

## BOOK REVIEWS

Jan Zielonka, *Europe as an Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union*.  
Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 293; ISBN: 0-19-929221-3

*Keywords:* European Union, policy, enlargement, neo-medieval paradigm, empire.

From a historical point of view, one of the most important events which took place at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the European Union's process of Eastern enlargement. The desire of the former communist countries to join the expanding supra-national Union finally became reality in 2004 and later on in 2007, at the end of a difficult process of negotiation. Although many were expecting miraculous effects as a result of the integration, the period which followed the accession marked even tougher moments for both the old as well as the new Member States. In what regards the former, questions were raised as to the capacity of absorption and proper implementation of the European funding. In addition, the Western European officials still seemed to be concerned about the lingering state of the reforms in the justice area in the case of Romania and Bulgaria. At the same time, some of the newly accepted nations have been able to use their political position to influence decisions at the supra-national level. This was particularly the case of the Polish veto regarding the development of a strategic partnership between EU and Russia. Apart from this, it seems that at least some of the accepted countries lead an open, pro-American policy which weakens their political position inside the Union.

To all these elements, one should not forget to add the social implications which appeared as a result of the process of opening the borders for the workers from Central and Eastern Europe. The Western European states have been confronted with waves of migration out of which the most dramatic one has so far been the case of the Romanian Roma in Italy. The portrayal of the minority as thieves, beggars, rapists or even murderers has not only had a negative impact on the community as a whole, but also on the ethnic Romanians who decide to study, work or travel in the Union. The Italian government decided to approach the situation in a rather non-conformist manner by announcing that they desire to fingerprint all the Rroma ethnics on its territory. At the pressure of the European Union which adopted a resolution in its Parliament condemning the gesture as one that violates basic human rights, the authorities decided to expand the measure to all the citizens living in the Peninsula regardless of their nationality.

This constitutes just one of the many examples regarding a wide range of problems which have occurred since the accession. From a scientific point of view, these can be interpreted as results of a mutual process of adaptation involving on one side the European Union (represented by the old Member States) and on the other the newly accepted countries. Following this logic one could say that not only did the Union manage to impose its most important sets of rules and regulations on the future Member States mainly through the accession mechanisms, but also the acceptance of so many countries in such a short period of time raised, as we have seen, important questions at the supra-national level. Apart from the economic, political or cultural areas probably the one which has been the most affected by these transformations has been the EU's institutional structure. Connected with this issue is the recent problem of the approval of the Treaty of Lisbon also known as the modified version of the first European Constitution. This particular legal document was deemed to be necessary, in the eyes of the European politicians, due to the institutional reforms which should be undertaken as a result of the integration and the expansion of the Union to currently 27 Member States. Its failure to be adopted via referendum in Ireland shows that still apart from the democratic gap existing at the supra-national level, nations are not yet ready to fully accept all the implications of the accession process. The future of the Treaty is still open. Its adoption or rejection raises, for the time being, a series of interesting questions as to whether the Union will further expand namely to include countries such as Turkey or Ukraine, given the fact that currently it does not only face a democratic deficit problem, but also an institutional one.

In order to find a possible answer to the question above, one needs to focus on analyzing the enlargement process in an attempt at understanding the reasons for which it happened as well as the multiple ways in which the new states can be accommodated into the already 'heavy' EU structure. From this point of view, Jan Zielonka's book *Europe as an Empire* offers the reader just the needed theoretical framework which solves the mystery of the Eastern enlargement. This particular study under review here focuses on three main topics, namely the reasons for the Union's expansion to the East, the consequences of this action and the ways in which the relationship between the West and the former communist countries can further develop after the integration.

In trying to achieve these purposes Zielonka uses an intriguing theoretical model respectively the neo-medieval historical paradigm. He considers it to represent a new way of looking at the Union as a whole and at the integration processes it goes through. As a result, the author believes that the current state of affairs points more towards a neo-medieval kind of political organization within the Union rather than a Westphalian (federal) one. In order to prove his argument, Zielonka makes use of several key ideas and concepts which will repeat throughout the book and will constitute the skeleton on which subsequent argumentations will be built. He refers to the political, cultural as well as the governing and identity spheres and he uses the "neo-medieval" and "Westphalian" notions in order to explain the particular realities of the Union.

In what regards, the political sphere, there currently seems to be an overlapping of responsibilities between several different institutions (or "units" as the author calls

them). At the same time, the governing system does not have a clear power center nor a hierarchical order.

Due to the recent waves of enlargement the diversity in the space of the Union increased considerably, not only in what regards the economic sphere, but also in the cultural and social ones. In addition, Zielonka considers that EU has “soft borders,” which are generating not only the increasing diversity which is hard to manage and which “...will prevent the Union from overcoming the already existing discrepancies between its functional and territorial borders” (Zielonka 2006: 3); but also because for instance the Schengen regulations are not extremely compatible with the EU’s foreign policy objectives.

Another important feature refers to the fact that the governing mechanisms within the Union are, at the present time, multilayered and multicentered, an aspect which contradicts the very logic of the Westphalian model which implies a high degree of centralization of the decision-making process.

The last, but not least important element is connected with the development of a European identity. This is probably one of the most problematic aspects of the European integration as it is hard to achieve practically. The cultural differences between the Member States still persist (even after so many years of cohabitation within the Union) and, as mentioned previously, they have gotten deeper as a result of the Eastern expansion. Now one can easily talk of a West-East divide in both social as well as cultural terms. This argument will be however contradicted later on in the book by the author himself who will point out to the many similarities between these two parts of Europe when taking into consideration the role played by the USA on the continent.

Summing up the ideas presented so far, one could conclude that the main features of a neo-medieval empire are diversity and its preservation (this touching on economic as well as social, political and cultural aspects); the lack of a clear cut hierarchy, which could translate into blurred relations between center and periphery (Zielonka 2006: 12); a multitude of institutions, including military ones, which have overlapping jurisdiction; and the fact that the territorial and functional borders of the empire do not coincide.

Opposite this view lies the Westphalian understanding which is characterized by the presence of a “clear hierarchical structure with one center of authority” (Ibid. 2006: 12); homogeneity between the member states; a powerful cultural identity; and an overlapping of “legal, administrative, economic and military regimes” (Ibid. 2006: 12).

If one however would take a closer look at the paradigms presented above, one would be able to understand that they actually portray, albeit in a different manner, the same fundamental debate in EU studies between the adepts of a federal Europe and those who support an intergovernmental one. Although the theoretical model offered by Zielonka does present a high degree of ingenuity especially taking into consideration the fact that it has revived specific historical frameworks, it lacks in specifying the concrete ways in which the Union could further develop according to this particular logic.

From a theoretical point of view, another important aspect to which one should refer is the way in which another central notion that of “empire” (particularly “neo-

medieval" empire) is used by the author. Zielonka motivates his choice by underlining the fact that the way in which European Union is currently organized is similar to other governing patterns present throughout the continent's history. He thus considers that making use of "historical comparisons can be useful in identifying basic analytical benchmarks" (Zielonka 2006: 17) which in the end would support the development of a new perspective regarding European integration phenomena.

The structure of the book follows the logic which has been previously presented by starting with a theoretical chapter in which the main notions and analytical frameworks are described and proceeding, in a purely research style, to the empirical elements which support the choice of this particular theoretical model. Thus, taking into consideration the fact that the main theme of the book is that of explaining the reasons for the enlargement of the European Union and its future prospects, Zielonka focuses on the following series of topics: the political and economic evolution of the former communist countries; the intrinsic EU mechanisms and the decisions surrounding the enlargement; the increased degree of diversity in the Union and its potential for surviving and adjusting to the new situation; the performance of the neo-medieval Europe in areas of economy, democracy, foreign affairs and defense.

The fall of the communist regime left the Central and Eastern European countries facing a whole new series of problems related mainly to the transition to a market-economy and a democratic system. However, at the time, an important question arose as to the role which the European Union played in securing the commitment of these nation-states regarding the continuation of the reforms. Zielonka's argument points in the direction of a strong influence from the Union towards the new Member States which took the form of tough pre-accession conditions mostly regarding the adoption and the implementation of the *acquis communautaire*.

At the same time, the author draws attention to the internal conditions specific to each one of the new Member States. These refer to different paces of economic development, establishment of new institutions and the construction of necessary legal frameworks. Each one of them brings with it a specific historical legacy (especially in terms of the communist experience) as well as a rich cultural and social background. These elements lead to one plausible conclusion, namely that once these states join the Union they will increase the degree of differentiation between the Member States while at the same time decreasing the possibility for the creation of an overlap between the geographical, cultural, economic and democratic borders of the EU. It is due to these reasons that Zielonka concludes that the new face of the enlarged Europe resembles more the structure of a decentralized, multi-cultural neo-medieval empire rather than that of a "Westphalian super state" (Zielonka 2006: 43).

From the Union's point of view, the enlargement process represented an important effort similar to that of building an empire because, as the author underlines, it has "tried to assert political and economic control over the unstable and impoverished eastern part of the continent" (Ibid. 2006: 44). Nevertheless, as in the case of the former communist countries, the influence was not unidirectional. Once the new Member States have been accepted they determined a process of institutional restructuring in the Union, not to mention that they have also brought regional disparities

and discrepancies between social classes and groups. All these differentiations have in the end had an impact on migratory patterns within EU which increased in some cases the nation-states nationalist feelings making the cultural integration process even harder to achieve.

However, diversity is not the only element which brings the current state of the Union closer to a neo-medieval model. The enlargement process as such represents one of the elements which support this idea as well. In theory, the Member States had a choice of whether to participate or not in the accession process, but actually in practice this choice did not exist. This was so not only because of the benefits which the European Union was believed could bring to these states, but also due to the high degree of control which the institutions of the Union exerted on these countries.

Despite appearances, the pre-accession process was nevertheless not a smooth one and it lacked, according to the author, certain clarity of purpose. Negotiations have also been influenced by the differences between the acceding countries and Western Europe which determined the latter to be more flexible in what regarded the formers' compliance in some specific areas. In addition, the fact that there has not been a single designated institution which could guide the European enlargement and its inner restructuring, made Zielonka wonder as to why due to the multitude of voices present at the EU level no one managed to successfully oppose the integration. As the author points out the answer to this question is rather simple: mainly because some countries were able to secure some advantages which would protect them against the possible negative effects of the integration. These referred to the processes of allowing or restricting the access to their national labor markets for the citizens of the former communist space.

According to Zielonka, in what regards the enlargement process, several conclusions can be drawn. First, although the Union put a lot of pressure on the future Member States, their integration was a two-way mechanism. It had effects not only for the Central and Eastern European countries, but also for the EU as such. The integration phenomenon was above all an ideological effort, one which was motivated by the maintenance of peace and tranquility in an area affected by transformations. This was doubled by political, institutional and economic mechanisms all aimed at better fitting the new members into the European structures with the aim—as declared in the Union—of creating harmony within its borders. All these elements prove in Zielonka's opinion the fact that the European institutions are moving in the direction of a neo-medieval type of government, this being most probably the only flexible solution for the integration of so many different (not necessarily converging) voices.

A second aspect which can be deduced from the above conclusion raises the question of how the Union will be able to cope with this newly acquired diversity. Not only did it have differences inherited from the Old Member States (most notably between the developed North and the impoverished South), but after the integration it will add a new division between the West and the East. This touches on all aspects, namely political, economic, cultural and social and risks to endanger the Union's internal functionality.

Regarding these problems, Zielenka is an optimist. On the one hand he considers that a certain amount of diversity is already incorporated into the decision-making processes and that most certainly institutional reforms will only modify these differences, but not affect them fundamentally.

In other words, despite crafting and engineering, diversity already appears as a normal state of affairs within the EU, and in this regard eastward enlargement will change little. The Union will have more countries, but there will still be large and small countries in the Union, there will be the rich and the poor, the original six and the latecomers, the Protestant and the Catholic, the obsessed with American power and those allied with it [...] (Zielenka 2006: 70).

On the other hand, he does admit that too much diversity runs the risk of paralyzing the political mechanisms by prolonging the duration of the period of time in which the decisions are reached.

I believe that one important argument, which is missed here by the author, refers to the different spheres of EU policy. Some are stronger regulated and monitored, while the supervision of the others is more flexible. Depending on the importance which is attributed to these spheres the decision-making process also varies from qualified majority to unanimity or rather open method of co-ordination (as is the case for the social sphere of the Union). Thus, it is true that a certain degree of variation is allowed within the EU, however the explanations for its existence can vary and may not necessarily be connected with a neo-medieval kind of governing.

By looking at *diversity* as one of the most important elements within a neo-medieval governing system, Zielenka attempts to establish specific ways in which the Union could cope with this issue especially in the areas of economy, democracy, foreign relations and defense. According to the European integration literature, these are the areas which represent Achilles' heel for the Union as compromise is hard to reach and usually demands strong institutions, hierarchical order and powerful political figures.

Apart from the political and institutional implications, Zielenka also touches on several other areas such as the economic sphere, the democratic one and foreign policy and defense. In what regards the economic integration processes, the author considers that the Union is subject to two different kinds of pressures: internal—arising from discrepancies between the Member States—and external—represented by the constant changes which take place at a global level. Under these circumstance the aim of the EU, that of increasing its competitiveness, can prove to be harder to achieve than initially expected.

Going back to the theoretical framework proposed by the author, one should pay attention to the implications which the neo-medieval paradigm has for this particular policy sphere. Here such a model will favor ideas such as increased liberalization, “institutional differentiation through delegation, devolution and decentralized experimentation [...] export of European laws and regulations to neighbors” (Zielenka 2006: 93). In concrete terms this system would imply that the economies of the new Member States be given incentives for increasing their competitiveness other than the transfers received from the Union. Additionally, more decisions should be taken

at the local/regional level rather than at the level of the European Commission as these would better reflect the realities of the lower units.

The author is aware of the fact that such measures might lead to an increase in the discrepancies between the rich and the poor regions as well as the rich and the poor social strata. However, he considers that “the Union would have to make sure that devolution, flexibility and deregulation does not leave large segments of the population in poverty and without any workable system of social protection” (Zielonka 2006: 100).

This particular affirmation leads one to the inevitable questions: how can the Union make sure that the poor are protected if at the same time it advocates decentralization and liberalization? Social protection schemes, in order to be effective, need at least a small degree of centralization and hierarchical decision-taking procedures. Not to mention that for the time being at least, the social sphere has been the least developed one from the policy agenda of the Union. The Open Method of Co-ordination does attempt to establish some common practice patterns between the Member States in what regards welfare, but they are not compulsory as some other aspect of the *acquis communautaire* are. Even if one refers to the taxation and redistribution processes, the diversity of the EU members would prohibit the European institutions from taking any kind of general actions especially if they are connected with the legal sphere. This might constitute a good example of how differences can lead to difficulties in the political as well as the economic spheres.

The consequences of the integration can also be felt in relation to the democratic area. Here the problems seem to increase with the expansions of the Union as the initial governing mechanisms designed for six countries face the pressure of a system of twenty-seven states. At the same time, EU has often been accused of manifesting a serious democratic deficit. Its leaders cannot be held accountable in a direct manner by the citizens of the Member States, making it thus more difficult for the simple person to influence the political decisions taken at the supranational level. Although Zielonka does not propose a clear cut solution for how the Union should try to deal with this phenomenon within a neo-medieval framework, he makes reference to Phillip Schmitter’s *condominio* system. This focuses on the development of several different kinds of Europe in charge with various policy areas while at the same time acknowledging the fact that the national parliaments would be forced to cooperate with many other, even more powerful institutions, leading behind a fragmented public opinion and space.

The only question which such an argument could raise is whether so much diversity and consequently fragmentation does actually provide the solution for the democratic management of issues which are of general, supranational concern? In this category foreign policy and defense could be included. As Zielonka further points out, more voices on the international arena are better than one unified front representing the entire Union. “With so many new members the Union can hardly afford a single foreign and security policy” (Zielonka 2006: 163). As in the case of the previously discussed policy areas, for this one as well, the main argument for the neo-medieval character of the Union is based on its increased diversity. Thus, contextualizing this

idea, not only do the member states develop different kinds of international relations outside the sphere of the EU, but also within it the degree of collaboration between the countries differs. Apart from this, Zielonka also points out to the role played by the USA in Europe and consequently to the various ways in which the relations between this nation and those on the continent are established. A concrete example, which comes to confirm the author's logic, is that of the anti-missile shield shrewdly positioned inside the borders of the Union by the United States. The two countries which have agreed to host this defensive mechanism on their territories are Czech Republic and Poland. The former has already signed the bilateral co-operation agreement, whilst the latter is still holding tough negotiations with the American side hoping to increase the benefits which would result from such a military initiative.

This particular case also comes to prove another hypothesis set forth by Zielonka namely that from the point of view of decision-making mechanisms regarding foreign policy and defense there is no unitary center within the Union and actually there should not be one. The degree of diversity is so high that actually decisions are taken at different levels within specific networks out of which some of them do not even belong to the Union like NATO. Apart from this, the author underlines the fact that this policy areas are shaped also by the future intentions of the Union to expand. From this point of view, a central position is held by the problem of the external borders of the EU, particularly the ways in which they are perceived and legally defined. Zielonka decides to look at the issue only from the point of view of the Union's future enlargement. He thus perceives these territorial delimitations as being in flux constant subject to modifications. However, one should bear in mind the fact that once the first integrated former communist states have joined the Schengen space the conditions connected with the entry on the territory of the Union toughened. It is true that there are a number of bilateral agreements regarding border co-operation between the Union and the non-EU countries bordering it (mainly through the Neighbourhood Policy), but this does not always touch upon such issues as the free movement of people. In addition, the conditions negotiated differ from country to country. Thus the Eastern neighbors Belorussia and Ukraine as well as Russia (with its Kaliningrad region) hold an important geopolitical position and are treated in a different manner than for instance the North African countries. Such political decisions impact the immigration policies within the Member States as well as the general legal framework present at the level of the Union.

In conclusion, one could easily deduce that although the foreign policy and defense areas do in fact resemble in their organization a neo-medieval model with a clear distinction between center and periphery, as the author points out, it cannot be said that there is no need for a stronger, more organized approach to such issues. Diffuse decision-making procedures may not necessarily reflect the reality and give voice to those who will be left outside of the decision-making process.

This kind of argumentation holds true also for the general conclusions of the book. These attempt to reiterate the fact that as the Union looks at the present time it already resembles a neo-medieval empire. Consequently, due to the high degree of variety inside the EU it is advisable to encourage a rather flexible structure of



decision-making processes which would thus offer the opportunity of representation to a wider variety of social actors. From this point of view, Zielonka envisages that between the different levels of decision the following kinds of interactions can be established: “self—and co-regulation, public-private partnerships, co-operative management and joint entrepreneurial ventures” (Zielonka 2006: 179). However, despite the fact that the model does emphasize the importance of developing multilateral kinds of relations between different actors (model which in reality is applied to several policy areas such as the social sphere), it does not offer a solution for the problem of the democratic deficit with which the Union is currently confronted. Zielonka does admit that a “plurilateral” system of governance (2006: 179) has several disadvantages, namely that it could encourage discrimination or even free riding (from an economic point of view). Nevertheless, he considers that these shortcomings could be solved if the Union would allow more possibilities of exit for its citizens. This mechanism would imply that in the situation in which someone would be dissatisfied with the way in which the system works, he or she could choose to live it and join another part of the organization depending on his or her particular interests.

On the other hand, this line of argumentation does not hold true if one takes a look at the social sphere where companies sometimes choose this exit option. They consider it advantageous to move from one part of the Union to another depending on their economic interests dictated by the system of taxation. Thus at least for the social area, such non-rigid decision-making mechanisms could encourage processes of “social dumping” which would only accentuate the differences between the various regions of the Union.

Nevertheless, given the fact that this kind of ideas can be applied to other policy-making areas of the Union, the inevitable question still remains: “Will the Union be capable of managing so much diversity and transform its negative implications into positive solutions?” The model offered here for analysis does provide one with clear-cut answers, however it is not capable of encompassing all the possible systemic effects which arise not only from within the EU, but also from outside it, be it geopolitical transformations or global economic fluctuations.

*Ruxandra Timofeychev*  
Graduate School for Social Research  
e-mail: ruxaya@gmail.com