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Alarums and Excursions: Improvising Politics on the European Stage

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Part insider memoir and part commentary, this is probably the best analysis yet to appear of how the EU managed its recent crises over refugees, Ukraine, and the euro. Van Middelaar, now a political theorist, worked as a speechwriter for Herman Van Rompuy, the president of the European Council, from 2010 to 2014. He repackages the EU establishment consensus in prose largely free of jargon and footnotes. He convincingly shows that the EU has been surprisingly successful at managing crises—although, in keeping with the conventional wisdom in Brussels, he suggests some moderate reforms designed to bolster its power and legitimacy. The book is less persuasive in its overarching explanation for the EU's success: that, when push comes to shove in Brussels, "politics trumps economics," thereby purportedly overcoming opposition to integration by special interests. This is the story leaders in Brussels tell. Yet what van Middelaar's narrative actually reveals is how European leaders, buffeted by market forces and regulatory failures, craft pragmatic responses to real-world problems in pursuit of their enduring national interests. Although this is not the technocratic world dreamed of by economists, it is also far from one in which politics reigns supreme over economics.

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