

APPLICATION RESEARCH PROJECT (senior) – PROJECT OUTLINE:

Exploring Conditions for Politicization: A Comparative Analysis of European Union Trade Agreement Negotiations

**Rationale and positioning with regard to the state-of-the-art**

Recent events like Brexit and protectionist trade policies by the US Trump administration have given prominence to trade politics in a globalized world. What is more, political contestation of trade policies, such as that of the world's largest trading entity with full negotiation authority, the European Union, would seem to fit into a pattern of universal upheaval against liberalization and deregulation. This research project seeks to unpack such a sweeping generalization and probes into the question under which conditions EU trade negotiations become highly politicized.

There is large consensus about the fact that the European Union has prioritized bilateral trade liberalization via Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs) over multilateral trade opening within the World Trade Organization (WTO) just like many other major trade powers (Baccini 2010; Poletti and De Bièvre 2014; Gstöhl & De Bièvre 2018). This strategic shift has widely seen to be motivated by various factors, including the decline of the WTO's ability to deliver negotiated trade liberalization (Poletti and De Bièvre 2016), the competition with other trading partners in emerging markets (Dür, 2007) and the growing integration of the EU's economy in Global Value Chains (Eckhardt and Poletti 2016).

There is far less consensus about the proposition that EU trade policy has become highly politicized (Laursen and Roederer-Rynning 2017; Young 2017). **Politicization** refers to an "increase in polarization of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation" (De Wilde, 2011: 260), or, more broadly, to "making collectively binding decisions a matter or an object of public discussion" (Zürn 2014: 50). A number of studies on recent EU trade agreements negotiations have suggested that EU trade policy, contrary to the past, should be understood as a highly politicized policy area (a.o. Gheyle and De Ville 2019).

This research project proposal outlines (1) why claims about a fully-fledged politicization of EU trade policy are exaggerated and even misleading, because politicization varies considerably across different trade agreements negotiations (and also across EU member states); (2) why some nascent and seemingly obvious explanations for this observed variation are logically and/or empirically problematic, and (3) outlines a new research strategy to start parsing out necessary and sufficient conditions for the politicization of EU trade agreements in a mixed-method research design.

A cursory look at recent EU trade negotiations suggests that in fact a particular set of such negotiations have generated a high degree of politicization. Some of the European Union's (EU) bilateral trade agreements negotiations generated unprecedented domestic political turmoil in the course of the past decade. Especially the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations with the United States – now aborted – and the negotiation and conclusion of the Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) mustered a wave of political contestation unequalled in any previous EU trade agreement negotiations (Young 2016 & 2017; De Ville and Siles-Brügge 2015 & 2016; Laursen and Roederer-Rynning 2017; De Bièvre 2018; De Bièvre and Poletti 2016).

Other EU bilateral negotiations and agreements however, have barely been the subject of attention from the side of organized societal actors, the media, parliamentary assemblies (whether the European Parliament or national-level parliaments) or the general public, and have either taken place (and/or faltered) in the absence of any public uproar. These include the ongoing and finished

negotiations with autocratic developing countries such as Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia, with advanced industrial and services competitors such as Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, or the negotiations for an investment-only agreement with an economic giant such as China. Somewhat in between these two extremes, other negotiations did trigger some political opposition, particularly by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), but did not spark the large-scaled political turmoil elicited by the TTIP and the CETA. These include the negotiations with Mercosur, which have been failing for approximately two decades now, the many Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) negotiations with former European colonies in the African, Pacific and Caribbean (ACP) region, most of which have failed to realize, with the notable exception of the agreement with the CARIFORUM region, and, to a lesser extent, the trade agreements signed with the Andean Community and Central American countries (Poletti and Sicurelli 2018).

What is more, this skewed distribution of politicization is by no means an exclusive feature of the politics of EU trade agreements negotiations. The political dynamics underlying EU-administered unilateral trade policy measures display similarly diverse patterns of politicization. These include antidumping measures (e.g. EU tariffs against Chinese solar panels) and the initiation of, or responses to multilateral dispute settlement procedures at the (WTO) (De Bièvre and Eckhardt 2011; Poletti and De Bièvre 2014).

These observations thus make clear that it is warranted to try and explain varying degrees of politicization rather than debate politicization per se. Observers have therefore often remained baffled at why Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or 'civil society organisations' have focused on some bilateral trade agreements, pulling a 5-meter high Trojan horse through the streets of Brussels and Berlin in protests against the EU-US TTIP negotiations, while remaining silent about the EU-Japan Free trade agreement.

Past and ongoing research on this topic has mainly focussed on explaining the internal dynamics of processes of politicization, NGO activity and agency, and the mobilization of public opinion (e.g. Dür and Matteo 2014; De Bruycker 2017; Gheyle and De Ville 2019; Hanegraaff, Braun, De Bièvre and Beyers 2015, Young 2017), leaving plenty of room for an analysis of the structural pre-conditions that make room available for politicization in the first place.

### **Scientific Research Objectives**

The objectives of this research project are threefold. **First**, the aim is to **parse out necessary and sufficient conditions for politicization of EU trade agreements**. These conditions can range from high or low parliamentary control, the presence or absence of domestic compensation for losers of liberalization, variation in the depth of regulatory commitments, the relative size of the negotiating partner, etc., in order to know which combinations thereof lead to high degrees of politicization. **Second**, the project aims to bring together the literature on **EU trade politics** with the more general literature on **interest groups and civil society**, still operating too much on separate tracks. And third, the project aims to provide **training-through-research** in its **mixed method research design**, combining so-called Crisp Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis with in-depth, controlled case comparisons.

Despite being a seemingly recent phenomenon, a number of prominent and plausible arguments about the causes of EU trade policy politicization of EU trade agreements have been put forward. Some of those can be rejected out of hand, while others perform relatively well, but seem to unfold their explanatory force only in conjunction with other conditions. More precisely: what has remained unclear hitherto is which explanations or conditions are necessary and which of those then combine into sufficient conditions to spark large scale politicization of EU external trade negotiations. The overview below thus sets the scene for why the state-of-the-art can be

substantially advanced by for the first time applying a systematic Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA crisp set) to the phenomenon and by combining this with in-depth controlled case comparisons (see methodology section for why these perform different epistemological functions). Whereas by no means suggesting exhaustiveness, the following section outlines plausible conditions for politicization by civil society and parliamentary actors in some detail, and thus sketches the structural conditions that circumscribe the room for agency on the part of these actors.

For a starters, one could that countries with a very high degree of trade integration would be less prone to politicization of bilateral trade negotiations between them, because of their mutual interdependence. However, the exact opposite turned out to be the case in the EU-US trade negotiations – two entities that have the highest mutual trade and investment dependence in the entire world economy (Young 2017). Thus, a high degree of integration in so-called global value chain trade (think of the production chain for an iPhone, or for cars) does not exert a mitigating influence on incentives for politicization, contestation and opposition. Also, one might submit that the rise of social media has greatly facilitated the politicization of online and activist political campaigning. While undoubtedly true, this does not answer the research question of why many and also significantly large agreements have remained entirely outside the scope of these targeted campaigns.

#### 1. Variation in European and national **parliamentary control** over EU trade policy

One plausible argument for the politicization of EU trade negotiations points to the increasing control over EU trade policy by the European Parliament introduced with the institutional reform of Treaty of Lisbon (ToL) (Woolcock 2015). Others have claimed that national parliaments have started to play a more important role than in the past in this policy process (Jancic 2017). With respect to the European Parliament, the ToL indeed mandated that EU trade agreements be ratified by a simple majority of representatives in the European Parliament, turning this institution into a formal veto player in policy process (Woolcock 2010). Moreover, the institution beefed up its administrative and political capacity in the field of international trade (Coremans and Meissner 2018). Indeed, all EU trade agreements negotiations characterized by a high degree of politicization so far have taken place in the post-ToL period, due to the crucial role of the EP, i.e. the TTIP and CETA negotiations. With respect to national parliaments, national governmental coalitions have demanded and obtained that important recent bilateral trade agreements be presented for ratification also in all member state parliaments (Devuyt 2013), although this had actually already been the case over the preceding decades (Meunier 2005; De Bièvre and Gstöhl 2018). Both the CETA and TTIP negotiations did indeed become the subject of a high degree of politicization at the European level (a so-called Citizens Initiative with 3 million signatures opposing such agreements), in particular in the European Parliament. Also a number of national legislatures bound their national governments to a very restrictive negotiation mandate for negotiations with Canada, or out-rightly blocked the continuation of negotiations with the US. (In Belgium, this even involved subnational, regional parliaments, with the Walloon government refusing ratification of CETA for some time). This suggests that institutional opportunities to voice and mobilize opposition towards trade agreements may have been a necessary condition for their politicization. However, the observation that not all post-ToL trade negotiations displayed high levels of politicization also suggests that these institutional innovations do not suffice to trigger the politicization of these negotiations.

#### 2. Variation in **domestic compensation** for losers of liberalization

A second candidate in the political economy of trade agreement contestation is the expectation that countries that compensate losers of trade liberalization through welfare state institutions, should be more prone to embark on further globalization of their economies (Burgoon 2001) and

thus less prone to very high degrees of politicization and contestation. The logic behind this expectation is that citizens are more prone to the anxiety of losses when financial and social compensation is not automatically forthcoming. Based on the comparative capitalism literature, one would indeed expect that the European Union's Coordinated Market Economies, like Germany, Austria or the Benelux countries, with large and generous welfare states are more able to reassure potential losers of liberalization that compensation will be forthcoming, while citizens in Mixed Market Economies, like Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain with less universal insurance coverage against risks (Sapir 2006) may be more prone to loss aversion and hence more susceptible to politicization.

Surprisingly in light of this expectation though, politicization was higher in the European Union's rich core member states with a high degree of social protection than in its southern and eastern European member states where social welfare provision is less universal and less generous. What is more, those regions in Europe which would stand to economically gain most from large bilateral agreements (Vermeiren and De Ville 2014), were the ones witnessing most adamant and consistent politicization (Bauer, 2016; Chan and Crawford, 2017; Young 2017). NGO campaigns were most sustained and parliamentary controversy was highest in Germany, Austria, and to a lesser extent the Benelux countries. By contrast, countries like Greece, Spain, or Italy witnessed far less NGO mobilization against EU PTA negotiations. Domestic compensation of losers of trade liberalisation is thus neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for politicization of EU trade agreement negotiations.

### 3. Variation in **depth of regulatory commitments** in PTAs

Another prominent explanation for the politicization of EU trade agreements negotiations focuses on the content of these negotiations. Indeed, politicization of these negotiations could be traced back to the growing importance of regulatory issues within in so-called "new generation trade agreements" (Young and Peterson 2006; Laursen and Roederer-Rynning 2017; Young 2017). Times are indeed long gone that a trade agreement just included commitments to reduce or abolish simple custom tariffs on trade in goods and nowadays virtually all as significant trade agreements include commitments about opening up markets for services, access to public procurement markets, the respect of domestic regulations on health and safety, on the protection of intellectual property, the respect of minimum labour standards, environmental protection, as well as human rights (Dür, Baccini and Elsig 2014). There is a compelling logic to this line of reasoning, since preferential trade agreements are alike in that they all abolish virtually all tariffs between the two trading partners, but differ in the depth of regulatory commitments they contain.

Since regulatory issues touch on sensitive domestic, behind-the-border issues they are likely to trigger public suspicion of regulatory downgrading in the face of international competition, which in turn should elicit a high degree of politicization. However, on a theoretical note, regulatory cooperation does not need to translate into lower regulation in the EU, as the EU often manages to impose costly regulatory burdens onto its trade partners via trade agreements (De Bièvre, Poletti and Thomann 2014; Lechner 2016; Horn, Mavroidis and Sapir 2009; Pelkmans and Hamilton 2015; Poletti and Sicurelli 2018). Moreover, also empirically, this explanation is problematic, since trade agreements containing some 'deeper' regulatory provisions than CETA and TTIP, such as the EU-Japan agreement, have not elicited large scale politicization at all (Suzuki 2017). For instance, in the TTIP negotiations, EU policy makers treaded more carefully on liberalization in trade in services than in EU Japan negotiations: negotiators adopted a 'positive list' approach, specifying which services sectors they would open up to American competition. By contrast, in the agreements with Canada and Japan, negotiators included a 'negative list' of those services sectors which would be exempted from the general rule that all services sectors would be liberalized. Thus again, depth of

regulatory provisions reaching deep into the politics of domestic regulation is by no means a sufficient condition for politicization.

#### 4. Variation in **economic size and bargaining power** of the trading partner

A fourth, widely mentioned candidate for explanation is the economic size and bargaining power of the negotiating partner. Here the expectation goes as follows. The larger the market of the EU relative to its negotiating partner, the greater the costs that such partners are willing to incur to gain access to it (Damro 2012; Dür 2010). This suggests that EU agreements with smaller trading partners should be less politicized than those with partners of a roughly equal economic size, as economic asymmetries ensure that the EU negotiates out of a position of strength, minimizing the risk that it has to make concessions on sensitive regulatory issues. This argument is consistent with observed patterns of politicization in the TTIP negotiations, which many observed to be linked to EU member state perceptions of the US as a powerful negotiating partner, engendering a kind of inferiority complex of the Europeans in terms of bargaining power (De Ville and Siles-Brügge 2015; Garcia-Duran and Eliasson 2018). However, the argument is clearly inconsistent with the high degree of politicization that characterized the CETA negotiations, i.e. negotiations with a much smaller trading partner. In short, Canada (a country of 23 million inhabitants, compared to 513 million in the EU) hardly qualifies as a country which exerts disproportionate bargaining power over the EU in trade negotiations. Conversely, this line of argumentation suggests that the negotiations with Japan should have elicited greater fears of having to concede much on regulatory issues to a powerful trading partner, fears that did not materialize. These arguments suggest that the configuration of relative economic power (a)symmetries between the EU and its trading partners is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for politicization to arise.

This overview of theoretically plausible and empirically often correct explanations shows that the research puzzle at hand is one of finding out which combinations of these structural conditions might explain high degrees of politicization coming about. In order to do so, this research project proposes to systematically map those conditions across all recent EU bilateral trade negotiations (since 2005 when the EU abandoned its focus on multilateral negotiations and lifted its moratorium on bilateral ones; Young 2011). Whereas the interest group literature has advanced greatly on strategies with regard to mobilization, organisational maintenance, access to policy makers and relative influence over policy outcomes in recent years (Berkhout, Beyers, Braun, Hanegraaff and Lowery 2017), there is ample need for research on the contextual conditions that open up room for agency on the part of organizations such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

By redirecting our attention to such contextual conditions, research on politicization can be broadened from its current (and necessary) focus on its internal dynamics (Gheyle and De Ville 2019) to the identification of those structural conditions that create the opportunity structures for politicization in the first place. Both this shift in focus and the application of a methodology that has never been used yet to tackle this question has high potential to contribute to advancing knowledge and insight into politicization of trade policies, as well as allow for generalizations to other neighbouring European policy fields, like privacy and ICT regulation, competition policy and monetary policy.

#### **Research methodology and work plan**

This research project will combine so-called **Crisp Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis** (cs-QCA; Ragin 1987) with in-depth controlled paired comparisons. Three reasons warrant this choice.

First, the epistemological nature of QCA methodology rests on a **logic of necessary and sufficient conditions** rather than probabilistic estimations and therefore allows to systematically address the

research question which is to explore and parse out structural conditions for politicization of EU trade agreement negotiations.

Second, despite this advantage, QCA has a major **disadvantage**, i.e. the fact that conditions need to be operationalised in a dichotomous fashion, that can be overcome by in-depth controlled paired case comparisons in which conditions can be allowed to vary along a continuum. Thus applied in combination, disadvantages of both methods can be mitigated.

And third, this research strategy allows for **training through research for the PhD researcher** to be appointed on the project. While the research question is clearly delineated, the researcher will also receive training in concept formation, operationalization, and hypothesis formulation, hypothesis adjustment and even hypothesis generation, next to the acquisition of high-level skills in these two methodologies. This will enable her or him to acquire a fuller range of skills than when she or he would only execute a pre-conceived project trajectory.

With regard to the first reason, Cs-QCA indeed has two advantages for the research question at hand. **First**, the methodology opens up the possibility to research **medium N samples** in a deeper fashion, as the number of bilateral trade agreement negotiations conducted by the European Union is too low to allow for a large N quantitative methodology. (One might opt for increasing that N by also selecting all bilateral trade agreement negotiations by the US or another important trading entity. Yet, this would significantly jeopardise unit homogeneity, as strategic context, domestic institutions, and indeed many other parameters would be different, reducing generalisability).

**Second**, using Cs-QCA makes use of Boolean logic, which 'allows us to examine the possibility that X has a different effect on Y when combined with the presence or absence of other variables'. It thus serves the purpose of theory development as it allows the researcher to test the causal effect on the dependent variable of several independent variables and their combinations. Each independent variable is codified in dichotomous terms and the causal link between the variables will be explored. Epistemologically, CsQCA is thus based on the principle of **causal complexity**, which implies that events do not have a mono-causal explanation, but rather that they can be explained only by looking at multiple independent variables.

Yet, on the downside, CsQCA presents **two limitations** that will be addressed with a case-study approach. The first limitation is the loss of information through **dichotomous operationalisation** (politicization yes/no; compensation yes/no; depth of regulatory commitments yes/no; etc.). Political phenomena however can be operationalised in a more fine-grained way along a continuum of less or more, as what may well matter most is the relative variation in them. Therefore, in the second phase of the in-depth comparative case studies, we will adopt a continuous operationalization of conditions. Second, QCA allows for the mapping of combinations of conditions, but in and of itself does not allow for the theory development in the form of the identification of new conditions, which is complementing this with the **controlled comparative case-study method** will allow us to further corroborate the hypotheses, to control for the cases, in which the hypotheses were falsified, and to engage in **further theory development and refinement**.

The **data sources** used for operationalization of absence or presence (for the QCA) of politicization and of differing degrees of politicization (for the comparative case studies) as well as for all the conditions identified will consist of the following. First, **specialised trade information services** will be accessed. These are not cheap, but offer a very systematic, weekly coverage of international economic agreement negotiations (**World Trade Online**; <https://insidetrade.com/>) and EU trade negotiations (**EU BorderLex**; <https://borderlex.eu/>). Their archives offer an invaluable, reliable source of information, covering decades of trade negotiations in the case of World Trade Online, and full coverage of EU trade policy since 2014 for Borderlex. Second, this information will be

matched further with the already existing **scholarly literature** on EU trade agreements and civil society mobilization, as well as **selected interviews** with key actors in the European Commission negotiators, (national and European) parliamentarians, and civil society organisations. One might say that systematic surveys among those actors would be the methodology of choice, yet for two reasons, we plan not to go down that road. For one, existing and ongoing research has and is already mapping preferences, strategies, and assessments of interest group and civil society activity in European Union politics and trade policy (e.g. the ESF INTEREURO project with Antwerp promotor Jan Beyers, now unfortunately ill, and copromotor Dirk De Bièvre; or ongoing research at the University of Antwerp by FWO postdoc Iskander De Bruycker 2017a and 2017b). Moreover, there are surveys on attitudes towards economic openness in general and particular trade agreements in particular, both for policy makers and stakeholders as well as on attitudes and preferences of the general preferences, conducted by larger organizations that are better placed to conduct this type of survey research (such as the Bertelsmann Foundation).

As with any research strategy adopted, **significant risks** are involved in this research project.

**First**, and as already argued, loss of information through the **simplification of a dichotomous operationalizations** in QCA will be mitigated by a continuous operationalization in the case studies.

**Second**, interviewing and surveying has become increasingly challenging, as response rates have declined, and availability of interviews and willingness to speak freely reduced. With regard to survey fatigue, esp. among trade negotiators (and to a lesser extent stakeholders), this will be met by relying on existing ones, while complementing this with interviews. With regard to **interviewing fatigue** (see also Beyers, Braun, Marshall and De Bruycker 2014), this challenge will be met by (1) **relying on already available survey data**, (2) very **selectively identifying only some interview partners** to corroborate and/or complement evidence obtained from other sources, and (3) guaranteeing **anonymity** to interviewees. The latter will allow us to complement primary and secondary sources with semi-structured interview information, rather than relying exclusively on interview and/or survey input. We will thus seek to meet the criteria of comprehensiveness, representativeness and reliability by complementing two methods of data gathering, rather than relying on one method mainly. This is realistic, due to the long-time expertise, familiarity and access to decision-makers in the field of EU trade policy (see for instance, for the writing of the recent and only interdisciplinary textbook on the matter by Gstöhl and De Bièvre 2018), the promotor Dirk De Bièvre will assist in overcoming or bypass this risk – either by participating in the interviews directly, or by facilitating the PhD researcher’s access to these key actors.

Third, the most classical risk involved in a PhD project, even if generously funded for 4 years, is **delay in implementation**, especially in the collection of empirical evidence. The embeddedness of the researcher will therefore go far beyond the yearly meetings of the doctoral committee and include a strict **regularity of feedback moments** at the two **summer schools**, presentation at at least **one academic conference a year** (such as those of the ECPR EU Standing Group, ECPR Joint Sessions, Political Economy of International Organizations PEIO, UACES, PolEtmaal and European Union Studies Association EUSA), and a **commitment to paper submissions**.

#### 4-year work plan, milestones, and feasibility of the PhD project

<u>Year 1</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recruitment of PhD researcher</li> <li>- Review of the political science literature on ‘politicization’</li> <li>- 1<sup>st</sup> detailed coding of conditions identified</li> <li>- ECPR Summer School <i>Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)</i></li> <li>- <b>Milestone 1: Paper 1</b>, research design &amp; 1<sup>st</sup> doctoral committee meeting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Oct – Dec 2019</li> <li>- Jan – March 2020</li> <li>- April – July 2020</li> <li>- July/August 2020</li> <li>- Sept – Dec 2020</li> </ul>
<u>Year 2</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Submission of an FWO pre-doc fellowship application</li> <li>- Research stay University of Trento: coding refinement and adding conditions</li> <li>- Summer School, World Trade Institute, University of Bern</li> <li>- <b>Milestone 2: Paper 2</b>, QCA analysis</li> <li>- Conference attendance I -</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Jan – Febr 2021</li> <li>- March – Aug 2021</li> <li>- July/August 2021</li> <li>- Sept – Dec 2021</li> </ul>
<u>Year 3</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Internship DG Trade, European Commission, Brussels</li> <li>- In-depth comparative case studies</li> <li>- <b>Milestone 3: Paper 3</b></li> <li>- <b>Milestone 4: International Workshop</b> on Politicization of Trade Negotiations, preparation of an edited book or special issue proposal with entire research team</li> <li>- Conference attendance II -</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Jan – March 2022</li> <li>- April – June 2022</li> <li>- July – Oct 2022</li> <li>- Nov – Dec 2022</li> </ul>
<u>Year 4</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Milestone 5: Paper 4</b>, combining QCA with the comparative case studies</li> <li>- Introduction &amp; conclusion, submission to doctoral committee</li> <li>- <b>Milestone 6: PhD defence</b></li> <li>- Conference attendance III -</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Jan – March 2023</li> <li>- April – June 2023</li> <li>- Sept - Oct 2023</li> </ul>

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