

# Vorwort

The European Union (EU) is widely viewed as an important international trend-setter that has substantial influence not only on the environmental agendas and policies of its own member states but also on other countries around the world. As a result there is now a large body of literature examining environmental policy making and agenda setting within the EU multi-level governance structure. Given this strong interest in European environmental policy and politics, it is therefore surprising how little has been written about the role of the European Environment Agency (EEA) as an independent regulatory agency (IRA). Ms. Særbeck's thorough study of the EEA fills the gap with an in-depth examination of the EEA, its relationship to other EU institutions, and the influence it is able to exert on the EU's environmental agenda.

The book is the most in-depth study extant of the influence of the European Environment Agency on decision making at the European level. At the same time, it speaks to larger theoretical concerns and makes important contributions to an area that has received relatively little academic attention – the role of IRAs. Given that there are 35 such IRAs in Europe, it is clearly important to consider what kind of role and influence they play in European decision making. Theoretically, this work builds on neo-institutional and organizational theories. Considerable importance is placed on the concept of information as a form of influence that can set agendas and shape policy outcomes. The work draws on ideas related to policy cycles, agenda setting and windows of opportunity, epistemic communities, and leadership.

Ms. Særbeck's book asserts that although an agency formed to serve the information needs of other EU institutions, the EEA is not simply controlled by its principles – in this case, EU institutions and member states; rather, the EEA through its collection and distribution of information is able to substantially influence the agenda setting process. Ms. Særbeck furthermore finds that the EU institutions – the Council, Parliament, and Commission – rely to different degrees on the services of the EEA, with the European Commission by far working most closely with the agency. There is considerable congruence between the Commission and the EEA in their structures and that the two actors consciously try to develop these similarities while at the same time making sure to develop complementarities.

This study shows that when an agency like the EEA takes action early on in the policy cycle, it can have considerable influence on the kinds of issues that are debated, the way issues are framed, and the political priority given to different issues. Later on in the policy cycle, policy making becomes more politicized and there is less potential for an agency like the EEA to influence the direction of negotiations.

Ms. Saerbeck puts considerable attention on the importance of leadership in terms of the kind of work that an agency does, the role it perceives for itself, and how it presents its work to the outside. She shows that the EEA sees itself as more than just a simple generator of information but also as an actor that can influence the kinds of ideas that are thought about and debated in the European decision making centers. This is a power that may go unseen but is in fact of tremendous significance and may go beyond what policy makers envisioned for the agency upon its creation.

Guided by several hypotheses, this book shows how decision making happens in the EU and the ways in which information can be and is used to influence debates and agendas. The book includes a brief introduction to the roles of the principle EU institutions: the Council, Parliament, and Commission and the formal procedural rules determining how decisions are made at the European level. It shows the considerable influence the EEA has exerted on various policy debates (special attention is given to the 6<sup>th</sup> Environment Action Program and plans for a 7<sup>th</sup> Environment Action Program) and the way in which the EEA supports in particular, the work of the European Commission. The book also shows how the EEA has been able to use information gathering needs to influence the accuracy and transparency of information generation within EU member states and how over time the EEA has been able to achieve an improvement in the general quality of the information being generated by member states. We also learn that the work of the EEA is in general highly valued and the quality of the information generated is considered to be very good.

Importantly, the book also raises practical concerns about the accountability of the EEA (and IRAs in general) and the importance of periodic reviews of the agency's (agencies') work. There are relatively few concrete rules regarding the work of such agencies giving them considerable freedom. This can be seen both as strength, but also as a potential weakness from a democratic accountability perspective.

Methodologically, the work pays much attention to the question of how influence can be measured. Throughout the book various tables are presented that help to enrich the findings of the thesis and are integrated well into the argument.

A tremendous amount of data collection and analysis went into this book. Over 40 interviews were conducted with experts in the EU institutions – the Commission, Parliament, and Council –, the EEA, and in NGOs, the media, and independent agencies. Excerpts from the interviews are nicely weaved into the argumentation of the book.

In sum, this analysis is theoretically innovative, logically consequent, and empirically rich. The book contributes both to our theoretical understanding of the influence that an independent regulatory agency can have on decision making in the multi-level European system as well as to the empirical understanding of the work and influence of the EEA. It also provides important insights into the extent to which different EU institutions (the Parliament, Council, and Commission) make use of the information generation potential of the European Environment Agency. It is a book that all serious scholars and students of European environmental policy making will want to have on their shelf.



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