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The European Commission and the Disintegration of Europe – Taking Stock and Looking Ahead

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Chapter 1 - The European Commission and the Disintegration of Europe – Taking Stock and Looking Ahead

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Abstract:
This chapter is an introduction to the volume. It explains the motivation and the focus of the research before summarizing the main findings of the various chapters and putting them into the broader context of the state of the art of research on the Commission. Finally, it develops propositions about the future role of the Commission that can be gleaned from the assembled scholarship and highlights gaps as well as promising avenues for further research about the Commission.

Zusammenfassung:
Dieses Kapitel bietet eine Einführung in die Thematik des Sammelbandes. Dazu beschreibt es zuerst die Forschungsschwerpunkte des Buches und die dahinterliegende Motivation. Anschließend werden die zentralen Ergebnisse der verschiedenen Kapitel kurz rekapituliert und in den Forschungsstand eingebettet. Abschließend formuliert das Kapitel einige These über die Rolle der Kommission im politischen System der Europäischen Union und identifiziert relevante Forschungslücken und fruchtbare Fragestellungen für die zukünftige Forschung.

1. The European Commission in Turbulent Times

The European Union is going through turbulent times (Ansell, Trondal, and Øgård 2017). The Eurozone crisis and its repercussions, the challenges posed by increasing migration into Europe, growing troubles in foreign relations with important third countries such as Russia and Turkey, uncertainties in the relationship with the United States, and the Brexit negotiations threaten the very future of the Union. Yet for the president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, this is no reason for despair, but rather for intensifying joint efforts to re-animate the integration processes with the help of new initiatives (European Commission 2015). His critics see Juncker's vision first and foremost as an attempt to strengthen the supranational executive he is heading by endowing the European Commission with new competences. However, in the face of growing fragmentation accompanied by spreading Eurosceptic sentiments and the rise of populist parties (Hobolt and Tilley 2016), the question arises of who, if not the European Commission, embodies the "European common good", and can thus be trusted to provide the policy proposals and institutional advances necessary to overcome the current challenges. It is against the background of such turbulent political times that this book presents recent research about the European Commission. There can be no doubt that European Commission, located at the center of the EU's political system, faces a particular responsibility for the provision of leadership and for designing solutions for the Union as a whole (Article 17 of the Treaty on European Union, TEU). But is the Commission able to live up to current challenges? Many observers argue that it has come under increasing pressure, constrained by the empowerment of other supranational institutions, especially the European Council and the European Parliament, as well as growing critical attitudes towards the Commission in many EU capitals. Indeed, for many national politicians, the Brussels bureaucracy is itself part of the problem, rather than a source of potential solutions. Such claims recall de Gaulle's famous criticism of the Commission as an "aréopage technocratique, apatride et irresponsable", i.e. a group of technocrats without national identity and lacking political accountability (quoted in de Gaulle 1970). Current critics are perhaps less harsh, but in substance the political debates use similar ammunition. It is therefore remarkable that in times when the popular consensus for "an ever closer Union" appears to be evaporating, disunity between member states is spreading, and world politics has turned multipolar, with the United tates showing little interest in Western Europe, fears and hopes seem to converge in this one actor – the European Commission. Indeed, the Commission seems to have taken on this challenge, especially since president Juncker took office (Kassim 2017; Peterson 2017). At the same time, member state governments disagree on essential issues, as evidenced by the conflicts surrounding the reform of economic governance, the establishment of a refugee quota system, and the unprecedented step of triggering Article 7 of the TEU against Poland, to name but a few matters of current internal discord. In an EU oscillating between further integration in some areas and rollbacks in others, therefore, expectations and fears rest on the Commission as the "engine of the integration process". In other words, with France and Germany paralyzed by domestic politics especially in 2016 and 2017 (but for different reasons), the Commission – as together with the European Central Bank in the monetary and financial sector – became the political center of the European Union, dragging along the member states perhaps more often than the member states taking political initiatives by themselves. In some policy areas, the Commission seemed to provide stability by conducting business as usual (Pelkmans 2016). In others, the Commission did not shy away from the thankless task of putting pressure on member states like Poland and Hungary to compel them to stand by their democratic credentials and the rule of law. In sum, the role of the Commission is once again—controversial and debated by political observers and academics alike. A "tale of gloom and doom" that sees the Commission in decline, can be contrasted to a picture of the "rock in the waves" that portrays the Commission as the winner or as the faithful manager of the unsettled state of affairs (Bauer and Becker 2014). Both positions resemble stereotypes. Yet they demarcate a spectrum of concurrent interpretations. Reflecting an awareness of the perils of normative bias on either side of this spectrum, this volume provides a broad range of analytical perspectives on the role of the Commission in the contemporary EU. Specialists on EU studies discuss current developments in their respective

research areas by focusing the European Commission as an organization, as an actor, and as a part of the institutional set-up of EU policy-making. A central concern is how the Commission, throughout a decade of crisis management roughly beginning in 2008, has influenced sectoral policy-making and institutional reforms of the EU as a whole. This focus relates to crucial questions of EU studies relating to whether and to what extent the Commission still acts as an autonomous entrepreneur that serves as an "engine of integration", or whether it has turned into a mere manager of the status quo (see e.g. Bauer 2006; Becker et al. 2016; Ege 2017; Laffan 1997; Metcalfe 1992; Wille 2013). By offering insights into the Commission's current political environment as well as its internal organization, this volume thus attempts to enhance our understanding of some the most pressing problems of the Union at large. More concretely, there are three dominant analytical perspectives on the Commission in EU studies that guide this volume. First, the Commission is studied as an actor within the institutional system of the EU. From this perspective, scholars ask about the Commission's relations with the European Council, the European Parliament, and the Court of Justice. In the wake of multiple political crises and the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, recent years have seen a vivid debate in EU studies about which of these actors gained and who lost influence (Peterson 2017; Schimmelfennig 2015). The second perspective views the Commission as an organization, with scholars analyzing internal structures and processes. Such an intraorganizational perspective focuses on both the characteristics of the Commission's political level (i.e., the College of Commissioners) and its administration (i.e., the civil servants in the Directorates-General), as well as the relationship between these two levels (Bauer 2008; Trondal 2007). The third perspective addresses the Commission's role in policy-making and implementation. While there is some overlap with the other two perspectives, the focus in this third area of research is on the Commission's role in sectoral policy development (Hartlapp, Metz, and Rauh 2013; Holzinger, Knill, and Sommerer 2008). This introduction pursues each of these themes with three objectives. It explains, first, the motivation and focus of the research assembled in this book on each topic. Second, it summarizes briefly the main findings of the subsequent chapters, and puts these insights into the broader context of the state of the art in the literature. Third, it puts forward propositions about the role of the Commission which can be gleaned from the assembled scholarship and highlights gaps, as well as promising avenues for further research about the Commission in the political system of the European Union.

2. Researching the Commission: Current Debates and Key Findings of this Volume

2.1 The Commission within the Institutional System of the EU

There is a widespread perception that the Commission has gradually lost influence within the institutional arrangements of the EU, whereas the European Council and the European Parliament have become more influential (see Dinan 2014; Puetter 2012; Rittberger 2003; Schön-Quinlivan and Scipioni 2016, 1173). However, given the complex nature of the EU's political system, such general assessments are problematic. Scholars are divided in particular over the question of in which areas and compared to which other institutions such a loss of power has occurred (Peterson 2017, 364). In the following, we focus on the relationship of the Commission with the European Council, the European Parliament (EP) and the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU). We summarize some recent findings about the Commission's role within the institutional system of the EU, and present what the chapters of this volume add to these debates. Despite its formal monopoly on initiatives, the Commission's policy influence has always been dependent on the support of member states. There is also recent evidence that the Commission's own resources, such as expertise and experience, have only limited effects on the success of its proposals. Rather, national governments' willingness to adopt legislation and to change the status quo are much more important (Bailer 2013). Moreover, after the Treaty of Lisbon, the Commission's core power of policy initiation has been increasingly challenged by the European Council. Bocquillon and Dobbels (2013) argue, for

instance, that despite the explicit exclusion of any legislative functions for the European Council in the Lisbon Treaty, its relationship with the Commission in the area of legislative agenda setting is in fact "competitive cooperation". A good example of such competition is the establishment of a taskforce led by the European Council President to guide the formulation of legislative proposals to reform the system of economic governance (Bocquillon and Dobbels 2013, 34). In a similar vein, Alexandrova concludes that the Commission's policy supremacy is vulnerable as "the European Council can temporally become more active in Commission proclivity domains in the context of largescale crises and political salience of big projects" (Alexandrova 2016). At the same time, member states also seem to exert ever more control over the Commission in day-to-day activities. In bilateral trade negotiations, for instance, member states have set up "police-patrol mechanisms" to monitor the Commission more closely (Gastinger 2015). These developments, often summarized as a trend toward a "new intergovernmentalism", challenge the traditional perception of the role of the Commission as the engine of integration (Warren, Holden, and Howell 2017; Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015 but see Nugent and Rhinard 2016; Schimmelfennig 2015). On the other hand, we also observe increased cooperation between these two institutions, i.e. the Commission and the European Council. For example, the Council and the Commission have developed flexible working mechanisms through which the Commission has retained substantial policy initiative capacities (Thaler 2016). In other words, while on a general level demands by the Council for particular policy proposals to be provided by the Commission are perhaps more frequent than in the past, it still remains the prerogative of the Commission to decide about the timing and concrete content of any proposal the European Council wishes to put on the agenda. The relationship between the Commission and the European Council is thus in flux, but the equilibrium is somewhat less endangered than is often claimed.

The Commission-Council equilibrium is addressed in this volume by Marieke Eckhardt and Wolfgang Wessels in chapter 2. They suggest that the relationship between the European Council and the European Commission can be best conceptualized by three distinct models. Eckhardt and Wessels ask how well each of these models can account for real world agenda setting and policy enforcement and examine the control mechanisms that the two institutions have at their disposal. The first two models consider the European Commission as the agent (model 1) or the hidden principal to the European Council (model 2). Reflecting the growing interconnectedness of national and European interests and decision-making structures, model 3 is based on a vertical and horizontal fusion, and thus an inter-institutional relationship characterized by partnership. While the authors find traces for the validity of all three models in different policy environments, they also attribute considerable importance to the role of the Commission vis-à-vis the European Council independently of whether it serves as a secretariat, hidden principal or partner to the European Council.

The Commission's relationship with the European Parliament has long been considered a natural alliance for an ever closer union, yet beneath the surface of general agreement on "more Europe" these institutions have often pursued different agendas (Pollack 2003). Indeed, the Parliament has been both "partner and rival" of the Commission in the course of European integration (Westlake 1994). The Lisbon Treaty has expanded the codecision procedure to most internal policy areas and upgraded the Parliament's say in selecting the Commission president, further strengthening the formal relationship between the institutions. Consequently, in recent years, scholars generally observe increased cooperation (Rosén 2016) and argue that the two institutions exert substantial collective influence. This applies even in areas where supranational competences are weak, such as EU foreign and security policies (Riddervold and Rosén 2016). On the other hand, the parliament has also become more interested in agendashaping, the exercise of executive powers and control over the Commission (Bauer and Ege 2012, 405). Brandsma, for instance, concludes that the new instrument of delegated legislation has allowed the EP to exert stronger legislative control over the Commission's adoption of executive transparency in delegated legislation allows for such accountability (Brandsma 2015).

These issues are addressed in chapter 3, in which Andreas Maurer and Michael C. Wolf investigate the growing agenda-shaping power of the European Parliament, in spite of the Commission's continued monopoly on formal legislative initiatives. The authors ask how, and under which conditions, the EP can affect Commission initiatives and by studying Non-Legislative Own-Initiative Reports and Legislative Own-Initiative Reports produced by the EP. Maurer and Wolf find that these instruments are rather successful tools for the EP to influence the agenda of the Commission. The authors thus identify the EP as an important additional player in EU agenda-setting that needs to be taken into consideration more carefully. Understanding the dynamics of supranational agenda-setting remains, in their view, fragmentary and partial if only the Commission and the Council are studied. In contrast to the European Council and the Parliament, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) cannot work in a proactive or entrepreneurial manner. It is dependent on other actors to become an active participant. Nevertheless, the CJEU plays a central role in the interpretation and review of community law, which enables it to act as engine of integration under certain conditions. In doing so, "the Commission and Court often work in close tandem, [...] the Court frequently supports the Commission in legal disputes with the Council or individual member governments" (Pollack 2003, 385). Again, however, this relationship is far from clear-cut. For member states, the CJEU constitutes an important actor to fend off interference with domestic policy, including the application of EU rules, as they can ask the Court to review the legality of legal instruments adopted by the Commission. Against this backdrop, Christian Adam, Michael W. Bauer and Miriam Hartlapp study, in chapter 4, the pattern of annulment litigation against the European Commission. The authors ask why certain governments initiate more actions for annulment than others, and compare the power of different potential explanations. The authors find that it is particularly governments suffering from low levels of administrative capacity and effectiveness which turn to annulment litigation. Moreover, the findings indicate an enhanced rate of occurrence of annulment litigation in years in which a new Commission is appointed, or in which national governments change. Thus, the analysis provides evidence that annulment litigation is used by litigation becomes especially important when established informal relationships with the Commission are interrupted.

The analysis of annulment litigation can also be read as an illustration of the growing role of the European Commission with respect to implementation of supranational policies in individual member states (see Falkner et al. 2005; Thomann and Zhelyazkova 2017). In other words, the strict separation between policy design and policy application—as useful as it is for empirical conceptualization—needs to be re-visited. The multilevel character of policy-making in the EU also includes the application phase, and unsurprisingly opens new possibilities for "politics" both on the side of the Commission and the national authorities. The more responsibilities the Commission assumes in the national application processes, therefore, the more political and contested will be the role of the Commission in EU implementation game. The relationships among the main supranational institutions and member state administrations in the EU are evolving and powers are continuously shifting. The Commission remains the core actor in supranational policy-making. No other actor has the informational resources and administrative capacities to provide policy drafts. The policy cycle, however, gets ever more contested. This can be read as a sign of "normalization", and does not come as a surprise in times of turbulence and crisis. We therefore see that during the initiation phase of policy-making, national governments and the European Parliament attempt to boost their influence. At the same time, this is easier for the governments (via the Council) than for the European Parliament given the need of executive expertise for policy drafting. The Commission consequently needs to pay attention to more actors, and thus more positions, than in the past. Nonetheless, its monopoly in the provision of concrete drafts remains intact. Moreover, the increasing pressure for good governance and the distrust among the member states themselves allow the Commission a greater say in the national application of supranational policies. Indeed, the rising number of litigations against Commission decisions concerning the national implementation hints that the Commission's role as a manager and implementer of EU policies has become more important over the years, rather than diminishing. Thus, while

the inter-institutional power balance is shifting, overall changes are of a smaller magnitude than is often suggested, and the Commission does not always stand on the losing side.

2.2 The Commission as an Organization – Internal Structures, Processes and Leadership

In recent years, the Commission has witnessed tremendous change not only in its institutional and political environment but also in its internal organization. The inauguration of the Juncker Commission in 2014 brought the latest installments of reform processes, which made the College arguably more hierarchical and the administration more centralized. What do these internal trends mean for the Commission's leadership potential? With Juncker assuming office in 2014, it is often argued that the Commission developed from a technical institution to a more political body with an ambitious agenda. This is reflected not only in Juncker's personal leadership style, but also in the way the President is elected after Lisbon. In the new system, the national governments are obliged to consider the results of EP elections when proposing a candidate for the Commission presidency (Article 17(7) TEU). Eager to strengthen their role in this process, the EP's largest political groups first named "Spitzenkandidaten" for the Presidency, and then successfully pressured national governments, against substantial opposition, into nominating the candidate of the group with the plurality of votes – in this case the European People's Party candidate Jean-Claude Juncker (Hobolt 2014). It has been argued that this reinforced link between the EP elections and the appointment of the Commission's president may give the latter license to head a Commission with a more ambitious political agenda (Peterson 2017), including the leeway for implementing internal reforms. In this regard, Bürgin (2017) argues that recent organizational reforms within the Commission, in particular the introduction of project teams and a stronger role of the Secretariat-General, have strengthened Juncker's leadership both inside the Commission and within the EU system as a whole. Juncker's "political Commission" also has a personnel dimension.[1] About 90 percent of his College are former members of their respective state's governing parties. This is an informative indicator that the Commission has become more directly linked to EU member states' internal control of national governing parties over the College, or whether the Commission is in fact able to use these channels to exploit political majorities among national governments, is difficult to tell (see Deckarm 2016). What is clear, however, is that the growing party political composition of the Commission has been recognized in most EU capitals. Thus, some of the more recent empirical findings challenge the thesis of a diminishing role or declining leadership capacity of the Commission. Addressing these developments, in chapter 5 Robert Böttner explores the legal conformity of the introduction of project teams, which group certain Commissioners under the leadership of a Vice-President to work on a specific priority project. Building upon the general merits and shortcomings of the "one Member State, one Commissioner" rule regarding efficiency and representation, Böttner introduces the project teams as a middle course between the status quo and a more radical reform. Studying the legal conformity of the project teams, he finds that they do violate the principles of collegiality and the department principle. According to the author, however, clustering the Commission is not per se illegal under the existing Treaties. However, the new rules would have to ensure the equality of the Commissioners within the College and the right of a Commissioner to propose initiatives.

From a different perspective, in chapter 6, Ingeborg Tömmel sets out to explore Juncker's leadership performance in setting the political agenda and in managing procedures for intra- and inter-institutional decision-making. Tömmel argues that Juncker was able to introduce a new, more political leadership style, which is, however, not to be seen as increasing the internal hierarchy within the College as previous studies suggested (Kassim 2017; Peterson 2017; see

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[1] What a "political" or a "politicized" Commission means in this context is up to interpretation. "Political" may refer to an orientation along party political lines, a shift from an expert-based administrative style during policy making toward stronger political ambitions or a better inclusion of member state preferences into Commission proposals (see e.g. Peterson 2017; Bauer and Ege 2012).

also Böttner this volume). The new style is rather characterised by strategic and skilful leadership as well as an open and conciliatory stance vis-á-vis the European Council and potential followers. Tömmel finds that Juncker has tackled existing institutional constraints by expanding the Commission's room for manoeuvre and advocating a more powerful formal position – eventually restoring the Commission's role as "engine of integration". This improvement in the Commission's ability to formulate coherent policy positions and the organizational transformation at the top of the Commission can thus be interpreted as a precondition for wielding more strategic influence in the EU system as a whole.

In sum, the Commission of 2018 is not the Commission of 2008. Indeed, the scale of organizational change becomes even greater if one compares the current management culture, processes and routines of the Commission administration with those of 1998, before the Kinnock reform (Bauer 2008; 2012; Kassim 2008; Schön-Quinlivan 2008). Yet this transformation — and its implications for both the balance of power and policy formulation in the EU — has so far not received the academic attention that it deserves. The contributions by Böttner and Tömmel show both the political reasons for remaining conservative with respect to changing the College formally, and the centralizing dynamic that can be reached by transformations on the purely organizational level. Decidedly, however, the European Commission of today is a very different institution than in the past. Whether and how these changes result in altered policy-making capacities and institutional interactions remains to be seen.

2.3 Policy-Making and Implementation

For all the emphasis on general trends in external environment and internal organization, the Commission's impact on policy-making has always varied across sectors. Some differences are based on its formal mandates, but others are deliberate decisions by the Commission. In fact, the extent to which the Commission is able and willing to use its competencies in a given field remains an important determinant of policy outcomes at the European level. Recent years have provided ample evidence that this continues to be the case. While "new" intergovernmentalist accounts of the Euro crisis have attributed little relevance to the Commission (Hodson 2013; Puetter 2012), there is ample evidence that the Commission was able to make a difference in the reform of the Economic and Monetary Union. Laffan and Schlosser (2016), for instance, show how the Commission was able to steer the "two-pack" legislation that strengthened budgetary surveillance. Schön-Quinlivan and Scipioni (2016) also emphasize the entrepreneurial role of the Commission in post-crisis economic governance during the 2005 and 2011 reforms of the Stability and Growth Pact. They conclude that the presence of a high problem load and a high level of systemic ambiguity created a window of opportunity for bottom–up entrepreneurship from the Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs. Moreover, scholars tend to agree that, overall, the reforms following the Euro crisis have strengthened the Commission's budgetary and economic surveillance capacity, opening up new spheres of influence (Bauer and Becker 2014; Savage and Verdun 2015; Seikel 2016; but see da Conceição-Heldt 2015). While the Commission has expanded its activities in economic governance, however, it has reduced its initiatives in other fields. Environmental policy is a prime example. Studying EU air and water protection policies, Steinebach and Knill (2016) find that after 2010 the Commission has significantly decreased the number of new ambitious policy proposals, leading the EU into a four-year period of almost complete regulatory inactivity. Likewise, with regard to state aid policy, the Commission demonstrated that in the face of crisis, it can be a rather flexible institution, resulting in a policy direction which managed to safeguard its exclusive competence in state aid control. After the banking crisis hit, the Commission adjusted quickly by speeding up its decision-making dynamics, but then returned to its ordinary mode and forced the financial institutions to be restructured as it would have done under the pre-crisis rules (Botta 2016).

In chapter 7, Sandra Eckert analyzes the Commission's role in negotiating with present and future third countries. Her contribution focuses on the bargaining processes with the UK, both before (2016) and shortly after the Brexit referendum (2017), and with Switzerland after its "mass immigration" referendum (2014). Eckert shows that the Commission's actual roles were products of its formal assignments in these negotiations and its other capacities as guardian of the treaties, policy initiator and executive institution. Furthermore, its room for manoeuver depended on the homogeneity of member states preferences. As a result, the Commission's involvement in the three negotiations varied considerably. In the run up to the referendum in the UK, the Council kept the Commission sidelined. Once the UK assumed the role of a future third country after the Brexit vote, however, the negotiations were quickly put back into the hands of the Commission. The same applies to the talks with Switzerland, in which the Commission was able to stand firm in its role as the guardian of the treaties and Switzerland had to concede much ground.

In chapter 8, Michèle Knodt and Marc Ringel study the Commission's role in EU energy policy. While this field remains dominated by member state sovereignty, the Commission has already strengthened its dialogue with national governments in recent years. Furthermore, Knodt and Ringel's analysis of the recent proposal for the Governance Regulation for the Energy Union shows that the Commission seeks to upgrade its competences by 'hardening soft governance'. The proposal foresees that the Commission can take corrective action if member state policies fail to comply with EU targets – a measure other soft governance tools lack. Although the regulation is still under discussion, the Commission thus appears to take a more proactive role than much research on soft governance would lead us to expect. Knodt and Ringel describe in detail how the Commission seeks to move beyond its original role as a mere facilitator and administrative manager in energy policy.

Similarly, the Commission is increasingly steering soft economic governance, as Stefan Becker shows in Chapter 9. His case study on countryspecific recommendations in the European Semester reveals that the Commission has been a driving force behind the recent increase in political importance of this nonbinding advice, which is now a frequent cause for controversy. The Commission promoted the procedural integration of the 'soft' Europe 2020 strategy into the European Semester and then coupled the country-specific recommendations with the 'harder' strands of economic governance, i.e., the Excessive Deficit Procedure and the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure. On this institutional basis, the Commission shifted the thematic portfolio of advice towards structural reforms and employment and social policies and further curtailed the focus on austerity by steering the delivery of advice. The Commission thus made itself heard in matters at the core of national welfare systems, while soft economic governance has become harder and more supranational during the Euro crisis. The contributions in this section show that the Commission is able to play a prominent policy-making role in areas deemed purely administrative. Sometimes the member states delegate powers deliberately, sometimes the Commission generates them through the clever use of already available—often less substantial or procedural—competencies. While the Commission keeps on operating in the shadow of intergovernmental control, the tasks at hand—negotiating, coordinating, recommending—are regularly compounds of numerous smaller, technical acts, which are hard for the principals to grasp in real time and thus enforce accountability. Clearly, therefore, the Commission is the executive hub of supranational policy-making. The overall level of policy output the European Union produces – "doing less, but doing it better" as Jacques Santer put it (see Christiansen 2005, 101) – may be in decline (Kassim et al. 2016). Yet given the necessities of keeping on administering the Acquis Communautaire and the strategic importance of some new dossiers in which the Commission plays a central part (e.g. Brexit, the Juncker fund, new budgetary negotiations), there is little evidence to support a "Commission in decline" thesis. What can be observed instead is that the forms and substance, as well as the conditions and configurations, of how the Commission is able to influence EU policy-making varies from sector to sector and sometimes even from critical juncture to critical juncture in one policy area.

In chapter 10, Hussein Kassim and Sara Connolly reflect on the individual contributions and present their own insights on some of the questions addressed. Going beyond the topics of this volume, they emphasize that research on the Commission should also consider bureaucratic factors and discuss, by way of example, the role of beliefs and values among its staff. Kassim and Connolly conclude by highlighting issues that should receive more attention in the future: the potential and perils of increasing presidential leadership, the wider implications of Juncker's "political" Commission for the EU's institutional system, and administrative issues such as employee engagement and coordination processes.

2.4 Outlook and Avenues for Future Research on the European Commission

In 2018, the EU looks back on almost a decade of turbulence. The prolonged Euro crisis, the institutional frictions created by the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, the refugee crisis, fragile relations with Russia and Turkey, and (not least) the Brexit vote have shaken the EU time and again. Meanwhile, public trust has plummeted (though at the time of writing it recovered somewhat) and anti-EU parties have gained in national and EP elections. The Commission has been at the epicenter of all this turbulence. Research about its current role thus makes for a test case of political and organizational resilience in the EU system. If the Commission in such a "perfect storm" manages to stick to its role and sometimes even increase its own institutional and policy-making influence, it becomes difficult to equate systematic turbulence with the fate of just one organizational component of that system. In other words, systemic complexity may be on the rise, as is the risk of policy failure and institutional stalemate, leading to a turbulent political environment overall. Yet the question of whether, within such conditions, the performance of the European Commission allows us to talk further about organizational crisis and decline is more difficult to answer.

In reality, keeping the status quo or even slightly declining performance can be taken as evidence of relative organizational success in troubling times of turbulence. This is the central, overarching message of this volume. Given the increasingly difficult politics in the European Union, the Commission is doing astonishingly and perhaps unexpectedly well; it has kept its level of involvement high, and even managed to overcome the political defensiveness which the strategic abstinence of the Barroso presidencies created. While it has always been an embattled institution, therefore, the last decade intensified the Commission's challenges considerably. However, even in these times the central position of this institution has endured, partly through deliberate decisions by the member states, and partly through the Commission's own activism. Taken together the contributions tell a story of institutional resilience. The way ahead is—as usual—murky. Crespy and Menz see "a new hybrid form of governance drawing from both political inter-governmentalism and technocratic supranationalism" emerging in the coming years (2015, 765). At the same time, the new intergovernmentalism scholarship observes a strategically diminished role of the Commission (Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015). Scholars from comparative administration take a more agnostic position about the institutional future, and continue to analyze the European Commission as the "EU Executive" (Brandsma and Blom-Hansen 2017). Instead of adding our own interpretation to these debates on the Commission's general trajectory, we would like to put forward three propositions about what future studies about the role of the Commission in the political system of the European Union may want to focus on in the short- or medium term. There is, firstly, the relationship between intra-organizational factors and policy output of the Commission. Recently, ever greater efforts have been made to grasp more systematically the internal organizational and bureaucratic patterns that determine the behavior of the European Commission as an institutional actor (Bürgin 2018; Kassim et al. 2013; Kassim et al. 2016). Our insights into the workings, logics and routines of the Commission's bureaucracy have therefore considerably increased. Administrative centralization and coordination have furnished greater capacities for hierarchical steering. The linkage between intra-organizational patterns and policy outputs remains weak, however. Hartlapp, Metz, and Rauh (2014) have made an important systematic contribution by focusing on the competition among Directorates-General as an important

feature of internal struggles within the Commission. In a similar vein, Jens Blom-Hansen and his team are currently studying the information politics of the Commission by focusing regulatory impact assessments, including the internal politics of their coordination (Blom-Hansen, Finke, and Senninger 2018, see also van Voorst and Mastenbroek 2017).

What remains unclear is whether the Commission has increased internal skills but lost its capacity for policy entrepreneurship. The research in this volume suggests that implementation and management has become a more important aspect of the Commissions role. In other words, as supranational policy expansion has slowed down, the Commission has been able to exploit its management tasks in a purposeful and self-serving way—similar to the kind of opportunism Laura Cram identified more than two decades ago (Cram 1993). The jury is however still out as to how intraorganizational dynamics feed back into policy making at the system level. Unpacking this relationship is therefore one productive direction which future research may want to explore. Secondly, if the nexus between intra-organizational characteristics and policy output can indeed be clarified, this might be the basis to re-visit the complex question of the transnational role of the European Commission. The question of the formation of an executive center in a loosely coupled and fragmented system of governance characterized by agencification, comitology, and horizontal coordination (Brandsma and Blom-Hansen 2017; Egeberg 2008; Egeberg and Trondal 2017; Heidbreder 2015; Trondal and Bauer 2017) represents a problem that is yet to be fully conceptualized. This means that the question about influence of the Commission in EU politics needs to be extended to its impact in multilevel administrative interactions, with view to policy development as well as its increasingly important role in policy monitoring and implementation with respect to

member states compliance with EU rules and programs. In this respect, it appears likely that the "normalization" thesis of the European Commission in organizational terms (Wille 2013) can inspire and guide future research on the new European executive too. Orientation may also be found in the scholarship about US presidential administrations (Resh 2015). What would then be at stake is the call for consolidating and systematizing our insights into a research area of "EU Executive Study", like US scholars work on the presidential administrations. To be clear, it is not the isolation of Commission studies that we advocate. Rather it is that Commission studies should be designed and conducted so that systematic comparison with executive studies elsewhere becomes feasible (for early hints into this direction see Coombes 1970; Siotis 1964).

The third proposition is simple, often given, and obviously difficult to follow. It is the challenge of accumulation and methodological professionalization that haunts—not only, but also—the study of the European Commission. A few projects mentioned in this introduction have set standards in Commission research (Hartlapp, Metz, and Rauh 2014; Kassim et al. 2013). But too often (excellent) case studies are conducted in relative isolation and too little effort is invested in meta- or secondary analysis of existing research. There is a split between research communities with a prime interest in organizational questions and another one that is interested in the Commission from a sectoral or policy making angle. To bridge this divide and to invest in systematic comparative research, as well as in systemizing what we already know about the Commission, is something which would surely provide a strong basis for improving the quality of coming generations of Commission research.