

## The evolution of EU trade policy

Written by Cecilia Malmström on 25 June 2019 in Opinion  
Opinion

EU trade policy has not only seen record numbers of partnerships, it has also established ethical standards that lead the world, writes Cecilia Malmström



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When I became EU Trade Commissioner in 2014, the global situation was very different. Public confidence in trade was at an all-time low, with regular protests on the streets outside my office.

Successive studies have shown just how important trade is to our economy. At the latest count, 36 million Europeans are in jobs supported by exports, up five million since 2014.

Nevertheless, in a trend captured in our Trade for All strategy paper back in 2015, it's clear that Europeans do not only care about jobs and GDP.

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They also care about values and want trade to reinforce high standards at home and abroad. This is why we've worked hard to regain citizens' trust. In 2019, EU trade is now synonymous with transparency.

We include the public at an early stage, we regularly consult civil society organisations and we publish an unprecedented number of documents online.

We should be proud that the EU is now the most transparent trade negotiator in the world. Of course, we continue to believe that open trade is economically beneficial.

In the last five years, the European Commission has negotiated and concluded more trade agreements than in any comparable period.

The EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement – our biggest ever – entered into force on 1 February 2019.

Recently, MEPs approved trade and investment agreements with Singapore. Meanwhile, we are already seeing the fruits of our agreement with Canada, in force since September 2017.

The EU now has 41 trade agreements with 72 countries – the largest network in the world – offering European businesses opportunities within a fair, predictable working environment. Our trade agreements also uphold and promote our values.

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Every comprehensive EU trade agreement now has legally binding commitments on workers' rights and the environment, including a specific reference to the Paris climate agreement. When our trade partners fail to walk the talk, we are prepared to hold them to account.

This is the case with South Korea, with whom we have launched a dispute on workers' rights issues – the first of its kind.

We still offer generous access to our markets for developing countries, but such access requires a commitment to apply certain minimum standards.

With Cambodia, we have launched the formal withdrawal procedure, which could their privileged access to the European market removed if the government fails to tackle human and labour rights

violations.

At the multilateral level, we are co-founders of the worldwide Global Alliance for Torture-Free Trade movement. Signing a trade agreement binds countries together economically, bringing businesses and citizens closer.

It also demonstrates shared values and a common outlook on the benefits of open trade. This is particularly important when, in a wider context, some major players seem to have lost faith in the rules-based system.

Indeed, this current order is at risk of collapse. Unfair practices, outdated rules and unilateral action are testing it to its limits. Some WTO members even question its relevance and are actively seeking to undermine it.

This is why we are working to reform the WTO to ensure it remains fair, strong, and equipped to face current and future challenges.

We are also open traders, but we take decisive action against those breaking or bending the agreed rules and harming European businesses, workers and consumers.

When the United States imposed unjustified tariffs on our steel and aluminium products, we reacted swiftly and proportionately.

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Thankfully, our dialogue with the US is now more positive, based on the joint statement agreed by Presidents Juncker and Trump in July 2018, but we remain vigilant in the event our interests are once again threatened.

Our reformed trade defence tools and our work on expanding market access allow us to tackle unfair trade and to break down overseas barriers to European exports.

In addition, we recently agreed to establish the EU’s first ever framework for screening foreign investments. This gives us a better overview of who is investing in our critical public infrastructure, allowing us to act where necessary.

My mandate is not yet over; we are still negotiating on numerous fronts and will continue to do so until the final day of the Juncker Commission.

We hope to formally conclude pacts with Mexico and Vietnam before then, as well as reaching political agreements with the four members of South American trade bloc Mercosur.

Beyond this busy bilateral agenda, I am also pleased that, in the autumn, we will hold a second-high level conference on trade and gender.

This will help identify the remaining barriers that women face when trying to benefit from international trade, whilst offering solutions and best practice from both private and public sectors.

### **About the author**

Cecilia Malmström is European Commissioner for Trade



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