

# JAN WERTS



## THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL in the era of crises

## 50 years of European Council: from an arbitrator to a fully-fledged Institution

**JOURNAL OF COMMON MARKET STUDIES**, 2022, p. 1213-1214

The European Council in the era of crises, by Jan Werts

London, John Harper, 2021, ISBN 9781838089849); xviii+430pp., €32.00.

A closer look at the crises the European Union has faced since the 1970s tells that the European Council has played the key role in the EU's institutional architecture to deal with threatening shocks. Given this pivotal role, the research into the way Heads of State or Government have again and again achieved sometimes ambitious and fragile consensus to resolve the poly-crisis, is often lacking empirical evidence. The professional secrecy of this club of national and European leaders makes it often difficult to analyse and assess the role, impact and the decision-making of this institution.

The book by Jan Werts, a veteran journalist who has observed the activities of the European Council since its creation, offers the academic community ample evidence – especially for the time since the Euro crises. In eight parts he traces in detail respective and relevant activities and actions of the European Council. He presents extended lists of decisions and factors leading the EUCO's agreements – using at several points of history the term 'taboo breaking'. He describes the performance of this institution as 'resolver of crises', as a 'provider of direction and leadership' but also as 'architect of its own mistakes and failures'. Of special usefulness for further political science studies are his insights into the 'mechanisms and organisational rules' and especially into 'the course and conduct of the meetings' with a focus on the 'foremost decision makers' and 'the dominance of France and Germany'. For students of the EU's institutional architecture Werts also presents a balanced and reflected view of the relations this 'principal' has with the Commission, the European Parliament, the Council and interestingly also the Court of Justice. Concerning our perpetual dispute between intergovernmental and supranational methods the author discusses Merkel's 'Union Method'. His work finishes with four major conclusions on the *autorité européenne* and the growing importance of the European Council.

As a contribution to our academic debates the book of 400 pages offers extended and detailed descriptions with illuminating and thought-provoking insights of an experienced journalist.

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**COMMON MARKET LAW REVIEW**, 2023, p. 1476-1478.

Jan Werts, *The European Council in the era of crises*. London: John Harper Publishing, 2021. Review shortened. xviii + 402 pages. ISBN: 9781838089849. 32€

The European Council (EUCO) is a puzzling element in the EU institutional architecture. In principle, the meeting of the Heads of State and Government is an intergovernmental forum where all Member States are represented by their political leaders and decide by consensus, as in most international organizations. And yet, when inserted within the EU supranational system, the European Council reveals itself as the most elusive and ambiguous institution. Let alone for this reason, the book of Jan Werts, which is entirely devoted to an in-depth analysis of the tasks, structures, and functioning of the EUCO, is a valuable contribution to the political and institutional debate on the EU. Furthermore, the book is very accessible. Its real added value lies, in my opinion, with the empirical insight that it offers on the work of the EUCO. The book, which is an update of Werts' 2008 monograph, is based on the extensive professional expertise of the author, gained through over 45 years of media coverage, as well as on interviews with key players. It thus combines a methodologically sound analysis with a first-hand personal knowledge of how things really go. This is a crucial strength.

Part I and II retrace the EUCO's evolution over time, showing a progressive strengthening via both Treaty revisions and political practice that has made it the centre of European governance. The leadership of the EUCO emerges forcefully through the analyses of the four major crises of the last 20 years—the euro crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, and the Covid-19 pandemic. When it comes to strategic decisions in emergency situations, national leaders are the ones who can find a solution, and, according to Werts, they nearly always do. Part III and IV in turn assess the European Council's leadership in key policy areas under normal circumstances, and highlight the responsibilities carried by EU leaders for subsequent crises. Part V and VI are devoted to the internal functioning of the EUCO. This is one of the richest parts of the book. Finally, Part VII addresses the relationship of the EUCO with the other EU institutions. Overall, the book inspires a host of reflections on the nature of the European Council and on the role that it plays in the EU integration process.

**Maria Patrin**

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Jan Werts brings a unique perspective to the European Council. As a journalist, he has reported on the spot from virtually every European Council meeting since 1975, a witness to countless episodes of last-minute arm-twisting and creative compromise. As a scholar, he wrote the first ever doctoral dissertation on the European Council, published in 1992. In 2008 he carried the story forward to the verge of the start of the permanent presidency.

In this third book, against the background of the broad sweep of the history of the European Council, he focuses especially on the sequence of crises that began around the time of his previous book – the Greek debt and broader euro crises, the migration and refugee crisis, Brexit and Covid among them.

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European Bookshop, 1 rue de l'Orme;

Librairie 1992, Rue Froissard 143 (Schuman Rotonde)

Recommended Internet and to order Ebook:

<https://www.johnharperpublishing.co.uk/the-european-council-in-the-era-of-crises>

• "I found myself reliving the time of my mandate as president of the European Council. (...) I very largely share his analysis. Jan Werts' story of the European Council is the story of the Union itself".

Herman Van Rompuy, president of the European Council (2009-2014)

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#### Books by Jan WERTS

The European Council in the Era of Crises, London, 2021

Hoe Europa al tien jaar crises bevecht, Den Haag, 2021

Arena Europa 1963-2013. A journalists' anthology, 2013

The European Council, London, 2008

The European Council, Amsterdam, 1992

The Dutch-EEC Gasconflict in Horticulture, Brussels, 1983

Het Groene Europa Nu, Den Haag, 1981

#### Co-author of

The Presidents of the European Commission, 2015

De Commissie Juncker: laatste kans voor Europa?, 2015

Spanning in Europa. 40 gesprekken, Elsevier, 2014

De Nederlandse Eurocommissarissen, 2010