Curriculum Vitae Irina Tanasescu

Following her BA degree in Political Science from the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) in 2002, Irina Tanasescu followed the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies programme at Dartmouth College and in March 2004 started her PhD research at the VUB. Her work focused on soft methods of policy-making, stakeholder participation in EU decision-making and broader issues of European multi-level governance and democratic theories. She published several book chapters and journal articles on social dialogue, voluntary instruments in environmental governance, deliberative democracy and stakeholder involvement in EU policy-making. Since June 2007 Irina Tanasescu works as an administrator in the Secretariat General of the European Commission.

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Towards a Deliberative Interpretation of Stakeholder Involvement in EU Policy-Making

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Voorstelling van het proefschrift

The analysis and understanding of the particular nature of the interactions between organized interests and the European Union institutions has had a prominent place on the research agenda of the past decade.

This research contributes to the wider debate by applying deliberative democracy – a theory born in the field of political philosophy – to the analysis of the interactions between the European Commission and organized interests. Deliberative democracy allows researchers to move beyond existing theories in an attempt to explain EU-specific public–private interactions as an argument-based participatory process capable of injecting legitimacy and effectiveness into decision-making. Indeed, by stressing the value of arguments as a legitimate basis for decision-making, deliberative democracy allows to move beyond the national-supranational dichotomy and to surpass the need for a European demos as the ultimate grounding for EU legitimacy. Moreover, the unique nature of the EU polity, where both governance and joint-decision traps feature prominently, is particularly suited for deliberative democratic theories. As for interest representation in the EU, the added-value of analyzing it through a deliberative-inspired lens is not only the lifting of the analysis from a mere empirical level to a more normative one, but more interestingly, a detailed assessment of what happens in concrete instances of consultation. While previous studies have explained how interest groups are organized at the EU level, which strategies they use and what the different access points to the EU institutions are, this research attempts to take the analysis to the next level of understanding and analyze what happens in concrete instances of consultation. More specifically, the focus is shifted from the interest groups as the main actor to the European Commission as the shaper (and main target) of interactions with third parties.

Drawing on an extensive literature review, coupled with detailed analysis of official documents and a qualitative assessment of 30 expert interviews, this research proceeds as follows. After a chapter dedicated to the analysis of deliberative democracy and its usefulness for the subject under scrutiny, the general framework of Commission-stakeholders relations is investigated. Attention is paid to the evolution of the guidelines regulating this relationship and to the standards and principles that apply to consultations in general. Then, a more detailed investigation of three case studies is offered, in order to inform the analysis with first-hand empirical information on particular instances of consultation. First, in chapter four, stakeholder involvement in Integrated Product Policy (IPP) is be scrutinized.

IPP is a novel approach to product policy that the Commission introduced in a 2003 Communication and that is characterized by its soft nature. Indeed, not only is the policy itself based on soft instruments (a Commission Communication preceded by a Green Paper) but its implementation relies entirely on soft instruments such as Eco-labelling, the Environmental Management and Audit Scheme or Voluntary Environmental Agreements. Moreover, this soft, governance nature of the policy implies a strong involvement of stakeholders at all stages of policy making. An analysis of stakeholder implication in both policy preparation and policy implementation is provided, in order to offer the full picture of consultation in a “soft” context and allow for the possible extension of conclusions to the stakeholder involvement in governance instruments in general. Then, chapter five offers an analysis of consultations in a completely different context, namely that of traditional, hard legislative policy-making. The 2005 Directive on the Eco-design of Energy-Using Products (EuP) is scrutinized because of the stakeholder consultation provisions embedded in the text of the directive itself. How the Commission shaped stakeholder interactions in this context and to what extent they are different from the ones in a governance environment is the purpose of this chapter. The last case study, in chapter six, is dedicated to the EU Impact Assessment (IA) guidelines. The purpose is to assess to what extent consistent provisions for stakeholder involvement are embedded in the IA guidelines and how they are translated into practice. This allows to see whether stakeholders are systematically involved in policy preparation at the EU level disregarding the legal nature of the policy decision (“soft” versus “hard”), given that IAs are required for all new initiatives included in the annual Commission Legislative and Work Programme, no matter what their form is.

The systematic application of four deliberative-inspired criteria (equality of participation, transparency, argumentative communication and binding decisions) to the analysis of the above-mentioned case studies leads to several conclusions. On the one hand, while the Commission interaction with stakeholders has been increasingly institutionalized over the past two decades, no consistent and uniform approach to consultation can be identified. Most Commission consultation exercises generally comply with deliberative criteria (albeit never with all), but the system is not fully deliberative due to a lack of engagement with deliberation as a desirable normative principle at the institutional level. On the other hand, deliberative democracy proves to be a useful tool for the analysis of the interactions between public authorities and stakeholders at the EU level, allowing for a better and richer understanding of the role of the European Commission as the shaper of interactions with organized interests.