



# The Ideology of Empire: the EU's Normative Power Discourse

*by Jan Zielonka*

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It is often argued that the EU is a peculiar, if not unique, international actor. Unlike other major actors, it is a largely civilian power promoting universal norms in its vast neighborhood and beyond. The EU is said to be an agent of peace, democracy, sustainable growth and good governance. It represents a unique project congruent with the deeper forces of modernization and cross-border integration. It contributes to order, development and cooperation by spreading institutional structures and rules of legitimate behavior. In essence, it is a normative power 'civilizing' the external environment. However, this noble, normative self-image is not always recognized by the EU's competitors and partners. They see the EU as a vast territorial unit with sizeable power and resources. They observe the EU's efforts to determine the notion of legitimate behavior, dictate international rules and impose domestic constraints on a plethora of formally sovereign actors. They do not find the EU's normative agenda universal enough, and question the motives behind the EU's policies. Basically, the Union is often perceived as a kind of empire with a post-modern version of mission civilisatrice.

Over the last decade there has been a heated academic debate regarding the EU's normative nature and credentials. This paper is inspired by that debate, but takes a different approach to the issue in its examination of the EU's normative power discourse, its origin, application and utility. First, the existing literature focuses on the EU's global efforts to promote its values and norms, whereas this paper focuses on two cases of the EU's efforts to promote its values and norms in its immediate neighborhood, first in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism, and then in North Africa and the Middle East after the fall of oppressive regimes there. These two neighborhoods are seen as the EU's peripheries that need to be taken care of lest they become a source of political or economic instability.

This leads to another novel aspect of this paper. Namely, while the existing literature on the normative power discourse treats the EU as a sui generis entity unknown in history, this paper treats the EU as a modern type of empire, sharing many common characteristics with its predecessors. Of course, the EU does not resemble the nineteenth century Britain or Russia. The Union neither has a clearly defined centre of authority nor sizable military forces. That said, the EU represents a vast territorial unit with the ability to influence (if not manipulate) the international agenda and shape the notion of legitimacy (if not normality) in various parts of the world, and especially in its neighborhood. These are all key characteristics of empires. The EU does what all historical empires have always done, namely it exercises control over diverse peripheral actors through formal annexations or various forms of informal domination. This leads to the third difference between this paper and other works on the EU's normative power discourse. Much of the existing literature debates the moral virtues of European policies; whereas, this paper is not concerned with moral issues. It views the EU's normative discourse as a device to legitimize the EU's imperial policies in its neighborhood. Civilizing missions always have ethical connotations, and cannot be seen as products of rational calculations only. But civilizing missions also reflect complex historical and ideological processes that do not correspond neatly with rigid moral positions. The success or failure of civilizing missions therefore depends on their ability to generate internal and external legitimacy rather than on their ability to meet moral criteria. Civilizing missions are seen as fulfilling their purpose if both the metropolis and periphery view them as credible and desirable for a mixture of moral, historical, cultural and utilitarian reasons. This article examines the chosen two cases from this analytical perspective.

This article observes that the EU has several important imperial characteristics, and therefore its discourse can well be seen as a kind of ideology of empire. In fact, the article shows numerous parallels between the rhetoric of EU officials and the writing of leading philosophers in the Enlightenment period. There is little doubt that this discourse helped the EU to legitimize its enlargement project in Central and Eastern Europe. The proposition that exporting European norms to the unstable post-

communist region would secure growth, democracy and peace across the entire continent has been overwhelmingly endorsed by the elites and the public in both parts of Europe. It legitimized the EU's territorial expansion, transfer of laws and resources and even the sharing of sovereignty. Today, new EU members from Central and Eastern Europe are the most fervent promoters of democracy.

The article notes that it is too early to assess the impact of the EU discourse on Arab countries. It took Central and Eastern Europe fifteen years to move from the Soviet Union to the European Union. Not all post-communist countries have secured democracy or stability, let alone EU membership. Culture and history has influenced their own models of democracy and capitalism: consider different corporate cultures in Romania, Slovenia and Estonia. Religion plays an entirely different role in the politics of Poland and the Czech Republic. Ethnic issues shape politics and the market differently in Latvia and Bulgaria. It would be irresponsible to expect that Arab countries could adopt norms propagated by the EU in a few short years. Equally it would be naïve to suggest that the chances for democracy and market capitalism are equal in Tunisia and Libya, for instance.

In short, the EU's civilizing mission has generated different outcomes in different countries for many local reasons. That said, it is important to ask whether the current European project is seen as legitimate on the one hand in Paris, Berlin and Brussels, and on the other in Cairo, Tripoli and Tunis. A civilizing mission is only successful if it generates legitimacy in both the metropolis and the periphery.

relations, human rights and security. His current research deals with the relationship between democracy and the media in Central and Eastern Europe as well as with the evolving nature of the European Union and a comparison of four contemporary 'empires' (America, China, Europe and Russia). Among other things he has published books like *Europe as Empire: the Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (OUP, 2006) and *Europe Unbound: Enlarging and Reshaping the Boundaries of the European Union* (ed.) (Routledge, 2002).

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