

The Hegemonic Politics of ‘Strategic Autonomy’ and ‘Resilience’: COVID-19 and the Dislocation of EU Trade Policy

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Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020 led to substantial upheaval in the EU’s trade policy. Over the course of a year, EU Trade Policy as a field witnessed the launch of hitherto unthinkable ideas; the proliferation of a range of new buzzwords such as resilience, autonomy, and reshoring; and ultimately the arrival of a new consensus in the Trade Policy Review of February 2021. This article uses a discourse-theoretical approach (PDT) to retrace the political process that unfolded throughout this year, from the start of the COVID-19 crisis, to a fundamental dislocation of EU trade politics, and ultimately to the consolidation of a partial, temporary, and frail new hegemony within the policy field. Our goal is to explain the trajectory and the dynamics of this process by studying the discourses, the framings, and the political strategies that comprised the hegemonic struggle underlying it.

Keywords: COVID; poststructuralism; discourse; EU trade policy; Laclau

Introduction

On 21 March 2020 *The Economist* (2020) put on the cover of its weekly edition a picture of the Earth with a large sign around its neck, which read: ‘CLOSED’. The message did not need additional explanation: globalization was temporarily on hold because of COVID-19. In *The Economist*’s wake, numerous other newspapers, academics, think tanks, businesses, politicians and activists actively pondered whether this crisis would sound the death knell of globalization as we know it.

In the European Union (EU), this sudden but profound upheaval caused major turmoil in trade policy debates. Since international trade is a core pillar of economic globalization, and the EU a key player in the reigning global trade regime, it was hardly surprising that EU trade policy became entangled in these emerging questions about the ‘end of globalization’. Was it not hyper-globalization driven by neoliberal trade agreements that caused detrimental environmental and biodiversity damage, increasing the chances of zoonosis? Did free trade not lead countries and firms to prioritize cost efficiency over security of supply, ‘just-in-time’ delivery over ‘just-in-case’ inventory? Have liberalizing trade policies not contributed to social inequality, making the impact of pandemics more hard felt for some groups than others?

Whether these questions are justified or not is beyond the aim of this article. Rather, we use Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (PDT) to analyse the dynamic through which crises trigger exactly these kinds of questions, thereby creating a moment of ‘dislocation’ that might lead to an alteration of the reigning policy paradigm (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2014). In times of crisis, established and common-sense assumptions or beliefs can become destabilized, as alternative paradigms, problem definitions and solutions, all with

the ambition of becoming the ‘new normal’, arise (Marchart, 2014). This is exactly what defines moments of dislocation: visible conflict through which the potential choices for alternative futures are articulated and recognized, resulting in a genuine struggle for hegemony that challenges (defenders of) the status quo (Laclau, 1990). What happened to EU trade policy since March 2020, is a textbook example of the effect that dislocation can have on a policy paradigm.

Yet the sequence from crisis to dislocation to hegemonic change is never automatic, causal or deterministic. A crisis is only ever a crisis because it is recognized and actively identified as one (Hay, 1996). Crises do not necessarily lead to dislocation, and even if such a moment of dislocation occurs, it does not need to result in a radical new understanding of the policy under scrutiny. According to PDT, the unfolding of this process is driven by the dynamics of the hegemonic struggles that underlie it. These dynamics are in turn moderated and steered by discourse, language, framing, and political strategy (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2014). This means that studying the discourses and the political strategies that surround a crisis from a discourse-theoretical point of view can help us explain how crises (fail to) result in hegemonic change (Jacobs, 2020a).

Against this theoretical backdrop, our analytical goal is to examine the dislocation in EU trade policy that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly its reverberations into the new Trade Policy Review (TPR) published by the European Commission on 18 February 2021. This TPR can be seen as the temporary consolidation of the hegemonic struggle triggered by the dislocation of EU Trade Policy due to COVID-19. It forms the discursive and political horizon within which the EU’s trade policy will be formulated in the years to come. Our paper analyses the process that led from the dislocation of EU trade politics, through hegemonic struggle, to the hegemonic change codified in the TPR. The contributions that we make to the literature in doing so, are both theoretical and empirical in nature.

Theoretically, we build on a growing current in the EU trade policy literature that focuses on the role that ideas and discourse play in political conflicts and their outcomes (De Ville and Orbie, 2014; Siles-Brügge, 2014; Dingwerth and Weinhardt, 2018; Holden, 2019). This tendency has gained significant momentum with the increasing contestation over EU trade agreements since the mid-2010s, with massive opposition against transatlantic trade agreements with the US (TTIP) and Canada (CETA) as prime examples (Gheyle, 2019). The analysis presented below inscribes itself in this emerging interpretivist current within the study of EU trade policy, yet simultaneously radicalizes it by drawing on a poststructuralist approach that has proven highly successful in the analysis of other aspects of the EU’s foreign policy (Howarth and Torfing, 2004; Rogers, 2009; Diez, 2014; Larsen, 2018). Specifically, we ground our analysis in Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (PDT) and the Logics of Critical Explanation (the Logics approach). The added value resides in our use of political, social, and heterogeneous logics (building partly on Glynos and Howarth, 2007 and Jacobs, 2020a) to map political debates in such a way that the hegemonic dynamics underlying them become apparent – something mainstream constructivism is not equipped to do. Using these logics also makes the often rather abstract insights proposed by PDT applicable to the field of political economy where it has rarely found purchase (Howarth and Torfing, 2004, pp. 24–5; Jacobs and Orbie, 2020).

Empirically, we apply PDT and the Logics framework to examine the dislocation of EU trade policy, where initially a range of rather unorthodox and hitherto rare buzzwords ('reshoring', 'resilience', 'over-dependency') made their appearance in EU trade policy debates. Apparently outside the reigning neoliberal trade hegemony, these words or goals were rather associated with archaic protectionist tendencies. We show in our analysis how this discursive challenge emerged, how it was taken up by key EU decision-makers, and how they partially adopted terms and reasonings from their opponents in an attempt to reproduce the extant hegemony, without necessarily accommodating newly emerging ideas to their full extent. In doing so, we shine a light on how various discursive dynamics and political strategies drove the process from crisis, to dislocation, to hegemonic struggle, to (limited) hegemonic change.

In the next section, we review the emerging ideational and constructivist tendency in research on the contestation of EU trade policy, which forms the state-of-the-art into which this paper intervenes. Section II then introduces PDT as a promising approach to study dislocation and the patterns of a hegemonic struggle. We outline a concrete framework that draws on the Logics approach. In Section III we use these logics to map and conceptualize the European Commission's attempt to deal with the ongoing dislocation. We conclude with a discussion of these findings, arguing that although the Commission's efforts to co-opt challenging discourses into its neoliberal paradigm follows a strategic pattern similar to the ones with which it found success during previous crises, the fragile alliance that emerges this way might produce further hegemonic struggle in the long run.

I. Ideas and Contestation in EU Trade Policy Research

Compared to other subfields in international relations and international political economy, the literature on EU trade policy has only recently taken an ideational turn. When explaining the trade positions taken by institutions (Meunier and Nicolaïdis, 1999) or economic actors (Woll, 2008), rationalist scholars accept that preferences are not completely determined by material structures but are co-shaped by ideas. But a more explicit constructivist perspective is only starting to emerge. Siles-Brügge (2014) for example uses ideational dynamics to explain the direction of post-2006 EU trade policy towards a more global (neoliberal) role. Likewise, Mathieu and Weinblum (2013) show that the extremely low level of contestation over trade defence instruments is due to the way 'unfair trade' is discursively articulated and understood in the European Parliament.

This discursive and ideational approach is used particularly to study episodes of contestation and politicization in EU trade politics, such as the anti-GATS protests (Crespy, 2014), contestation against the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) (Moerland and Weinhardt, 2020), the aftermath of the financial crisis (De Ville and Orbie, 2014), or the widespread politicization of TTIP and CETA (Gheyle, 2019). Challenges have mostly come from countries in the Global South, progressive NGOs, trade unions and (radical) left and Green parties. Beyond the particular agreements, they have consistently criticized the paradigmatic neoliberal logic that underlies EU trade policy: the maximization of economic welfare through the liberalization of markets abroad and at home.

The extant literature has identified two phases through which this neoliberal logic emerged. First, the finalization of the internal market project (Hansen, 1998) and the

strengthening of export-competitive industries in Europe entailed a more free trade oriented trade policy since the mid-1990s. The EU became the biggest proponent of further liberalization within the WTO (Van den Hoven, 2004) and it assertively pursued reciprocal trade liberalization with developing countries. Second, the Commission's 'Global Europe' strategy of 2006 is widely considered as a radicalization of the EU's free trade approach with an increased focus on bilateral trade agreements with industrialized economies (for example Heron and Siles-Brügge, 2012). These agreements should foster European competitiveness at home and abroad and can be situated against the background of the impasse of the WTO, the rise of emerging powers, and (later) the financial crisis with ensuing austerity politics (De Ville and Orbie, 2014). Although the EU also started to insert sustainability provisions in its trade agreements, these are not enforceable and arguably serve to legitimate its neoliberal trade policy core (Orbie *et al.*, 2016).

Much constructivist work has focused on the discursive actions of the challengers and the defenders of this neoliberal trade policy. With regards to the former, scholars are mostly interested in how discourse aided relatively small (networks of) civil society groups to exercise a large influence on the procedure and outcomes of EU trade policy. Multiple studies in the context of TTIP, for example, show how the use of narratives, European 'myths' or frames contributed to raising awareness, creating resonance, or mobilizing a wider public (Buonanno, 2017; Dür, 2019; Gheyle, 2019). Concerning the European Commission, the focus has predominantly been on how it strategically uses ideas in political communication in order to (re)legitimize certain policy choices and to mute opposition. In the context of the politicization of TTIP, scholars have identified how discursive shifts by the European Commission with respect to transparency or investor protection have contributed to dampening criticism and garnering support (Gheyle and De Ville, 2017; Siles-Brügge, 2018). In the post-2016 era, furthermore, there has been a discursive re-emphasis on the role of 'values' in EU trade policy and the 'managed globalization' discourse of the end of the 1990s as a way to counter the ongoing contestation (McKenzie and Meissner, 2017; Garcia-Duran *et al.*, 2020).

This line of inquiry has proven particularly adept at understanding EU trade discourse in times of crises. In the wake of the financial-economic crisis, De Ville and Orbie (2014) demonstrated how discourse effectively constrained the range of acceptable policy responses, by labeling trade-restrictive measures as illegitimate, mistakes. Holden (2017) focuses on the Commission's discourse during crisis and argues that the neo-liberal hegemony has retained its grip but has become more confrontational and realist against an altered (geo-)economic landscape. Even Brexit and the election of Trump have been interpreted as mutually reinforcing signs of a populist and isolationist trend that the EU should resist, reinforcing the need for the EU to become an even more passionate global leader regarding 'free trade', integrating opposing vocabulary such as 'fair', 'modern', or 'progressive' into their repertoire (De Ville and Siles-Brügge, 2018).

A core characteristic of all these discursive articulations is the Commission's reactive or proactive inclusion of the vocabulary, frames or argumentations of opposing actors or paradigms. In studying EC discourse over the past 25 years, De Ville and Siles-Brügge (2018) argue that the Commission has continuously adapted its discourse to challenges and opportunities presented by the domestic and international context. As shown above, the core of the policy paradigm underlying EU trade policy discourse (what we will later in this article term its 'social logic') has always been 'free trade'. Yet in

responding to external and internal challenges, the Commission has at several points integrated ideas from the 'embedded liberalism', 'fair trade' and more recently also the 'trade as foreign policy' approaches into this paradigm. These inclusions were aimed at protecting its free trade core from fundamental criticisms by various societal groups (or to co-opt these into the pro-free trade coalition) or to legitimize the expansion of trade policy into new areas such as domestic regulation and sustainable development.

II. Theoretical Framework

As indicated above, this article studies the impact that COVID-19 has had on EU trade politics from the point of view of Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (PDT) (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2014; Laclau, 1990; Howarth and Torfing, 2004; Glynos and Howarth, 2007). PDT's operationalization in the study of EU trade policy can be seen as a radicalization of the interpretivist tradition that has been gaining traction in the study of the contestation and politicization of the EU's political economy (Jacobs and Orbie, 2020).

In essence, PDT is a poststructuralist and discursive re-interpretation of hegemony theory. Its central assumption is that social structures are by nature precarious and contingent, and that their stabilization and institution as constant elements of everyday life is the outcome of an enduring process of hegemonic struggle (Marchart, 2014). EU trade policy, for example, did not have to assume the neoliberal and technocratic guise it possesses today, it could just as well have been collectivist and authoritarian, or progressive and democratic. The fact that it does have a neoliberal and technocratic shape, is the outcome of a hegemonic struggle, in which various political strategies that drive EU trade policy in a different direction interact. The idea that all social structuration is the result of hegemonic struggle entails that all forms of social construction have a deeply political character – they are the outcome of a fundamentally political dynamic of contestation (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2014).

In this study, we use PDT's emphasis on the political character of social construction to analyse the rise of signifiers like 'resilience' and 'reshoring' during the COVID-19 crisis. Particularly, we are interested in how these signifiers affected the hegemonic struggle that shapes EU trade policy. As PDT theorizes the existence of social structures such as EU trade policy as the outcome of a hegemonic struggle, a change in the dynamics of that struggle can evidently alter the shape of the structures that are produced through this struggle. This theoretical mechanism allows us as analysts to use PDT to understand social change and continuity as the outcome of a hegemonic struggle. Mapping the discursive dynamics of a hegemonic struggle is therefore the first step towards explaining (the absence of) social change.

Practically, we do this by drawing on three key analytical concepts, which will collectively structure this article: social, political, and heterogeneous logics. These concepts are drawn from the adaptation of the 'logics framework' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) proposed by Jacobs (2020a, 2020b). Generally speaking, within PDT, a 'logic' is understood as a discursive pattern or regularity, which the analyst distinguishes in the discourses under analysis. The analyst uses logics to map and characterize the dynamics and patterns in a hegemonic struggle, making it easier to apply PDT's abstract and theoretical insights about the functioning of hegemony to the study of concrete discourses and political

strategies. Once we have captured the discursive patterns and dynamics of a hegemonic struggle by conceptualizing them as logics, we can reflect whether they are likely to generate particular political effects and whether they will reproduce or dislocate the existing social order.

It is crucial to emphasize that logics are the product of the researcher's interpretation. The logics sketched in the empirical sections of this paper are no objective or law-like sequences which we uncovered. Rather, they are the intersubjective effort of several authors, who collaborate and deliberate. Together, they attempt, based on their expertise in the domain at hand, to make sense of the patterns that they recognize in the analysed data within the context of the particular and situational rules, norms, institutions, and systems of relations and meanings that characterize EU trade politics.

Social logics describe the patterns of day-to-day life. They capture normalization and common sense, what passes as the rules of the world we live in. When an analyst uses a social logic to characterize a particular discursive pattern, he argues that the practices comprising this pattern contain reasonings, actions, and statements that frame a particular interpretation of the world as normal and self-evident. Social logics thus constitute the established norms and the conventional truths that structure our lifeworld. Glynos and Howarth (2007), pp. 106, 136) describe them as the grammar of the social world. In the context of EU trade policy, market opening is a typical social logic: one may agree or disagree with the desirability of the tendency of EU trade policy towards the opening of new markets, but one would be hard-pressed to deny that it is the rule. Whenever an EU politician or civil servant talks about 'the opening of global markets' as self-evident and given, he or she reproduces the existing hegemonic structure, a discursive pattern that we as analysts describe with a social logic.

Political logics describe the contestation and the defence of what is considered normal – they capture how actors contest or defend an existing social logic. Criticisms of the status quo, attempts to redefine what established social logics mean, and efforts to change or even overthrow existing hegemonic structures are all examples of political logics. So are explicit attempts to defuse these criticisms, to pre-empt these redefinitions, and to protect the existing structures. Political logics can differ widely in terms of their reach, their ambition, their scale, and their intensity, but generally speaking, they always operate in two dimensions: they can either forge a link between extant concepts (*political logics of equivalence*) or they can split them up and disconnect them (*political logics of difference*) (Laclau and Mouffe, pp. 129–30). The attempt to link international trade to multinational corporations, capitalism, and greed is a typical political logic of equivalence used in the contestation of EU trade policy. The attempt to undo the social logic that connects trade with jobs, employment, and growth, is a political logic of difference used to contest EU trade policy.

Heterogeneous logics, finally, describe attempts to (re)define the boundaries of debate. They do not only pay attention to extant concepts, but are instead concerned with questions of relevance and irrelevance, of presence and absence, and focus on which signifiers are and aren't available when constructing a political argument or strategy in a given context. Whereas social and political logics concern the interpretation and reinterpretation of prevalent signifiers, heterogeneous logics are about the omission of common signifiers from, or the insertion of new signifiers into, the debate (Jacobs, 2020b). The newly introduced signifier or the hole left by the omitted signifier can then subsequently generate

new patterns of contestation and new political logics or facilitate the (re)normalization of the existing structures through social logics. During the TTIP controversy, the insertion of 'democracy' as a signifier into the debate uprooted the dynamics of the hegemonic struggle over EU trade policy – this insertion constitutes a heterogeneous logic, which led to the proliferation of new political logics (the idea that EU trade policy is untransparent and undemocratic) and the consolidation of new social logics (the new norm of a progressive trade policy that harnesses globalization) (Jacobs, 2020b).

The choice for heterogeneous logics deserves extra attention, as traditionally the third component of the Logics framework are the so-called *fantasmatic logics*. These focus on the emotional and affective component of politics. However, they can be impractical to use in political analyses that operate on a larger scale. Studies that focus on broad, societal issues can struggle to take stock of emotions and affect, as these become very difficult to measure once the level of analysis aggregates (Jacobs, 2020b). Lacking dedicated training in psychoanalysis, we found it hard to detect emotive or affective discourses in the technical empirical data analysed below. As such, we complement social and political logics with heterogeneous logics, which explain the functioning of political and social logics by showing how these shape and exhaust the available means for signification (Jacobs, 2020b).

Once we have mapped the dynamics of a political debate by identifying its social, political, and heterogeneous logics, it becomes easier to grasp why certain political strategies play out the way they do. For instance, an attempt to achieve social change may fail because a powerful social logic, that pre-empts the dislocation of the debate, is not dealt with. This social logic must first be turned into a political logic through its sustained contestation and the articulation of a bevy of political logics. Similarly, a heterogeneous logic inserting a new signifier into a debate may be unconvincing because this new signifier does not fit within the extant social and political logics structuring this debate. Should the insertion be successful, however, then the new signifier could dislocate the existing structure and politicize its social logics, thereby creating opportunities for social change where there were previously none.

In sum, logics form a bridge between the concrete and tangible discourses articulated by the subjects under analysis, and the more aggregate poststructuralist interpretation of the theory of hegemony provided by PDT. Describing discursive patterns through logics makes it easier to apply PDT's abstract insights in a way that explains hands-on examples intelligibly. In this article, we want to analyse how the dislocation triggered by the COVID-19 crisis has led to the articulation of new social, political, and heterogeneous logics, that have reshaped the hegemonic struggle over and the eventual outlook of EU trade policy.

To analyse the hegemonic struggle over the EU's trade policy response to COVID-19, we analysed over 75 public interventions by key policy-makers within the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, as well as by the most relevant interest groups, stakeholders and think tanks active in the field of EU trade policy. We are convinced that this selection provides a fair and proportionate representation of the wider dataset that we have analysed.¹ Texts were selected if they explicitly link trade with COVID-19 and if they either causally connect the pandemic and its

¹A full list of texts can be found in the online annex.

economic fall-out with trade and/or propose an EU trade policy response to the unfolding crisis. Our analysis spans one year, starting with the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe and ending with the publication by the European Commission of the Trade Policy Review that outlines the EU's trade strategy for the near future.

III. Covid-19 and EU Trade Policy

On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. That same week, several European countries started taking emergency measures, which included closing borders for travellers and restricting exports of protective equipment like face masks at national and EU level. Germany and France stopped delivering masks to heavily affected Italy, arousing strong debates about European trade, solidarity and 'coronationalism'. In these frenetic weeks of lockdowns, travel and export bans, there was frequent talk about 'the end of globalization' (for example BBC, 2020; Foreign Policy, 2020; The Economist, 2020).

Dislocation: Free Trade Contested

The disruption of international trade flows caused by the COVID-19 crisis was paralleled by a significant dislocation in the way politicians think and talk about trade. With global value chains ceasing to function, debates concerning the relevance and desirability of national borders and autonomy proliferated, and a variety of novel political and heterogeneous logics could be recognized. In the first days of April, the French Minister of Finance argued in favour of 'European industrial independence' and 'legitimate protection' (Le Maire, 2020) and two weeks later the Dutch Trade Minister said that 'it is time to take a step back' and 'rethink our trade deals' (Moens, 2020). We argue that this rhetoric constitutes a clear break with the dominant social logics, and explicitly creates space for the appearance of alternative discourses in European trade policy debates. In other words, with the outbreak of COVID-19, EU trade policy once again turned into a discursive battlefield.

The most important counterhegemonic discourses challenging the neoliberal paradigm were centred around the concepts of 'autonomy', 'sovereignty', 'self-sufficiency', 'protection' and the 'reshoring' of offshore production. Interestingly, many of these terms have long had an outsider status in the debate about international trade. 'Protection' is usually part of the chains of equivalence that constitute the antagonistic Other of free trade – the enemy to be defeated (De Ville and Orbie, 2014). 'Self-sufficiency' and 'sovereignty' have an even more marginal position, rarely featuring in serious debates about international trade, as they hint at an even stronger decoupling of national or regional economies from the global economy. As explained above, the social logics of EU trade policy have been markedly neoliberal since the mid-1990s. 'Self-sufficiency', 'sovereignty', 'autonomy' and active interventions aimed at the 'reshoring' of industrial infrastructure seem hardly compatible with these neoliberal social logics. Based on this observation, we argue that the outbreak of COVID-19 heralded the manifestation of a series of heterogeneous logics in the debate on EU trade policy, which inserted previously excluded and repressed signifiers into the debate.

These heterogeneous logics in turn triggered the proliferation of a series of political logics, thus creating a moment of dislocation. The novel and underdetermined status of these newly introduced concepts entailed that they could be interpreted in various ways; they created room for a variety of political logics that could use these new terms to formulate a variety of critiques of the dominant neoliberal paradigm. Two paradigms that have historically tried to challenge the EU's neoliberal trade ideology in the past seemed obvious candidates to infuse these novel concepts with meaning. These new signifiers could either be linked to the political logic established by the 'trade justice' discourse, which emphasizes the need for a more democratic and sustainable trade system that allows for legitimate protection and more small scale and local production chains; or alternatively to the political logic established by a 'geopolitical' discourse, which emphasizes how trade policy should be coherent with wider foreign policy agendas that aim to secure Europe's interests in the world. In other words, the trade justice movement could seize the opportunities created by these heterogeneous logics to cast a political logic of equivalence between trade and social protection; and a geopolitical discourse could use these new signifiers to articulate a political equivalence between trade and foreign policy.

On the flip side, proponents of the dominant neoliberal social logics initially tried to discredit the concepts of 'protection' and 'reshoring' by associating them with seemingly outdated and outmoded pleas for autarky and self-sufficiency and relating them to 'old-fashioned protectionism' and 'nationalism' reminiscent of the 1930s. The European Commission and its then Commissioner for Trade, Phil Hogan, lamented protectionist responses to COVID-19 at Member State level (for example Hogan, 2020a). In policy practice, national export restrictions were Europeanized and narrowed down to a limited number of products (European Commission, 2020a). These EU export authorization measures were articulated as 'targeted, proportionate, transparent and time-limited' measures, thereby stressing their exceptional nature and emphasizing that this is no model for long-term trade policy. This was joined by the more general claim that protectionism is not the answer to the COVID-19 crisis and that 'an open trade policy will need to be part of any future economic recovery plan' (Hogan, 2020a). The Commission depicted 'reshoring' as an impossible and undesirable strategy, except for some very specific products (Financial Times, 2020). Political logics challenging the dominant paradigm must thus be interpreted in the context of articulations with an opposite dynamic, such as reiterations of the extant social logics and political logics of difference that defuse the counterhegemonic logic of equivalence.

Discursive Struggle: Resilience and Strategic Autonomy

However, we believe that the European Commission quickly realized that a purely defensive strategy was risky given how the COVID-19 crisis disrupted public perceptions of globalization. In April 2020, the Commission started to embrace two new concepts that might have been less threatening for its existing paradigm as they could more easily be moulded into neoliberal discourse: 'resilience' and 'strategic autonomy'. These concepts progressively became legitimate signifiers in public debates about trade politics, and the heterogeneous logics that inserted them into the debate gained acceptance. Nevertheless, these signifiers remained surrounded by a myriad of political logics. The Commission

explicitly recognized these political logics, arguing in mid-April that the meaning of the newly inserted signifier ‘strategic autonomy’ was still very much open:

[w]e need an evidence-based discussion on what it means to be ‘strategically autonomous’. For example, we need to look at how to build resilient supply chains, based on diversification, acknowledging the simple fact that we will not be able to manufacture everything locally (Hogan, 2020a).

A similar situation surrounded the concept of ‘resilience’. While there is transformative potential in the idea of ‘resilience’, and while the concept can cater to a variety of different interpretations, it has often been seen as compatible with the neoliberal paradigm (for example Nelson, 2014; Bracke, 2016). Indeed, focusing on resilience may imply that crises are external, that responsibility is shifted towards individuals, and that neoliberal values of entrepreneurship are cultivated. Scholars have also identified the ‘resilient turn’ in EU development and neighbourhood policies and pointed to its neoliberal implications (for example Joseph and Juncos, 2019; Korosteleva, 2020). With COVID-19, the ‘resilience’ concept entered, belatedly, into EU trade discourse, where it progressively became aligned with neoliberal social logics.

As concepts such as ‘reshoring’ faded from the debate again in the following weeks, the focus shifted from the question *which* signifiers best characterize the COVID-19 crisis and its consequences for the global economy, to *how* these new concepts should be imbued with meaning (for example Hogan, 2020b). This marks for us the transition from a struggle between various heterogeneous logics to a struggle between different political logics contesting how the newly inserted terms needed to be signified. For instance, the exceptional nature of export authorization measures and the need for an open trade policy were weaponized once again into a call for ‘tariff relief for COVID-19 related products [... and] to explore WTO initiatives to facilitate trade, including elimination of tariffs, in medical, pharmaceutical and other health-related products’ (Hogan, 2020b).

We interpret a political logic of equivalence that added the prefix ‘open’ to the concept of ‘strategic autonomy’ as a key development in this process. In a speech in mid-June, Trade Commissioner Hogan gave an elaborate definition of the concept clarifying how it does not contradict the EU’s existing trade strategy of pursuing and enforcing market opening (Hogan, 2020c):

Open Strategic Autonomy means reaffirming our global leadership ambitions across a range of areas, in line with the aims of a more geopolitical European Commission; It means building stronger alliances with like-minded partners; It means shaping a better type of globalisation— fairer, and more sustainable; It reflects our commitment to strong and up-to-date multilateral rules; It recalls our belief in ‘the opportunity of openness’. While at the same time: It advocates for a tougher, more assertive approach to protect our businesses and consumers, notably through stronger trade defence and enforcement; And it calls for the diversification of supply chains to assure our strategic independence.

End April 2020, the European Commission decided to launch its trade policy review one year earlier than planned (Agence Europe, 22 April 2020). It concerns a ‘major EU trade policy review’ with a special focus on, inter alia, ‘[b]uilding a resilient and sustainable EU economy after the coronavirus’ (European Commission, 2020a). A public consultation was launched during which stakeholders and civil society representatives could voice their opinion on the future direction of EU trade policy. The first question

in this consultation asked '[h]ow can trade policy help to improve the EU's resilience and build a model of open strategic autonomy?' (European Commission, 2020b, p. 4). This led to some pushback by traditional supporters of the EU's free trade orientation. For example, the Confederation of Swedish Enterprises responded that 'we are not comfortable with the word "autonomy", as it hints at the idea of being closed off from the world economy' (Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, 2020, p. 1). The Swedish government, with the support of other member states, would also push back against a protectionist interpretation of autonomy.

When Valdis Dombrovskis became the new EU Trade Commissioner in October 2020, his discourse remained similar to that of his predecessor. Resilience and open strategic autonomy are key concepts during his hearing before the European Parliament's trade committee. While the new Commissioner does not abandon the EU's free trade orientation and continues to advocate openness and diversification of supply chains, he seemingly leaves some ambiguity around the exact meaning of resilience and open strategic autonomy: 'We are currently working on strengthening this economic resilience and we are looking at different options. Onshoring, nearshoring, stockpiling, diversifying, shortening supply chains, this is a whole toolkit which we can explore (...)'. In addition to openness, the Commissioner also stresses 'fairness' and 'the need to become more assertive'. He also regularly refers to the ongoing trade policy review that will 'help us to design a new direction for EU trade, based on the concept of open strategic autonomy' (European Parliament, 2020).

Eventually, in February 2021, the new EU trade strategy 'An Open, Sustainable and Assertive trade policy' was published (European Commission, 2021). The concept of open strategic autonomy is central in this document. Unsurprisingly, it stresses the importance of 'openness' within this concept. It states that '[t]he EU is built on openness [... and ...] just as in the aftermath of the latest economic and financial crisis, trade will be critical for the EU's green recovery from the COVID-19 slump' (European Commission, 2021, p. 5). Openness is presented as a strategic choice, that helps the EU achieve not only economic recovery and prosperity but also geopolitical and sustainability objectives. Moreover, the document defines 'resilience *and competitiveness*' as a key benefit of openness (European Commission, 2020a, p. 4, emphasis added) and argues that openness underpins the EU's resilience in times of crisis. One lesson that should be drawn from the COVID-19 crisis, according to the strategy, is that 'most supply chains have shown remarkable resilience ... [and] [w]hen faced with an unprecedented rise in demand, as in the case of facemasks, trade openness was key in expanding the range of alternative sources of supply' (European Commission, 2021, p. 7). At the same time, in a limited number of product categories where demand suddenly far exceeded supply, disruptions emerged. The strategy tasks the Commission to identify these 'strategic dependencies' and states that '[s]olutions can range from crisis preparedness to diversifying production and supply chains, ensuring strategic stockpiling, as well as fostering production and investment including in neighbouring countries and Africa' (European Commission, 2021, p. 7). This idea is linked to geopolitics as '[i]n order to help fulfil its geopolitical ambitions globally, the EU will need to diversity its relations and build alliances with like-minded partners, including through its broad network of trade agreements' (European Commission, 2021, p. 9). The ambition of a more muscular approach to trade already

became clear from the document's title, which puts 'assertive' alongside 'open' and 'sustainable'.

Neoliberalism and Geopolitics: A Fragile Alliance

As such, we find in the speeches and documents on the EU's trade response to COVID-19 three distinct discursive patterns. First, two new signifiers take central stage: 'open strategic economy' and 'resilience'. These concepts marginalized other, potentially more radical notions, like 'reshoring' or 'sovereignty', that arose in the very early phase of the COVID-19 crisis. Second, politicians and officials defined these concepts in such a way that they justify open trade as a contribution to economic recovery and prosperity as well as to geopolitical goals. In fact, it could be argued that the concepts of resilience and strategic autonomy have been adopted from the EU's security sphere, where they had become prominent some years before the COVID-19 crisis (for example High Representative, 2016). Third, the policy direction flagged by the phrase 'open strategic autonomy' is very much in line with EU trade policy before COVID-19. The only new element is the call for 'the diversification of supply chains'. But this diversification is much less radical than the 'reshoring' of supply chains, which featured at the start of the debate. On the contrary, one way to diversify supply chains is in fact to conclude more trade agreements.

Hence, we see this hegemonic struggle as having resulted in a victory for the political logic that attaches a geopolitical interpretation to 'autonomy' and 'resilience', but this political logic is not incompatible with the neoliberal paradigm. As such, the COVID-19 crisis may result in a tentative logic of equivalence, which sees the hegemonic social logic that establishes a neoliberal interpretation of international trade partially incorporate the political logic that establishes a geopolitical interpretation of international trade.

Yet we believe that the coalition carried by this chain of equivalence is fragile. While the two discourses may converge around the concepts of resilience and strategic autonomy and on instruments to serve this approach, their respective logics culminate in very different end goals and trade policies. For neoliberals, this is expanding the reach of free markets to maximize economic efficiency and growth, while in the geopolitical approach it is security and alliances, to which free trade should be subordinated. This temporary geopolitical flavouring of EU trade policy discourse may not be surprising as it is in line with the Von der Leyen Commission's ambition (2019–24) to be a 'geopolitical Commission' and with the EU's more assertive approach with respect to trade defence and investment screening, in particular towards China (Meunier and Nicolaidis, 2019). In this sense, the COVID-19 crisis seems to reinforce the growing yet fragile alliance between trade policy and foreign policy – which institutionally belong to separate realms of the EU's architecture (respectively the Commission's DG Trade and the European External Action Service).

Remarkably, the other major competitor for discursive hegemony over EU trade policy, namely the trade justice paradigm, seems to have lost the struggle over the interpretation of 'resilience' and 'strategic autonomy', notwithstanding the inclusion of 'sustainability' in the subtitle of the European Commission's Trade Policy Review. As outlined at the beginning of this section, these concepts could theoretically align well with long-standing demands of trade unions, public health advocates, human rights movements, environmental groups and development NGOs to provide more policy space for

legitimate public interventions (cf. strategic autonomy) and to cushion the impact of neoliberal globalization on the most vulnerable people and societies (cf. resilience). But in the first months of the COVID-19 crisis, the trade justice camp did not really take up arms in this regard. Consequently, the Commission was initially not compelled to engage with political logics articulating more justice-oriented interpretations of 'resilience' and '(open) strategic autonomy'. It took until the end of June 2020 before coalitions of trade justice NGOs somewhat attempted to politicize EU trade policy by linking it to COVID-19, specifically in the context of the Stop EU-Mercosur campaign (11.11.11, 2020) and calling to restrict the use of investor-state-dispute settlement (ISDS) (Seattle To Brussels Network, 2020). Only in November 2020, European NGO campaigns started to get off the ground insisting on the EU to approve a TRIPS waiver for COVID-19 vaccines within the WTO (Civil Society, 2020). Yet these political logics do not connect with the heterogeneous logics inserting 'resilience' or 'strategic autonomy' into the debate, thereby leaving the interpretation of these terms entirely at the discretion of the neoliberal and geopolitical logics. One exception is the European fair trade movement, which picked up the notion of 'resilience' in its advocacy during the COVID-19 crisis (for example FTAO, 2020). But their pleas for resilient supply chains and the resilience of workers in the global South again do not necessarily challenge the neoliberal paradigm – quite the contrary.

Conclusion

This article has analysed how the hegemonic struggle over the shaping of EU trade policy has played out since the dislocation triggered by the COVID-19 crisis. The political process that we have described above has (perhaps partially and temporarily) been consolidated in the Trade Policy Review of February 2021, which will influence the future direction of EU trade policy. On the one hand, this process seems to have followed a strategic pattern that EU trade politics has witnessed before. As heterogeneous logics introduce new signifiers into the trade politics debate, the European Commission first seeks to disarm them, by underscoring the incompatibility of these new signifiers with the dominant social logics, and through political logics of difference that undo counterhegemonic equivalences. But as the political logics advancing an alternative, counterhegemonic interpretation gather steam, the Commission switches strategy and co-opts these political logics in a way that partially gives in to their demands, while rendering their chains of equivalence compatible with the present hegemony. Put plainly, the Commission first attempts to defeat its challengers by declaring their concerns irrelevant and contextually inappropriate. When this fails, it pivots to a strategy of co-optation and recuperation, that renders challengers' concerns compatible with the Commission's own view, by mimicking and reappropriating counterhegemonic rhetoric and arguments in a minimalistic and superficial manner.

For now, it looks as if this strategy has been successful in containing the dislocation caused by the COVID-19 crisis, much like it was successful in subduing contestation after the financial crisis (De Ville and Orbie, 2014; Siles-Brügge, 2014) and the politicization of TTIP and CETA (Gheyle, 2019). While the way in which the Commission gave in to the political demands for resilience and autonomy blurs the boundary between foreign

policy and free trade, this heterogeneous logic does not necessarily jeopardize the neoliberal core of EU trade policy.

Of course, it is early to make definitive statements in this regard. As COVID-19 continues to reverberate; there remains space for the articulation of more heterogeneous and political logics, that could challenge the extant social logics in new and innovative ways. Furthermore, as the boundary between foreign policy and trade policy blurs, the scope for new political logics making further geopolitical demands is broadened. While the neoliberal core of EU trade policy could be strengthened by its newly won geopolitical clout, it could eventually become overshadowed and dominated by these geopolitical demands. An example of the former dynamic is the launch of the Trade and Technology Council by the European Union and the United States, which tries to reinvigorate transatlantic regulatory co-operation after the failed TTIP negotiations and which is explicitly justified in geopolitical terms. Yet the pushback within the EU against the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment demonstrates that geopolitical logics can also thwart free trade initiatives. One can, in other words, put into question the durability of the strategic pattern currently pursued by the Commission. It is fair to wonder how much further the neoliberal chain of equivalence can be expanded with new (geopolitical) signifiers and concepts, before it becomes fatally overstretched.

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