Who Said Brussels Was Boring?

By STEPHEN KOTKIN

SUMMERTIME cries out for some beach reading. How about a page-turner on the European Union?

On paper, the E.U. is a colossus, with nearly 500 million people and a gross domestic product of around $16 trillion, larger than that of the United States. In practice, the E.U. is an empire of paper, some 90,000 pages laboriously negotiated over half a century. These rules and regulations — they expand to two million pages once translated into the union’s many member languages — govern everything from bottle labels to agricultural subsidies. Settle into that beach chair.

Europe’s writ is generated by the 785 members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France; the 22,500 civil servants, known as Mandarins, who staff its executive branch, the European Commission, in Brussels; and the 27 judges of the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg. Confusingly, there is a parallel E.U. Council of Ministers, with one representative from each of the 27 member countries, as well as a European Council, composed of the leaders of member states. The E.U. also has a High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, but no army or navy.

This complex but minimal machinery, supporting one of the world’s most remarkable experiments in transnational cooperation, does not usually make for pleasure reading. But in a clever memoir, “Life of a European Mandarin,” from the Belgian publisher Lannoo ($40), Derk-Jan Eppink entertainingly brings the internecine E.U. to life.

First, some background: Mr. Eppink emerges from a conservative village in Holland, lands a coveted traineeship at the European Commission in 1984 and is smitten. He then goes off for a decade or so to toil as a journalist, often covering the E.U. (which even his editors find dull). With the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe is transformed, and in the late 1990s he is invited to serve on the senior staff of a deliberately provocative Dutch commissioner of the E.U.

In a Brussels high-rise — not exactly on the tourist’s Grand Tour — Mr. Eppink sets about on what he and his boss see as levelheaded work. This, the book says, means manipulating people, chiefly to remove the myriad lingering obstacles to the single European market in goods and services. But their real holy war involves demanding cultural assimilation of the waves of (mainly Muslim) immigrants to Europe, and keeping Turkey out of the E.U. Mr. Eppink and his boss (though unnamed in the book, he is Frits Bolkestein, then commissioner for the internal market of the E.U.) make enemies left and right (mostly left).
Settling scores archly, the book tells compelling stories, like the multiyear political intrigue to undo Europe’s national postal monopolies in a Big Bang. Mr. Eppink drinks a pub dry with a former boxer who represents a British postal workers union, and brings off a coup by splitting two French-headed groups opposed to liberalization. Press leaks, tricks on allies, and more are needed to eke out a compromise.

This is a very European book. American readers may sometimes become lost in the “special chefs,” E.U. jargon for the weekly meetings of cabinet personnel across the many commissions, or in the “Hebdo,” weekly meetings of just cabinet heads. Inexplicably, Mr. Eppink omits naming many identifiable people, like his main boss. The book’s smart-alecky moments — it caricatures the European Commission as “the Princess” — can wear thin. But Mr. Eppink provides unusual immediacy and insight on what the E.U. largely is: a glorified but indispensable economic regulator and deregulator.

To outsiders, the protagonists of the integration melees are Europeans. In the book, they appear as a bunch of national stereotypes. He is told to watch out for one eurocrat, a “typical Greek” who “manipulates without you even noticing.” (“The Dutch,” Mr. Eppink adds, “are generally suspicious of the Greeks.”)

Negotiating skills are decisive, he says, because each national culture has its ways: The Dutch are hapless, expecting to win arguments on the merits. The French “are pedantic to the point of boredom, gradually wearing you down,” the author says, while the Belgians excel at “waiting until the last minute and then rushing to support the side they think is going to win.”

And the Germans? They “get moody if they don’t get their own way.” The most obstreperous, though, are the Spanish and the Poles, who “feel themselves superior to the smaller countries but inferior to the larger ones,” Mr. Eppink writes, yet “demand to be treated like the big boys.” In general, the Calvinist author concludes, the Catholics use “all their Jesuitical tricks.”

Mr. Eppink overindulges the politically incorrect national portraiture, obscuring the ideologies that divide the pro-European Union side between economic liberalizers, like himself, and proponents of social and environmental programs. But the book shows that policy for a collective Europe is made, or unmade, by national sentiment. How to kill a proposed regulation mandating reduced bus emissions? Spin the British press about how the European Union wants to do away with cherished double-deckers, and the French press about how it wants to privatize sacred public transit. Voilà.

Still, what Mr. Eppink calls “the harsh reality of national (and sometimes personal) interests” is the secret of the European Union’s success. The supranational union works only because its laws are largely enforced by national governments, whose interests must be served.

In a crisp final chapter, Mr. Eppink confronts the Mandarins’ foreboding about a union in crisis. European voters — when asked — have rejected an E.U. constitution, even though it was recently repackaged as a “reform treaty.” Good riddance, he argues, because the more the E.U. tries to become like the United States, the more it ends up resembling the Soviet Union.
Mostly, Mr. Eppink says, the European Union needs to do less: stop expanding, prune the number of parliamentarians, drop the efforts to introduce a European tax, rein in agricultural and regional policy. But it should do more on energy and immigration. “Will Europe become a more Islamic continent?” he asks with alarm, or will Islam in Europe “become a more Europeanized religion?” Both, no doubt. The achievement of the European Union is all about flexibility, and that’s the only way it can survive.