

Implications of the Proposed EU-Mercosur Free Trade Accord: Challenges for European Agriculture and Policy Responses

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Abstract

The EU-Mercosur trade deal has sparked heated debate. While it promises economic benefits like reduced tariffs and increased trade, European farmers fear the influx of cheaper imports produced under looser regulations. These imports threaten the sustainability and profitability of local agriculture, already under strain from environmental mandates and rising costs. Farmers argue that EU policies like the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) favor large operations and unfairly burden smaller farms, adding to their challenges. This study examines the ongoing tension between the EU's trade goals, the pressures on its primary sector, and its commitment to sustainability. It also considers the broader geopolitical stakes, including the risk of losing influence in Latin America to competitors like China, should the agreement face further delays.

Keywords: EU-Mercosur Trade Agreement, Tariff Elimination, Agricultural Subsidies, Common Agricultural Policy

I. Introduction

Is this the end for European Agriculture? Four years ago, the EU announced its planned free trade accord with Mercosur. A trade deal that is supposed to get rid of all tariffs for all goods produced in the four South American members of MERCOSUR at their entry into Europe. After the agreement was made public in June 2019, European farmers began rioting and manifesting. Hundreds of tractors began choking the biggest European cities, such as Brussels, Rome and Berlin.

The Covid-19 pandemic made it impossible for European farmers to sustain themselves. Prices have since gone down while costs have gone up. All of this combined with the threat of a new deal that will bring new competitors, with different regulations and cheaper costs of production. This paper will thus focus on how the EU is dealing with this recurring problem, as well as possible outcomes of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) being put forward. Moreover the paper will explore the EU's motivations for developing a liberal market with other trading groups, like MERCOSUR. The EU must decide and reword its food production. It is vital to

understand that the primary sector is not any industry that reword. A lack of self-sufficient food production results in two major fears: dependance on external resources and changes in demographic composition. Harming the rural population's only source of income will force cities to enlarge. However, before delving into the consequences, the paper will begin by describing the Mercosur agreement and the farmer's current situation, and analysing the EU's policies at the heart of the problem, to understand its repercussions.

II. Background: EU-Mercosur Agreement

To understand if the EU is risking the preservation of its primary sector, it is crucial to first define what the EU and Mercosur trade agreement is and what implications it has for European Farmers. This deal has been in negotiations for over 20 years, and was announced in 2019 at the G20 summit. However, this free trade agreement has not been ratified yet, and has therefore, not entered into force.

The current trade relationship between Mercosur and the EU can be described as The EU is Mercosur's biggest trade and investment partner. They have a robust and mutually beneficial relationship, as the EU is its second biggest trade in goods partner (EU Commission). In 2021, the EU's exports to the four Mercosur countries amounted to a total of €45 billion, while Mercosur's exports to the EU totaled €43 billion.¹ The objective of the trade agreement is to eliminate 93% of the tariffs for Mercosur

imports to Europe, leaving the rest with a preferential tariff treatment. This will create a much more accessible European market for Mercosur's agricultural products, such as beef, poultry and sugar. The trade is expected to provide the EU with a 91% elimination of tariffs to its exports. At the same time, the deal will increase Mercosur's exports outstandingly, allowing the South American countries to export up to 99,000 tons of beef per year. This is almost triple the amount from 2020's 34,000 tons.² The European Commission expects the trade agreement to save €4,5 billion worth of duties.

Furthermore, after the deal was announced at the G20 Summit in Japan, it faced severe backlash. The reason for it is that the deal places European farmers at a serious risk by lowering prices of what, while also forcing them to compete against other producers in an unfair market with different regulations for different competitors. This will make it difficult for European farmers to sustain themselves. European agricultural regulations prioritize factors in line with sustainable development. Certain regulations force farmers to keep arable land without farms or to reduce the use of pesticides. These regulations ensure a high quality of production and the integrity of the sector for maintaining environmental procedures. However the influx of cheaper products, that would come from MERCOSUR countries, could threaten the sustainability of agricultural production, undermining the standards and threatening the jobs of European farmers. Furthermore the entry of cheaper products would mean the lowering of

¹ EU Commission. *EU trade relations with Mercosur*. n.d. EU Trade. Accessed March 27, 2024.

² Messad, Paul. "[France reaffirms opposition to EU-Mercosur deal as farmers' protests mount.](#)" *Euractiv*, January 29, 2024.

certain standards that the European farmers hold if they want to survive.

The European Union policies regarding the primary sector, led by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), have been facing lots of debate and criticism by the European agriculture community. Although their spending is part of 60% of the EU's budget, their attempt to increase the quality of food and to transition into more sustainable production processes is causing serious scrutiny and distress.

Some examples of stringent policies introduced by the CAP are requirements to minimize tillage, to grow and cover crops between seasons, to grow all kinds of crops during the growing seasons and to maintain arable land without crops. All of this is aimed at addressing pressing environmental concerns like soil erosion, chemical usage reduction, and biodiversity preservation. However, these mandates have inadvertently burdened farmers, with a solution that has led to a loss of competitiveness in the global market.

The reallocation of their budget to sustainable efforts enlarges the claims of farmers' unjust market competition. With a budget of €55 billion, their efforts of modernization have been turning down. More than 70% of those €55 billion is spent on direct payments to farmers, which were created to provide vital safety to them. There is also a lot of skepticism with this system, mainly requiring greater transparency regarding the funds spent and how they are allocated to the different farms. Nonetheless, one of the concerns with direct payments is that certain

payments are only awarded if the farmers complete a certain number of sustainable commitments. Therefore they are forced to adapt to certain regulatory standards, which inevitably have high costs associated with them, in order to receive the subsidies offered by the Union.

As part of the renewal of the CAP, new measures have been introduced. These include provisions requiring farmers to allocate at least 4% of arable land to non-productive features, along with implementing crop rotations and a reduction in the use of fertilizers by a minimum of 20%.³ This type of policies have also affected European farmers on an international level. This has made them lose competitiveness against importers, that is, without even accounting for the implications of the Mercosur agreement. All coupled with inflation has made direct payments lose much of their value.

As a consequence, farmers all over Europe have protested, in countries such as Italy, France and Belgium where farmers are concerned by the cheap imports of countries with different standards. Conversely in Germany, farmers have been concerned about the tax rebate on vehicles.⁴ This has led to farmers driving their tractors around the largest European cities in protest, and even to the egging of the European parliament.

The European Commission has also launched initiatives such as the "Farm and Fork" strategy, meant to make food

³ Gozzi, Laura. 2024. ["Why Europe's farmers are taking their anger to the streets."](#) *BBC*, January 26, 2024.

⁴ Cokelaere, Hanne, and Bartosz Brzeziński. 2024. ["Europe's farmer protests are spreading. Here's where and why."](#) *Politico*, January 31, 2024.

systems fair, healthy and environmentally friendly. Such initiatives launched by the European Commission aim to drive positive environmental outcomes while addressing critical challenges such as climate change mitigation and adaptation. By promoting sustainable practices and biodiversity conservation, these efforts aim to reverse biodiversity loss and safeguard ecosystems. The Commission also prioritizes food security, nutrition and public health, striving to ensure universal access to safe, nutritious and sustainable food sources.⁵ The free trade agreements and such sustainable aims, have suffocated European farmers against competition. This has forced them to enter a market where their production costs increase, and the prices of their goods decrease, thus decreasing farmers' profit margins. Many farmers have, as a consequence, tried to extend their means of production by buying more land and machinery, which has however had the opposite effect of increasing farmers' debts.

All of this is sparking a lot of criticism for the European Union. As a result, some have adopted a firm stance against neo-liberal policies, asking for protectionist policies, and renouncing to sustainable ones. Others have suggested establishing a more liberal market in Europe, consequently ending farmers' livelihoods.

European farmers, on one hand, have expressed their dissatisfaction with the work done by the CAP for the last 60 years. For instance, the European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC), a European grassroots organization

⁵ ["Farm to Fork Strategy - European Commission."](#) n.d. Language selection | Food Safety. Accessed march 26, 2024.

run by farmers, insists that only large scale farms tend to be favored by the CAP. Around 80% of the subsidies given by the CAP only reach 20% of European farms,⁶ boosting the maldistribution of subsidies. Subsidies which were introduced almost 30 years ago to fender reform effects. Despite there being no real reason for their existence as having proven to be inequitable, the payment system persists. Furthermore, in 2015 a total of €25 billion given in direct payment ended up going to farms that already had a higher income than the medium farm.⁷ Instead of supporting farms in need, the CAP supported farms that already had prosperous incomes. This misallocation of funds only perpetuates existing inequalities in the agricultural sector, taking the resources from growing farms who need it the most. In addition, this misallocation of resources undermines the initial purpose of direct payments which is to give financial assistance to struggling farms, which is why the CAP is facing repeated criticism. Although the EU has its reasons and arguments to defend some of their actions, it's rather the accumulation of those actions that left European farmers in crisis and therefore saving an action is not enough.

III. EU's response to the negative reception of the CAP

As the discourse surrounding the CAP intensifies, the EU finds itself compelled to justify its policies. Before

⁶ Courtine, Emma. 2021. ["Green Deal, the Farm to Fork \(F2F\) strategy and climate."](#) European Coordination Via Campesina.

⁷ W. Scown, Murray, Mark V. Brady, and Kimberly A. Nicholas. 2020. ["Billions in Misspent EU Agricultural Subsidies Could Support the Sustainable Development Goals."](#) *One Earth* 3 p2 (August).

delving into the CAP, it is important to consider the effects that climate change has on farmland and how the primary sector can scale pollution by itself. Making an effort to mitigate the effects of farming for climate change is both crucial for those involved in the sector and for the rest of the population.

With the introduction of longer and more manifesting extreme weather conditions, the production of food is impacted negatively. Farmers will have to cut production more often if the conditions get worse, which may lead to food shortages. Studies conducted by the European commission show how agriculture is responsible for 10% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions. The land where this is produced from is filled with carbon storages, which are at risk of being released into the atmosphere. Therefore, the management of these vulnerable areas is key to stopping the risk of more greenhouse gas emissions. Similarly, the way in which production is being conducted in this land can also affect the extent of the emissions.⁸ Agriculture suggests that policies such as the Farm and Fork strategy have made it difficult to meet sustainability objectives. Smaller farms have especially suffered the effects of these policies. For this reason, , different organizations such as the ECVC have suggested implementing subsidy capping and redistributable subsidies to allow small farms to make the transition into more sustainable production.

⁸ Environment, Alliance. "[Evaluation study of the impact of the CAP on climate change and greenhouse gas emissions.](#)" European Commission, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development: Brussels, Belgium (2019).

In essence, policies forwarded by the European Commission have made farmers' lives more difficult, especially with the CAP's imposition of unfair prices of what upon farmers. Since the 1980s, various regulations ensuring fair prices for European farmers have been dismantled.⁹ This is the consequence of the so promising free trade agreements that the EU shows faith in. In order to quell ongoing protests, the EU is planning to change mandatory regulations to voluntary. While in doing so they are trying to seek an easy path for European farmers, this is triggering environmental measures that are already existing in the CAPs sustainable model. All of this comes from a leak of EU executive plans to cut CAP funding and a change in the enforcement of Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAEC). For example, GAEC 6 and GAEC 7 are foreseeing a change. Having previously mandated an obligation to keep a certain amount of arable land safe from production, the new plan is to make member states form a 'green scheme,' rewarding those who keep setting different kinds of crops in their growing seasons instead of obligating them to do it. The GAEC 8, similarly, makes the maintenance of non-productive features in farms obligatory in order to improve biodiversity.¹⁰ This change in policies seems risky but is encouraged by farmers, such as Natasha Foote, a peasant farmer and now journalist working in a NGO that pursues

⁹ Odoy, Morgan, and Vincent delobel. 2024. "[Farmers' protests in Europe and the deadend of neoliberalism.](#)" *Al Jazeera*, February 25, 2024.

¹⁰ Foote, Natasha, and Hannes Lorenzen. 2024. "[Green CAP on the Chopping Block - Commission to Cut CAP's Environmental Ambitions with no Impact Assessment.](#)" *ARC2020*, March 13, 2024.

for better rural policies. She explains how these reforms are simple and flexible. She argues that making Member States more responsible for checking the compliance of the GAECs will allow them to be more flexible and make frequent changes depending on extreme weather conditions. Furthermore, she discusses how this proposal will allow small farms to get rid of checks and controls more easily. Being obligated to leave arable land without producing is a bigger burden to small farms due to their already small amounts of yield, thus, this type of flexibility will allow them to produce more.

This proposal will also affect organic farmers. Organic farmers tend to be more environmentally friendly, the CAP will not make them comply with certain environmentally friendly requirements such as GAEC 6 which they already comply with. This also makes farmers less likely to protest against the CAP, which is largely beneficial to them. Despite its benefits, these changes still have significant risks and drawbacks, enforcing new enemies such as environmentalists, and going against environmental measures such as the SDG Goals and 2030 Agenda.

On the other hand, several EU coalitions and civil society organizations have disagreed with the derogation of GAEC 8 and spoken against it in a letter arguing how the derogation of GAECs 1, 6, 7, 8 will undermine Member States obligations to support the environmental and

climate ambition.¹¹ They argue that the environmental progress made from 2014-2020 will be lost through this. Even more so, this period wasn't able to decrease a loss of biodiversity, thus their statement that removing the necessity of having non-productive arable land will encourage a bigger loss on already decaying biodiversity. They quote how the European Commission has already stated how important these GAECs are in the fight against climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental issues. Therefore, the European Commission already recognizes the importance of these policies. Implementing short and medium Restate the last sentence it is super difficult to decipher Instead, they state how the farmers protests should not be used as a pretense for them to loosen their strictness on the environment-related policies, and that these protests come in place of free trade agreements, such as Mercosur which introduces new competition which is impossible to compete with. They also reiterate how the distribution of funds relate a bigger portion to the large farms. For these reasons, EU coalitions encourage the EU Commission to create "meaningful policies" that actually make a difference in accomplishing better conditions for European farmers? such as the redistribution of funds reframing the inequitable profits of farms .

The intention of changing environmental policies' to comply with what has only made a part of the public happy yet it affects the reputation of the CAP. While it may seem obvious that both environmentalists and farmers

¹¹ Ursula von der Leyen. "[Joint letter to the EU Commission to reconsider the loosening of the CAP's green architecture.](#)" *EU Commission*. 2024.

have a common enemy, which is the free trade deal, this raises the question of why the CAP doesn't kill two birds with one bullet by withholding the deal? This is due to the EU's pushing of the EU-Mercosur free trade accord, as the EU expresses the need for preferential access to Latin American countries as part of the deal as this will boost exports and create more jobs by limiting protectionism and barriers to trade. While Mercosur is one of the EU's biggest partners, they also claim that this trade agreement stipulates that Mercosur must follow EU trade and environmental guidelines. While many environmentalists worry how this trade deal will affect the environment, and the continuity of the environmental value agenda pursued by the EU, the European commission dictates that both economic blocks must agree to follow this agenda. The EU has also made clear the importance of the trade agreement in maintaining free trade, while the world economy chokes under growing protectionism.

The trade also favors the European market more than the Latin American market, as in the deal, MERCOSUR countries will scrap tariffs on 91% of EU imports, covering key goods such as vehicles and machinery. Meanwhile, the EU will open up 95% of its imports from MERCOSUR, including 82% of agricultural products¹². European firms will then be the first to enter the Mercosur market with the same procedures as the local ones– this will allow them to conduct trade without dealing with tariffs and customs. Prior to this, they could only enter the market with

¹² Banco de España. “[The EU-Mercosur Trade Agreement and its Impact on the European Economies.](#)” *Banco de España's Economic Bulletin*, (March 2024).

subsidiaries- Firms made in Latin America but controlled by a European parent company. The EU also holds a competitive advantage in most trading sectors with MERCOSUR, particularly in the supply of higher technology products. Most European exports to MERCOSUR consist of machinery, vehicles, chemicals, pharmaceuticals and electric products. All these products have to pay bigger tariffs than the concentration of agricultural products that MERCOSUR exports. This is shown the following to graphs made in a study conducted by Banco de España:

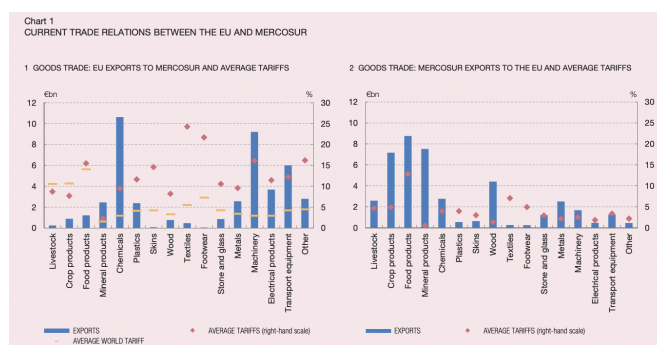


Fig. 1: Current Trade Relations between the EU and Mercosur.

Source: Banco de España. 2019.

As shown in Chart 1, exports received by Mercosur have much higher tariffs than the goods they export to the EU. However on the European side, the highest tariffs are placed on food products from which Mercosur economically benefits the most. This is the source of the conflict. It, however, remains that European companies will hugely benefit from lower tariffs as these pose the best chances for growth in the industries that the EU specialises, including the textile and footwear industries, analysts speculate. This is prevalent in countries such as

Spain and Portugal which, additionally, have linguistic ties to the American continent. The agreement will essentially improve the existing trade relations between Portugal and Spain with South American nations. For example, Spain's trade with South America now represents 4.5% of its economy,¹³ figures which are heavily underestimated, and which will continue to connect Europe and South America, with the expectation of growth in the future. This opportunity is however not expected to exist for long, as Mercosur's biggest trading partner, China, might get the continent to itself. Forcing a new deal with itself. Every time the Mercosur deal is delayed, South America gets closer to China. For instance, Uruguay has always been more inclined to sign a trade deal with China rather than the EU. Since China is already exporting the most in Latin America, a deal between them would most likely surpass the EU in numbers. Last year Uruguay was already entering formal talks between an agreement with China. Mercosur also has its biggest destination of exports to China. What's more, China plans to invest \$250million on the continent. European corporations, in retaliation, aim for their firms to relocate their supply chains away from China in an effort to develop South America's industry and escape the dependency on China in the process. However, if the trade deal does not materialise, and Mercosur falls under Chinese influence, this would signify a double loss to the EU: increasing dependence on Chinese industries and losing a potential new partner to China.

¹³ Lacerda, Antonio. 2024. "[The bigger picture: The case for an EU-Mercosur free trade deal.](#)" *European Council on Foreign Relations*, January 15, 2024.

Moving on, in order to defend itself, the European Commission showed in a letter how it has stored information of how their subsidies work and methods that they use in order to make European farming, equal and safe. Farmers still fight the spending methods of the CAP, yet the policy has its own methods to stop the negative claims from the farmers. Things such as disproportionate distributions of funds have an explanation or are trying to be tackled. For example, the clearance of accounts procedure clarifies, through regular inspections, that the payments made by member states are done correctly. Audits ensure the security and accessibility of the European budget in an annual report. The CAP tries to be as transparent as possible with these public reports. Despite this, protestors argue that nobody knows who receives these funds- although these are publicly accessible. Most farmers expostulate the direct payments, as they mostly benefit bigger farms. The CAP defends this by stating that funds are distributed depending on the size of the area farmed as according to them 20% of the largest farmers in the EU own over 80% of arable land. Despite this, more than half of the income beneficiaries are from small farms.¹⁴

The CAP also has payments for small farmers, called PSFs. These aim to reduce administrative burden, and maintain the rural areas where small farms are crucial to local populations. However, once a farm has applied and been granted a PSF, they cannot receive any other funds. The payments are usually given per hectare and the

¹⁴ European Commission. n.d. [The Common Agricultural Policy: Separating fact from fiction.](#)

maximum amount which may be given per farmer is €1250. Another form of Direct Payment the CAP subsidized is basic income support for sustainability, or BISS. The BISS is put in place with the aim of making the average salary of farmers grow to reach the average salary of other sectors, while making the farms more sustainable. In this case, the aid is not given for production means as now, farmers can produce whatever product they decide This allows them to change production based on current demands.

V. Conclusion

Despite the primary sector's disagreement, the CAP arguably tries to ensure sustainable and equal farming practices across Europe- yet their efforts can only reach a certain extent. However, in terms of the EU- MercoSur Agreement, it is the EU which will benefit the most, due to a rise in its exports. Therefore the EU will most likely take a liberal approach and engage in free trade in order to benefit EU citizens. This would mean lowered food prices for European consumers. While this negatively impacts European farmers, it benefits EU citizens. Despite this, the EU remains in a tricky position, where its actions will have a large Brussels Effect. This term describes how different countries outside of the EU tend to copy certain regulatory measures that the EU implements.¹⁵ More recently, the EU's regulatory protectionism has sunk their previous

emphasis of free trade and other nations' opportunities to grow.

The MERCOSUR agreement has sparked a chain reaction. The more time is taken to ratify the trade deal the less chances for the deal to ever happen. If this is the case, we will see the Brussels Effect take action as other countries begin to impose trade barriers. This could be the worst case scenario for the EU. While the EU should not underscore the effects this will have on its primary sector, it should not underscore its effect on global trade- this being one of the key reasons for, as the EU admits, the Mercosur agreement to be so crucial.

¹⁵ Abbott, Roderick, Matthias Bauer, and Dyuti Pandya. 2024. "[EU Autonomy, the Brussels Effect, and the Rise of Global Economic Protectionism](#)." *ECIPE*, February 13, 2024.

VI. List of Figures

1. **Figure 1:** Current Trade Relations between the EU and Mercosur. 8

VII. Bibliography

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