how the Commission works. It is through these three substantive case studies that Dr Tanasescu seeks to assess to what extent the Commission's interaction with third parties has been influenced by deliberative democracy. For the IPP case the book finds a very open and inclusive Commission approach that meets all but one of the deliberative democracy criteria – failing to deliver binding decisions. In addition certain theoretically appealing deliberative instruments failed to work as expected, like product panels. These findings start to reveal that the consultation tools required have to be tailored to the specific circumstances of individual cases, simultaneously explaining the approach of the Commission to not impose horizontal legalistic consultation obligations – but to set general principles and minimum standards. For the EuP case study the book finds that there was positive stakeholder participation, in the deliberative sense, but that the subsequent market take-up was very poor. This finding contradicts the deliberative literature that posits that deliberated outcomes have higher chances of better implementation. The final case, the Impact Assessment guidelines, finds that the Commission has taken the novel approach to embed a minimum standard of stakeholder consultation in the preparation of Impact Assessments – although even this has mixed results in practice. The three cases lead Dr Tanasescu to conclude that *“the institutionalisation of stakeholder participation in policy-making at the level of the Commission has many (and increasingly more) deliberative qualities,*

without being fully deliberative and consistent across the board”³.

The book ends with some very interesting policy recommendations, reinforcing the practical value of the book, where it suggests that the Commission should start to more consistently embed clear consultation requirements into legal texts, notably when it comes to consultation at the implementation stage. The Commission should also be more targeted and clearer about what it is consulting for. These suggestions should be taken up horizontally so that the standards and requirements are the same across the whole of the Commission. With these recommendations the book makes not only a valuable contribution to the academic literature on deliberative democracy by analyzing the theory against the practice of the European Commission, but also to the practice of consultation in the EU by taking a very practical focus with an intent to deliver policy solutions. This provides the reader with a solid general framework of consultation criteria and the ideal-types that exist in the literature and how they fare in the reality of Commission consultations.

Overall, ‘The European Commission and Interest Groups: Towards a Deliberative Interpretation of Stakeholder Involvement in EU Policy-making’ provides scholars, policy-makers and students with an excellent overview of the development and current practice of consultation in the EU. The book tackles a very topical, and important, question in a thorough and engaging way and one that benefits from significant institutional knowledge and expertise. From this the book will be of interest to anyone, scholar, practitioner, civil servant and student alike, wanting to understand more about all aspects (theoretical and practical) of how the European Commission consults and interacts with stakeholders.

3 See p. 230.