

**Jan Zielonka:**  
***Europe as Empire. The Nature of the Enlarged European Union***

*1st edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 293 pages, ISBN: 0-19-929221-3.*

Whilst heralding the birth of a misty neo-medieval behemoth, Jan Zielonka has invited a nascent Westphalian superstate to its own funeral. The Oxford professor's latest work stages a last battle between the notion of the European Union as an emerging Westphalian state and its challenger, Zielonka's concept of a neo-medieval European empire. However, Zielonka hardly conceals his determination to toss the former on the pyre and dissolve what he perceives as its hegemony in the field of European Studies. The book offers a comprehensive theory, which claims to explain European economic and political integration, as well as European Foreign Policy.

In the introductory chapter Zielonka develops his idea of a neo-medieval European Union, marked by little similarity with the states that emerged in Europe after the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. According to him, the typical Westphalian state was characterised by hard outer borders, a central authority, a roughly homogeneous cultural identity and coinciding administrative, economic and military regimes. In addition, such states could in theory rely on sovereignty as the governing principle in international politics. Zielonka claims that the academic field of European integration has become dominated by the paradigm of such a budding Westphalian superstate, despite the fact that there is little evidence for such an emergence.

In stark contrast, the author's neo-medieval paradigm holds that the European Union may best be characterised by four opposite key features. Firstly, the Union's borders are fuzzy. It is increasingly difficult to distinguish members from non-members and borders are often of a temporary nature. Secondly, power and authority are not concentrated, but unevenly distributed throughout the continent and organised in concentric circles. The European Union's governance is multi-layered and made up of quasi-feudal relationships between agents, which poses obstacles to a clear Westphalian chain of command. Thirdly, the European Union is not in the process of developing a clear cultural identity and will in the future remain heterogeneous. Finally, the European Union's Member States do not only engage in each other's domestic affairs, but are also willing to interfere with the EU's neighbours, thus somewhat antiquating the concept of sovereignty. However revolutionary and non-conventional the notion of a neo-medieval empire might appear, it must be stressed that it is not entirely novel.<sup>1</sup> Yet, over the last few years, the name Zielonka has become attached to the concept, due to his attempts to transform the concept into an all-embracing theory.

The author's first three chapters, which form the informal part one of the book, deal with the EU's enlargement into East Central Europe, whereby he

examines the initial disparities between old and new members, the interests behind the accession and the adjustment process between the EU-15 and the East Central European countries. This first part enables Zielonka to strengthen his neo-medieval concept. It is in his sharp analysis of the EU's eastern enlargement, labelled an "impressive exercise in empire building",<sup>2</sup> that the author displays his intention to depart from the dominant discourse. Hidden behind the official rhetoric of enlargement he identifies an often badly coordinated attempt by the Union's old members to fill a power vacuum, to conquer new markets and secure stability in their Eastern neighbourhood. Furthermore, he points out that the losers of the enlargement process in both new and old Member States were "often appeased if not bribed".<sup>3</sup> Significantly, Zielonka argues that the accession of the East Central European states has substantially increased the Union's diversity, which, as the author reveals, is treated with suspicion in the academic field of European Studies. By means of a comparative examination of economic and good governance indicators, Zielonka convincingly argues that a clear and lasting East-West divide after the 2004 enlargement, which is regarded by many as paralysing, cannot be detected, despite the overall increase of heterogeneity.<sup>4</sup> Instead, this amplified diversity, Zielonka observes, fosters the development towards a neo-medieval empire and renders the European Union incapable of transforming into a Westphalian superstate.

In the three subsequent chapters, the informal second part of the book, Zielonka tests and traces his neo-medieval concept. The author discusses his concept's applicability in three areas; the economic sphere, the field of democratic governance, and the area of European Foreign Policy. In this second part, the Zielonka's initial analytical sharpness wanes and the link between the evidence and his notion of a neo-medieval empire becomes somewhat artificial. It is for instance unclear and therefore unconvincing that the Lisbon agenda, increased internal liberalisation and privatisation are inherently neo-medieval responses to global economic pressures. After all, this would assign a Westphalian state like the United States a leading-role in the spread of global neo-medievalism. Although Zielonka states that his neo-medievalism is more of an abstract concept than an historical comparison, the reader might ask why Zielonka does not use established concepts instead of referring to the rather misleading notion of a "neo-medieval model of democratic governance", which is merely synonymous with a flexible multilevel and polycentric system of governance in which majoritarian bodies dominate only on the national level.<sup>5</sup>

In his chapter on European Foreign Policy the concept is able to regain some of its strength; nowhere else is the Union less Westphalian than in this area. Instead of enjoying coherence in decision-making and possessing a foreign minister, a secret service or a nuclear arsenal, Brussels' foreign policy is characterised by a multiplicity of actors, the absence of hard power tools, multiple loyalty and overlapping authority, which can be observed in the varying membership of NATO, Schengen or the European Monetary Union. Towards the end of the book Zielonka draws an interesting comparison between the current role of the United States as a "European power *sui generis*"<sup>6</sup> and the position of the Vatican in the Middle Ages.

According to Zielonka, the struggle for cultural superiority and power between Church and Empire in medieval Europe is analogous to the competition between the United States and the European Union in contemporary Europe.

Concerning Zielonka's key concept of fuzzy borders, it must however be pointed out that especially the EU's southern border might not be as blurry as Zielonka claims it to be, given the fact that the northern costal line of the *mare nostrum* increasingly resembles a fortification against political and economic asylum seekers. Moreover, whilst in the South East and to the East the Union is at least rhetorically upholding the chance of accession, enlargement to Northern Africa and the Middle East has been ruled out. Even though the author explicitly rejects a normative view of his concept and its future implications, his preference for the neo-medieval solution is hard to miss. Moreover, his work provides academic legitimisation for the current shape of the European Union and will be welcomed by those who propagate both further economic liberalisation and a weak political Union.

Furthermore, Zielonka's analysis fundamentally lacks a comparison to traditional empires, which for instance are also characterised by fuzzy borders.<sup>7</sup> This comparison, for which the word "empire" in the author's concept calls, would show the limitations of the neo-medieval paradigm, as can be demonstrated by three examples. Firstly, the author neglects the creation of an educated quasi-imperial elite. Through financial incentives, education and propaganda the European Union and especially the European Commission have helped to install an elite in Brussels and other European capitals that will defend the existing power structures and render the absence of a common popular identity insignificant. It is this economic and political elite that will continue to spur integration by stealth, the only possibility of avoiding the failure of European prestige projects like the European Defence Community or the Constitutional Treaty, as Zielonka rightly observes. Secondly, Zielonka has either failed to grasp or deliberately downplayed the militarisation of the European Union and thus the possible shift from "soft imperialism"<sup>8</sup> to hard imperialism. Despite the new military structures' apparent lack of autonomy from NATO and the United States, the Union as an economic block is acquiring a tool that potentially enables it to install and stabilise regimes and ensure access to both markets and resources. Thirdly, he overlooks that the European Union, like traditional empires, but unlike Westphalian states is in the process of acquiring an "imperial mission".<sup>9</sup> The ideas of Robert Cooper that have shaped the European Security Strategy could serve as a basis for such an ideological mission, which would provide it with further internal and external legitimacy.<sup>10</sup>

Despite its shortcomings, Zielonka's "Europe as Empire" is a must for students, scholars and policy-makers in the European arena who have observed a painful divergence between well-established conceptualisations of the European Union and their own perception of and experience with the enlarged European leviathan. The neo-medieval notion's all-encompassing nature, its applicability to both the debates on European integration theory and on European Foreign Policy and its unconventional approach to the latest enlargement, make it an exceptional contribution to the existing body

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of literature. It is, however, a book which despite its seemingly radical name remains embedded within the mainstream discourse on the European Union.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hedley Bull was amongst those who sparked off the debate about a return to medievalism in the late 1970s – Bull, Hedley (2002), *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition Columbia University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Zielonka, Jan (2006), *Europe as Empire. The Nature of the Enlarged European Union*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Zielonka claims that the diversity does not follow the old East-West border. In terms of economic performance and good governance, Zielonka observes a decline towards both the East and the South of the Union, although he also explains that there are many exceptions to this pattern.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>7</sup> Although some striking parallels exist between the EU and other empires, the idea of the European Union as a nascent empire has remained largely outside the mainstream discourse with few exceptions. See for instance: Münkler, Herfried (2005), *Imperien. Die Logik der Weltherrschaft*. Bonn: Lizenzausgabe für die Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung; Ferguson, Neill (2004), *Colossus. The rise and fall of the American empire*. London: Penguin Books. Whilst Münkler claims that Europe is an emerging empire though at the same time part of an American empire, Ferguson dismisses the chances that Europe is turning into an empire.

<sup>8</sup> Hettne and Soederbaum define “soft imperialism” as soft power applied in a hard way. Currently, this soft imperialism acts as the Union’s last resort to coerce other actors in the international arena. Hettne, Bjoern and Soederbaum, Fredrik (2005), *Civilian Power or Soft Imperialism. The EU as a Global Actor and the Role of Interregionalism*. European Foreign Affairs Review 10. Kluwer Law International.

<sup>9</sup> Münkler, 2005, p. 132.

<sup>10</sup> Cooper, Robert (2004), *The breaking of nations. Order and chaos in the twenty-first century*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition. London: Atlantic Books.