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Europe Knows Best?

The European Union's patronising trade negotiations with the Global South

Elena Escalante-Block, ARENA Centre for European Studies

Key points

- In trade agreement debates, key political actors in Germany, France, Spain, and Ireland often frame the European Union as a global moral authority. But this framing can take on a patronising tone, especially when referring to partners from the Global South.
- The EU-Mercosur case shows how moral standards are not applied equally: European leaders and political actors across different member states often present countries in the Global South as needing the EU's help or as falling short of European values, therefore showing a moral hierarchy.
- Framing the EU as morally superior in trade negotiations risks damaging its credibility as a fair and equal partner. This can fuel resentment and complicate relationships with Global South countries.
- To build lasting partnerships, EU political actors should replace top-down moral messaging with mutual respect, shared responsibility, and open dialogue.

When Trade Becomes a Battleground for Values

The EU-Mercosur agreement is a free trade agreement between the EU and the following South American countries: Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay. While the Amazon rainforest was on fire in 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron criticised the EU-Mercosur free trade agreement on his Twitter account (now X). In his tweet, Macron framed the agreement as a moral failure and an assault on Europe's environmental standards. This type of framing tends to happen among key European figures. They tend to position the EU as a global standard-setter and as a champion of human rights, democracy, environmental protection, and social justice through its trade deals. This type of framing is not necessarily problematic in itself. But it becomes problematic when national parliamentarians, government officials, and media commentators across different EU countries position trading partners from the Global South, such as Latin American countries, as morally or developmentally inferior. Such portrayals can strain diplomatic relations and complicate trade negotiations between the EU and its global south partners. Indeed, this very image of a 'moral authority' risks being perceived as paternalistic by partners from the Global South, particularly when the EU positions itself as morally or developmentally superior in trade negotiations.

In the article *Trade, Politics, and Patronising Otherness: Analysing the EU's Moral Authority in EU-Trade Agreements* (published in [Geopolitics](#)), I conducted a media analysis focusing on four EU member states: Germany,

France, Spain, and Ireland. The analysis draws on both centre-left and centre-right newspapers in each country. The study identified two types of political actors:

- 1) Proponents of the agreement: this can involve government officials, business leaders, and EU policymakers who typically argue in favour of deeper economic integration and global competitiveness.
- 2) Opponents of the agreement: e.g., Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), farmers' associations, and some political figures who often raise concerns about social, environmental, or economic risks).

I analysed the claims made by these two groups in the media regarding the two trade agreements: the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which is an agreement between the EU and the US, and the EU-Mercosur trade agreement.

When Trade Turns Moral: Framing, Power, and Unequal Partnerships

During the negotiations over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), governmental leaders across Ireland, France, Germany and Spain often framed the U.S. as an equal partner among proponents of the agreement. Opponents of this agreement feared external threats to European standards. They focused on investor courts and protecting EU agricultural and social standards (with specific attention on local industries like Irish and French agriculture). With the TTIP agreement, the moral authority comes from the standards in products, but it

is portrayed as “equally powerful” when it comes to exerting its normative power against China. Meanwhile, there seems to be a paternalistic tone that arises in the EU-Mercosur agreement that does not occur in the TTIP agreement. This can be seen in the following statement:

China and other countries, which are far less environmentally conscious than the EU, are grabbing raw materials and agricultural products in South America without much thought about sustainability. It would be fatal to leave the field completely to them.

- Claim made by Hannelore Croll, Die Welt, August 2019.

The statement above suggests that it would be “disastrous” if the EU, which she believes is more environmentally conscious, were to completely withdraw (“leave the field”) from trading with Latin America. If the EU “leaves” Latin America, this could potentially allow for even less regulated or sustainable practices to prevail, leading to further environmental damage. This claim seems to presuppose a certain level of authority that the EU ought to have over Latin America's trade practices, indicative of a hierarchical morality by the EU. Therefore, this claim could be interpreted as an expression of the EU's perceived moral superiority.

Political actors across different member states often treat Mercosur as a “younger” version of the EU, reinforcing a sense of paternalism. As a result, Mercosur is rarely seen as an equal trading partner. These types of paternalistic claims made by key EU politicians risk undermining the EU's credibility as a fair and equal trade partner.

They can fuel resentment, reinforce older North–South power dynamics, and make it harder to build lasting, cooperative relationships with countries outside Europe.

My study in [Geopolitics](#) shows how trade agreements have become sites of intense political debate: it is not just about economics, but also about values and identity. This reveals a deeper issue: political actors can use debates surrounding trade agreement to define the EU's global role and its relationship with others. A more constructive approach would be for political actors to shift away from top-down moral messaging and instead focus on mutual respect, shared responsibility, and open dialogue. If the EU is to be seen as a legitimate global superpower, its values must be offered and not imposed.

Implications and recommendations

My analysis shows that the way political actors in the EU talk about trade (especially in public debates) matters. This is particularly important when it comes to recent shifts in the global politics. The second administration by Donald Trump in the United States has meant a move towards trade wars and protectionism. This puts pressure on the EU to rethink its own trade strategies.

The image of the EU as a defender of both multilateralism and rules-based global governance is more important than ever. This is because the EU can be seen as the moral authority that sets itself apart from more interest-driven approaches such as Trump's America First. However, the EU's emphasis on moral authority does not necessarily mean

that it acts more ethically than other global actors. Rather, the EU strategically uses a values-based approach as a way to reinforce its global influence and position. This is a

great strategy, however, there are some caveats involved if political actors within the EU do not communicate their strategic rules-based values carefully.

Recommendations

- 1) **Framing Trade Partners Responsibly:** Political and institutional actors in the EU should reflect on how they describe the EU's trade partners in public debates. These portrayals are never neutral. Discourses surrounding the moral authority of the EU can unintentionally reinforce old hierarchies (where Europe sets the rules and others are expected to follow). This is especially important when engaging with countries in the Global South, where such framings may damage trust and cooperation
- 2) **Avoid a patronising tone in trade discussions:** Even when promoting values like environmental protection or human rights, trade rhetoric can still come across as patronising if it frames others as needing to be "improved" or "brought up to standard." Thus, a more constructive approach would be to emphasise shared challenges, joint problem-solving, and mutual learning, especially when it comes to communication and media engagement.
- 3) **Rethink what it means to lead on values:** Being a global leader on values does not mean assuming others will follow. It means leading by example, showing consistency, and being open to dialogue.

Further reading

- Full article: Escalante-Block (2024) Trade, Politics, and Patronising Otherness: Analysing the EU's Moral Authority in EU-Trade Agreements, [Geopolitics](#).
- Manners (2002) Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms? [JCMS](#).
- Singh (2017) Sweet Talk: Paternalism and Collective Action in North-South Trade Relations, [Stanford University Press](#).
- Lavery (2023) Rebuilding the fortress? Europe in a changing world economy, [Review of International Political Economy](#).