



Ingeborg Tommel

### The European Union – what it is and how it works

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When *The European Union – what it is and how it works* was published in late 2014, Ingeborg Tommel could hardly guess how helpful and updated this book could be in the current times when the European Union is facing two pressing issues: the economic default of Greece and the migration massive flows from the Mediterranean and the Balkans. We also assume that the author didn't have a crystal ball that could predict the leading role that Germany would assure in both situations. Tommel is professor emeritus in International Politics and Jean Monnet Chair in European Politics at the University of Osnabrück. However, the book doesn't show any particular tendency of the influence of the places she lived or worked in (also Berlin, the Netherlands, Canada and Egypt) to explore EU's functioning or mission.

*The European Union – what it is and how it works* is exactly what we can guess from the title: an academic handbook from a professor that has been devoting her life teaching and researching on the political system of the EU and European governance. In 2009, Tommel published (with Amy Verdun) the book "Innovative Governance in the European Union: the Politics of Multilevel Policymaking" (Lynne Rienner 2009) and we can easily find several articles online, as the one wrote in May 29, 2013 to E-International Relations called "The EU's New Neighbourhood Policy: An Appropriate Response to the Arab Spring?". In fact, what we can find in this book is the author's assessment on how the EU's functioning affects the lives of Europeans (even if they don't perceived it in their daily routines) explaining in detail EU's nature, evolution, structure and decision making procedures. But we can ask: are these topics new, especially if we recall that this is a "European Union series" publication? What is distinctive in this book? The author clarifies in the preface: «Despite a wide variety of valuable book on the subject, I felt that something was missing. I was looking for a book that could give a lean description of the EU as an emerging political order beyond the nation state. I wanted a book that highlights the basic features of the EU's institutional structure and the 'why' of this apparently unusual structure. I needed a book that describes the Union's institutions not just one by one, but also in their complex interactions. I also required a book that places European integration in a consistent theoretical framework, without reverting to the grand theories of international relations, or to those capturing the nation state. The present book is a response to what I felt was missing. Of course it doesn't satisfy all my aspirations. Nevertheless, I hope readers will view this book as a missing link in the crowd of textbooks on the EU». (2014: x)

The book *The European Union – what it is and how it works* succeeds not only as a potential selfish attempt of the author to find a "missing link" but is particular interesting in the critical analysis of dilemmas (on cooperation and consensus but also conflict and skepticism) and discrepancies highlighted in page 3 and developed through the book (between an apparently 'weak' institutional structure and the far-reaching impact of European decisions and actions; between a highly fragmented process of decision-making and the centralizing impact of decisions; between powerful individual actors and institutions and a collective weakness in exercising power; and between 'grand designs' for focused reform and the Union's piecemeal institutional evolution without a clear vision of its final shape, the so called 'finalité'). The paradoxes from which the author insists in starting he book proves how the EU is such a *sui generis* organization and leads the path in the next chapters to several prospects on democratic legitimacy on the future.

Tommel1 divides her book in 14 chapters but we could easily split it into three main parts: the first one is dedicated to the historical background of the EU project and includes the



Introduction (“The Political System of the EU) and chapters 2 (“Theorizing European Integration and the Union as a Political System”), 3 (“Building the European Union: Supranational Dynamics and Intergovernmental Configurations”) and 4 (“Consolidating the European Union: Enlargement, Deepening Integration and Crisis Management”). The second part relates with institutional procedures and mechanisms. It comprises chapters 5 (“The Core Institutional Structure”), 6 (“Decision-Making: Cooperation and Conflict among the Core Institutions”), 7 (“Decision-Making and Consensus-Building within the Core Institutions”) and 8 (“Expanding and Diversifying the Core Institutional Structure”). Finally, a third part is dedicated to a critical analysis on the EU’s multidimensional governance (both in terms of efficiency and legitimacy) concluding on an assessment of the EU’s nature in action. This part then comprises the last five chapters of the book: 9 (“Promoting Integration: Policy-making and Governance”), 10 (“Building a Multi-Level System”), 11 (“Building a Multi-Actor System”), 12 (“Assessing the European Union: Efficiency and Effectiveness”), 13 (“The Democratic Legitimacy of the EU”) and 14 (“Conclusions: The Nature of the European Union”). This last division is indeed the most interesting, as the author’s arguments recall us the multiple labelling debates that academia has been proceeding in the last years - the ‘ethical power europe’ of Lisbeth Aggestam or Weiler; the ‘civilian power’ of François Duchene, Helen Sjursen, Bjorn Hettne and Fredrik Soderbaum; the ‘normative power’ of Ian Manners – to try to define the “unidentified political object” that Delors addressed in 1985 in a speech in the Luxembourg.

While the author searches for the EU’s *raison d’être*, it’s worth reading how she acknowledges how post national forms of democracy should be explored to overcome a structural deficit of citizen’s representation (2014: 292-303). In fact, the book offers critical insights about EU security governance and actorness with a solid and up-to-date literature review on these subjects.

However, the biggest challenge remains, after almost 370 pages: what is the European Union and how it works? The author’s options are clearly more academic than policy oriented, leaving to students and general audience enough guidance for an individual analysis on the topic. In fact, it is towards “those who, until now, have been largely excluded from the project of European integration” (2014:335) that the author addresses the higher expectations of progress in the way ahead.

*The European Union – what it is and how it works* is undoubtedly a worth reader, either for beginners or experts who are willing both to learn “the basics” and to explore further research on this area in a crucial time for Europe and for the Europeans to keep engaged with the European project.

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