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# FRENCH OPPOSITION TO THE EU-MERCOSUR FREE TRADE AGREEMENT: HOLDING THE STATE ACCOUNTABLE

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## **Abstract**

Prior to the agreement in principle of the EU-Mercosur free trade agreement (FTA) several studies were made, arguing that the French agricultural interest groups no longer have the power to dictate French decision-making on the matter. However, since then the French have not only agreed to the FTA in principle; they have gone back to opposing it once again. We believe this curious pattern justifies not only a reexamination of the agricultural interest groups' influence on state behavior, but a wider examination including the influence of two other relevant groups as well: environmental organizations and the French electorate. The forthcoming thesis will demonstrate, on the basis of an initial analysis without theoretical bias, that pressure from French society should at the very least not be disregarded, and that liberal intergovernmentalism as well as social constructivism can thus help shine more light on the case. As to what theory one should utilize while analyzing the case, the answer turned out to be both, as none of the two theories is able to explain the case as a whole on their own. However, if one insists on applying just one, the results indicate that social constructivism in a more open form is the better choice. These findings partially fall in line with the hypotheses: while the hypothesis that the domestic actors played a significant role did turn out to be true, the hypothesis that one could vigorously analyze the case with a framework that would respect the individuality of each paradigm turned out to be impossible, as one theory would too frequently need the assistance of the other. As such, one would be better off opting for a pragmatic research design.

## Table of contents

<b>1. Abstract</b> .....	1
<b>2. Table of contents</b> .....	2
<b>3. Introduction</b> .....	3
<b>4. Methodology</b> .....	5
4.1 <i>Paradigms</i> .....	6
4.1.1 <i>Ontology</i> .....	7
4.1.2 <i>Epistemology</i> .....	10
4.2 <i>Data</i> .....	12
<b>5. Theory</b> .....	13
5.1 <i>Liberal Intergovernmentalism</i> .....	14
5.2 <i>Social constructivism</i> .....	17
5.2.1 <i>A model of EU opposition and legitimacy</i> .....	20
<b>6. Analysis</b> .....	26
6.1 <i>Analysis of the French case</i> .....	26
6.1.1 <i>How successfully can the liberal intergovernmentalism be applied?</i> .....	31
6.1.2 <i>How successfully can the social constructivist approach be applied?</i> .....	33
6.1.3 <i>French discourse of rhetorical action</i> .....	35
6.2 <i>Analysis of the Irish case</i> .....	39
<b>7. Conclusion/comparison</b> .....	56

## Introduction

Through the time of its existence, the European Union (EU) has negotiated many free trade agreements (FTAs), several of them – such as the FTAs with Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam – consisting in negotiations spanning over five years (Young, 2020, p. 375). Though that may seem like a long time, it comes nowhere close to the – as for the writing of this thesis – 24 years that it has been attempted to conclude an FTA with the South American trade bloc, the Southern Common Market (Mercosur).<sup>1</sup> One of a number of reasons for the stagnation has by several academics been argued to have been France's opposition to the FTA, an opposition that would – at least in the case of their head of state, President Emmanuel Macron – turn to support for a short while, allowing for the FTA to be agreed to in principle on 28 June, 2019 (Manzanaro, 2019; Euractiv & AFP, 2019). However, the negotiations would soon return to their stagnating state as Macron on 23 August 2019 would once again go back to opposing the FTA, citing the deforestation of the Amazon Rainforest as his reason for doing so (Morgan, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, France going back to their initial stance so swiftly could signal that this was perhaps not a decision made autonomously by the French government. That is, they could have been influenced by societal opposition to the FTA; a hypothesis the two theoretical frameworks, liberal intergovernmentalism and social constructivism, would both agree with. However, given that there is no clear answer to this question, we believe a further examination is valid to affirm or disconfirm the hypothesis. Said examination will be based on the following research question:

How probable was it that the French government was affected by societal pressures in their decision to once again block the EU-Mercosur FTA, and which, if any, of the two theoretical frameworks outlined in the thesis aligns best with the case as a whole? (is most successfully applicable to the case as a whole?)

The reason it is believed that this research question merits further investigation is that the swift return to a position of opposition may indicate that previous accounts, mainly that by Konold

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<sup>1</sup> The Southern Common Market consists of the four South American states Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and the suspended member, Venezuela (Young, 2020, p. 375).

<sup>2</sup> It is given the fact that the EU-Mercosur FTA reflects a mixed agreement, that is, an agreement based on shared competences between the EU and the member states, that France has been able to block it (Malamud, 2022, p. 17).

(2010), have downplayed the role of French interest groups' influence on the French governments' behavior in the EU-Mercosur context. While Konold's study focuses solely on the agrarian lobby, this thesis will expand the focus on societal actors to include environmental interest groups and the French public as well. Environmental interest groups have been added as they, like the agricultural interest groups, have signaled strong opposition to the EU-Mercosur FTA; their opposition based on environmental concern, however, contrasts with the agricultural groups' opposition on the grounds of economic interests. Said economic interests are more specifically related to a concern over the Brazilian and Argentinian staple products of sugar, ethanol, poultry and especially beef, entering France and, thus, making the equivalent French producers suffer due to increased import competition (Conconi, Herghelegiu & Puccio, 2021, p. 245; Keating, 2019).

Now, then, what about the other societal actor emphasized, the French public? It has been selected for investigation mainly due to the potential of it being a significant pressure group, said potential depending on how salient the the EU-Mercosur FTA, and the polemics tied to it, will show to have become. The hypothesized salience is, on one hand, expected to be caused by French news agencies of daily newspapers. The reason for this is that many news articles were published in the wake of the agreement in principle of the FTA (e.g.: Véronique, 2019; Le Gal, 2019; Girard, Barroux & Faye, 2019). Another possible factor to salience could have been the August 2019 forest fires going viral on twitter, considering the presence of the app and its importance as a social media (Skill, Passero & Francisco, 2021, p. 715)

The main takeaway, then, is that these additional actors could constitute other central interest group in opposition to the FTA, implying a possible increase in pressure on the French government. If said hypothesis is correct it would mean that significantly more pressure has been exerted on the French government than anticipated in Konold's account, and thus also the possibility that societal actors informed French foreign policy on the EU-Mercosur FTA.

On the other hand, if the hypothesis is incorrect, two alternative explanations should be considered: 1) that pressure might have come from political officials inside the political institutions themselves or 2) that the Macron government's foreign policy on the EU-Mercosur FTA has been more or less autonomously by the government itself, as argued by Konold.

Finally, before moving on to the part of the thesis covering the methodology, it is important to understand the reason for why Macron, and in extension France as a state, decided to go back to

their old position of blocking the EU-Mercosur FTA, as it is key to the interpretation of their bargaining at the intergovernmental level. While Macron supposedly has blocked the FTA based on environmental concerns, it should be emphasized that there has been speculation that France has gone back to opposing the deal based on protectionist motives (mirroring the concerns of the agricultural interest groups) (Keating, 2019). Uncovering the French government's climate commitment will be key in deciding whether France has used the environmental concerns as a shield of legitimacy, or if the blocking of the FTA signals a deeper interest in protecting the environment. Additionally, it has implications for the interpretation of the bargaining taking place at the international/intergovernmental level. That being said, the case of the former effectively reflects the stance of liberal intergovernmentalism and social constructivism, while the latter leans towards the idea that the French government acted more or less autonomously.

## **Methodology**

In order to evade results stemming from a uni-dimensional understanding of the world, that is, results based on a study that understands the world as either entirely positivist or entirely constructivist in nature, this thesis instead wishes to take a dual-dimensional approach. What is meant by this is that it will incorporate both of the abovementioned paradigms, more specifically in a competitive sense. However, competing should not be confused with dominating. While the former leaves room for the two paradigms to demonstrate their strengths against one another at different stages of the analysis, the latter insinuates that one of the two paradigms has all the explanatory power over the other, no matter the context or concepts involved. The broader idea behind this approach, thus, is to give space for aspects found in both interpretations of the world, while at the same time making sure to not mix up the methodological elements of the two paradigms. However, what defines a paradigm and what methodological elements do the positivist and social constructivist paradigms in particular consist of? That is what we are going to cover in the following subsection

## *Paradigms*

According to Alan Bryman (2012), an academic focused on social science research methods, a paradigm is in simple terms a cluster of beliefs, with said beliefs determining what elements

should be studied in the research, how the research should be carried out, and how the results should be interpreted (p. 630). He further raises the point that each paradigm brings with it its own set of beliefs, meaning that there is a competing nature between them, and that they are therefore incommensurable (Bryman, 2012, p. 630). While this has been argued to not always be the case, such incommensurability has indeed been argued to be found between the positivism and social constructivism (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 194). One evidence of the incommensurability of the two paradigms is exemplified by each of their understandings of the researcher's position in relation to the objects of study. The former of the two, positivism, holds that the object of study should be studied objectively, without the object or the researcher being influenced by one another (Park, Konge & Artino Jr., 2020, p. 691). Constructivism, on the other hand, assumes that the researcher is part of a subjective reality that does not apprehend the researcher, nor object being studied, from influencing one another (Guba, Lincoln, 1994, p. 110).

This is but one of the many opposing views between the two paradigms from which the body of theory draws from. Thus, to better understand from what conceptualization of the world the liberal intergovernmentalist and social constructivist theoretical frameworks draw from, we will now dive into the ontology and epistemology of both positivism and social constructivism.

### *Ontology*

Starting with the positivist ontology, it is defined by an objectivist view of the world which interprets the reality of the social phenomena investigated as external facts outside our reach of influence (Bryman, 2012, p. 32). In the same vein social entities – such as organizations like the EU and national cultures in the case of this paper – are understood to be effectively external to the social actors, existing in their own nearly tangible reality. Social entities are, thus, conceptualized as having the characteristics of objects and hence of having an objective reality (Bryman, 2012, pp. 32-33) To give an example related to organizations, an organization like the EU has: “rules and regulations. It adopts standardized procedures for getting things done. People are appointed to different jobs within a division of labour. There is a hierarchy. It has a mission statement. And so on.” (Bryman, 2012, p. 32). Additionally, the EU, as it constitutes an organization, represents a social order that exerts pressure so as to make the social actors conform to its requirements. If they do not comply with the requirements of the organization in question they may risk

consequences, going as far as to be fired. Therefore, organizations are seen as a constraining force that acts on and inhibits its members (Bryman, 2012, p. 32).

Much the same can be said about culture, another central social entity of this paper. It likewise exerts such pressure, though in its case the constraining powers are internalized beliefs and values. These can be tied to such ideas as what constitutes a good citizen or what is understood to be morally incorrect by fellow countrymen (Bryman, 2012, pp. 32-33).

A final insight into positivist ontology is given by Park, Konge, and Artino Jr. (2020) who stress that because positivist ontology assumes that there exists a single tangible reality – one that can be understood, identified, and measured – it is possible to naturally operate explanation and prediction in a causal framework (p. 691). The reason it is possible is because causal inferences rely on the following three elements: temporal precedence, that is, the fact that for X to cause Y, X must precede Y in time; association, as in the fact that X and Y are correlated, and; lack of confounders, i.e. no other factors besides those identified should affect the outcome (or X is the only cause of Y within the space identified; if going by the terminology of X and Y) (Park et al., 2020, p. 691).

As for social constructivism, its ontology, interchangeably referred to as constructionist and constructivist by Bryman, challenges the assumptions of objectivism that categories such as organization and culture can be pre-given (Bryman, 2012, p. 33).<sup>3</sup> However, this is not the only idea that it challenges: as it questions the idea that categories can be pre-given, it at the same time implicitly challenges the assumption that the categories confront social actors as external realities that they have no part in shaping.

So how does constructivist ontology understand social phenomena? To determine that, the examples of the EU as an organization and national culture will once again be utilized. Regarding the EU, rather than seeing its order as a pre-existing characteristic, it should be seen as a negotiated order; in other words, order is worked at. As such, its rules are conceptualized to be far less extensive and rigorously imposed compared to the account of objectivism (Bryman, 2012, p. 33; Strauss et al., as cited in Bryman, 2012, p. 33). In an environment based on rules of such a nature – referred to as general understandings, as opposed to commands, by Strauss et al. (as

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<sup>3</sup> Bryman utilizes the term categories to refer both to social entities and social products, though he does not specify what exactly constitutes a social product, beyond the fact that they fall under categories that have their meaning constructed (Bryman, 2012, p. 34)



cited in Bryman, 2012, p. 33) – the EU is, thus, conceptualized as an order based on the outcome of agreed-upon patterns of action, themselves the products of negotiations between the different parties involved (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). Summarizing, the basic gist is that the social order of the EU is in a constant state of change because numerous agreements are being terminated, but likewise established, reviewed, revised and regulated.

Regarding national culture the idea functions much the same way. Instead of seeing national culture as an external reality that constrains social actors, it is instead assumed to be an emergent reality in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction (Bryman, 2012, p. 34). In the words of Becker (1982): “people create culture continuously. . . . No set of cultural understandings . . . provides a perfectly applicable solution to any problem people have to solve in the course of their day, and they therefore must remake those solutions, adapt their understandings to the new situation in the light of what is different about it.” (p. 521).

In a more general sense constructivism also assumes that the categories that people employ to understand the natural and social world are themselves products of socialization. As Bryman (2012) elaborates: “The categories do not have built-in essences; instead, their meaning is constructed in and through interaction (p. 34). Thus, a category such as “moral values” might be treated as a social construct. This conceptualization is another one that clashes with the notion found in objectivist ontology, as rather than being a distinct, fixed entity, moral values are from the constructivist perspective a category built up through interactions. In other words, what is understood as moral values might change relatively rapidly and depend on time and space, that is, context (Bryman, 2012, p. 34). A stance of such character regularly demonstrates constructivism’s concern surrounding language as a tool to present categories in particular ways. It indicates that the social world and its categories are not external to us, but instead constructed and constituted in and through interaction (Bryman, 2012, p. 34).

Lastly, and as was alluded to with language, it needs to be emphasized that just as much as the actions of people shape categories/objects, these same actions also produce and reproduce people’s perception of self and others. In the field of international relations this applies particularly to identity and interests (Wendt, 1999, p. 36). As such, while people shape the understanding of categories and objects – a category, such as identity – can come to also shape the behavior of the subjects submitted to it. This idea likewise extends to social entities like the

EU, which through norms and values shapes the thinking of both the social actors inhabiting the institution as well as those outside affected by it (for example, the EU member states) (Pollack, 2020, p. 23). This is what was coined as mutual constitution by who is arguably considered as the father of social constructivism in international relations, Alexander Wendt (Wendt, 1999, p. 342). Perhaps the best way to summarize the constructivist perspective is the below quote from Bryman, which, though he does not explicitly mention mutual constitution, defines the very idea:

*“it is necessary to appreciate that culture has a reality that ‘persists and antedates the participation of particular people’ and shapes their perspectives, but it is not an inert objective reality that possesses only a sense of constraint: it acts as a point of reference but is always in the process of being formed”*

Having covered the ontologies that inform the thesis and their key differences, we will now move on to the epistemologies, starting out with the positivist epistemology.

### *Epistemology*

The positivist epistemology, known simply as positivism, follows, according to Bryman, six different principles (Bryman, 2012, p. 28). The first, and arguably most emphasized by him, is the demand that methods of the natural sciences be applied to the study to social reality. The second constitutes that only phenomena, and hence knowledge, confirmed by the senses can truly be considered as knowledge; what Bryman terms the principle of phenomenalism. The third holds that the purpose of theory is to produce hypotheses which can be tested and that will thus permit explanations of laws to be assessed; what Bryman defines as the principle of deductivism. The fourth argues that knowledge is arrived at by collecting facts that provide the basis of laws; what Bryman calls the principle of inductivism. However, while inductivism is indeed a feature of positivism, Bryman stresses that in the working-through of positivism’s implementation in the practice of social research, it is the deductive component which tends to be emphasized. In extension to the nature of positivism’s deductivism and inductivism, it is likewise necessary to understand that positivism draws a fairly sharp line between the distinctions of what is regarded as theory and what is regarded as research (Bryman, 2012, p. 27, 31).

The fifth, and perhaps one of the most well-known principles of positivism, makes clear that science must (and in the words of Bryman, presumably can) be conducted in a manner that is free from value, or objective, if you will. Drawing on Park et al., it can further be added to this principle that, to obtain objectivity, and in extension truth, absolute separation must be present between the researcher and the entities involved (Park et al., 2020, pp. 691-692). However, the way they phrase the sentence: “In other words, positivist thinking asserts that participants and researchers can actually be separated (dualism).” (Park et al., 2020, p. 691) underscores that the separation arguably does not need to be literally physical. Still, it does not change the fact that truth is conceived to only be achievable by separation.

The sixth, and final of the principles outlined by Bryman, stresses that there is a clear distinction between scientific statements and normative statements, and that the former statements reflect the true domain of the scientist. Additionally, this principle is implied by the first as the truth or otherwise of normative statements cannot be verified by the senses. In the same breath it should be emphasized that, along with principle three and four, this principle implies that epistemology, in the positivist mindset, is given a higher status than theory (Bryman, 2012, pp. 27-28).

As for the social constructivist epistemology, it is necessary to recognize that it can in fact take two forms of epistemology: the already mentioned positivism, and interpretivism. The model employed here – a model of EU opposition and legitimacy – is based around the latter. First and foremost, interpretivism interprets the social sciences, that is, people and their institutions, as fundamentally different from the natural sciences (Bryman, 2012, p. 28). Whereas positivism merely tries to explain human behavior, interpretivism seeks to understand it. Hence it is the job of the social science researcher to gain access to the common-sense thinking of people to be able to interpret their actions and social world from their perspective. The reason why the social scientist has to do this is to figure out the meaning behind the involved subjects’ social actions.

One significant epistemological influence on interpretivism, and thus to this thesis, is the one informed by symbolic interactionists, who have argued that individuals continuously interpret the symbolic meaning of their environment (including the actions of others). The meanings they get out of their interpretation(s) will then be the basis for how they act on the situation themselves (Bryman, 2012, p. 31; Blumer, 1962, p. 188). This effectively summarizes the international

relations concept of intersubjectivity, which is one of the concepts which informs social constructivism.

Finally, it is necessary to underscore that following an interpretivist epistemology entails a double interpretation. What is meant by that is that the researcher is providing an interpretation of other individuals' interpretations. As Bryman puts it "Indeed, there is a third level of interpretation going on, because the researcher's interpretations have to be further interpreted in terms of the concepts, theories, and literature of a discipline (Bryman, 2012, p. 31). Putting this into the context of the paper: the interpretation that Macron interprets the EU-Mercosur deal as a threat to his interests, is in fact itself an interpretation of Macron's words and actions. That is, the interpretation might have differed if the research had been conducted by another university student/social scientist.

We will now move on to the research strategy and research design to get an understanding of basis on which the conclusions reached in the paper were made.

### *research strategy and research design*

Starting with the research strategy, given the qualitative focus of this thesis, one would perhaps expect it to have an inductive approach to theory. However, the thesis is first and foremost interested in testing the validity of the hypotheses presented by liberal intergovernmentalism and social constructivism, and not in investigating whether the case can develop theory. As such it is more deductive in nature, but as Bryman points out there is no inherent problem with this since 1) induction and deduction are expected to each have an element of the other in its principal orientation to the role of theory in relation to research and 2) while it can be helpful to contrast the two research designs, one should not necessarily have a wedge hammered between them (Bryman, 2012, pp. 26, 36). The latter point is effectively demonstrated by the former.

On the other hand, The research design that will be employed here is that of the case study. What this type of study entails is effectively a detailed investigation of one single case – the term itself commonly referring to a specific location (Bryman, 2012, p. 67). In this instance the location constitutes the member state of France in the wider context of the EU-Mercosur FTA negotiations. Given that France is treated as a case, it implicitly signals that France is likewise the object of

interest. That is, all elements analyzed here ultimately stem from an interest in better understanding France's foreign policy in the EU-Mercosur context.

On another note, given that there are various types of case studies, it would seem adequate to go into more detail about what type of specific case study this thesis constitutes. The answer is that it constitutes a mixture of a system-driven and concept-driven case study, both deriving from the theoretical path identified by Brinberg and McGrath (1985). The former's goal is to understand a specific phenomenon through triangulation by analyzing the case from several theoretical perspectives (Løkke & Sørensen, 2014, p. 67). This is one way to examine theories' explanatory power and is employed at the intergovernmental level of the analysis. Besides covering the intergovernmental level, however, the overall thesis is arguably more informed by this type of case study, as it is after all France in the context of the EU-Mercosur FTA, and not the theories that are the center of attention here. That being said, though the concept-driven aspects may overall be less dominating, they are the centerpiece of the analysis of the domestic level, as rather than the case here being filtered through theoretical perspectives, the theories' applicability is measured against the empirical data collected and analyzed without the bias of said theories. This constitutes the second of the two manners in which one can investigate a theory's explanatory power (Løkke & Sørensen, 2014, p. 67).

Having gone over both types of case study covered here, then, it is evident that though their goals are ultimately different, they are importantly both able to give us more insight on the applicability of liberal intergovernmentalism and the social constructivist framework of the norm life cycle and rhetorical action. However, one should be aware that, as this is a case study research design, it should not be employed to make generalizations (Bryman, 2012, p. 71).

### *Data*

First and foremost, the data that has been collected here is mainly of a qualitative nature, there are however two exceptions to this rule. One is the quantitative data collected through four CCPI reports, included in the data set to determine France's level of climate commitment. The other is the quantitative study on tweets connected to the Amazon forest fires of August 2019. Though the pools of cited sources are small, the data found in them are of a quantitative nature. However, they are not employed in the exact same manner. In the case of the CCPI pool, quantitative data

has been selected because it was important to have well-established data on France's overall climate performance. If qualitative data had represented this base, the data set would have been significantly smaller, and thus less well-founded. That being said, it does need to be recognized that a qualitative approach to France's climate commitment could have fleshed out the way in which they go about said climate commitment, as qualitative research generally gives more context to the data analyzed. This is an element that unfortunately is lost when one utilizes quantitative data, as it is bound to the overall tendency demonstrated by numbers rather than the additional context given by words. Additionally, given the lack of context, there is likewise a risk that the data set can be interpreted incorrectly. That is, that the interpretation drawn from the data does not actually reflect reality.

In the case of the twitter/forest fire pool, a quantitative approach to data has been chosen, as it was the only manner in which one could analyze on the presence of tweets relating to the forest fires and, thus, to the possibility of salience on twitter. Given that this data, too, is of a quantitative nature, there is similarly a risk that the interpretation of the data could be incorrect. That is, that it could lead to a miscalculation of the level of salience.

Now, moving on to the purely qualitative data, it needs to be stressed that there is not merely one type of qualitative data. The data set on qualitative data can generally be divided into three categories: articles from a selection of the most prominent daily

The data behind the analysis of the hypothesized salience of the EU-Mercosur FTA is in the case of France based on articles from what the French Embassy to Slovakia (2010) considers to be the main daily newspapers of France. While not all news publications on this list have been included in the data, their political affiliation have been taken into account. As such, one rightwing (Les Echos), one Christian democratic (La Croix), one center-right (Le Figaro), one center-left (Le Monde) one and leftwing (l'Humanité) daily newspaper have been chosen to investigate how significant the possibility of the public having been politicized by the news publications were.

The reason it has been decided to go with an analysis built up from data based on newspaper articles, reports and political discourse is that a main goal of the thesis is not to draw on conclusions reached by prior approaches. As one will see, this leads to alternative conclusions that, hopefully, will shine new light on the EU-Mercosur literature. One additional thing that needs

to be considered when it comes to newspaper articles is that they may include bias, as such one should take this aspect into account when using them.

## **Theory**

Before we outline the theories that will be utilized to be able to analyze the French and Irish case, it seems appropriate to first outline the wider theoretical framework. This framework consists of the two major theoretical perspectives: Andrew Moravcsik's (1998) liberal intergovernmentalism and social constructivism, in the field of international relations pioneered by Alexander Wendt (1992). The former has been described as both a theory proper (by such academics as Moravcsik himself and Frank Schimmelfennig) as well as a theoretical framework and a model (the former by Cini and the latter by Pollack) (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 64; Cini, 2019, p. 76; Pollack, 2020, p. 17). The latter, social constructivism, has, in much the same way, by some, been defined as both a pure theory (see Risse and Pollack) and a theoretical approach (see Schimmelfennig and Rittberger) (Risse, 2009, p. 145; Pollack, 2020, p. 22; Schimmelfennig & Rittberger, 2015, p. 53). No matter in what way you define them, though, a key point is that both draw on explanatory theories so as to be capable of tackling the questions posed by the phenomenon of European integration (Schimmelfennig & Rittberger, 2015, pp. 39, 53). In the case of liberal intergovernmentalism the explanatory theories that are drawn on are bargaining theory, club theory, and functional theory of institutions. On the other hand, the explanatory theories of social constructivism constitute community theory of institutions, argumentation theory, and socialization theory.

While the explanatory theories will not take up too much space in the following theoretical outlines – as the tenets of the main theories have a higher priority – they should nonetheless be considered. With that said, we will now go over the theoretical elements of liberal intergovernmentalism.

### *Liberal intergovernmentalism*

To begin with, it is necessary to understand that the framework of liberal intergovernmentalism has taken inspiration from the idea of two-level games, first developed by Robert D. Putnam (1988) in his academic article *Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games*. It

assumes that politics can be divided into a domestic sphere, where national preferences are established, and an international sphere where inter-state bargains are struck (Cini, 2019, p. 76). Moravcsik would go on to further develop on these ideas with his three-stage framework. However, before we go over the three stages, it would seem appropriate to first cover the two basic assumptions about politics that lie at the most fundamental level of liberal intergovernmentalism. According to Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, those assumptions are, on one hand, that states are viewed as the critical actors of international anarchy, and, on the other, that states are purposive and, as a minimum, boundedly rational (2019, p. 65).

Regarding the first basic assumption, Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig emphasize that states pursue goals first and foremost through intergovernmental negotiation and bargaining, as opposed to through a centralized authority that makes and enforces political decisions. That is, the EU is best understood as an international regime for policy co-ordination where the member states continue to enjoy preeminent decision-making power and political legitimacy (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 65).

Another point related to the assumption of states as critical actors, is that liberal intergovernmentalism – despite the wide range of domestic actors involved in the preference formation and foreign policy-making itself – treats the states as unitary actors during the negotiation phase.<sup>4</sup> Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig make sure to stress that this does not mean that domestic pluralism does not matter; just that liberal intergovernmentalism assumes that (at any given time and in any given issue) diverse opinions on state interests internally, and different actors that represent the state externally, aggregate to relatively coherent preference functions and strategic calculations (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 65). In other words, liberal intergovernmentalism holds that foreign policy goals of national governments, such as those of France, are articulated on the basis of shifting pressures from domestic societal groups, whose interests are aggregated through the political institutions (Moravcsik, 1993, p. 481).

The second basic assumption, that states are purposive and, as a minimum, boundedly rational, is, evidently, tied to the concept of rationalism. In covering said concept it is necessary to understand that rationalism is an individualist or agency assumption: That is to say, actors

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<sup>4</sup> While domestic actors are not always involved in the formation of foreign policy-making, it is highlighted by Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig as something that occurs often (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 65).



calculate the utility of a collection of various actions and choose the one that satisfies (or maximizes) their utility under the given conditions. The collective outcomes reached in the end are explained as the result of, and the interaction among, individual actions based on the relativity (though never perfectly) efficient pursuit of interests. Factors that influence the pursuit are: the fact that it is subject to cognitive limitations; the presence or absence of information; uncertainty about the future; and the availability of reliable theories of cause and effect. Lastly, the agreement to cooperate is by liberal intergovernmentalism viewed as a collective outcome of “interdependent (strategically) rational state choices realized through intergovernmental negotiations” (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 65).

The already mentioned three-stage framework constitutes a way to translate the two abovementioned assumptions into a more easily digestible and coherent framework. The stages go as follows: first states define their preferences, then bargain to substantive agreements, and finally, establish institutions (or adjust them in the case that the relevant institution has already been created) to commit to and secure the outcomes in question as a measure towards future political uncertainty (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 65). The last step has only been highlighted here for the sake of clarity of the full process, as it will not be covered further given its lack of relevancy to the questions posed by the thesis. That is, since the agreement has been blocked by not only France, but also other member states (such as Austria and the Ireland), the negotiations have never gone beyond agreement and, thus, nor to the stage of institutional creation or adjustment (Nolte & Ribeiro, 2021, p. 110).

Moving on, then, the first stage, also known as the liberal stage, sees heads of states aggregating both the interests of their domestic constituencies, as well as their own interests to then formulate their respective national preferences at the EU level (Pollack, 2020, p. 17). Given that the interests reflect those of distinctive economies, parties, interest groups, and institutions from each member state, national preferences are arguably quite complex in nature. An important point raised by Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig is that they are also issue specific, meaning that rather than being subordinated to a single overriding policy concern (such as national security in neorealism), they are instead driven by preference functions about how to manage globalization (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 66). In other words, liberal intergovernmentalism should not be interpreted as a theory exclusively focused on economic interests, as it is sometimes

simplified to be, but rather as a theory that takes into account interests formed at the national level more generally. Both areas dominated by intense economic interests, such as the area of agriculture, and areas based on regulatory concerns related to more diffuse but salient issues, as environmental policy, are present (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 66; Schimmelfennig & Rittberger, 2015, p. 43).

In the second stage, alternatively known as the intergovernmental stage, the national preferences that were accumulated at the domestic level are brought to the bargaining table in Brussels (Pollack, 2020, p. 17). The preferences rarely converge exactly, so to overcome collectively suboptimal outcomes the member states must coordinate and cooperate to achieve mutual benefits (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 67). In order to do that, however, they must at the same time decide how the mutual gains of cooperation are distributed amongst themselves. What decides the final outcome of the negotiations, including whether cooperation comes about in the first place, is the relative bargaining power of each state. The type of bargaining conceptualized in international governmentalism is known as hard bargaining, a form of negotiation which includes strategies. The ones important to this particular case are the linking of issues, granting or withholding of side payments, and threats of vetoing (Cini, 2019, p. 77; Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1654).

Another aspect that characterizes the process of hard bargaining is the fact that the smaller states are not necessarily the least powerful at the negotiation table. The reason for this is that a state's bargaining power is relative to the intensity of its interest in the issue being negotiated, meaning that the intensity of interest in the issue will determine the amount of power the state has. That is to say, if the state's interest in the issue is high, its power is assumed to be relatively low, while if its interest is low, its power is instead assumed to be relatively high (Schimmelfennig & Rittberger, 2015, p. 43). So, in other words, the intergovernmental setting is one of asymmetrical power where states with relatively more power can extract concessions and compromises from the relatively weaker states (Moravcsik, 2018, pp. 1653-1654).

Following Moravcsik (2018), the determining factors behind the intensity of interests are not only theorized to be connected to how much the state will win or lose economically, but also to the veto power of powerful domestic interest groups (p. 1654). An additional factor that this thesis believes is arguably relevant is that of domestic public opinion which relevance to liberal

intergovernmentalism has been recognized by Moravcsik himself (p. 1650). He demonstrates said relevance, in the very same article, by showing how public opinion had a say in the member state governments cooperating to limit migration efforts in the wake of the 2015 migration crisis (Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1662). Following this example, then, it would only be logical that member states experiencing similar public backlash – however in this case to an FTA – would have the member states once again adhere to public opinion, of course carrying with it the implication of opposition rather than cooperation. Such a hypothesis seems to be confirmed by that of the EU-Mercosur FTA, where cooperation, and in extension integration, has not been reached, given – in the liberal intergovernmentalist perspective – incompatible national interests based on either divergence over fundamental goals or the disagreement over distribution (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 67).

Having outlined the liberal intergovernmentalist theoretical framework we will now move on to that of social constructivism.

### *Social constructivism*

Unlike liberal intergovernmentalism, which was created deliberately as a theory to explain European integration, social constructivism comes from the background of the conventional grand theories of international relations. Consequently, the social constructivist framework that is utilized to analyze European integration is one of several frameworks taken into use by researchers in the sphere of international relations. However, before we go into detail about said framework, we will first go over the arguably three central elements that are bound to social constructivist thinking: ideas, norms (which can be considered a subcategory of ideas) and interests (an extension of constituted ideas) (Risse, 2000, p. 5).

Starting out with ideas, they can according to Ibañez (2015) be considered to constitute the very social structures that determine political action in the international system, their centrality likewise the reason why social constructivism is referred to as having an idealistic character (p. 196). Given this central role, it should come as no surprise that they also, at least partially, reflect the cultural beliefs that function as building blocks to establish shared cultural identities (such as those of being French or European). Of these building blocks of ideas, the central category that is of importance here, is that of the normative ideas. Based on the worldview in question, they will

determine what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behavior by the collectives in question as well as the action they will take based on said opinions (Ibañez, 2015, pp. 196, 198). In the case of the shared collectives constituting France, it is for example evident that the EU-Mercosur FTA is seen as something both negative and unacceptable. On this basis, they have thus, unsurprisingly, made the decision to try and block it.

One final aspect of ideas that should be covered is the concept of ideas as rhetorical weapons. Here ideas are understood as strategically utilized weapons that are utilized by the actors to help them achieve their goal in question (Alons, 2014, p. 290). While these ideas may not shape actual interests, they do act as external constraints. Additionally, given that ideas, here, are merely being used for strategic purposes, this means that they have in fact not been internalized. As a result, they only affect the behavior of the weaponizing actor indirectly. This is opposed to discourse which constitutes internalized ideas that instead affect the actor directly (Alons, 2014, p. 290). Applying the concept just discussed to the case studied here, would see the French and Irish pro-environment rhetoric as a means to constrain the European Commission in a web of its own supposed values. That is, by drawing on said rhetoric, President Macron and the Irish PMs have been able to put the Commission in a position where it cannot argue against their points. If it were to do that, it means that it would act in contradiction to the EU's supposed green profile and, thus, delegitimize itself.

Moving on to norms, they are, according to Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), defined as a standard of appropriate behavior which, when they constitute an institution, should be understood as a collection of practices and rules (p. 891). As an example, Greenpeace advocates the norm that we should protect the environment. However, protecting the environment includes various practices and rules, such as the extraction of energy from more climate friendly sources, the need to reduce our consumption of meat and, of particular interest to this case, not causing deforestation and actively condemning said deforestation.

Another element relevant to the discussion of norms is the fact that they can be divided into three categories: regulative norms, constituting norms, and norms that are known as either evaluative or prescriptive norms. The former two are, by Ruggie (1998), defined as ordering and constraining behavior, in the case of the first, and creating new actors, interests or forms of action, in the case of the second (p. 871). As for Evaluative/prescriptive norms, these are by Finnemore

and Sikkink highlighted as important exactly because the quality of oughtness they demonstrate is what sets norms apart from other kinds of rules (1998, p. 891). In extension they argue: "Because norms involve standards of "appropriate" or "proper" behavior, both the intersubjective and the evaluative dimensions are inescapable when discussing norms. We only know what is appropriate by reference to the judgments of a community or a society" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 891-892). That is, what constitutes norm-breaking and norm-conforming behavior can only be understood by investigating what norms are approved by a given community. The reaction of the French and Irish community to the Commission's behavior regarding the EU-Mercosur agreement (prioritizing trade over the environment) showcases the reaction to what is in this case considered an inappropriate action. As such, it is crucial to understand that, given the nature of the prescriptive quality of norms, there are, by definition, no good or bad norms; in the end it all depends on the perception of good and bad in the community in question (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 892).

Though evidence of norms can only be discovered indirectly, as in the case of other motivations of political action (like interests or threats), their quality of oughtness and shared moral assessment prompts justifications for action and, thus, leaves an extensive trail of communication among actors that can be studied (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 892). It is, however, necessary to emphasize that norm existence and strength distinguish themselves from behavioral change in the operationalization utilized here. The reason this is necessary is because one central question of the research on norms is the effect norms have on state behavior, and that type of research would simply not be able to be carried out if the norms were fixed to state and nonstate behavior (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 892). The implications here are, furthermore, that norms are continuous and not dichotomous, and that their strength depends on the level of agreement, be it domestically, regionally or internationally (Legro, 1997, p. 33.). This leads directly into Finnemore's and Sikkink's concept of norm life cycle, which follows the precise idea that norms are not fixed and must reach a tipping point before they can truly assert themselves (1998, pp. 892-893). We will now go over this first level of a two-level games approach.

*A model of EU opposition and legitimacy*

First and foremost, norm influence should, in the conceptualization of Finnemore and Sikkink, be interpreted as a three-stage process (1998, p. 895). However, since the argument of this paper rests on Macron and the Irish PMs not having internalized the environmentalist mindset of norms/practices and rules, we will only go over the first two stages. The first of these is the norm emergence stage. This is the stage where new norms are created and there are particularly two elements that are central to it: norm entrepreneurs and organizational platforms.

Norm entrepreneurs are agents with strong notions of what can be considered as appropriate or desirable behavior in their community and as they act on these notions they are known as “norm builders”. As such, they are critical in making a norm emerge. They can do this by merely calling attention to an issue, but they can also create the issues themselves with the assistance of framing through language (for example by dramatizing a certain event). These cognitive frames are a powerful and necessary tool in the norm entrepreneurs’ toolbox since, when they are successfully employed, the new frames will resonate with broader public understandings and are adopted as new avenues of discussing and grasping issues. However, in the process of construction of frames entrepreneurs will have to face already embedded alternative norms and frames that themselves establish perceptions of appropriateness and interests (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 896-897).

The norm contestation signaled above reflects a key implication for our understanding of the manners in which the logic of appropriateness relates to norms: in order to promote a new norm, a norm entrepreneur may be forced to in fact act inappropriately, as he or she is located in a space of prior norms. This evidently highlights the complicated nature of the logic of appropriateness, as appropriateness is exactly what is being contested. However, the answer lies in the motivations of the norm entrepreneurs. In political science these are often connected to attributes such as empathy, altruism and ideational commitment. Common to all of them is the fact that they reflect a nature of selflessness. In that sense, from the perspective of the entrepreneur, acting inappropriately could in reality be interpreted as a way of acting appropriately, with them viewing their actions as doing a greater good for the community/mankind (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 898-897).

Now, regarding organizational platforms, these function as the platform from which all norm promoters disperse and promote their norms. One can distinguish between two types of

organizational platforms: those that have been specifically constructed for the very purpose of norm promotion and those with purposes and agendas that goes beyond said promotion. The former type includes such institutions as NGOs like Greenpeace and the Red Cross, as well as wider transnational advocacy networks constituting several organizations focusing on specific common issues (such as climate action or human rights). The latter, on the other hand, is defined by standing international organizations which include organizations like the EU, the UN and the World Bank. In this type of organization, the agendas that are not directly focused on promoting norms – such as the practice of entering into FTAs in the EU’s case – indirectly shapes the norms spread by the organization. Thus, when the EU enters into FTAs it can be interpreted as them indirectly promoting the norm of cooperation built on liberal economic values and processes (and the argument could be made that they likewise reinforce their identity as a liberal institution) (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 899).

The first is the source of influence found in the use of expertise and information to change the behavior of, in this particular case, state actors. While the use of information can in and of itself have the power to influence state decisions, expertise is an aspect that is generally found in professional bureaucrats, who have been trained to support or block new norms emerging from standing organizations. Expertise is therefore directly related to the concept of persuasion. The way NGOs convince their constituents is by means of persuasion through framing; more specifically what is perceived to be appropriate as inappropriate. However, to achieve successful framing, the NGO in question might need to pull on its organizational network’s information and access to important audiences that, themselves, might hold that information; the latter especially in the case of media and decision makers (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 900).

Finally, for norms to move on to the stage of norm cascading, and thus solidifying themselves, they must get over a tipping threshold. This can, according to Finnemore and Sikkink, happen both with the concept of institutionalization preceding, as well as following, a norm cascade (1998, p. 900). Here, though, it will be argued that the institutionalization preceded the cascade. The reason why is that the EU has already constituted a set of regionally based norms on environmental action, the exact prerequisite highlighted by Finnemore and Sikkink for the institutionalization to occur first (1998, p. 900). Evidence of an institutionalization in reality having taken place can be exemplified by such legal texts as the European Green Deal (at a regional level) and the Paris

Agreement (at the international level). Both texts are central to this case and can, importantly, be contested by the actors involved in the frameworks that they guide (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 900).

The second stage, the norm cascade, has its own features that contrasts it to the stage of norm emergence. The first of these is the dynamic change in pressure, with the majority of influence shifting from domestic politics to international socialization intended to induce norm breakers to become norm adherents. However, the network of norm entrepreneurs is still relevant at this level, as they pressure targeted actors, among them states, to adopt new policies and monitor that they comply with international standards. Therefore, from the social constructivist perspective, socialization should be viewed as the dominant mechanism behind norm cascades.

But what is it that causes socialization to work? To understand that one has to realize that when the tipping point has been crossed, the new norm will then redefine the identity of the majority of the states and, hence, establish a new framework of what is to be considered appropriate behavior. The redefinition of the EU's and its member states' identity as an environmental-conscious unit serves as an example of how a change in identity can make an action like deforestation suddenly be perceived as inappropriate, demonstrated by Macron having criticized Bolsonaro for not adhering to the Paris Agreement.

However, if we go deeper behind the mechanism, an attitude like that of Macron can in fact be interpreted as one created from legitimacy. Legitimacy, as pointed out by Finnemore and Sikkink, is an important resource both in its international and domestic variant (1998, p. 903). Regarding the former, they argue that international legitimacy is achieved by states gaining the approval of international organizations. At least in the case of the EU, however, we believe that this interpretation should be extended to political institutions more generally. That is, just like international organizations are able to influence the level of legitimacy a state has, we believe an organization like the state, or its agents, are able to do the same with the EU. States' search for international legitimacy should, lastly, be understood as an extension to domestic legitimacy, as legitimacy from the international level has become, in the words of Finnemore and Sikkink "an essential contributor to perceptions of domestic legitimacy held by a state's own citizens" (1998, p. 903).



However, there is more to domestic legitimacy, that being the central concept of conformity. According to Robert Axelrod, conformity involves what he refers to as social proof, which is the practice of states complying with norms to demonstrate that they have adapted to their community (Axelrod, 1986, p. 1105). This leads us directly to the theory of rhetorical action, a theory centered around international actors criticizing other international actors based on the normative structure found in their home community.

The first assumption of rhetorical action is that actors are weakly socialized, but that they share constitutive values and norms with a community. Furthermore, it is expected that the collective identity generates a general commitment to upholding the community's norms and values (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 62). As such, the assumption aligns properly with the second stage of the norm life cycle. In this particular thesis not only state actors are assumed to take on this role, but so are officials of the Commission, as they similarly, though indirectly, must act along lines of legitimacy. Acting indirectly in the sense that while the Commission officials might not respond directly to the communities constituting the member states, their (inappropriate) actions are used as tools for political benefits by member state politicians. If the Commission acts too out of line and contradicts prior established norms, this becomes an opportunity for member state constituents to point out their inconsistency, just as the public would do it to their constituents. However, naturally they do not face the danger of not being reelected like the French and Irish governments do (Schimmelfennig, 2001, pp. 63-64).

In other words, for France, as well as the Commission, the standard of legitimacy functions as both an external institutional resource and a constraint. As a consequence, the context of legitimacy sets both the mode of interaction – strategic bargaining through rhetorical action – and the relative power over outcomes. Here it is expected that Macron and the Irish PMs will have had the most significant relative power, given a context where their self-interests and the interests of their communities align, and the Commission has acted against an institutionalized norm.

This leads us to the informal “soft” mechanism of shaming, which entails the public exposure of illegitimate objectives and behaviors. For shaming to be effective an actor needs to have declared their support for the standard of legitimacy prior to the shaming taking place. However, just like the shaming actor can utilize rhetorical action, so can the shamed one. The shamed actor does this to avoid or reduce the costs of conforming to the standard of legitimacy. The most critical point

when trying to repel shame is that they do not use norms and values cynically and inconsistently. As a result, and as Schimmelfennig points out “The requirement of consistency applies both to the match between arguments and actions and to the match between arguments used at different times and in different contexts” (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 65) Thus, even if community members only use the standard of legitimacy instrumentally, they can still become entrapped by their own arguments.

Following the logic of appropriateness, it naturally must be assumed that the position taken by Macron and the Irish PMs is understood as a result of social pressure and not them acting freely without constraint. Their interests do, generally, not change; they just refrain from illegitimate behavior (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 65). If the same case were to be analyzed from the perspective of a logic of consequences, on the other hand, the social pressure would be interpreted as not being sufficiently strong to constrain them, with them therefore acting out of a power maximization mindset. In the end, Whatever the case, the bottom line is that political actors, from the rhetorical action perspective, will use arguments strategically in what Jobert (1998) has referred to as the arena: a space of confrontation where what matters are convincing arguments (as cited in Saurugger, 2014, p. 148).

## **On France’s climate profile**

So as to not simply decide, without proper investigation, that the French government did not care about the environment, and in extension that it had not internalized the norm(s) of environmental protection, there will now be shone some light on how the French government has in fact treated the issue. First of all, we should look towards statistics on French environmental policy. The precise statistics we will be observing are those found in the reports of Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) from the year 2019 to 2022 (labelled 2020-2023) (Burck, Hagen, Höhne, Nacscimento & Bals, 2019; Burck et al., 2020; Burck et al., 2021; Burck et al, 2022).<sup>5</sup> The overall climate performance laid out by these reports is based on four factors: GHG emissions (40% of total), renewable energy (20% of total), energy use (20% of total), and climate policy (20% of

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<sup>5</sup> Note that the CCPI emphasizes that there have been made slight alterations to the methodology utilized in the 2023 edition, but that they should not, however, prevent comparisons with issues starting from the 2018 edition. Furthermore, all editions – except the one from 2023, which is based on data from 2021 – utilizes data recorded two years prior (Burck et al., 2022, p. 27)

total). Though the French government is most likely involved in all of them, it should at the same time be considered that French society can have had an influence on some of these numbers, namely GHG emissions and energy use. Still, this would leave 40% of the total climate performance strictly in the hands of the French government. Now, following the data provided by these reports, one can observe that France's overall climate performance, relative to that of other States, has been rather fluctuating. They went from an 18<sup>th</sup> down to a 23<sup>rd</sup> place between 2019 to 2020, the former ranking indicating a better than average medium performance, while the latter indicates an average medium ranking. In 2021 they would then rise to a 17<sup>th</sup> place, just barely making it into the high performing category, only to drop all the way down to 28<sup>th</sup> place in 2022. In other words, 2022 marks their lowest ranking of all in the period investigated, but still placing them close to the middle of the medium performing countries.<sup>6</sup> Thus, overall, France has demonstrated a medium performance, leading to the conclusion that they must at the very least have taken some measures against climate change.

However, what are the results if we look specifically at climate policy, in which category the performance is measured on both domestic and international level?<sup>7</sup> As for the years 2019 and 2020, France would drop from 11<sup>th</sup> place, indicating a high performance, to a 20<sup>th</sup> place, falling just below the high performing States into the medium performance group. Here the contributing factor appears to have been the domestic performance going from high to low, as the international performance remained the same (high). However, in 2021 they would once again constitute a high performance state, as they would end up in 10<sup>th</sup> place. This seems to have been mainly because of a rise in performance at the domestic level, going from low to medium, with the international performance still unchanged. As for 2022, France's climate performance would drop to its lowest in all years investigated, placing them 31<sup>st</sup>; only four ranks from the low performing group. This time the performance would drop at both levels, with domestic performance going from medium to low, and the international performance going from high to medium.<sup>8</sup>

A clear pattern can be observed here: the French government has evidently focused more of its energy on climate policy at the international level than at the domestic level. Examples of the

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the number of States included in each report varies, with the 2019 and 2020 editions having 57, the 2021 60, and the 2022 59. (Burck, et al., 2019; Burck et al., 2020; Burck et al., 2021; Burck et al, 2022)

<sup>7</sup> More precisely, the reports measure climate policy based on a performance rating by climate and energy policy experts from NGOs, universities and think tanks within each evaluated countries (Burck et al, 2022, p. 26).

<sup>8</sup> The report links the fall in performance to the Russia's war against Ukraine (Burck et al, 2022, p. 14).

international climate commitment includes France initiating both the One Planet Summit and the One Planet Lab, As well as them blocking international climate finance, predominantly involving loss and damage (Burck et al., 2019, p. 19; Burck et al., 2022, p. 21). In contrast, the French government has been found guilty of climate inaction by the Council of State – the governmental body that acts as the supreme court for administrative justice in France – based on a failure to curb greenhouse gas emissions on French territory (Bauer-Babef, 2021). The Council of State even went as far as to condemning the French government for not complying with the Paris Agreement.

We will now move on to the analysis of the thesis, starting out by analyzing the CCPI data through a liberal intergovernmentalist and a social constructivist perspective respectively. Then we will cover the domestic level from an analytically neutral standpoint so as to be able to measure the data gathered on the interest groups and the influence of the public against the liberal intergovernmentalist and social constructivist frameworks. By doing that we will be able to give at least one possible answer to what (if any) theoretical elements align with the reality reflected by the data. With that said, we will now cover the analysis.

## **Analysis**

### *Analyzing the climate data*

However, how can one interpret the data on climate policy outlined above? Three interpretations will be proposed here: one following the liberal intergovernmentalist perspective, and another two following the social constructivist perspective.

Starting with liberal intergovernmentalism, its explanation is rather straight forward: at the domestic level, the interests of a significant part of the agricultural sector – among other business sectors – clash with the interests of environmental organizations, leading to less climate policy being approved. On the other hand, when it comes to climate policy at the international level, there is arguably a high possibility that both businesses hurt by stricter environmental laws and environmental interest groups' interests will align. In the case of the former, it is likely that they would support climate policy at the international level, as it could come to restrict competitors in the same manner that EU and French climate policy restricts them. In other words, they could view international climate policy as a way to be less disadvantaged. As for the environmental

interest groups, the answer should be fairly obvious: as their very interests are tied to protect the environment, they will evidently also be interested in doing so at the international level. In other words, the higher degree of performance at the international level could be explained by domestic interests coming less into conflict there.

As for social constructivism, at least a version based on rhetorical action, it offers two possible explanations. The first follows the liberal intergovernmentalist hypothesis, only instead of the French interest groups' interests being catered to, it is the interests of the French public. That is to say, that one could – like was the case with the interest groups – arrive at the conclusion that public opinion was more divisive on climate issues at the national level than it was at the international. The reason for this clash of interests, following a social constructivist perspective, could be the plurality of identities found between supporters and opponents of climate policy. Going by the data offered by CCPI, the public's opinion was either more uniformly positive towards climate policy international level or most climate policy negotiations simply did not become salient to climate sceptics.

The second explanation follows the idea of power maximization. In this scenario the French public was either not unified enough to be the cause of the French government's behavior, or they were simply not sufficiently aware of climate policy negotiations at the international level. In any case, in said scenario, France's push for environmental policy at the international level would be interpreted as them focusing on maximizing their power. In other words, implementing more climate policy at the international level would here be seen by them as an advantage to France. It can arguably be compared to the interest groups' behavior in the liberal intergovernmentalist explanation, with France trying to even out the playing field between it and the States outside the EU.

Of course, one should consider the complexity of the network of the French governmental institutions and that some, if not all, will contain agents that act out of a genuine interest in protecting the environment. If that were not the case, it is unlikely that France would have a medium performance level on overall climate action. However, as strong as France has been in the area of international environmental policy, the medium performance score also indicates that though environmental action constitutes an area of certain priority, environmental action itself

has not yet become an internalized norm. That is, while some departments of the State very well could have internalized the norm, the French government as one unified institution does appear to have done so, following the data of CCPI. One only needs to look towards the case of the Paris court finding the French State guilty of climate inaction to observe this in action (France 24, 2021). It is on the background of this data, clearly demonstrated in practice, that the author of this thesis has interpreted that rhetorical action, rather than discourse, has been utilized by the French government officials.

### *Investigation of the domestic level*

The natural point of departure is arguably the date of the agreement in principle (28 June 2019), as it solidified that neither the agricultural groups and the farmers attached to them, nor the environmentalist interest groups, were powerful enough to sway Macron's initial support for the EU-Mercosur FTA. While there is no direct evidence that the two groups were lobbying on the issue prior to the FTA being agreed to in principle, there are however sources suggesting their dissatisfaction already having been expressed to the French government before the agreement in principle was reached.

However, before we delve into the pressures emanating from society, it would seem suitable to first cover the government-based group briefly mentioned in the introduction, as it can be interpreted as an argument against the purely societal perspective on state pressure. The group in question consists of the French ministers and members of parliament (MPs), both of which have had members among them that have expressed discontent with the EU-Mercosur FTA. Each one of the two come with their own implications as to the pressure put on Macron. On one hand, having had two of his own ministers – Agricultural Minister Didier Guillaume, and Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian – question the principles on which he agreed to the FTA, could signal pressure through legitimacy loss among his own (Guillaume, 2019; Le Drian, 2019). This happened July 2, 2019, which indicates that it did not change Macron's view on the matter. As for more severe consequences, it is unlikely that there were any in the context of this group, as they cannot actually dismiss Macron (Élysée, n.d.). Though this is true for the MPs as well, they do have the power of going through with a vote of no confidence if they are not satisfied with the work

exercised by the government appointed by the president (Élysée, n.d.; France 24 & AFP, 2022).<sup>9</sup> As such, the fact that 52 MPs from the political party Les Republicains, in a forum on 7 July, 2019, would voice their dissatisfaction with the agreement, might have influenced Macron's positioning (Larrivé, 2019). The possibility of this being true is only further strengthened by it having occurred *after* his last outright pro EU-Mercosur statement, opening for the probability that this was in reality what caused him to change position. That being said, it might also merely have been an attributing factor to the already accumulated pressure. In any case, the central take-away is that it cannot be ruled out that it was internal institutional pressure that alone caused Macron's attitude to shift. However, as France is not a dictatorship, at the same time it needs to be recognized that Macron would not have been able to go ahead and agree to the agreement in principle if he did not have at least a minimal level of support from his political officials. When precisely they came to an agreement is difficult to say, but going by a press release dated 23 May 2019, which expresses both Guillaume and Macron's continued opposition to the EU-Mercosur FTA, it would have had to have been barely before the 29, at the G20 summit where the EU and Mercosur would reach the agreement in principle (Ministère de l'Agriculture et de la Souveraineté alimentaire, 2019).

Now, turning to the case of the farmers, their dissatisfaction was highlighted by a nationwide protest in February 2018 and a more radical protest in June 2018. The former was, from what can be gathered from the article covering them, only organized by France's main farmer's union, National Federation of Agricultural Holders' Unions (FNSEA), and attended by an estimate of 20.000 farmers (Reuters staff, 2018). The latter would see the FNSEA cooperate with their branch Young Farmers (JA), encouraging farmers to block oil refineries with their tractors. Though the number of farmers involved was significantly lower, the important take-away is that it caused such commotion that they in fact secured a meeting at the technical level (implied to have been with the French Ministry of Agriculture) (Reuters staff, 2018a; Mayance, 2009, pp. 28-29). Thus, while there is no direct evidence showing that they lobbied against the EU-Mercosur FTA, there is indeed evidence that shows that it was quite likely. Though it is not possible to conclude whether some of the other central agricultural interest groups – such as Confédération Paysanne,

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<sup>9</sup> To be more specific, the President appoints a Prime Minister, who will then propose candidates for the appointment to the different minister positions. The President then has to decide whether he wants to appoint the candidates proposed or not.

Coordination Rurale, and Interbev – had the same success, they have all stated a similar opposition to the FTA (Confédération Paysanne, 2018; Coordination Rurale, 2018; Interbev, 2014). Hence, there is a strong indication that the French agricultural interest groups were (and to this day are) united on this issue (more on the continued united stance later). Still, the fact that their (hypothesized) pressure did not discourage Macron from agreeing in principle points to said pressure not having been strong enough.

But what about the Environmentalist groups then? Their pressure prior to the agreement in principle was, at least in the public space, considerably less intense than that of the agricultural groups.<sup>10</sup> Mainly, no research found that there had been any protests on the EU-Mercosur FTA up until the date of the agreement in principle. However, a report made by the French environmental organizations, the Nicolas Hulot Foundation for Nature and Man, and Institut Veblen, highlight that more than 30 French environmental interest groups were involved in an open letter signed by more than 340 environmental organizations, published by Institut Veblen on June 18, 2019 (Baldon, Dupré & Leré, 2019, p. 8; Dupré, 2019). Therefore, while the letter was directed towards the European Union, it importantly underscores that French environmental interest groups had indeed mobilized before the agreement in principle. Though that does not enlighten us regarding how much lobbying they were doing, it does crucially highlight that Macron did not go from a positive to negative attitude on the EU-Mercosur FTA because of them adding to the pressure after an agreement in principle had been reached. Further indication of this is that he was quoted by Euroactiv as defending the FTA in Brussels, on 2 July, claiming that “a trade deal is not bad in itself” (Euractiv & AFP, 2019). While it is true that in his conference at the G20 summit in Osaka – on June 29, 2019 – he likewise underlined that France will be very vigilant regarding the final drafts of the FTA, there is in the end an implication that Macron with the latter statement merely defended himself preemptively (Macron, 2019). In other words, President Macron did not appear to change his opinion regarding the FTA from the mere presence and opposition from the Agricultural and environmentalist interest groups. If these two groups alone were the ones to cause the change of behavior of President Macron one, or both of them, would have had to increase their lobbying efforts and in that way change his stance. One should, however, consider

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<sup>10</sup> Here public space refers to both the physical world as well as the internet.



another group which, arguably, did not appear before after the agreement in principle: the general public.

Here it would seem appropriate to divide the French population, or rather electorate, into two groups: one consisting of the electorate based on farming, and one that falls outside said farming sector.<sup>11</sup> The possibility of the former already being politicized cannot be denied, considering their affiliation to the agricultural interest groups, but at the same time, it should be considered that the farmers not associated with the sectors sensitive to imports from Mercosur, might have abstained from pressuring the French government. In other words, there is no guarantee that a significant part of farmers making up the sectors unlikely to be hurt by Mercosur exports, showed solidarity with the farmers that would actually be hurt by them. Furthermore, the percentage of French farmers has decreased to a degree, that they, as a group of peers, would seldom influence the French elections alone.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the framing of the EU-Mercosur FTA as a potential environmental threat – established by some of the main French news publications (see: LePuill, 2019; Campion, 2019; Ducourtieux, 2019; Massiot & Didelot, 2019) – had, at least on paper, a better precondition of mobilizing a larger part of the population, at least if one follows a Eurobarometer study conducted in April 2019. According to said study, 82% of the French respondents considered climate change a very serious problem, with 23% even finding it to be the most serious problem of all (European Commission, 2019, p. 1). In the same time frame as the other articles (end June to the beginning of July) it was, however, also framed as a problem that could hurt French agriculture, and as a result the French people (Campion, 2019; Le Monde & AFP, 2019). Lastly, there were also news articles that had a more positive to neutral stance on the FTA, but these appear to have been in the minority (see: d'Abbundo, 2019; AFP, 2019; Cougard, 2019).

While it cannot be ruled out that articles covering the pre agreement agricultural protests affected a portion of the non-farmer electorate, the fact that they obviously predated the agreement in principle also highlights that it was not a significant enough amount to make Macron refrain from agreeing to it. Therefore, if a public pressure would have had to have influenced him, it would have had to have been the one hypothesized after the EU and Mercosur countries came to an agreement. While the articles from the French newspaper publications of course highlighted

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<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that there is no overlap. This distinction was merely made for simplicities sake

<sup>12</sup> According to the French Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (2020) the percentage of farmers in employment has gone from 7,1% in 1982 to 1,5% in 2019.

several issues of the EU-Mercosur FTA, it would appear the August 2019 Amazon forest fires were the true troublemaker for Macron. The reason why is that it would lead to a huge outcry on Twitter, resulting in high activity around several hashtags related to the forest fires, the hashtag #PrayforAmazonas even ending up as a trending topic (Skill, Passero & Francisco, 2021, p. 721). Though it would be difficult to measure just how widely it reached the approximately 4,6 million daily French Twitter users, the fact that the topic became as salient as it did, it would be unlikely if it did not also reach a wide French audience (Mediametrie, 2020, p. 2). Tweets about the issue in French being up as early as 20 August, as screenshots by Le Monde demonstrate, certainly highlights that the French-speaking part of the world reacted to the issue rather promptly (Maad, 2019). Adding to that, the tweets in other languages, which could arguably be understood through the visual elements (mainly photos) and hashtags, likely constituted another means for this information/issue to reach the French Twitter users that were not already aware of it. All in all, there were plenty of possibilities for the issue to go viral among the French audience as well, and as a result for the issue to spread to the general public as a whole. After all, it would not be too out of the ordinary to talk about a viral issue with your peers. Whether or not that spread to the general public did happen is debatable, however, the fact that Macron would change his position on the agreement to one of opposition only a couple of days after the outcry began certainly indicates that he felt like he needed to distance himself from the FTA in order to avoid controversy.

Overall, then, there is an indication that between the agricultural and environmental aspect, it was in particular the latter that was influential. This goes hand in hand with the Eurobarometer study, which seems to indicate that environmental issues are important to the French public, more or less as a whole, and not just in the case of a section of the population. This brings us to a central point: one should not automatically assume that the farmers that have opposed the FTA have done so purely – or even at all – on the grounds of agricultural interests. With 82% of the French respondents expressing that climate change is a very serious issue, one should not be surprised if a portion of the French farmers have gone against the trade agreement because they are worried about the environment. The fact that 11 Farmer's organizations are part of Pour une autre PAC – a French inter-association body which criticized the lack of agro-ecological focus in the 2023-27 CAP

reform – certainly indicates such preoccupation (Pour une autre PAC, n.d.; Pistorius, 2021).<sup>13</sup> As such, it is indeed likely that the public opinion of at least a small part of French farmers could have pressured the French government, either partially, or completely, based on environmental concerns. Consequently, one should consider that there may have been an overlap for a part of the peers between the agricultural and environmental sphere.

In the end, the key take-away is that issues considered to be important to the French likely became salient and that they as a result mobilized. The close proximity between the beginning of the outcry and Macron's change of stance at least implies this. If not that, then at least that public opinion was influential enough to give him the final push towards opposition. Last, but not least, there is an indication that public opinion has also been a contributing factor to why Macron is still opposing the FTA; a survey carried out by YouGov and published by Regnskogfondet would at least imply that. In said survey 50% of the French respondents replied that they were totally in favor of halting the EU-Mercosur FTA until the deforestation of the Amazon had stopped (YouGov, 2021, p. 6).<sup>14</sup>

#### *How successfully can liberal intergovernmentalism be applied?*

Now, can liberal intergovernmentalism explain the French case going by the conclusions reached above? Starting with the domestic level, it is clear that the amount of the French population that opposed the EU-Mercosur FTA was quite significant, and likely more intense than what Macron anticipated. The reason we have arrived at this conclusion is that Macron, as was covered earlier, would actually go from a negative stance on the deal to a positive one, only to return to his once negative position. One interpretation of this behavior is that Macron had miscalculated the opposition to the EU-Mercosur when aggregating the interests of the French society (a psychological limitation if you will), and only when he realized just how significant the opposition was would he align himself with the more dominant interests of society. That is, he could have aligned himself with these interests out of a fear of not staying in power. Following such an interpretation of the data, liberal intergovernmentalism would very much be applicable.

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<sup>13</sup> Formed in 2007 under the name Groupe PAC 2013, Pour une autre PAC focuses, in part, on a sustainable approach to farming, specifically in the context of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (Pour une autre PAC, n.d.).

<sup>14</sup> Note that the question was formulated as on a degree basis, with 1 signalling total disagreement and six signalling total agreement. All respondents were 18 years or older.

Alternatively, Macron's behavior could be explained by the pressures from inside the state institutions which, as has been covered – have come from both his political allies as well as adversaries. In the case it played a role, it could have played a role as either the key pressure, or additional pressure, highlighting that the French government may have been constrained from within too. Lastly – and contrasting the liberal intergovernmentalist explanations – based on France's overall medium level climate commitment performance, one cannot dismiss that the actions of Macron's government were perhaps in reality based on a legitimate climate concern.

On a different note, as no type of interest is disqualified from being analyzed in liberal intergovernmentalism, that likewise means that all societal groups analyzed here can be investigated by the theory. Additionally, as liberal intergovernmentalism not only considers the diversity of interests in society, but also those within national institutions (as highlighted in the theory section) it would even be able to account for the context of diverging interests on the FTA taking place inside the French state institutions (at least partially). The diverging interests between the French politicians could in fact be argued to be a result of the societal pressures exercised on the French government if one follows an intergovernmentalist perspective.

Just as liberal intergovernmentalism can assist us in emphasizing how the agricultural groups, environmental groups and the peers had an influence in Macron's change of stance – to a lesser or more significant degree depending on the group – it can likewise help us in emphasizing at least a handful of groups that were unlikely to have had such influence. These would be the groups which can be theorized to have been for the FTA, based on the fact that they would stand to gain from it coming into force (Conconi, et al., 2021, p. 245). What appear to be the most often-cited would-be beneficiaries are the industries related to chemicals, pharmaceuticals, automobiles, textiles, wine and, though somewhat disputed, cheese (see: Ghiotto & Echaide, 2019, pp. 20-22, 27; Conconi et al., 2021, p. 245; Zelicovich, 2019, p. 6). Following a liberal intergovernmentalist perspective, then, the abovementioned groups would not oppose the FTA, as opposing the FTA would mean opposing an economic opportunity, which in turn would mean going against their economic interests. In the end, this would result in a conflict with the conceptualization of rational choice for which the theoretical framework is partially built on, as they would no longer be following a – in this conceptualization – rational line of thinking. What would appear to be the most logical conclusion as to why their interests were not met would be that the French government has not

only been facing pressure from the more general agricultural sector and environmental organizations, but in addition also the French electorate. That is, the interests that reflect opposition to the FTA have arguably been more widespread, and as a result, more dominant compared to those in favor of the FTA.

Now that we have gone over the applicability of liberal intergovernmentalism at the domestic level we will move on to the analysis of the intergovernmental which, as highlighted in the methodology, reflects a standard application of theory to analyse a given phenomenon.

### *Bargaining of the French at the intergovernmental level*

Going by what has been observed until now, we can start out by highlighting the losers of the negotiations. Here one can distinguish between domestic losers and losers at the intergovernmental level. The former of these, based on the outcome of the negotiations, most likely count the beneficiaries mentioned at the end of the last section: the industries related to chemicals, pharmaceuticals, automobiles, textiles, wine and, disputably, cheese. As for the latter, two types of losers can be perceived. The first type of loser would be the member states that have actually been pushing for the EU-Mercosur FTA to be concluded. The list of member states pushing for its conclusion is fairly exhaustive, consisting of: the Czech Republic, Spain, Sweden, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal and Slovenia (Reuters, 2022). That is to say, over half of the 27 member states have explicitly expressed a desire to conclude the FTA.

Though France is not alone in its opposition, the above observation points to liberal intergovernmentalism's hypothesis on relative power in the intergovernmental setting being correct, or at the very least applicable to this particular case. That is, Because France's interest in finalizing the FTA has been relatively small compared to that of the abovementioned member states (and the Commission, but we will get to that), they have not been able to make France carve in to demands of finishing said FTA. It is as a result of this – following liberal intergovernmentalism – that the negotiations have thus far still not ended in its signing, and much less so, ratification. For them to move forward, the member states with a high interest in the FTA would, thus, have to make sufficient concessions and/or compromises to satisfy France (and the other states opposing the agreement for that matter) under the current circumstances.

Turning to the other loser of the intergovernmental level, the Commission, a similar pattern can be discerned. Similar in the sense that France's demands can likewise be interpreted as a roadblock for them. The Commission's reaction to this roadblock – possibly circumventing the national parliaments by means of splitting the environmental and trade aspects of the FTA into their own distinctive parts – highlights how intense their interest in the finalization of the EU-Mercosur FTA is, and how, if they wish to finalize it quickly, they will likely have to use illegitimate means. That being said, it would be difficult to cover this aspect under a liberal intergovernmentalist lens, since liberal intergovernmentalism places the power in the hands of the member states. Furthermore, the element of legitimacy is not particularly developed in its theoretical framework, and it would therefore arguably be more sensible to utilize social constructivism to analyze the possible consequences the Commission could face by going down the route of circumvention. Whatever the case, it appears that France has made the Commission consider more extreme measures to swiftly achieve its interests. Measures that would not require them to make concessions or compromises regarding their interests.

As such, it is evident how the domestic interests of the French – which, as underscored in the liberal intergovernmentalist section, inform the interests expressed at the intergovernmental level – have turned into a real headache; not only for the member states supporting the EU-Mercosur FTA, but for the Commission as well. If they want the FTA to be finalized, they may either risk drawn out negotiations – perhaps even vetoing if the FTA stays mixed – or reaching their goal swiftly, but with likely consequences as a result. The key aspect causing said headache has arguably been the intense pressure related to both the trade and environmental issue. This dual pressure would – from a liberal intergovernmentalist perspective at least – have constituted what made the French state link the environmental issue to the overall FTA. If merely one of the two issue areas had been intensely pressured, it is less likely that France would have linked the two at the intergovernmental level, and as a result, that the FTA would have been blocked. This is not to imply that the French interest groups necessarily cooperated, just that pressuring the state can result in their interests being achieved. The bottom line is that this demonstrates why groups (including the public) show interest in pressuring their state.

As the actors in favor of the EU-Mercosur FTA could be considered the losers, it should come as no surprise that the member states that have been against it in its current version, and in

extension their interest groups – could be considered the winners. However, if one want to examine the fine details, “against it in its current version” emphasizes another shortcoming of liberal intergovernmentalism with regards to this case. Though there is no apparent issue with the agricultural groups, as they could be theorized to become in favor of the FTA if their economic interests were met, the fact that the environmental interest groups want it downright terminated, clashes with how France has negotiated. That is, though France has opted for a pro-environmental stance – in the liberal intergovernmentalist perspective based on pressure for environmental action – there is a disparity between the precise interests that France has supposedly acted on and what they have negotiated at the intergovernmental level. As such, one could argue that France has in fact not acted in the interests of the environmental sphere of society. Of course, that is not to say that the analysis cannot be carried out – the theoretical elements do technically fit the case after all – but merely that it would not demonstrate the exact reality of the case. The only way it could fit the case exactly would be, if in the end, the FTA stays mixed and France in the end decides to veto it in their parliament. For now, then, social constructivism’s idea of acting on legitimacy might better explain both France’s behavior at the intergovernmental level, as well as the French government’s relationship with the pro-environmental societal actors.

On this note, we will now move on to the social constructivist part of the analysis. To begin with, we will go over social constructivism’s applicability at the domestic level from the norm life cycle perspective. From there we will then move on to the analysis on France’s use of rhetorical action at the international level.

*How successfully can the social constructivist approach be applied?*

Moving on to the social constructivist approach as applied through the norm life cycle, will it yield a more vigorous or less vigorous result than did liberal intergovernmentalism? First of all, like was mentioned in tandem with liberal intergovernmentalism, it would appear that the level of pressure exerted on Macron was high enough that he would return to a negative stance on the EU-Mercosur FTA. Given that the pressure appears to have come from bottom-up, then, the theory in this particular aspect can very much be applied to analyze the case. However, when it comes to covering the plurality of actors found in society, things become a bit more convoluted.

For one, while the French environmental interest groups more generally could be considered to have played a role as norm entrepreneurs, in the case of the agricultural ones, this would only be applicable to the agricultural interest groups that are actively invested in climate issues. That is, though some of the agricultural interest groups have indeed supported the environment, they are not environmental organizations per se, and as such, a significant part of them can be expected to lack an interest in spreading pro-environmental norms. However, despite this being the case, and the fact the theory focuses on social norms, the agricultural groups without a climate profile can still arguably be incorporated into the analysis, even if they have shown not to act based on a shared moral assessment.<sup>15</sup> A manner in which they can be incorporated is by interpreting them as actors that, in the context of the EU-Mercosur FTA, have not shown to oppose reasons for blocking the FTA based on environmental norms. As such environmental norms, here, have supposedly remained unchallenged. This is to be expected given that their interests – in the EU-Mercosur case – ultimately align with those interested in protecting the environment. That being said, their agricultural interests are hard to account for, for as was mentioned, they appear incompatible with the idea of a shared moral assessment.

The French interest groups that do actively fight for climate issues, whether environmental or agricultural, do however not face this problem, and as such, they can be implemented and analyzed more fully. Both as agents influencing the French government less directly through public opinion, as well as in a role of agents of socialization, forming a network of norm entrepreneurs pressuring state actors. Though the ability to investigate about the access of environmentally engaged French norm entrepreneurs to policy is limited using this method, one could hypothesis that they perhaps have gone about pressuring their government for policy change in the same manner as they did when they sued the French government over inaction on climate commitments. That being said, interviewing representatives of the network on their access to the policy processes would indeed be a better manner of trying to answer this question.

On the topic of the public, there is a similar, though not identical pattern: while public opinion covers the French population as a whole, it cannot handle the agrarian interests, as these, again, are not related to a shared moral assessment. That is not to say that the economically interested

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<sup>15</sup> A shared moral assessment can be described as a collective evaluation of whether an action is moral or not, and constitutes one half of what constitutes a social norm (the other being oughtness) (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 892).



agricultural groups were not raising awareness among farmers – the case has clearly demonstrated that they did – but rather that interests were not related to changing social norms. The same absence can be observed with regards to why the French citizens with sympathy for the agricultural sector pressured the French government: there is an indication that it was out of economic concerns and sympathy on the basis of a shared French identity that this section pressured the government, and not a shared moral commitment related to a social norm. Importantly this leads to an implication that a less norm-centered approach to social constructivism – one focusing more on interest based on identity for example – would be able to incorporate the agricultural aspect to a higher degree. Though identity would be the central element in such an analysis, and not norms, the change of central element does not necessarily mean that the approach would position itself differently on the social constructivist spectrum. Whether it would change or not would ultimately depend on if the researcher would still follow an interpretivist interpretation of social constructivism or instead opt for a positivist one.

Regarding the pluralism of actors inside French state institutions, it can, in the norm life cycle approach – not go into the detail offered by the liberal intergovernmentalist counterpart. The reason why is quite clearly because social constructivism – at least in its norm life cycle version – presents the state as one whole, standing in contrast to society. As such the analysis of the governmental side of affairs will be fairly rigid, with the conclusion resulting in an either-or scenario: either the whole state apparatus had internalized the norm of environmental protection or no parts of it had (in the French case, as was assumed, the latter has been indicated to be the case). However, though the lack of distinction between policy-makers in the political institutions signify that some nuance would be lost, the norm life cycle is still technically capable of analyzing this aspect of the French case.

The overall implications, then – at least in the French case – are that the domestic level can be more widely analyzed by liberal intergovernmentalism than social constructivism in its norm life cycle form. This is given that the former can also account for actors whose interests were of a non-normative nature, an element that is simply not present in the latter's theoretical framework. Thus, in a sense, the liberal intergovernmentalist analysis could be argued to constitute the more complete analysis of the two.

That being said, as fewer actors are qualified for being analyzed from the norm life cycle perspective – in this specific case anyway – it also gives it the advantage of having a more definitive answer than liberal intergovernmentalism with regards to what groups influenced the stance of the French government the most. The caveat here is of course that this more definitive answer might represent an incorrect one. However, going by the findings of the French case one could certainly argue that the combined environmental groups, in tandem with the French public, were the more influential in altering their government's stance on the FTA.

Additionally, one at the same time needs to consider that the norm life cycle offers an alternative explanation, mainly because identity and ideas constitute the starting point of analyzing an actor instead of its interests. From such a conceptualization, then, the French environmental groups identity as environmental groups and the ideas of pro-environmentalism tied to such an identity would be what would shape their interests in the protection of the Amazon Rainforest and the termination of the EU-Mercosur FTA. The same could be said about the French public, as the studies highlighted in the initial part of the analysis indicated that French citizens have, in their majority, adopted pro-environmental ideas. As this would provoke pro-environmental interests, it is not surprising that public opinion would sour on Macron government once they would find out that the EU-Mercosur FTA would hurt the environment (whether it was immediately after the signing or by the time the Amazon forest fires became salient). The result of the topic becoming salient would, from norm life cycle's perspective, lead the French government to search for renewed legitimacy. This by more generally signaling – through discourse directed at the public – that the French government has been committed to climate action (see for example: Reuters staff, 2019a; Le Monde & AFP, 2019a).

Having covered the social constructivism from the norm life cycle perspective, we will now go over the French state's application of rhetorical action. More precisely how they utilized it through public channels as an attempt to secure their interests by shaming EU actors in favor of the EU-Mercosur FTA.

### *French discourse of rhetorical action*

Chronologically, the first statement that could be argued signal the application of rhetorical action is the statement expressed by the French presidency to Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro on 23 August 2019. The statement reads as follows:

*"Given the attitude of Brazil in recent weeks, the President of the Republic can only note that President Bolsonaro lied to him during the summit in Osaka. The decisions and words of Brazil in recent weeks show that President Bolsonaro has decided not to respect his climate commitments or to commit to biodiversity. Under these conditions, France opposes the Mercosur agreement as it stands"* (Franceinfo & AFP, 2019).

First of all, though the statement calls out Bolsonaro, it can be interpreted just as much as a signal to the French public, other member states, and the Commission, of what France finds to be inappropriate. To elaborate, it can be observed how the French presidency highlights a lack of promised climate action as an illegitimate behavior, as opposed to what they present as their own legitimate behavior of taking action by opposing an FTA that will hurt the environment.

Regarding the illegitimate behavior, it can, on one hand, be observed how the French presidency frames Bolsonaro as an unreliable and unpredictable negotiator who lies. The reason they decided to do this is likely in part because they actually meant it, however, at the same time it could function as a way for the French presidency to frame further negotiations on the EU-Mercosur FTA as illegitimate. This is further emphasized by the fact that they likewise stress Brazil itself as representing an unreliable trading partner, both by referring to their attitude as well as their decisions and words. As such, they framed the situation so that the Commission, and the member states that would continue to support the FTA, would appear as actors caring more about trade than the environment. In other words, as actors not following one of the standards of legitimacy in the EU area: the commitment to environmental protection. In a sense, then, this could be viewed as a less direct manner of shaming.

On September 18 the following year, the French state would again express their opinion on the EU-Mercosur FTA. This was in the context of a report having been delivered to then French Prime Minister Jean Castex; the report describing the FTA as a *"missed opportunity for the EU to use its*

*negotiating power to obtain solid guarantees”* (Euractiv & AFP, 2020). On the basis of this report the French government would issue the following statement:

*The draft agreement has no provision to impose discipline on the practices of the Mercosur countries in the fight against deforestation. This is the major shortcoming in this agreement and this is the main reason why, as it stands, France opposes the draft agreement* (Euractiv & AFP, 2020).

As can be seen in the quotation above, France would this time explicitly focus on the deforestation in its rhetorical action on the FTA. While one could argue that this statement was a mere expression of their interest and a possible search for legitimacy among their citizens, one could also read this as France once more trying to delegitimize the Commission by exposing their lack of action. That is, by referring to the FTA’s lack of provisions that could limit deforestation, the French government could be attempting to implicitly link the deforestation issue with the Commission, as the Commission after all was the one negotiating on behalf of the EU member states. Presenting it in such a manner would make the Commission appear both incompetent and with illegitimate goals, and thus make them possibly lose legitimacy among the European community. Now, considering the context of the statement – it being expressed in the wake of the release of a report underscoring the lack of environmental measures found in the draft text of the FTA – it is likely that this statement was directed more towards member states than the constituents of said member states. In that sense, the French government’s hypothesized framing of the Commission could be interpreted as a form of bargaining to try and convince member states supporting the FTA to oppose it.

That being said, the statement overall appears to reflect a standard discourse rather than rhetorical action. That is, though there is a negotiating quality to the statement, it is difficult to make the argument that it is outright antagonistic. Therefore it appears more in line with the other assumption connected to this statement: that it simply demonstrates the French government following their interests, and a possibly searching for some legitimacy at home.

As for the year 2021, foreign trade minister Franck Riester would in an interview early February, in connection with a meeting of the Trade Policy Monitoring Committee, declare that still France *“will not sign at this stage”* the EU-Mercosur FTA (Rodrigues, 2021). He would go on to elaborate:

*“It does not mean our withdrawal, but we will only be satisfied with a political declaration on environmental commitments from the four countries involved [Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay], and that will take a long time,”* (Rodrigues, 2021 (parentheses added by source)).

Adding:

*“Our demands are clear, we must work in depth to make them as objective as possible to advance the agreement,”* (Infobae, 2021).

The most interesting part of the above quote is perhaps that Riester assures that France’s opposition to the EU-Mercosur FTA in its, then, current version, was not an actual withdrawal from the FTA negotiations. Rather, he communicates that France is still interested in the deal, but under the circumstances that environmental commitments are taken seriously. A conclusion, then, must be that the initial enthusiasm for the FTA that Macron expressed back when it was first signed, still holds true. Considering that what was communicated in the interview was likely also communicated at the meeting – as well as there not only having been parliamentarians and officials present, but likewise NGOs, trade unions and employers – one could interpret this signal as France slowly trying to move towards the FTA, attempting to evade the negative reactions of the public and the environmental interest groups alike while doing so. At least in an analysis based on a social constructivist theoretical framework, such an interpretation does not appear too farfetched. In fact, it would confirm the hypothesis of France being genuinely interested in the FTA, but without losing legitimacy. However, as for whether Riester was successful in this hypothesized mission or not, the answer would appear to be no, at least as far as the environmental and agricultural interest groups were concerned (Logvenoff & Groult, 2021). In conclusion, the French state arguably became entrapped by their own argument in trying to shame the Commission and other member states into accepting their terms for the FTA. That is,

there is a possibility that they lost legitimacy in their home community as a result of having attempted to impose their interests onto the other political actors. Further investigation, that lies outside the scope of this article, would however need to be conducted to confirm this.

An ironic factor to Riester's statement is that, though he, by emphasizing France's commitment to climate action, tried to gain – or at least not lose – legitimacy, the statement would nonetheless result in a loss of legitimacy, as the environmental interest groups (and the agricultural ones for that matter) wanted the FTA abandoned, not altered. The backlash, in tandem with both the French presidential as well as legislative elections coming up, could be a reason why the France kept effectively silent about the FTA during their 2022 EU presidency (Allenbach-Ammann, 2022).

**Finally**, the reason we can more definitively consider this behavior shaming, and as such rhetorical action, is that it was done in a forum with the interest groups present, while a **discourse** orchestrated to put pressure on the actors in disagreement with French interests was utilized. In other words, there were agents present to judge if the standard of legitimacy was being followed by the member states (including France) and the Commission.

So, did the shaming actually work? Regarding the member states, it would seem that the member states that were in favor of the EU-Mercosur FTA had not in reality shifted their stance by 2022, that is, after the rhetorical action had taken place (Reuters, 2022). Even the ones that did signal concern about the FTA and its impact on the environment, namely Germany and the Netherlands, are now pushing for its conclusion (Deutsche Welle, 2020; French Embassy to the Netherlands, 2020).

As for the Commission, while it did underscore that it was serious about green trade deals, following the rhetorical action – it having tried to circumvent the environmental factors by splitting the trade part of the FTA off from the rest of the agreement implies otherwise (Moens & Vela, 2022; Moens & Vela, 2022a). In other words, similarly to the member states, it would seem that the rhetorical action of the French was not effective in pushing the Commission to follow French interests. Thus, for now, it can overall be concluded that the French government failed to secure their interests. However, it should be recognized that they have been successful in stalling the FTA's signing and ratification, so as for the FTA not coming into force, they have had success for now.

## **Conclusion and final considerations**

So, what can we conclude from having investigated the French side of the EU-Mercosur FTA? First of all, by examining the case at hand without theoretical bias, it would appear that pressure from society on the French government could at least have played a role. This can be drawn both from the level of climate commitment demonstrated by their CCPI score – which indicates that they may not be committed enough for one to consider environmental norms as internalized within them – as well as Macron distancing himself from the FTA further and further, after it was initially agreed to in principle. As such, though both theories had shortcomings in the context of this case, they were in more general terms capable of analyzing it. An important detail here is that when one theory failed to explain a phenomenon, the other was there to help explain it with its alternative theoretical framework. This frequent overlapping indicates that one would perhaps be best off by considering to analyze the case with a pragmatist research design. That way liberal intergovernmentalism would have been capable of delving into the role of legitimacy – which their intergovernmental bargaining could be argued to be partially based on for the moment – while the norm life cycle version of social constructivism – with the help of liberal intergovernmentalist ideas on interests – would be better able to tackle the groups without a normative background. That being said, if one insisted on going with one or the other, a more open-ended version of social constructivism, focusing less on norms and more on identity's influence on interests, could constitute a reasonable choice.

However, the above considerations are not the only ones that should be considered. The level of influence from each group in the domestic arena is likewise important to reflect upon. Here it was in the case of liberal intergovernmentalism difficult to pin down what group(s) actually had the biggest say in the change of Macron's stance on the EU-Mercosur FTA. While the measures utilized to analyze the case – change in stance/discourse in relation to the moments of outcry – do give us an idea whether it was the agricultural or environmental “audience” that was more prioritized, at the same time it is only an approximation. This is not so much the fault of liberal intergovernmentalism as it is the fact that the given question is hard to answer if one does not have access to the proper policy-makers. If one had such access, it would likely be easier to trace from where the pressure imposed on the policy-makers came, and thus for liberal

intergovernmentalism to be capable of answering exactly what group(s) had more influence than others. On the other hand, social constructivism's norm cycle perspective gives us a more straightforward answer, as its perspective stresses the influence of norms. This would fall in line with the part of the analysis not informed by theory bias, but once again it is based on an approximation. If said approximation turned out to be wrong, the norm life cycle would suddenly have more difficulty in explaining the domestic part of the case.

Lastly, it should be considered that the French state as a whole might in fact have internalized norms of environmental protection and expressed their statements as discourse rather than rhetorical action. The analysis on rhetorical action certainly indicates that the French could have expressed their statements in a more aggressive manner than was the case. Another conclusion, then, might be that the analysis has simply been too critical of the French state. After all, as has been the case with various aspects in this thesis, the answer of what hypothesis reflects actual reality is not immediately obvious. If that were the case, the answer would likely already have been discovered. Though this indicates no new discoveries, this paper has served as a further discussion of France's role in the EU-Mercosur negotiations by reexamining France's role more deeply post-agreement-in-principle.

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