Introduction

The European Commission has been undergoing a series of rapid changes since the early 2000s. This has come as a shock for an institution that for much of its existence has been characterized by organizational evolution of a more incremental nature. To the extent that we can understand the forces at work upon and within the Commission, both external pressures and internal responses have had important impacts. Three drivers of change are identified in this chapter: the post-2000 administrative reform of the Commission; the large-scale, primarily Central/East European enlargements of 2004 and 2007; and the post-2007 financial/economic crisis and its implications for the Eurozone and the EU in general.

The administrative reform of the European Commission came about as a consequence of the events culminating in the resignation of the College of Commissioners in March 1999 (Macmullen 1999). After accusations of fraud and nepotism were directed at Commission staff, and with Commissioners accused of failing to take political responsibility for problems within the institution, the College of Commissioners, led by Jacques Santer, took the unprecedented step of resigning en masse. This paved the way for a reformist president, Romano Prodi, to take charge and created an opportunity for internal administrative reform to become a top priority for the Commission in the years that followed. The ramifications of the reforms were dramatic; for many officials in the Commission, they were also extremely ‘traumatic’ (Peterson 2008: 762).

The enlargements of 2004 and 2007 were also challenging events for the Commission. The 2004 enlargement in particular was unprecedented in its scale, with ten new member states entering the Union on 1 May of that year. These new member states had undergone a long period of adaptation in their relations with the EU, but their participation in the everyday work of the Union also had significant implications for the Commission. The EU was conscious of the fact that enlargement would affect its institutional environment, and it had taken steps to prepare for the likely effects. Some of these effects were direct, as in the case of the impact on and implications for staffing in the Commission; others were more indirect, such as the changes in the cultural and political environment in which the EU (and the Commission) operated after the mid-2000s.
This political environment would change even more towards the end of the decade. The financial crisis that hit the US and then Europe in 2007 was followed by a crisis in the real economy that led many EU member states to voice a growing ambivalence towards the European integration project. For members of the Eurozone, the highly integrated framework within which they operated meant that individual solutions to the crisis were more difficult to implement for them than for non-euro states, and it was clear to all parties that the crisis challenged the very existence of the European Union. The Commission found itself at the centre of debates over the future of Europe, whilst at the same time facing severe criticism for its failure to adequately deal with crisis situations in individual member countries.

This chapter reviews these three drivers of change in the Commission and considers the extent to which each has led to a weakening of the institution. The chapter begins by introducing the European Commission and by reviewing the relevant academic literature. It then examines the impact of each of the three drivers of change in turn – administrative reform, enlargement and economic crisis. It concludes by arguing that the Commission is likely to emerge from this period of change a very different and (in some senses) weaker institution.

The European Commission prior to 2000

The European Commission’s first incarnation was in the form of the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952; only later, after the European Economic Community had been formed, was the Commission of the European Community created. These institutions were merged in the late 1960s into what is now generally called ‘the European Commission’ or simply ‘the Commission’. The institutional framework in the early years of the Community reflected the technocratic ambitions of the Community’s founders, including Jean Monnet (Featherstone 1994). This framework changed only incrementally over the decades as the Community and later the European Union expanded to 9 countries in 1973, 12 countries by 1986 and then 15 in 1995. Naturally, the number of European Commissioners leading the Commission increased with the number of member states, and new administrative departments (DGs) were added as the competences of the European polity grew (see Table 13.1). However, the structure of the Commission in 1999 was much as it had been in the early 1960s.

The structure of the Commission is characterized by its division into executive (political) and administrative wings. From a hierarchical perspective, the political leadership is positioned above the administrative body. The former comprises the 28 Commissioners acting collectively in the College of Commissioners, along with their cabinets of political advisors; the latter is composed of administrative departments or services and the directorates-general (DGs), each of which has specific functional responsibilities (see Table 13.2).

Commissioners are political appointees, nominated by the member states (through the European Council) and confirmed by the European Parliament. They are expected to provide political leadership both within the Commission and more broadly within the Union, working closely on specific portfolios with their counterparts in the other EU institutions and national capitals. They are supported by personal offices (cabinets) of six people. These cabinets must each include at least two women, and not more than three people of the same nationality. The cabinets are the eyes and ears of the Commissioners and advise them on a broad range of policy and political matters.

DGs inhabit a more administrative and less political world, although their heads, the directors-general, represent a bridge between these two arenas. DGs are the Commission’s ministries, staffed by permanent EU officials as well as temporary personnel, many of whom come to the Commission on secondment from national administrations and agencies. They vary
The European Commission after the reform

Table 13.1 Commission presidents and the size of the College of the Commission (1958–2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>President</th>
<th>Term of office</th>
<th>Number of Commissioners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walter Hallstein</td>
<td>1958–62</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1962–7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Rey</td>
<td>1967–70</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franco Maria Malfatti</td>
<td>1970–2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sicco Mansholt</td>
<td>1972–3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>François-Xavier Ortoli</td>
<td>1973–7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roy Jenkins</td>
<td>1977–81</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaston Thorn</td>
<td>1981–5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacques Delors</td>
<td>1985–8</td>
<td>14, later 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1989–91</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1991–5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacques Santer</td>
<td>1995–9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romano Prodi</td>
<td>1999–2004</td>
<td>20, later 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José Manuel Barroso</td>
<td>2004–9</td>
<td>25, later 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2009–14</td>
<td>27, later 28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

greatly in size, ranging from around 200 to over 600 staff members, and perform a variety of functions reflecting the various competences of the Commission. DGs are supported in their work by the Commission’s services, such as the Legal Service. The Secretariat-General (officially a DG rather than a ‘service’) serves a coordinating function across the Commission’s administration. Its head, the Secretary-General, leads the administration of the Commission, works closely with the Commission president’s cabinet and is an extremely powerful figure within the organization. The number of Commission DGs has fluctuated over time; the Commission website currently lists 33. New competences have recently led to the establishment of new departments, including DG Climate Action; other DGs, such as DG Competition, have been in existence since the 1960s and remain highly relevant, although their internal organigrammes have changed substantially since that time.

The Commission performs various political and administrative functions, from the management of EU programmes to the initiation of EU legislation. It also acts as a mediator for the EU institutions and the member states and represents the EU externally. These functions vary from policy to policy and from department to department; they have also fluctuated in importance over different periods in the Commission’s history. During periods in which the Commission has played more of a leadership role in the EC/EU, this assertiveness has emphasized its political functions; at other times, it has adopted (or has been forced to adopt) a more cautious stance in keeping with a focus on its administrative and managerial functions. The Commission’s varying levels of activism reflect not only the external environment in which it operates but also the political leadership qualities of the Commission president. For example, it is often claimed that the most activist periods in the Commission’s history were the Hallstein years (1958–67) and Jacques Delors’ tenure (1985–94) (see Table 13.1); by all accounts, it played a more cautious role during the presidencies of Sicco Mansholt (1972–3) and Jacques Santer (1995–9). Since 1999, many have argued that the Commission is in decline; both the Prodi and the Barroso Commissions have been labelled as weak, though in different ways. In general, however, the
Table 13.2 The Commission’s directorates-general and services (2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body</th>
<th>Acronym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Directorates-General</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and Rural Development</td>
<td>AGRI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget</td>
<td>BUDG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate Action</td>
<td>CLIMA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>COMM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications Networks, Content and Technology</td>
<td>CNECT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>COMP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic and Financial Affairs</td>
<td>ECFIN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Culture</td>
<td>EAC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion</td>
<td>EMPL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>ENER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlargement</td>
<td>ELARG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enterprise and Industry</td>
<td>ENTR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>ENV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EuropeAid Development &amp; Cooperation</td>
<td>DEVCO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EUROSTAT</td>
<td>ESTAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Consumers</td>
<td>SANCO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Affairs</td>
<td>HOME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian Aid</td>
<td>ECHO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resources and Security</td>
<td>HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informatics</td>
<td>DIGIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Market and Services</td>
<td>MARKT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>SCIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Research Centre</td>
<td>JRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>JUST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maritime Affairs and Fisheries</td>
<td>MARE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility and Transport</td>
<td>MOVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Policy</td>
<td>REGIO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research and Innovation</td>
<td>RTD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretariat-General</td>
<td>SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service for Foreign Policy Instruments</td>
<td>FPI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxation and Customs Union</td>
<td>TAXUD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>TRADE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation</td>
<td>DGT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Services</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureau of European Policy Advisers</td>
<td>BEPA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Library</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Anti-Fraud Office</td>
<td>OLAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Commission Data Protection Officer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Archives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructures and Logistics – Brussels (OIB)</td>
<td>OIB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructures and Logistics – Luxembourg (OIL)</td>
<td>OIL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Audit Service</td>
<td>IAS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Service</td>
<td>SJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office for Administration and Payment of Individual Entitlements</td>
<td>PMO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publications Office</td>
<td>PO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: European Commission website, at http://ec.europa.eu/about/ds_en.htm (accessed 12 September 2013).*
The European Commission after the reform

Commission has tended to associate itself with its more political or agenda-setting functions, envisioning its role as the driver of the European integration process and the representative of European interests. This has often led to clashes with national leaders who have argued that the Commission is deluding itself with regard to the extent of its importance. There are some signs that the Commission’s priorities have changed under the Barroso Commissions.

It is difficult to make an evidence-based assessment of the performance of the Commission on a general level. At the policy level, the Commission is now obliged to publish Annual Activity Reports for each of its DGs. These are internal reports that highlight the achievements of each department over the previous year (measured against management plans produced at the start of the year). External evaluations are conducted by the European Court of Auditors and the relevant European Parliament Committees, which keep a close watch on the work of the Commission. In the first Barroso Commission, the Commission’s policy successes (and half-successes) included the climate change package, its work on energy security and – unsurprisingly – enlargement policy. Its failures were primarily related to the Commission’s limited role in the early years of the financial and economic crisis, and perhaps also to its role in promoting the Services Directive (although whether this was a success or a failure seems to be a matter of opinion).

Researching the European Commission

Research on the European Commission has delved into the history, organization and functions of the institution, as summarized in the section above. In the period before the resignation of the Commission, however, the only historical accounts of the Commission appeared contemporaneously. When it was studied at all, the Commission was analyzed discretely as an organization. The first and seminal text of this kind was Coombes’ classic account of the EEC bureaucracy (Coombes 1970), a study that, although now over 40 years old, provides a still-relevant snapshot of the institution as it was a decade or so after its formation. The continued usefulness of this text up to the late 1990s demonstrates how much continuity there had been in the institution until this point. Later studies of the Commission adopted a similar organizational approach, providing an overview of the institution in an attempt to understand it (Edwards and Spence 1994; Cini 1996; Nugent 2001). The Delors presidencies (1985–90, 1990–5) encouraged the proliferation of research that viewed the Commission through the lens of political leadership and more specifically through the character and qualities of its charismatic president, Jacques Delors (Grant 1994; Ross 1994; Endo 1999; Drake 2000; for a later account, see also Cini 2008). The end of the final Delors presidency and the appointment of Delors’ successor, Jacques Santer, decreased academic interest in the Commission, with the exception of a small number of scholars who eagerly investigated Santer’s escalating reform agenda (Cram 1999; Peterson 1999).

However, this type of analysis is not the only way to study the European Commission. Empirical research on the Commission has been increasingly used as evidence in theoretical accounts of the evolution of the European Community/Union (see, for example, Pollack 2003). Moreover, much of the research produced on the Commission in the pre-1999 period was primarily policy oriented; it sought to examine the European policy process, within which the Commission was generally an active player.

In the period after 1999, the emphasis shifted to the public administration dimension of the Commission’s evolution, with a focus on institutional reform/adaptation (Cini 2007; Kassim 2008; Stevens and Stevens 2001). Commentators reviewed and assessed the Commission’s administrative reform plans, tracking their progress between 1999 and 2004 and their subsequent
implementation and implications. A number of articles examined these reforms in the context of the resignation of the Commission in 1999, an event that was also thoroughly analysed in the academic literature (e.g. Macmullen 1999; Ringe 2005; Tomkins 1999). A focus on agency within the Commission also characterized this period. Hooghe’s now classic study of Commission officials (Hooghe 2001) contributed to a debate that also inspired the work of Egeberg (1986) and, more recently, Suvarierol (2008). A wave of research in the late 2000s led to a publication boom concentrating on the Commission around 2012–13, with notable projects conducted by Ellinas and Suleiman (2012), Carolyn Ban (2013), Anchrit Wille (2013), Kassim et al. (2013) and Hartlapp et al. (2012) all being completed at around the same time. Other studies have examined the role of the College of Commissioners (e.g. Egeberg and Heskestad 2010), the impact of EU enlargement on the Commission (Ban 2013; Lass-Lennecke and Werner 2009; Peterson and Birdsall 2008) and the Commission’s changing role in the EU policy process (e.g. Borrás 2009). Surprisingly little has thus far been published on the role of the Commission in the context of the economic/Eurozone crisis.

The administrative reform of the Commission

Administrative reform that was both ‘comprehensive and controversial’ (Bauer 2012: 489) became the predominant issue on the Commission’s agenda between 2000 and 2004. The repercussions of this reform are still being felt. Referred to internally as the ‘Kinnock Reforms’ (after Neil Kinnock, the Commission vice-president who oversaw their development and implementation), they have left a legacy for the institution that is only now being uncovered by researchers (for example Bauer 2012; Ongaro 2013). The Commission president appointed by the European Council in July 1999, Romano Prodi, was instructed to overhaul the Commission’s administration following the resignation crisis of the previous March (European Council 1999). The framework within which the reforms took place was set out in a White Paper published in March 2000 (European Commission 2000). This framework demonstrated the far-reaching and historic nature of the intended reform process: it was planned to encompass all the systems involved in the allocation of tasks in the Commission, as well as human resources policy and financial systems (European Commission 2000; see also Box 13.1). A fourth element concerned the establishment of new ethical standards for officials and Commissioners (Cini 2004, 2013).

The process by which the administrative reform was rolled out had been based on lessons learned in the period prior to the Commission resignation. The previous Commission president, Jacques Santer, who was discredited as a consequence of his involvement in the resignation crisis, had initiated a reform of the Commission during the 1995–2000 term, after taking over the presidency from Jacques Delors. His approach was unambitious, but it antagonized Commission staff (and the unions representing them), as it was perceived as highly top-down in its proposed manner of enforcement. There was little involvement of ordinary Commission officials, and the changes were poorly communicated (Cram 1999; Peterson 1999). These reform attempts provoked strikes by officials in 1998, and the changes became increasingly difficult to implement; ultimately, by the time Santer resigned in March 1999, the minor reforms had made little impact on Commission operations.

The approach adopted after 1999 was very different, and not only because of the holistic nature of the planned reform. While remaining sensitive to the specificities of the Commission context, the approach developed by Prodi and Kinnock drew on the principles of New Public Management (NPM), ideas that had been informing public administration reform across the developed world since the 1980s (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). Although the Commission reform
Box 13.1 The Kinnock Reforms

A major administrative reform of the European Commission was spelled out in a White Paper entitled Reforming the Commission, which was released in March 2000. This Paper consisted of two elements: the strategy to be pursued and an action plan, focusing more specifically on the implementation stage of the administrative reform process. The objectives of the reforms were to create a strong, independent and effective Commission that would be able to fulfil the tasks set out in the Treaties and improve structures and systems to that effect. It was also stated that the reforms were intended to help the Commission to better perform its institutional role as the motor of European integration. Five themes were emphasized, framing the more specific elements of the reform: independence, responsibility, accountability, efficiency and transparency. The first of the reform elements, which fell under the heading ‘the means to match our ambitions’, sought to improve strategic planning by more systematically matching Commission functions to resources, enabling the Commission to prioritize its most important tasks. The second involved a major reform of human resources (personnel) policy, including a revision of career structures. The third focused on financial management and controlling and auditing systems, entailing a complete overhaul of the existing framework to create a more effective internal control system that stressed the responsibility of all actors involved in financial decision-making; in addition, a more thorough system of internal audits was established. The ethics dimension of the reforms cut across these three areas, but also involved revisions to the EU’s Staff Regulations and a new Code of Conduct for Commissioners (revised in 1999 and then again in 2004 and 2010), as well as an emphasis on training and consciousness-raising initiatives for all Commission staff.

The agenda did not seek to impose NPM as a package on the Commission, some major themes of NPM can certainly be identified in parts of the Commission reform endeavours (Levy 2003, 2006). This is instructive, as NPM is often associated with a neo-liberal, deregulatory agenda; inside the Commission, this bolstered the argument that the reform was politically motivated, its raison d’être being the undermining of the Commission’s political role within the EU (Peterson 2008: 775).

It is also important to understand the impact and implications of the reform within the Commission, and to situate these implications in the specific historical, institutional and political context in which the Commission operates. What has been identified to date is the extent to which the focus of Commission activity has shifted away from its traditional policy/political functions towards management and administrative tasks (Bauer 2012). This is largely congruent with the more general literature on NPM reforms; however, as already noted, this shift must be understood in the context of the European Commission, an institution that had long had an explicitly stated political function within the European integration process. In practical terms, there is some evidence suggesting that junior and mid-level managers have been the most affected by the changes in the organizational context, whereas organizational elites have seemed to weather the reform more easily (Bauer 2012). Some have accepted the reforms as necessary; others have become disaffected and demoralized because they have been forced to spend more time on what are often considered routine process issues, allowing less reflection and practice related to policy-relevant questions. To the extent that policy-related activities continue to enjoy a higher status in the Commission, this has undermined their roles. Even when managerial skills are rewarded, the ‘old guard’ has found it hard to adapt to the changed conditions.
organizational environment. However, the passing of time has eased the concerns over the reform, resulting in a ‘kind of normalisation’ (Bauer 2012: 499) of the changes introduced a decade earlier.

How the Commission has been affected by the reform more generally is difficult to judge. For example, there has been insufficient research on whether the external perceptions of the Commission have improved as a consequence of the administrative changes implemented since 2000. It would be difficult, though perhaps not impossible, to unravel the effects of the range of variables (including the reform) affecting attitudes towards the Commission in the post-reform period, not least given the disruptive effect of the Eurozone crisis. Similarly, it is not easy to judge whether the administrative reform has made the Commission more efficient or effective in any ‘real’ organizational or managerial sense, although we might expect that it has, at least to some degree. Staff responses to reforms during the period of transition or just afterwards are likely to be negative; the broader and more profound implications of reform require more time to identify.

Enlargement and the Commission

The European Commission is heavily involved in managing the preparation and implementation of the enlargement of the EU (Lass-Lennecke and Werner 2009: 271). This has meant that the Commission has been engaged in functions such as the assessment and monitoring of prospective member states and the reporting of its findings to current EU members. The Commission has been the main point of contact for applicant/candidate countries and has even been responsible for establishing the criteria against which potential members are judged.

The flip-side of the Commission’s active involvement in enlargement policy is the manner in which it – as a European institution – has been affected by enlargement. Lass-Lennecke and Werner (2009) have shown how enlargement policy impacted the administrative structures and procedures used to manage the process in the period prior to the accession. Their work suggests that these adaptations were not connected to the Kinnock Reforms, but were instead the product of a kind of ‘functional adaptation’ (Lass-Lennecke and Werner 2009: 281) specific to the effects of enlargement.

Other scholars have also examined the post-accession enlargement effects. The most obvious and direct impact of enlargement on the Commission concerns the integration of a large number of staff from new member states into the organization. This took place at the same time as the administrative reform process discussed above, and as such is clearly ‘bound up’ with it (Ban 2013: Ch. 3; Peterson and Birdsell 2008: 63). While integrating staff from new member states into the Commission has always been problematic, the 2004 enlargement was unprecedented because of the extremely large number of member states (ten) entering the EU at the same time.

There are two dimensions to this process: recruitment and integration/socialization. Regarding the former, the process by which officials from the new member states were recruited into the Commission was far from smooth. It was extremely difficult to appoint staff at anything other than the lowest of levels. By 2007, only 12 per cent of Commission staff came from the new member states, and relatively few of these were employed in high-ranking posts. Indeed, only 9 out of the Commission’s 75 top officials were from the EU-12, that is the 10 Central and Eastern European accession countries, plus Malta and Cyprus, and there were none all at the deputy director-general level (Peterson 2008: 768; Peterson and Birdsell 2008: 58). This led to concerns both within the Commission and in the new member states that there was inadequate representation of the new states in the Commission services (Peterson and Birdsell 2008: 58).
The European Commission after the reform

The difficulties facing the Commission did not end with recruitment, however. Despite the shortfalls in recruitment, integrating such a large number of staff into the organization posed several challenges. New staff entering the Commission at a senior grade who had not been acculturated into the Commission found it hard to gain the respect of their colleagues, as well as that of the more junior staff, who felt they were having to ‘teach’ their new bosses their jobs (Ban 2013). At least some new junior staff members found it hard to gain the respect of their peers; and sensed that they were not taken as seriously as staff from existing member states. Experiences were also mixed at the senior level (Ban 2013: 146–7), and even amongst the Commissioners (Peterson 2008: 765). It did not help that the terms under which new staff entered the Commission from 1 May 2004 differed drastically from those of existing staff: their promotion tracks would be slower and their pay scales lower (Peterson 2008: 769).

Problems such as these are to be expected during a difficult period of transition; however, if not addressed, they can lead to longer-term dysfunctions within the organization. This influx of new staff into the organization brought with it new expectations, experiences and cultural characteristics, including new working cultures. Legitimate research questions might examine the extent to which new officials have become socialized into the ‘Commission culture’ – that is, into the pre-existing shared assumptions that underlie the everyday working practices of the organization – or perhaps determine whether the new staff have contributed to the emergence of a hybrid Commission culture that reflects certain elements of the old guard, together with aspects associated with the flood of incoming staff. From Ban’s instructive research, it seems that the experience of most new officials was positive; only a minority reported negative experiences (Ban 2013: 120–1). The fact that existing officials can also feel disoriented by new officials entering their institutions and potentially interfering with their expected career trajectory may additionally be of relevance. Peterson and Birdsell (2008: 56) provide some evidence that established officials found the institution ‘less cosy’ after enlargement, reflecting the sense of institutional change effected by the influx of new officials. However, other research suggests that the Commission has been left relatively unchanged by the process of enlargement (Peterson 2008: 774).

The implications of enlargement for the Commission stretch far beyond the internal administrative concerns of the officials working within the Commission’s services. The increase in member states to 28 has had a dramatic impact on the functioning of the Union, and this has affected the Commission as well. The larger number of member states increases the diversity of actors within the EU, making it more difficult for the Commission to build bridges between these states’ interests and expectations; this places substantial pressure on both the Commission’s capacity to serve as an honest broker and its ability to set an EU agenda that is likely to gain acceptance across the EU as a whole. Although the Commission needs to be aware of national interests (as it always has been) if it wants to shape European issues, it also must recognize that the increased number of member states strengthens the position of the EU Council and the European Council. In a more diffuse European Union, these organizations seem better placed to forge compromises and build consensus intergovernmentally than the European Commission, no matter how conscious and reflective of member state interests it strives to be. This intergovernmental trend has been further strengthened as a consequence of the economic/Eurozone crisis.

The economic crisis and the Commission

The economic/Eurozone crisis and its effects imply both threats and potential opportunities for the European Commission. The opportunities are related to the enhanced role of the
Michelle Cini

Commission in economic governance, as well as the broader transformative potential of the crisis as a driver of change and more specifically as a motor of the European integration process. There is a precedent for this: in the past, when European integration has stalled and crises have shaken the foundations of the European institution, by some undefined process – perhaps neo-functionalist in character, although that is open to debate – the European Community (and later the European Union) has always managed to muddle through, and the European Commission has often emerged as one of the main beneficiaries. However, this gain in power has not come without costs, not least in the form of popular distrust of the Commission. It should be noted that past experience may not help us to predict the future, nor even to analyse the meanings and implications of ongoing changes in the European Union. In the post-2007 period, along with heated debate over whether the European Union – and the Euro experiment – can survive, the crisis has also provoked discussions about the limits of European integration and the potential integrative responses to crisis. This has not involved the emergence of a pro-federalist agenda, although it has opened the door to more imaginative Europeanized solutions to the crisis that generally involve a central role for the Commission. Amongst the many proposals floated, the European Semester (which provides targets for national budgets) and the so-called ‘Six Pack’ legislation (which came into force in December 2011, strengthening the Stability and Growth Pact) offer the Commission new opportunities to wield power within the Eurozone, if not in the wider EU. Like the Treaty on Coordination, Stability and Governance signed by 25 EU member states in March 2012, the ‘Six Pack’ introduces a procedural change: reversed qualified majority voting. In situations where this applies, a Commission proposal can only be overturned if opposed by a qualified majority of member states, substantially strengthening the agenda-setting capacity of the Commission.

Even so, the European Commission has more often been depicted as part of the problem rather than as a source of European-level solutions in the Eurozone crisis. In the early stages of the financial and economic crisis in Europe, the Commission seemed to be paralysed, leaving national leaders to resolve their problems largely through intergovernmental mechanisms; when the Commission finally intervened, it frequently misjudged and sometimes exacerbated the situation. This was certainly the case when it sought in March 2013 to seize money from Cypriot bank depositors whose deposits were less than the guaranteed sum of €100,000.

Since the crisis began, the Commission has faced attacks from national, European and international media. This is not a new phenomenon, and there is evidence that Euroscepticism, with its concomitant critique of the European Commission, was on the rise well before the onset of the crisis. However, public opinion polls also suggest that the Commission’s reputation has suffered as a consequence of the crisis. However, it is the marginalization of the Commission by national governments that may well be the most long-lasting effect of the crisis. The wrangling over the EU budget during the negotiations of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) in 2013 saw the Commission take the brunt of the criticism. The UK government was particularly vociferous in its condemnation, with Prime Minister David Cameron claiming to be outraged at the Commission’s proposal to increase the EU budget by 5 per cent while national budgetary expenditures were being cut.

By contrast, there seems to be a general consensus that the European institutions that have benefited most from the crisis are the European Council, which consists of heads of government (and some heads of state), and the European Central Bank. The Commission is generally perceived as the loser, despite the new powers it has gained as a consequence of the post-2010 reforms in European economic governance. Indeed, even in the sphere of economic governance, the evidence indicates that although the institution has gained some enhanced status from the new economic governance initiatives introduced since the start of the crisis, the Commission’s role...
The European Commission after the reform

(and particularly its traditional legislative role) is being undermined by the reform process (Dawson and de Witte 2013).

Conclusion

The primary impact on the European Commission of the administrative reform of the early 2000s, the enlargement of the mid-2000s and the economic/Eurozone crisis of the late 2000s (stretching into the following decade) has been a reduction in the capacity of the Commission to perform its original function as a political player in the EU system. Although this process actually began prior to the resignation of the Commission in 1999, it has intensified since that time (Peterson 2008). The Commission has become more intergovernmental, certainly, but it has also become more modern and professional. Its administrative and management capacities have been enhanced and are now to some extent prioritized above its more traditional functions as an agenda-setter and policy initiator. Of course, this is not to say that the Commission no longer performs political functions; however, it has become more difficult for the Commission to play a leading role in the EU.

An inter-institutional perspective can facilitate an analysis of the changing role of the European Commission. This is particularly the case when our focus is what legal scholars generally refer to as ‘institutional balance’. The question here is the extent to which the Commission has become weaker within the EU’s inter-institutional framework, and whether the EU itself has become more intergovernmental as a consequence of the changes identified above. There is some evidence supporting an intergovernmental trend in the EU and a weakening of the European Commission. However, the danger of making such generalizations is that they can mask the complexity of the position of the Commission (and other institutions) on the ground. Further research on inter-institutional relations in the EU is needed to confirm the effects that the combination of administrative reform, enlargement and crisis have had on the Commission, especially given some indications that the Commission may in fact be strengthening its role in economic governance in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis. Avid Commission-watchers have often pointed out how the Commission takes advantage of crises to bolster its inter-institutional position, even though (given current circumstances) this hypothesis might be counterintuitive.

It is therefore difficult to predict how the Commission’s role will develop in the future. At the time of writing, its position remains in a state of flux, with the future and fate of the Commission inextricably tied to the future and fate of the Euro and that of the EU as a whole. This also makes it more complex, if not impossible, to discuss the challenges facing the Commission in the coming years without considering them in the context of broader changes in the European Union. Given that the future of the European Union is still in question and that the effects of the 2008 economic crisis are yet to be fully understood, we must conclude that on all of these issues the jury is still out.

Bibliography


