

European Crossroads: A Review

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Among all the books about the European Union that have recently flooded the market, there is one deserving our attention. *Evropské křižovatky (European Crossroads)* by Hodač, Lacina and Strejček brings a mix of three different views on the contemporary European Union. Such a global approach is undoubtedly interesting and offers useful material for contemplating the current state and functioning of the crucial European organization. The authors try to bring the EU nearer to the reader, and declare their intention to avoid both excessive criticism and adoration of the EU. In practice, they mostly critically evaluate and discuss the way institutions function and hot current problems. But they point out the after-war integration successes as well. The broad intention is not to show that the overall European project is doomed but to draw attention towards weak spots in its functioning. The book is formally divided into six chapters, however, there are three main chapters that were obviously written by different individual authors (without authorship being specified). It is written in a readable style, mostly avoiding repetition of well known facts – the authors do not have ambitions to cover all topics (in a textbook form).

The first main chapter begins with a reminder of the initial integration conditions after World War II and follows with discussion of the main integration milestones, which mentions interesting (not well known) aspects, among others. The author consequently deals with problems related to European integration, the changing role of Germany and France in the integration process, the EU as a guarantor of peace on the continent, etc. The respective topics are often relatively isolated collections of ideas about issues in European history and current state of the integration.

The author of the second main chapter looks at the integration process more from the position of the European institutions, and concentrates on the political and legal system in the EU. Democratic deficit in the contemporary Union is the main idea that permeates the whole chapter. The author here expresses criticism of the role of the European Parliament as well as the Commission. The former is generally presented as too weak and the second as too strong. He also misses a strong European opposition. The chapter generally provides a view on the functioning of the main European institutions and offers ideas about future development with emphasis on the discussion about federalisation of the EU.

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The third main chapter is dedicated to economic aspects of the integration process, and highlights the consequences of the last economic crisis. The chapter includes an interesting application of Hayek's ideas on the European integration process and discussion about the role of Germany. The author analyses the possibilities of future development as well.

The following (and last) chapter condenses the previous findings of the individual authors. The role of the EU is evaluated and balanced from the perspective of a nearly seventy-year-long development. The authors pay attention, among others, to the position of the EU in the world and the development of the Euro.

I have several comments regarding the general attitude of the book. I would personally expect more of "detachment" from the topics – especially because the authors are (on the contrary to many critics) experts in this field. Especially the authors of the first two chapters are, in my view, too submerged in the current European problems and are not able/willing to see the whole integration process from a perspective and distance. Such approach results in an overly critical view in dealing with some topics. One of the examples is that the first two authors repeatedly state that there are no common values within the EU (and between the EU and the USA). On the other hand, though, the third author mentions democracy, human rights, dealing with minorities, etc. – all these are in my view very strong common values inside contemporary Europe (and are similar to the values in the USA). I can personally hardly imagine stronger values in a society. Without any doubts, there are differences among the countries as far as their attitudes towards the role of the centre, strength of the government, openness to international trade, etc. is concerned, but I deem them minor in comparison to the fundamental values on which the cotemporary EU is based. Similarly, there are several critical comments about a low level of knowledge about the EU matters among European inhabitants. I believe that this is a stereotyped cliché: I am wondering whether there is any way to achieve a higher level of awareness about European matters among population.

I would personally elaborate on what is labelled as "two-speed Europe" (instead of concentrating on federalisation) to a greater extent and use the possibility offered by the topic. It is mentioned only in the third part of the book. It is (in my view) a possibility that is currently in fact developing (for example the Euro) and it seems to be a more realistic future development direction than federalisation.

Additionally, I have one "technical" comment – the authors could have devoted more space to explaining structures of their chapters. Also, they could have been more careful in reasoning their interpretations at some places, as their statements occasionally seem not to be justified well.

Despite my critical comments about the general form of the book, I can recommend it to anyone interested in contemporary European matters. It provides the reader with useful material for thinking about the integration process that we are all involved in. In practice, it offers experts' contemplation (without rigorous analysis) and this approach is the book's greatest asset as well as drawback.

References

HODAČ, Jan; LACINA, Lubor; STREJČEK, Petr: Evropské křížovatky. Brno Barrister & Principal, 2014, 181 pp., ISBN 978-80-7485-018-9.