

# 'A Force for Good': The Narrative Construction of Ethical EU–Vietnam Trade Relations

CAMILLE NESSEL<sup>1</sup>  and ELKE VERHAEGHE<sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup>Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) & Ghent University, Brussels, Belgium <sup>2</sup>Ghent University & United Nations University on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS), Bruges, Belgium

## Abstract

Political representation of problems includes an aim to control an audience's impressions and create a societally-acceptable social reality. This paper analyses the narrative construction of ethical trade between the European Union (EU) and Vietnam. As an undemocratic Other, Vietnam has been sharply criticized for its human rights record by civil society and Members of European Parliament. Yet, the EU recently concluded two trade agreements with Vietnam. We argue that, unchallenged by the European Parliament, the European Commission created a performative 'story of change' for its European audience by simultaneously appealing to underlying 'neoliberal' and 'development' paradigms. In this narrative, the EU and Vietnam star as the main characters, who, in their joint attempts to make bilateral trade 'a force for good', live moments of heroism, encounter fleeting instances of victimhood, and defeat villains on the path to ethical trade.

**Keywords:** trade; narrative; sustainable development; EU; Vietnam

## Introduction

After rediscovering a prospering 'Asia' in the mid-1990s, the European Union (EU) formulated an ambitious 'Global Europe Strategy' (EC, 2006). This laid down the initial conditions for the EU's actorness towards East Asia. To catch up with the US, Japanese and Chinese economic presence in the region, better market access strategies were proposed to be achieved through more trade agreements. As a result of this new economic interest, the European Council gave a mandate to the European Commission (EC) to negotiate a region-to-region agreement between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the EU. After initial failure, this shifted to bilateral EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations with selected ASEAN countries, including FTA negotiations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, launched in 2012 (Meissner, 2016). In response to Vietnam's booming timber industry, the EU also negotiated a complementary Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) in 2010, aimed at regulating EU–Vietnam timber trade and disincentivizing illegal logging. After the successful conclusion of negotiations in 2015, a quarrel over competences between the EU and member states led to the FTA being divided into two agreements, requiring EP consent once again.

Once newly ratified in 2020, the EC exemplified that the EU–Vietnam trade agreements prove 'that trade policy can be a force for good' (EC, 2020a). Not only does it deliver economic results, but it also promotes 'sustainable development, human rights, fair

[Correction added on 20 December 2021, after first online publication: article footnote has been removed.]

and ethical trade and the fight against corruption' (EC, 2015). Meanwhile, the European Parliament (EP) (EP, 2016, 2017, 2018) and various civil society actors (Lawyers for Lawyers, 2018; Tremosa, 2018) have sharply criticized 'the repressive Vietnamese government' (EP, 2018) for its human and civil rights violations, the suppression of free speech and association, and the disappearance of political activists. Alongside increased public salience of trade agreements in the aftermath of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), the EU–Vietnam trade agreements became subject to increased scrutiny by the EP compared to the previous 2015 FTA between the EU and Vietnam.

This paper applies an interpretivist narrative analysis to the EU–Vietnam trade agreements. Specifically, we try to understand how the EC and the EP narratively responded to the wicked problem of ethical EU–Vietnam relations. We argue that the EC in particular has developed a coherent 'story of change'. Rooted in the free trade and development paradigms, the story de-villainizes the Vietnamese government and carves out a crucial role for the EU as an ethical trading partner. The article continues as follows. Firstly, the article introduces policy narratives as paradigmatically defined performative responses to 'wicked' policy problems. Secondly, it discusses extant literature in EU scholarship that examines the EU as an ethical actor. Thirdly, the article presents the wicked case of EU–Vietnam trade relations. Subsequently, it introduces the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) as a useful tool to deconstruct the EU's narrative responses to this wickedness, then deconstructs the narrative put forward by the EC and the EP. Finally, it discusses this narrative and its paradigmatic assumptions before drawing our conclusions on the EU's ethical trade policy in the last section.

## I. Narratives, Policy Stories, and Paradigms

Narratives can be understood as a specific variant of discourse with sequentially and chronologically organized events (Roe, 1994) that are causally linked in a plot (Stone, 1989; Patterson and Monroe, 1998). In line with other schools of discourse analysis, we understand the social world as primarily created by the human mind (Lynggaard, 2019). Within this view, we perceive narratives as an ontological and epistemological condition: as a storytelling being or 'homo narrans' (Fisher, 1984, p. 2; Jones *et al.*, 2014, p. 1), the human constructs narratives to organize contradictory and fragmented perceptions of the world into a (more or less) coherent whole (Somers, 1994; Haste *et al.*, 2015). A narrative perspective views discourse as historical and situational, its success dependent upon internal coherency and fidelity with the audience's values and past experiences. Consequently Fisher proposed the metaphor of 'homo narrans' to challenge rational perceptions of human rhetoric as convincing through laws of logic (Fisher, 1984, p. 2). This understanding of narratives as value- rather than ratio-driven is also backed by interpretative schools (see Dunn, 1997), which contend that narratives are shaped at different levels of socially constructed and institutionalized belief-systems (Somers, 1994; Patterson and Monroe, 1998).

We follow this critique on rational modes of thinking and go a step further in following the idea that discourses on public policies can also be treated as narratives (Roe, 1994; Hajer, 1995; Jones *et al.*, 2014). Narratives help creating an intersubjective understanding between narrator and audience and have the power of influencing the latter's perceptions

and behaviours (Shanahan *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, *policy* narratives, directed at the 'homo narrans' in the audience, create an intersubjective understanding of the most appropriate course of policy action (Jones and McBeth, 2010). When political agents find themselves confronted with so-called 'wicked policy problems' problems, which are difficult to define and without one correct solution, narratives provide a straightforward answer (Veselková, 2017). This makes narratives attractive to both policy makers and receivers as a mode of meaning-making (Crow and Jones, 2018), as well as to strategically convince broader audiences of a particular policy measure (Lynggaard, 2019). If a policy narrative is to perform successfully, it needs to be robust, coherent, relatable, and understandable to satisfy a diverse public (Goffman, 1990; Hagström and Gustafsson, 2019).

In line with the attention to institutionalized belief-systems in the interpretative school of thought, we can understand policy narratives as both reflecting and reinforcing their underlying ideological paradigms (Patterson and Monroe, 1998). In this regard, it has previously been argued that the EU's external economic actions are informed by the neoliberal free trade paradigm (Bollen *et al.*, 2016; De Ville and Siles-Brügge, 2018; Jacobs, 2020), as well as by a 'Eurocentric, modernist and colonial' paradigm (Delputte and Orbie, 2020). In the context of EU-East Asia relations, Lee (2020) argues that European narratives hold a clear civilizational dimension, upholding a performative 'standard of civilization' that points to a single route to modernity, thereby preventing the EU from recognizing the variety of existing modernities. We will now apply these insights to the case of EU–Vietnam trade relations.

## II. The 'Ethical Power Europe' Policy Story

EU scholarship has long understood the EU's ethical actorness on the international level through Ian Manners' 'Normative Power Europe' hypothesis. It suggested that the EU's external actions are informed by internal European norms, such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (Manners, 2002). Over the years, more critical accounts emerged. Among others, Lisbeth Aggestam (2008), without refuting Manners' ontological statement on the EU, proposed the broader notion of 'Ethical Power Europe', which intended to 'critically examine the self-image of the EU as an ethical power 'doing good' in the world' (Aggestam, 2008). Such critical perspectives opened the door for new reflections on the EU's identity creation, where concepts such as Normative Power Europe have become a part of EU policy makers' self-identification and the narratives they put forward. This shifted the research question from what the EU *is* or *ought to be*, to a more performative lens asking what the EU *does* and *how* agents create meaning and legitimacy for EU actions (Bickerton, 2011; Whitman, 2013). The EU's ontologically normative nature therefore became a powerful story to legitimise the EU's actions and ideational preferences (Hoang, 2016; Lawrence, 2020). Building on these insights, several stories of the EU contributing to the well-being of people worldwide have been identified (Nițoiu, 2013). Through their performative nature, these ethical narratives aim to convince several audiences that the EU's actions are appropriate and legitimate.

Reflecting the 'Ethical Power Europe' concept, the 'new generation' FTAs entail a Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) chapter and an institutional link to a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). The VPAs provide incentives against illegal

logging and for forest governance improvements by granting special market access to legal timber products (Council Regulation (EC) No 2173/2005).<sup>1</sup> Yet, existing literature tells us relatively little about the narration of these ethical trade policies. Literature on the FTAs has largely focused on the effectiveness of these ethical trade policy instruments (Young and Peterson, 2013; Oehri, 2017; Harrison *et al.*, 2019; Holden, 2019; Yildirim *et al.*, 2021). Meanwhile, research on the FLEGT VPAs has focused on the VPAs' cultural and socio-economic implications (Buhmann and Nathan, 2012; Maryudi and Myers, 2018; McDermott *et al.*, 2019). This article complements these insights by arguing that the FTA's and the VPA's policy approaches are moulded into coherent stories which are paradigmatically defined, and which allude to the 'homo narrans' in the audience.

### III. The Wicked Policy Problem of EU–Vietnam Relations

We consider that the ethical challenges to trade with Vietnam to be wicked, as there is no one right answer to them. After years of civil war fought to defend a communist political system, Vietnam's Communist Party finally reached its political goal of reunification in 1974. By 1986, Vietnam's centrally planned economy 'was left in ruins' (Interview Vietnam, 2018). The Communist Party saw itself obliged to open and diversify its economic policies to achieve economic progress through a controlled modernization or 'peaceful evolution'. In this system, the supremacy of the Communist Party over Vietnamese society remains the constitutional heart (Bui, 2016). In cooperation with the National Assembly, it controls 'what is happening in the country' (Interview Vietnam, 2020). Permitted civil society organizations (including trade unions) are organized in the Fatherlands Front, which is equally under the supervision of the Communist Party (Sicurelli, 2015). In recent years, the overarching position of the government has been further strengthened by several national security laws as 'the government is only concerned about the possibility of the overthrow of the communist regime' (Interview Vietnam, 2020). This 'supremacy' has consequences for independent civil society organizations and freedom of expression, media, association, and religion. In international indexes and assessments, Vietnam scores very low on these freedoms (for example HRW, 2020).

The state of human rights in Vietnam contradicts core values in the Fundamental Charter of the EU and challenge the EU's 'cultural universalism' (Lee, 2020, p. 468). From the beginning of FTA negotiations, there was contention within the EU about the link between trade negotiations and ethical considerations like human rights, with several civil society organizations, MEPs and member states pushing for binding human rights clauses (Sicurelli, 2015). In 2014, two civil society organizations issued a complaint with the European Ombudsman that the EC had neglected to carry out a human rights impact assessment and were proven right (Ombudsman, 2014). Other civil society organizations asked for the altogether rejection of the FTA (Lawyers for Lawyers, 2018), as did 32 MEPs in an open letter (Tremosa, 2018). In parallel to these developments, human rights violations are a recurring theme in non-trade related plenary EP resolutions connected to Vietnam (for example EP, 2016, 2018, 2017). In these resolutions, the EP uses concrete language

<sup>1</sup>VPAs are rooted in the FLEGT Action Plan (EC, 2003). Timber products from VPA countries are free from legality checks under the European Union Timber Regulation (EUTR). Vietnam is one of 15 countries that have engaged in VPA negotiations.

to depict the individual stories human rights and environmental activists, journalists, bloggers, and religious dissidents. It strongly condemns the Vietnamese government for surveilling, arresting, convicting, discriminating, harassing, mistreating, and sentencing to death these victims of the regime. These wicked challenges present a challenging starting point to construct a good story of EU–Vietnam trade relations. Nevertheless, the EU–Vietnam FTA was passed with 401 votes in favour, 192 votes against and 40 abstentions (EP, 2020b). In the case of the VPA, the EP voted 632 for and 14 against the agreement (with 23 abstentions). Against this background, we will deconstruct how the EU has built a performative narrative.

#### IV. Research Methods

For the concrete analysis we use the narrative building blocks as suggested by the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (Jones *et al.*, 2014), which allows to read public policies as narratives with four essential components:

- a. a setting (context in which the policy problem is situated);
- b. characters (heroes, villains and victims);
- c. a plot (linkage between a and b through a causal relationship);
- d. and the moral of the story (policy solution).

The setting portrays the environment in which the policy problem is situated and contextualizes the problem (Jones *et al.*, 2014). One can view the setting as a stage in a theatre play where the most important information is laid out. This can include evidence, legal parameters, geography, all of which have meaning to the audience and identifies the empirical reality that accompanies the policy problem. Characters are central to the NPF, as they strongly influence the persuasive power of a narrative (Shanahan *et al.*, 2013). Villains cause the problem and need to be dealt with through the policy solution. Importantly, abstract non-human characters, with human characteristics, can also appear (Shanahan *et al.*, 2019). While they have no human agency and cannot take direct action, their villainous attributes inhibit heroes from obtaining their goals (Shanahan *et al.*, 2018). Victims are harmed by the problem and need to be protected. Heroes will bring, through their heroic actions, the solution to the problem (Shanahan *et al.*, 2013). Combined, these elements make up the (policy) plot of the story (Shanahan *et al.*, 2013). The policy plot usually has a beginning, middle and end, which prepares the path for the possible policy solution(s), while following a specific storyline, e.g., change, decline, stymied progress, helplessness, and control (Jones *et al.*, 2014). The policy solution represents the moral of the story, enacted by the heroes (Jones *et al.*, 2014).

We aim to identify the dominant policy narrative for EU–Vietnam trade relations through abductive thematic coding in NVIVO software, based on three elements of narrativity (setting, characters, policy solution). Analysis is undertaken at the level of the EC and the EP. While the EC (DG Trade) is the main developer and defender of the EU's trade policy, the EP is the institutionalized veto player that creates democratic legitimacy through its consent to trade agreements and as a defender of human rights (Meissner and McKenzie, 2019). The narration of EU–Vietnam trade relations was researched for the period from the beginning of respective negotiations to the date of entry

into force of the two agreements (from 2012 to 2020 for the FTA and 2010–19 for the VPA). Earlier sectorial trade agreements from 1992 and 2004 between the EU–Vietnam were excluded as they were concluded before the ‘Trade for All’ strategy introduced sustainable development chapters and the Lisbon Treaty made EP consent of trade agreements mandatory.

We identified a total of 112 relevant texts addressing EU–Vietnam trade negotiations, including press releases and background information sheets intended to inform the media and interested publics; staff working documents aimed at specialist stakeholders; EP debates; explanation of votes, and other speeches with a stronger persuasion function. Heterogenous corpora have the advantage of being more representative and having less ‘bias related to a single type of source’ (Crespy, 2015, p. 112). The texts considered for the analysis are those on trade relations with Vietnam published on the EC website, the DG Trade Press Corner, and the EP website (see Table 1). For both agreements, publications and documentation not authored by the EC and EP were excluded. We do not understand all communications (for example, fact sheets) as a narrative (Patterson and Monroe, 1998) as they do not fulfil the requirement of having a setting, characters and policy solution. Based on Shanahan *et al.* (2018), we included only those publications that encompassed at least one character and a point of view on a specific policy issue. Moreover, we did not assess the novelty of information provided in the texts as our aim was not to conduct a frequency analysis. Whereas 69 documents were coded deductively, drawing from the NPF component, the latter 49 documents were not manually coded, but still considered in the discussion of the storyline presented by the EU (see Annex 1 for the total corpus).

## V. The EU–Vietnam Trade Policy Story

### *The Free Trade Setting*

The curtain rises and the setting – the empirical reality accompanying the policy problem, as narrated by the storyteller – is revealed. The EC narrative presents EU–Vietnam trade against the background of a changing, competitive global order, in which Vietnam plays a

Table 1: Composition of the corpus coded with NVIVO

Year	Press Releases	Speeches, Interventions	Webpage	Working Documents, Position Papers, Memo's	EP Resolutions	Total n
2011	0	1	0	0	0	1
2012	6	1	0	0	0	7
2013	0	2	0	1	0	3
2014	1	7	0	0	2	10
2015	2	1	1	0	0	4
2016	2	2	0	2	0	6
2017	2	0	0	1	0	3
2018	1	3	0	2	0	6
2019	1	9	0	0	2	12
2020	2	1	2	0	2	6
Total n	17	27	3	6	6	69

Source: Authors' data.

particularly relevant role. If the EU is to remain a relevant global actor, so the setting suggests, trade agreements with Vietnam are very much needed.

In the context of the FTA agreement, the setting is economically colored: Vietnam is presented as an 'emerging market of the future' (De Gucht, 2014a; EC, 2020c) and 'a booming, competitive and connected economy' (EP, 2020a). Strengthened trade relations with this booming economy are narrated as being of the utmost economic importance, as they are to address the EU trade deficit with Vietnam and increase the competitiveness of EU businesses in the region (EP, 2020a). Yet, several sustainability challenges impede this goal, which can be largely attributed to Vietnam's lack of commitment to international norms and regulations. Most notably, Vietnam's non-ratification of two out of eight core International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions, the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, crystallizes as an 'area of concern' in the EU's relations with Vietnam (Hogan, 2020, see also EC, 2020c). The EP also adds a stronger human rights dimension than the EC by referencing its earlier resolutions on the topic. Concerns about environmental (un)sustainability in Vietnam are more general in nature and tend to lack a clear exposition. This is less the case for EP communications, which on occasion elucidate delineated environmental problems related to, e.g., fisheries (EP, 2020a). In both the EC and EP narratives, these social and environmental concerns always remain subjugated to the issue liberalized bilateral trade, which remains the FTA's unquestioned goal.

In contrast, the VPA narrative setting firmly places environmental concerns at the heart of the trade agreement. The EC presents the VPA as 'further building block in the EU's fight against illegal logging and associated trade' (EC, 2016c, 2017). The policy problems 'illegal logging and associated trade' are narrated to be a 'significant driving force behind deforestation' (Ansip, 2019) that 'deprives the government of revenue, threatens biodiversity and creates conflict with forest communities' (EC, 2016b). EP resolutions provide a more detailed account by presenting Vietnam's 'illegal timber trade from Laos, and in recent years from Cambodia' as a particularly important challenge (EP, 2019a). Similar to the FTA, Vietnam is narrated as an especially desired trading partner, as its position as a 'major exporter of timber products to the EU but also to countries in the region, notably China and Japan' has 'the potential of generating positive spill overs to other major importers' (EP, 2019a).

### *The Story Characters: Heroes and Abstract Villains*

Characters infuse life into narratives through identification of causes and solutions for the wicked policy problem. In the EC's story, the protagonist and fixer of the problem is the EU. Through the EU's trade agreements, 'respect for human, environmental and workers' rights' (Juncker, 2019) are strengthened and the fight against illegal logging is propelled (EC, 2012). The EU does not act alone, however: Vietnam is always the deuteragonist, the secondary hero, fighting alongside the EU to combat Vietnam's unsustainable development. The story of shared values and a common goal between both parties is strongest in the VPA story, where a true coalition of heroes based on 'the EU and Vietnam's joint commitment to the sustainable management of all types of forests' emerges (EC, 2016c). The EP's view of characters slightly differs from the EC's characterization. The EP supports the depiction of the EU as an ethical actor, whose 'standards on the environment,

human rights, good governance and Corporate Social Responsibility' (EC, 2020b) can lead to significant improvements in Vietnam. However, it is generally more modest on the EU's heroic potential and more careful in its wording.

As presented above, the protagonist EU is confronted with ethical challenges on the way to strengthened trade relations. Accounting for these ethical hurdles, the EC's narration alludes to an abstract non-human villain: Vietnam is characterized as a 'developing country' (Barroso, 2014; De Gucht, 2014b), pointing to underdevelopment as the villain creating the policy problem. Former EU Trade Commissioner Hogan expressed that 'human rights ... remains an area of concern in our relationship with Vietnam, but we must take into account where the country has come from and see clear evidence of progress in the last 25 years, notably in the socioeconomic domain' (Hogan, 2020). In this statement, we see Vietnam emerging as a victim of poverty and underdevelopment that deserves empathy and praise for its gradual emancipation from these villains. Similarly, the EP's resolutions on the FTA occasionally narrate Vietnam as facing 'specific development challenges' and as being a 'developing country' that is undergoing 'positive trends' by committing to ratify international human rights treaties (EP, 2020a). The same underdevelopment villain is present (albeit less strongly) in communications on the VPA, as illegal logging is narrated as being caused by failing forest governance and law enforcement practices that need to be 'improved' (EC, 2016a) and 'reinforced' (EC, 2017).

The villainization of 'underdevelopment' has important narrative implications. It allows the EC to recognize ethical challenges while still depicting Vietnam as a secondary hero: if Vietnam is the victim, it cannot be held accountable. Instead, development programmes become necessary (De Gucht, 2014a). Similarly, it helps the EP to create a convincing argument of why Vietnam's non-democratic political system does not challenge the positive and ethical nature of the EU's trade policy and does not require dismissal of the agreements. In this regard, we see a clear narrative shift away from the EP's narration of Vietnam in non-trade resolutions dedicated specifically to the human rights situation in Vietnam. In the plenary resolutions on the FTA, Vietnamese authorities – who are so clearly narrated as the villain in non-trade related resolutions – are visibly 'de-villainized'. This is achieved by narrating victims and villains in less specific and more technical ways. Several EP trade resolutions (for example, 2014, 2020) for instance reiterate human and civil rights concerns and even explicitly challenge the 'repressive nature of the regime and the grave and systematic violation of human rights' (EP, 2020a), but do not elaborate on the specific individuals, stories or situations behind human rights violations as non-trade focused resolutions do. Overall, a change in wording is occurring, which contributes to seeing the Vietnamese government as having less agency and being the victim of underdevelopment. This is less the case for EP narrations on the VPA, which villainize provincial authorities relatively explicitly as complicit in illegal logging (EP, 2019a). Here too, however, victims become obscured, as there is no mention in the VPA story of the human, minority, or environmental rights situation in Vietnam or its supplier countries.

### *The Rule-Based Policy Solution*

The policy solutions provide answers to ethical challenges presented in the setting, which can largely be attributed to Vietnam's missing commitment to domestic and international



rules and regulations. The proposed solutions thus entail a strengthening of the rule-based trade order which 'brings peoples together and raises standards worldwide on safety, labour, environment and human rights' (Bourgeois, 2020). In the FTA context, the EC firstly proposes a TSD chapter, which covers four components serving as baselines for ethical behaviour: (a) commitment to eight core labour standards on collective bargaining and association, slavery and forced labour, discrimination and child labour; (b) to multi-lateral environmental agreements on toxic waste, climate change, and biodiversity; (c) a non-regression clause 'to avoid 'a race to the bottom' in the labour and environmental areas' (EC, 2016a); and (d) dialogue-based dispute resolution procedures involving civil society from both partners (EC, 2018). Secondly, the EC proposes human rights conditionality through an institutional linkage with the more political PCA. The respect for human rights thereby indirectly becomes an 'essential element' of the FTA. It gives the EU the possibility of suspending or terminating the agreement in case of human rights violations (Meissner and McKenzie, 2019). This institutional link 'gives the EU a clear legal basis for raising human rights issues' (EC, 2016a) and allows the EU to end the trade agreement if violations occur. Finally, as an underpinning policy, the EC also emphasizes that development projects in Vietnam financed by DG DEVCO will further foster sustainable development (EC, 2016a).

The EP largely supports the EC policy solutions. It commends 'the inclusion in the future FTA of a chapter on trade and sustainable development' (EP, 2015). Moreover, it was the EP that insisted on the linkage with the PCA to 'ensure that human rights are placed at the core of the EU–Vietnam relationship' (EP, 2014). Unaccepted by the EC, the EP also envisioned a human rights monitoring mechanism and a sanctions-based approach in the dispute settlement mechanism to address potential negative impacts on human rights, as well as a 'reform of the Domestic Advisory Group (DAG) system' (EP, 2020a, 2020b) to encourage a broad representation of independent civil society. However, these reservations did not lead to a plenary rejection of the FTA as the EP acknowledged that the FTA negotiations had already 'fostered changes in many areas through dialogue and [saw] it as the basis for further improvements for the people through dialogue' (EP, 2020a, 2020b). The chairman of the INTA Committee Bernd Lange (S&D) concluded: 'History shows that isolation does not change a country. That is why Parliament voted in favour of this trade agreement with Vietnam' (EP, 2020b).

Meanwhile, the VPA is in itself a rule-based policy solution for achieving ethical trade in timber, based on domestic, rather than international, legislation. The agreement is based on the premise of verification of individual timber products in the supply chain. Concretely, Vietnam is to set up a Legality Assurance System, intended to ensure timber products exported from Vietnam to the EU have been legally harvested and processed (EC, 2016c, 2017). These mechanisms aim to 'fight' illegal logging and 'promote trade in timber products that are from sustainably managed forests' (EC, 2017). The EC considers the VPA system as a 'prime example of environment, development and trade policies acting in a mutually supportive way' (Ansip, 2019). Contrary to the FTA, this policy solution finds strong support in the EP, which narrates the VPA as 'designed to progressively bring complete policy reform' to Vietnam's supply chains (EP, 2019a). Concretely, the EP welcomes Vietnam's moves towards an import regulation, an independent evaluation and complaints mechanism, and increased civil society access and monitoring (EP, 2019a).

The rule-based policy solutions developed in the EC and EP narratives allow the EU to narrate both the FTA and VPA as change-bringing partnerships. Former Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström concluded that ‘an approach of engagement and trade [...] can have the strongest positive influence’ and that ‘our free trade agreement will accelerate the modernization of the country and support reforms including in human rights’ (Malmström, 2015). Similarly, the EP sees a change-bringing potential of ethically strengthened EU–Vietnam trade relations to extend beyond economic benefits, as they will support Vietnam’s transition to a fully modernized and developed society. Under the leadership of the EU protagonist, several provisions are put in place to make this happen. The FTA and the VPA therefore entail a strong developmental and modernization component and solution that should allow Vietnam to fight villains hindering the road to ethical trade.

### *A Policy Story of Change*

Our narrative analysis displays a story of change that presents as a ‘force for good’ towards the European audience. In what follows, we discuss how the free trade and development paradigms are narratively translated into an attractive story of change. Above, we found that the setting is constructed with a primarily economic profile: the starting point of the narrative is the EU’s desire to take a more assertive position in the EU’s global trade order, be it for economic gain (the FTA) or for gaining regional regulatory leverage (the VPA). Trade agreements with Vietnam are narrated as rational steps towards (green) economic growth. The ethical trade story is therefore first and foremost based on a belief in free trade. This first finding is essential for the coherence and success of the story of change. In both the FTA and VPA agreements, ethical problems are narrated so that they do not conflict with the logic of free trade: they are simplified as manageable rule-related problems. The ‘goodness’ of trade relies on the fixing of these rule-related problems through the implementation of the right international agreements (FTA) or the establishment of the right infrastructure (VPA) (see also Buckley, 2021). The importance of dialogue to achieve the desired rules is emphasized.

The free trade-oriented setting constrains the policy solution to a binary choice: either engage in rule-based trade agreements or accept unethical trade relations without rules. A different setting could have hypothetically led to a different morale and policy solution; the conclusion of the trade agreements would perhaps have been less straightforward. Critical questions that conflict with the trade objectives might have arisen: the EC’s Sustainability Impact Assessment clearly states that several sectors, including the Vietnamese agriculture sector, would likely suffer from the FTA (EC, 2013). Nevertheless, the plenary resolutions largely silenced these concerns.

With the rule-based policy solutions, a second paradigm emerges: the development paradigm. The selected rule-based solutions are infused with developmental thinking. They are shaped by norms of industrial capitalism and enlightenment philosophy, which through imperialism have obtained a universal disposition (Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013; Delputte and Orbie, 2020). In the characterization of the ethical trade story, Vietnam’s government features as the administration of a developing country that struggles with similar issues as other developing nations, including missing commitments to (international) rules, corruption, and poor governance. Vietnam’s government is no longer

narrated as a cruel, undemocratic, authoritarian Other, as it is in some earlier non-trade EP resolutions. Instead, Vietnam, including the regime, becomes a lesser evolved Other suffering from 'underdevelopment'. This idea, critiqued by post-development scholars (Kothari *et al.*, 2019), suggests a historical backwardness vis-à-vis more developed European cultures (Ziai, 2013; Lee, 2020). To help overcome this backwardness, policy solutions therefore entail good guidance from the EU through the trade agreements, as well as through complementary development programs, to adopt European norms such as ecological sustainability, equal opportunities, individual gender equality, pluralistic independent civil society, and so on. In this story of change, the EU is portrayed as the main hero that is initiating change towards a rule-based system, while Vietnam is narrated as the secondary hero that is taking important steps to improve itself. Trade agreements provide the leverage for this all, as they are the 'logical next step in [the EU's] contribution to Vietnam's ongoing development' (Malmström, 2015).

Within these paradigmatic contours, the story of change also has a strategic performative function. It allows policy makers to organize a complex reality and provide guidance on an appropriate course of action. The EU's ethical trade story is constructed in such a way as to appeal to a broad European audience, from conservatives to cosmopolitan liberals. The necessity of economic growth (threatened by 'geopolitical' rivalries), which takes up a central position in the narrative's setting, is relatable to a conservative European audience prioritizing interest-based trade. Meanwhile, the story also addresses ethical concerns voiced by a more progressive audience and manages them within the free trade contours. This dual allure was also vital for the EP, whose more straightforward villainization of the Vietnamese government in earlier human rights resolutions would have made justification for ratification very difficult. Based on the premise of underdevelopment and EU guidance, the story of change allowed the EP to argue in the analysed resolutions that the FTA and VPA were not concluded and ratified *in spite of* ethical challenges, but as a suitable *response to* them.

As this research is situated on the meso-level, a full investigation of intra-EP dynamics and MEPs' various economic, strategic, or normative considerations for ratification falls beyond the scope of this paper (see Hoang and Sicurelli, 2017; Pennisi di Floristella, 2021). Yet, an exploratory analysis of the INTA Committee meetings gives some indication of narrative (in)coherency among MEPs. The VPA INTA Committee meetings show no resistance to the rapporteur's view that the VPA is a 'very valuable model for trade negotiations' (Hautala of Greens/EFA in EP, 2019b). The VPA's regulatory nature was firmly placed within the free trade paradigm by, for example, the EPP shadow rapporteur, who stated that 'free trade agreements [...] can be a means for us to address an important issue like illegal timber but also allowing trade flows to continue' (Proust of EPP in EP, 2019b), as well as by the ECR shadow rapporteur, who stated that the VPA is 'necessary to deal with' in response to the FTA's upcoming liberalization of timber trade (Zahradil of ECR in EP, 2019b). In contrast, FTA INTA Committee meetings show an important internal division within the EP, as several political groups voiced concerns regarding ratification (for example EP, 2019c). Individual interventions reflect 'different views on what an FTA can potentially do' in light of a 'deteriorating human rights situation' (Bricmont, in EP, 2019c). Nevertheless, after several INTA meetings with stakeholders from Vietnam, ILO and trade unions, a majority of skeptical MEPs began echoing the EC's 'story of change'. In the final vote, only the Greens/Verts and GUE

voted collectively against the FTA. It seems that, in light of low societal pressures on the EP (in comparison with CETA and TTIP) to engage with counter-narratives (De Bièvre and Poletti, 2020), the narrative building blocks discussed above formed a societally acceptable ‘story of change’, with EU–Vietnam trade relations being the catalyzing ‘force for good’.

## Conclusion

In this article, we deconstructed the ‘force for good’ narrative as a performative story that simplifies ethical challenges and creates domestic legitimacy for the EU’s FTA and VPA trade agreements with Vietnam. Building on the NPF, we showed how paradigmatically shaped policy solutions are moulded into an attractive performative story of change. As humans, we construct narratives to make sense of chaotic, complex realities and guide our everyday choices (Somers, 1994). Whether or not intentional, we usually want to hear ‘a good story’ that is easy to grasp and paints a positive picture of ourselves and our actions. The narrative regarding EU–Vietnam trade agreements is such a story. It entails a villain, underdevelopment in Vietnam, which must be defeated; a hero, the EU, that contributes to the well-being of people (Nițoiu, 2013); and a policy solution, bilateral trade agreements, which are the instrument to leverage it all.

Prior research has problematized how the neoliberal paradigm continues to define the EU’s actions in economic policy solutions. We further this debate by showing how this paradigm is translated into a story that appeals to the ‘homo narrans’ in the audience. The interest-based economic setting, which provides the starting point for the narrative, establishes the story of change firmly in the free trade paradigm. Within these paradigmatic contours, trade agreements are narrated as the most appropriate policy solution to ethical challenges, in the form of rule-based responses to the anarchy of the international trading system. A developmental, civilizational discourse that depicts Vietnam as a victim of backwardness and underdevelopment in need of EU guidance is further used to diffuse potential concerns about the trade provisions themselves, while equally ‘de-villainizing’ the Vietnamese trading partners. We conclude that the ‘force for good’ story of change has important performative implications and ultimately allowed the EP to justify ratification.

At the same time, the ethical character of the EU’s trade agreements might be increasingly challenged in light of evolving power relations in the global (trade) arena. The recently observed geopoliticization of trade (Meunier and Nicolaidis, 2019) will likely force the EU to compromise on its newly announced ‘strategic’ and ‘assertive’ trade policy that focuses on ‘shap[ing] the world around it *through leadership and engagement, reflecting our strategic interests and values*’ (EC, 2021). Further research is needed to better understand the EU’s narration of different trade negotiations and the implications of the geopolitical turn on future trade relations. Questions also rise on the implications of this civilizational narrative for external legitimacy beyond the EU. Interestingly, individual interventions of MEPs at INTA Committee meetings indicated a narrative evolution. After encounters with Vietnamese stakeholders, convergences between the EC’s narrative and that of central Vietnamese stakeholders were observable. Future research examining the narrative diversity among the various Vietnamese and expat stakeholder groups could shed further light on such domestic–EU narrative interplay.

## Acknowledgements

We thank the three anonymous reviewers for the constructive feedback. This work was financially supported by the Fond De La Recherche Scientifique (FNRS) (1178019F) and the Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (FWO) (11H2720N).

### Correspondence:

Camille Nessel, F.R.S.-FNRS Research fellow, Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) & Ghent University, Brussels, Belgium.  
email: camille.nessel@ulb.be

## References

- Aggestam, L. (2008) 'Introduction: Ethical Power Europe?' *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 1, pp. 1–11.
- Ansip, A. (2019) Opening and Concluding Remarks by the European Commission during the Parliamentary Debate on the EU–Vietnam Voluntary Partnership Agreement on Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade, Brussels, 11 March. Available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2019-03-11-ITM-021\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2019-03-11-ITM-021_EN.html). Accessed 11 August 2020.
- Barroso, J. M. (2014) Déclaration du Président Barroso à la Suite de sa Rencontre avec le Premier Ministre du Vietnam, Nguyễn Tấn Dũng, Brussels, 13 October. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/fr/SPEECH\\_14\\_685](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/fr/SPEECH_14_685). Accessed 5 October 2020.
- Bickerton, C.J. (2011) 'Functionality in European Union Foreign Policy: A Framework for Analysis'. In Bickerton, C.J. (ed.) *European Union Foreign Policy: From Effectiveness to Functionality* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK), pp. 12–33.
- Bollen, Y., Ville, F.D. and Orbie, J. (2016) 'EU Trade Policy: Persistent Liberalisation, Contentious Protectionism'. *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 279–94.
- Bourgeois, G. (2020) Conclusion of the EU-Viet Nam Free Trade Agreement - Conclusion of the EU-Viet Nam Free Trade Agreement (Resolution) - EU-Viet Nam Investment Protection Agreement - EU-Viet Nam Investment Protection Agreement (Resolution) (debate CRE 11/02/2020 - 4). Strasbourg. European Parliament. 9th Parliament.
- Buckley, J. (2021) 'Freedom of Association in Vietnam: A Heretical View'. *Global Labour Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2. <https://doi.org/10.15173/glj.v12i2.4442>
- Buhmann, K. and Nathan, I. (2012) 'Plentiful Forests, Happy People? The EU's FLEGT Approach and Its Impact on Human Rights and Private Forestry Sustainability Schemes'. *Nordic Environmental Law Journal*, Vol. 2, pp. 53–82.
- Bui, T.H. (2016) 'Constitutionalizing Single Party Leadership in Vietnam: Dilemmas of Reform'. *Asian Journal of Comparative Law*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 219–34.
- Crespy, A. (2015) 'Analysing European Discourses'. In Lynggaard, K., Manners, I. and Löfgren, K. (eds) *Research Methods in European Union Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 102–20.
- Crow, D. and Jones, M. (2018) 'Narratives as Tools for Influencing Policy Change'. *Policy & Politics*, Vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 217–34.
- De Bièvre, D. and Poletti, A. (2020) 'Towards Explaining Varying Degrees of Politicization of EU Trade Agreement Negotiations'. *Politics and Governance*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 243–53.
- De Gucht, K. (2014a) 'Speech: Industry Matters Trading our Way to Recovery'. Presented at Business Europe Day, Brussels, 28 January. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_14\\_72](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_14_72). Accessed 5 October 2020.
- De Gucht, K. (2014b) 'Speech: Opportunities from Globalization for European Companies'. Presented at the High-level conference 'Spain: from Stability to Growth', Bilbao, 3 March.

- Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_14\\_171](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_14_171). Accessed 5 October 2020.
- De Ville, F. and Siles-Brügge, G. (2018) 'The Role of Ideas in Legitimizing EU Trade Policy: From the Single Market Programme to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership'. In Khorana, S. and García, M. (eds) *Handbook on the EU and International Trade* (Edward Elgar), pp. 243–62.
- Delputte, S. and Orbie, J. (2020) 'Paradigm Shift or Reinventing the Wheel? Towards a Research Agenda on Change and Continuity in EU Development Policy'. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 235–56.
- Dunn, W.N. (1997) 'Probing the Boundaries of Ignorance in Policy Analysis'. *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 277–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764297040003005>
- EC (2003) Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament - Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) - Proposal for an EU Action Plan. Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52003DC0251>
- EC (2006) *Global Europe: Competing in the World* COM(2006)567 Final (Brussels: European Commission).
- EC (2012) Remarks by High Representative/Vice President Catherine Ashton following the Signature of EU–Vietnam Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO\\_12\\_502](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_12_502). Accessed 11 August 2020.
- EC (2013) EU-ASEAN Countries Free Trade Agreement – Annex Vietnam Position Paper. Available at: [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2013/may/tradoc\\_151230.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2013/may/tradoc_151230.pdf). Accessed 29 March 2021.
- EC (2015) Trade for All. Available at: [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2015/october/tradoc\\_153846.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2015/october/tradoc_153846.pdf). Accessed 29 March 2021.
- EC (2016a) Commission Staff Working Document: Human Rights and Sustainable Development FTA. Available at [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2016/february/tradoc\\_154236.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2016/february/tradoc_154236.pdf). Accessed 11 August 2020.
- EC (2016b) Press Release: EU and Vietnam Agree in Principle on Timber Trade Deal. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/pdf/18\\_11\\_2016\\_news\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/pdf/18_11_2016_news_en.pdf). Accessed 13 August 2020.
- EC (2016c) Questions & Answers: EU and Vietnam Reach Agreement on Voluntary Partnership Agreement. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/pdf/18\\_11\\_2016\\_QA\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/pdf/18_11_2016_QA_en.pdf). Accessed 11 August 2020.
- EC (2017) Memo: EU and Vietnam Complete Negotiations on a FLEGT Voluntary Partnership Agreement. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/forests/pdf/11\\_05\\_2017\\_flegt\\_memo.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/forests/pdf/11_05_2017_flegt_memo.pdf)
- EC (2018) Standards and Values: Promoting Human and Labour Rights – Protecting the Environment. Available at: [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2018/october/tradoc\\_157446.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2018/october/tradoc_157446.pdf). Accessed 2 July 2020.
- EC (2020a) Press Release: Commission Welcomes European Parliament's Approval of EU–Vietnam Trade and Investment Agreements. Available at: <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=2114>. Accessed 18 August 2020.
- EC (2020b) Press Release: EU–Vietnam Trade Agreement Enters into Force. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1412](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1412). Accessed 18 August 2020.
- EC (2020c) Follow Up to the European Parliament Non-Legislative Resolution on the Draft Council Decision on the Conclusion of the Free Trade Agreement Between the European Union and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Available at: [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2018/0356M\(NLE\)](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2018/0356M(NLE)). Accessed 24 October 2020.

- EC (2021) Commission sets course for an open, sustainable and assertive EU trade policy. IP/21/644. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_644](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_644) Accessed 29 March 2021.
- EP (2014) European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2014 on the state of play of the EU–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (2013/2989(RSP)). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52014IP0458>. Accessed 29 March 2021.
- EP (2015) European Parliament non-legislative resolution of 17 December 2015 on the draft Council decision on the conclusion, on behalf of the Union, of the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Partnership and Cooperation between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, of the other part (05432/2015 – C8–0062/2015). Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2015-0468\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2015-0468_EN.html). Accessed 29 March 2021.
- EP (2016) European Parliament Resolution of 9 June 2016 on Vietnam (2016/2755(RSP)). Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4151e608-211b-11e8-ac73-01aa75ed71a1>. Accessed 2 July 2020.
- EP (2017) European Parliament Resolution of 14 December 2017 on Freedom of Expression in Vietnam, Notably the Case of Nguyen Van Hoa (2017/3001(RSP)). Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0496\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0496_EN.html). Accessed 2 July 2020.
- EP (2018) European Parliament Resolution of 15 November 2018 on Vietnam, Notably the Situation of Political Prisoners. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0459\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0459_EN.html). Accessed 2 July 2020.
- EP (2019a) European Parliament non-legislative resolution of 12 March 2019 on the draft Council decision on the conclusion of the Voluntary Partnership Agreement between the European Union and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam on forest law enforcement, governance and trade. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0141\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0141_EN.html). Accessed 29 March 2021.
- EP (2019b) Committee on International Trade Ordinary meeting. Available at: [https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/committee-on-international-trade-ordinary-meeting\\_20190123-0900-COMMITTEE-INTA\\_vd](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/committee-on-international-trade-ordinary-meeting_20190123-0900-COMMITTEE-INTA_vd). Accessed 25 June 2021.
- EP (2019c) Committee on International Trade Ordinary meeting. Available at: [https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/committee-on-international-trade-ordinary-meeting\\_20191202-1500-COMMITTEE-INTA\\_vd](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/committee-on-international-trade-ordinary-meeting_20191202-1500-COMMITTEE-INTA_vd). Accessed 25 June 2021.
- EP (2020a) European Parliament non-legislative resolution of 12 February 2020 on the draft Council decision on the conclusion of the Free Trade Agreement between the European Union and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0027\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0027_EN.html). Accessed 29 March 2021.
- EP (2020b) Parliament approves EU–Vietnam free trade and investment protection deals. Press Release. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200206IPR72012/parliament-approves-eu-vietnam-free-trade-and-investment-protection-deals>. Accessed 22 June 2021.
- Fisher, W.R. (1984) 'Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument'. *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp. 1–22.
- Goffman, E. (1990) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books).
- Hagström, L. and Gustafsson, K. (2019) 'Narrative Power: How Storytelling Shapes East Asian International Politics'. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 387–406.
- Hajer, M.A. (1995) *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

- Harrison, J., Barbu, M., Campling, L. *et al.* (2019) 'Labour Standards Provisions in EU Free Trade Agreements: Reflections on the European Commission's Reform Agenda'. *World Trade Review*, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 635–57.
- Haste, H., Jones, J. and Renwick Monroe, K. (2015) 'Political Psychology'. In Bevir, M. and Rhodes, R.A.W. (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Interpretive Political Science* (Abingdon: Routledge), pp. 309–23.
- Hoang, H. (2016) 'Normative Power Europe through Trade: Vietnamese Perceptions'. *International Relations*, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 176–205.
- Hoang, H. and Sicurelli, D. (2017) 'The EU's Preferential Trade Agreements with Singapore and Vietnam. Market vs. Normative Imperatives'. *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 4, pp. 369–87.
- Hogan, P. (2020) Comments by the European Commission during Parliamentary debate on the EU–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement and Investment Protection Agreement. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-02-11-ITM-004\\_NL.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-02-11-ITM-004_NL.html). Accessed 18 August 2020.
- Holden, P. (2019) 'Finding Common Ground? European Union and European Civil Society Framing of the Role of Trade in the Sustainable Development Goals'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 5, pp. 956–76.
- HRW (2020) Vietnam. Events of 2019. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/vietnam>. Accessed 1 January 2021.
- Jacobs, T. (2020) 'The post-Marxist Political Economy of EU trade. A Discourse-Theoretical Analysis of the Construction of Political Agency in the European Parliament.' Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/1854/LU-8664120>. Accessed 18 August 2020.
- Jones, M. and McBeth, M.K. (2010) 'A Narrative Policy Framework: Clear Enough to Be Wrong?' *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 329–53.
- Jones, M.D., McBeth, M.K. and Shanahan, E.A. (eds) (2014) *The Science of Stories: Applications of the Narrative Policy Framework in Public Policy Analysis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Juncker, J.-C. (2019) Remarks by President Juncker at the Joint Press Conference with President Tusk Ahead of the G20 Summit, Osaka, 28 June. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_19\\_3448](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_3448). Accessed 5 October 2020.
- Kothari, A., Salleh, A., Escobar, A., Demaria, F. and Acosta, A. (eds) (2019) *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (New Delhi: Tulika Books).
- Lawrence, J.C. (2020) 'The EU in the Mirror of NPE: Normative Power Europe in the EU's New Generation Trade and Investment Agreements'. In Nagy, C.I. (ed.) *World Trade and Local Public Interest: Trade Liberalization and National Regulatory Sovereignty* (Cham: Springer International), pp. 33–50.
- Lawyers for Lawyers (2018) 'Open Letter to Reject the EU–Vietnam FTA'. Available at: <https://lawyersforlawyers.org/open-letter-to-reject-the-eu-vietnam-fta> (Accessed 15 July 2020).
- Lee, Y. (2020) 'Performing Civilisational Narratives in East Asia: Asian Values, Multiple Modernities, and the Politics of Economic Development'. *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 4, pp. 456–76.
- Lynggaard, K. (2019) *Discourse Analysis and European Union Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK).
- Malmström, C. (2015) 'EU–Vietnam: Human Rights and Sustainable Development'. Presented at the Roundtable on Trade, Sustainable Development and Human Rights, Brussels, 12 May. Available at: [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2015/may/tradoc\\_153438.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2015/may/tradoc_153438.pdf)
- Manners, I. (2002) 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?' *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp. 235–58.



- Maryudi, A. and Myers, R. (2018) 'Renting Legality: How FLEGT is Reinforcing Power Relations in Indonesian Furniture Production Networks'. *Geoforum*, Vol. 97, pp. 46–53.
- McDermott, C.L., Hirons, M. and Setyowati, A. (2019) 'The Interplay of Global Governance with Domestic and Local Access: Insights from the FLEGT VPAs in Ghana and Indonesia'. *Society & Natural Resources*, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 261–79.
- Meissner, K. (2016) 'A Case of Failed Interregionalism? Analyzing the EU-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement Negotiations'. *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 319–36.
- Meissner, K.L. and McKenzie, L. (2019) 'The Paradox of Human Rights Conditionality in EU Trade Policy: when Strategic Interests Drive Policy Outcomes'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 26, No. 9, pp. 1273–91.
- Meunier, S. and Nicolaidis, K. (2019) 'The Geopoliticization of European Trade and Investment Policy'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 57, No. S1, pp. 103–13.
- Nițoiu, C. (2013) 'The Narrative Construction of the European Union in External Relations'. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 240–55.
- Oehri, M. (2017) *US and EU External Labor Governance: Workers' Rights Promotion in Trade Agreements and in Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Ombudsman (2014) Decision in case 1409/2014/MHZ on the European Commission's failure to carry out a prior human rights impact assessment of the EU–Vietnam free trade agreement. Available at: <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/nl/decision/en/64308>. Accessed 01 April 2020.
- Onar, N.F. and Nicolaidis, K. (2013) 'The Decentring Agenda: Europe as a Post-colonial Power'. *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 48, No. 2, pp. 283–303.
- Patterson, M. and Monroe, K.R. (1998) 'Narrative in Political Science'. *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 315–31.
- Pennisi di Floristella, A. (2021) 'EU Trade Policy: Principles versus Pragmatism. The Cases of Vietnam and Cambodia'. *International Spectator*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1857131>
- Roe, E. (1994) *Narrative Policy Analysis: Theory and Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press).
- Shanahan, E.A., Jones, M.D. and McBeth, M.K. (2018) 'How to conduct a Narrative Policy Framework study'. *Social Science Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 3, pp. 332–45.
- Shanahan, E.A., Jones, M.D., McBeth, M.K. and Lane, R.R. (2013) 'An angel on the wind: How heroic policy narratives shape policy realities'. *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3, pp. 453–83.
- Shanahan, E.A., Reinhold, A.M., Raile, E.D., Poole, G.C., Ready, R.C., Izurieta, C., McEvoy, J., Bergmann, T. and King, H. (2019) 'Characters matter: How narratives shape affective responses to risk communication'. *PloS One*, Vol. 14, No. 12, e0225968.
- Sicurelli, D. (2015) 'The EU as a Promoter of Human Rights in Bilateral Trade Agreements: The Case of the Negotiations with Vietnam'. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 230–45.
- Somers, M.R. (1994) 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach'. *Theory and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 5, pp. 605–49.
- Stone, D.A. (1989) 'Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas'. *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 104, No. 2, pp. 281–300.
- Tremosa, R. (2018) 32 MEPs Send a Joint Letter to Mrs Mogherini and Commissioner Malmström to Ask for More Human Rights Progress in Vietnam. Available at: <http://tremosa.cat/noticies/32-meps-send-joint-letter-mrs-mogherini-and-commissioner-malmstrom-ask-more-human-rights-progress-vietnam>. Accessed 25.06.2021.
- Veselková, M. (2017) 'Narrative Policy Framework: Narratives as Heuristics in the Policy Process'. *Human Affairs*, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 178–91.
- Whitman, R.G. (2013) 'The Neo-Normative Turn in Theorising the EU's International Presence'. *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 48, No. 2, pp. 171–93.

- Yildirim, A., Badesow, R., Fiorini, M. and Hoekman, B. (2021) 'EU Trade and Non-Trade Objectives: New Survey Evidence on Policy Design and Effectiveness'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 3, pp. 556–68.
- Young, A.R. and Peterson, J. (2013) "'We Care About You, But ...': The Politics of EU Trade Policy and Development'. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp. 497–518.
- Ziai, A. (2013) 'The Discourse of "Development" and Why the Concept Should be Abandoned'. *Development in Practice*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 123–36.

### **Supporting Information**

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Data S1.** Supporting Information.