



POLITICO

# Brussels Playbook

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## SPRING BOOK REVIEW, PART I: ON EUROPE

**THE SERIOUS SPECTACLE OF EU POLITICS:** The back of Luuk van Middelaar's new book, "[Alarums and Excursions: Improvising Politics on the European Stage](#)" is covered in suspiciously effusive praise. Donald Tusk just loved it. Sir Ivan Rogers recommended it to both Europeans and Britons as a guide to understanding how the EU really works. And on it goes. But read the book, and it's hard to disagree. Van Middelaar, a former adviser to Herman Van Rompuy, is a very fine writer and academic, and has penned the most insightful and original book on this era of European politics.

**Euro crisis revisited:** It's a crisis well known to a whole generation of Brussels correspondents, and yet Van Middelaar tells us something new. He evokes its peak moments with an insider's knowledge and points to key events overlooked by many, including myself, at the time. It's easier in hindsight of course, but it's a thoroughly enjoyable read and a true page-turner — so much so that I didn't get nearly enough sleep this weekend.

**His thesis:** Improvisation is the distinctive feature of EU politics these days, Van Middelaar writes. In all crises, past and present, it takes some trial and error to adjust the balance of power between opposing forces: France and Germany, solidarity and responsibility, improvisation and regulation. Another way to look at it: There are three "dramaturgical styles for Europe's theatre," he writes — "backstage depoliticization, frontstage parliamentarization, and frontstage summitry" — that have to be reconciled. When the euro crisis was resolved in the summer of 2012, it was because the EU landed on a successful improvisation, according to Van Middelaar, and founded the banking union.

**If you're wondering about the title,** "Alarums and Excursions" is "an Elizabethan stage direction used to prepare the actors for an onstage skirmish, or to make the noise of battle," the author explains.

**Speaking of *dramatis personae*:** In the book, Van Middelaar refers to Angela Merkel as "Europe's pre-eminent leader, now in her final years in power." But it seems some of the EU's other lead characters aren't ready to let her go. [In an interview with Funke Media Group](#) this weekend, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said he "cannot imagine" Merkel will "disappear without trace" when her term ends in 2021. He also referred to her as a "lovable work of art" and said she would be "highly qualified" for a senior EU position.