

EU Trade and Non-trade Objectives: New Survey Evidence on Policy Design and Effectiveness

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Abstract

EU trade policy increasingly focuses on the achievement of non-trade policy objectives (NTPOs) such as the promotion of human rights or environmental protection, motivating research on the political economy determinants and effectiveness of linking trade policy and NTPOs. This research reports selected findings from a new expert survey of stakeholder perceptions of trade–NTPO linkages. These suggest that the views of EU institutions align with those of civil society organizations more than with business, but also reveal significant differences in the perceived effectiveness of trade–NTPO linkage strategies. Many stakeholder groups believe that policy instruments other than trade agreements are more effective tools to pursue NTPOs. These findings suggest that further research on EU trade policy and non-trade issues should consider the broader range of external policy tools available to the EU in pursuit of NTPOs and the determinants of differences in preferences for alternative policy instruments.

Keywords: EU trade policy; non-trade objectives; trade agreements; expert survey; issue linkage

Introduction

The EU trade policy increasingly includes a focus on non-trade policy objectives (NTPOs), such as the promotion of human rights, labour standards or environmental protection in partner countries (European Commission, 2015; ; Lechner, 2016; Poletti and Sicurelli, 2016; Raess *et al.*, 2018). This is reflected in linkage strategies, that is, conditioning access to the EU market on NTPO commitments by partner countries (Borchert *et al.*, 2018), and has inspired a long line of literature emphasizing that successfully pursuing NTPOs through trade policy hinges on garnering support from domestic organized interests, including different business interests and civil society organizations (CSOs) (Meunier and Nicolaidis, 2006; Young and Peterson, 2014; Poletti and Sicurelli, 2018; Dür *et al.*, 2019). Notwithstanding the quality of these works, little is known about the alignment of EU policymakers' preferences with those of CSOs and other stakeholder groups and the degree to which different actors have similar preferences.

While studies have found that EU trade officials often agree with the views of non-business stakeholders, when are they more (or less) likely to do so? Do the preferences of EU businesses and policymakers align in using trade agreements to pursue NTPOs? In this research note, we help answer these questions and focus on variations in actors' preferences across the alternative policy instruments available to the EU to

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[Correction added on 20 October 2021, after first online publication: The copyright line was changed.]

pursue NTPOs. We present evidence from a new expert survey on preferences over NTPOs and perceptions on the salience and utility of alternative trade-relevant policy instruments, shedding light on a range of stakeholders' views over the EU's use of trade policy to pursue goals lying beyond trade.¹

The results suggest there is a broad agreement to use trade policy conditionally (that is, to pursue trade-NTPO linkages), but substantial disagreement about the most appropriate (effective) instruments for achieving NTPOs. CSOs perceive targeted assistance to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as the most desirable instrument for pursuing NTPOs, while partner country governments and European businesses, on the other hand, show strong support for technical assistance. Among businesses, the views of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) mirror those of CSOs in preferring targeted assistance, while large firms are more supportive of bilateral expert dialogues. In general, unlike EU policymakers, European firms, business associations and CSOs are sceptical of the effectiveness of conditioning trade agreements on NTPOs. These findings raise questions over the dynamics underlying this variation in interest alignment between different actors and policy instruments to achieve non-trade goals in EU external relations. The findings contribute to academic research on societal preferences for linkages between trade and NTPOs and perceptions on the effectiveness of EU trade and external policy in attaining economic and nontrade objectives.

I. Views on Trade and NTPOs

Conventional accounts of EU trade policy-making suggest that businesses largely oppose or hesitate to include NTPOs, reflecting fears that these may reduce competitiveness or market access (Lechner, 2016; Poletti and Sicurelli, 2016). CSOs, on the other hand, are held to favour linking EU trade policy to strong labour, environmental, and human rights provisions in trade agreements and the granting of preferential access (Bossuyt *et al.*, 2018; Fritz, 2010; Lechner, 2016; Young, 2016). EU policymakers, in turn, are shown to be closely aligned with business interests, often overlooking CSO concerns on trade policy (Elsig and Dupont, 2007; Woll, 2009). The logic underlying EU policy alignment on business preferences is that integrating business into trade policy-making increases EU bargaining power vis-à-vis third countries, strengthens its legitimacy and solidifies technical expertise (Bouwen, 2002; Elsig and Dupont, 2007; Van den Hoven, 2006; Woll, 2009). These accounts have been complemented by nuanced studies that aim to capture differences in business interests with regard to their preferences over NTPOs. For example, some scholars have postulated that import-competing firms and sectors are more likely to be proponents of labour and environmental standards because of their potential to impose additional costs on foreign competitors (DeSombre, 2000; Raess *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, importers and vertically integrated multinationals that rely on imports may mobilize against trade-NTPO linkages, as such policies may increase the cost of doing business (Lechner, 2016).

¹The survey complements other public opinion polls such as the Eurobarometer polls or Pew Research Centre global surveys on attitudes to economic globalization and the EU Commission public consultations. See <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm> for information on the different types of Eurobarometer editions and https://ec.europa.eu/info/consultations_en for EU public consultations. Pew surveys are at <https://www.pewglobal.org/category/publications>.

The growing politicization of trade policy increases the salience of analyses of the political dynamics and coalitions that underlie EU trade policy (De Ville and Siles-Brügge, 2017; Young, 2015, 2016). Recently scholars have demonstrated that CSOs have a significant influence in EU trade policy making (Eliasson and Garcia-Duran, 2018) and that EU policymakers increasingly consider the views of CSOs in using trade policy to pursue NTPOs. The literature on normative power Europe highlights the EU's pursuit of sustainable development goals in a 'new generation' of trade agreements, with civic society supporting the foundations of a value-based discourse in trade policy (Poletti and Sicurelli, 2018; Van den Putte and Orbie, 2015; Young and Peterson, 2014). We complement this scholarship by providing new evidence on the preference alignment between organized interests and policymakers on the one hand, and various stakeholders on the other.²

II. The Survey Instrument

The expert survey has several distinct features. It covers a wide range of stakeholder groups in and outside the EU, together with their views on EU trade policy-making. The sample includes practitioners in EU institutions, governments (both EU member states and non-EU partner countries), businesses and associations, CSOs working on trade and academics in and outside the EU. This comprehensive coverage of actors with an operational stake in EU trade policy helps us identify patterns of preferences over NTPOs and the extent to which actors' views are aligned with each other in a systematic way. The questionnaire also includes questions on the perceived effectiveness of different trade-relevant policy instruments used by (and available to) the EU. This permits us to map perceptions of the usefulness of different instruments across actors within and outside the EU. The inclusion of non-EU participants sheds light on EU trade partner's views. This is important as they are key in ultimately implementing the non-trade policies pursued by the EU (Harrison *et al.*, 2019).

The data were collected through an online survey application from 5 July 2018 to 24 June 2019. The survey was sent to people identified in a contact list of trade policy experts).³ All responses were anonymized by the software application used. A total of 416 respondents affiliated to the stakeholder groups analysed here took part in the survey, of whom 348 completed the questionnaire.

III. Findings

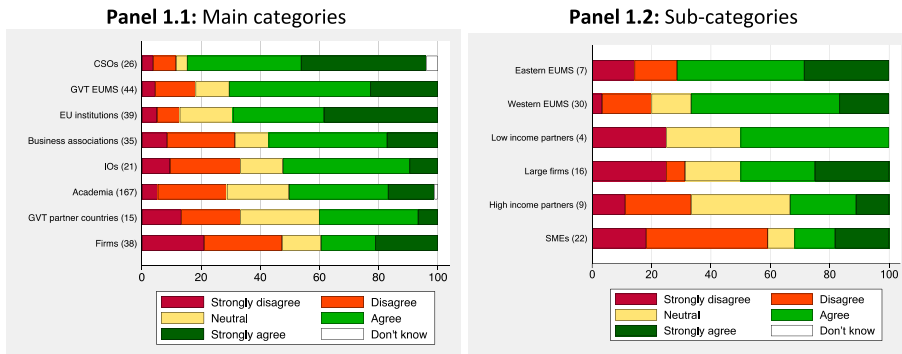
The four groups we focus on in what follows are EU policymakers, distinguishing between EU institution staff and member state officials; businesses, distinguishing between

²The survey instrument is complemented by a series of articles by practitioners and experts reflecting on different aspects of EU trade policy and the efficacy of efforts to link trade to NTPOs. These are collected in Bilal and Hoekman (2019).

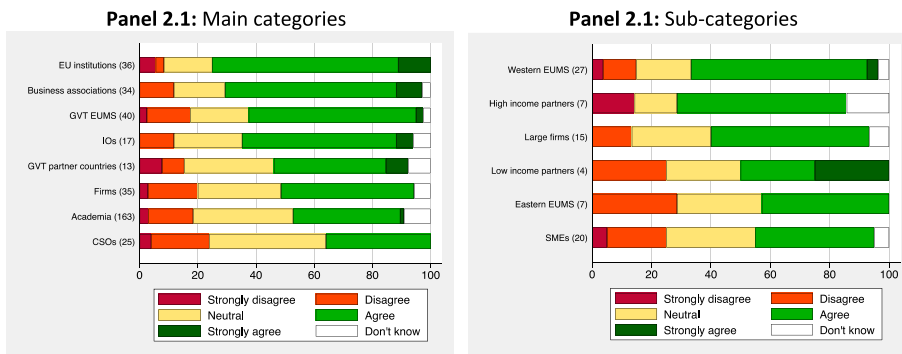
³Respondents had the option not to answer a question, creating a missing value for the associated variable. The survey was disseminated by email using a contact list of about 2,600 experts including practitioners and stakeholders (an initial email was followed by six reminders, staggered over time). Further dissemination of the survey to the relevant population of EU trade policy stakeholders was promoted by encouraging respondents to forward the questionnaire to colleagues (ie, snowballing). Note that this methodology does not permit computing response rates as the size of the total population invited to take the survey is unknown to the analysts. Moreover, the anonymity of responses does not permit the analyst to identify the subset of contacts that did not take the survey. See Fiorini *et al.* (2019) for a detailed description of the survey design and implementation, as well as responses to all questions.

Figure 1: Selected survey results; descriptive analysis. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

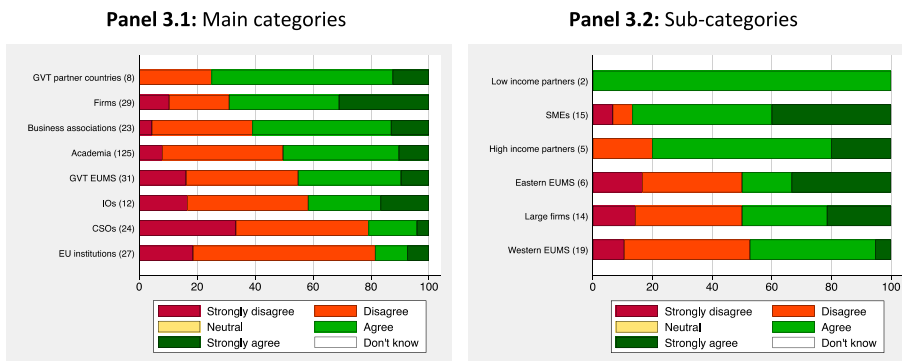
Panel 1 question: The EU should make access to its markets by other countries conditional on non-trade outcomes (such as human rights, labor, environmental protection)



Panel 2 question: EU trade policy supports the realisation of EU non-trade objectives (such as human rights, labor, environmental protection)



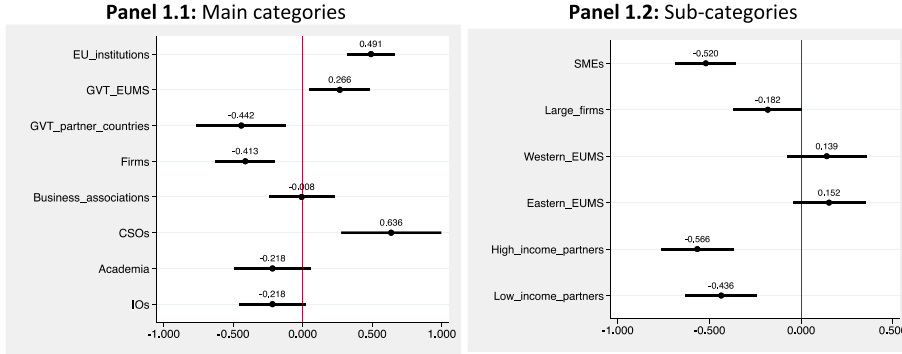
Panel 3 question: Inclusion of non-trade objectives reduces the effectiveness of EU trade policy



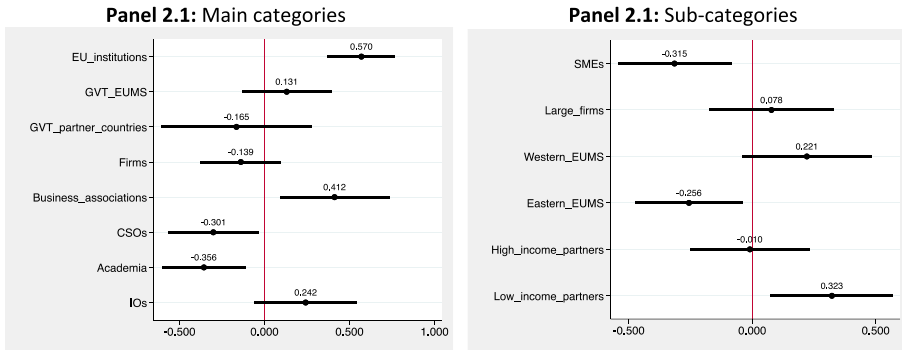
Notes: in the panels professional categories are sorted according to the percentage of strongly agree plus agree responses (from highest to lowest).

Figure 2: Selected survey results; regression analysis. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

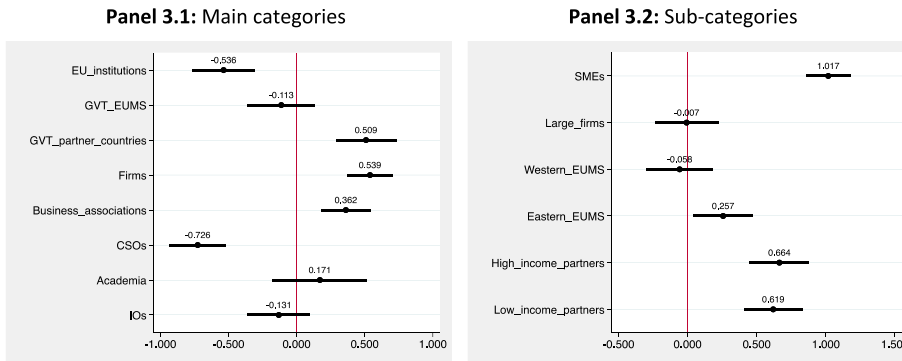
Panel 1 question: The EU should make access to its markets by other countries conditional on non-trade outcomes (such as human rights, labor, environmental protection)



Panel 2 question: EU trade policy supports the realisation of EU non-trade objectives (such as human rights, labor, environmental protection)



Panel 3 question: Inclusion of non-trade objectives reduces the effectiveness of EU trade policy



Notes: Panels report point estimates and respective 95% confidence intervals from ordered probit models.

firms and business associations; and CSOs and government officials of EU trade partner countries. We report results for two additional categories that are covered in our survey: respondents from academia (and think tanks), and from non-EU international organizations.⁴ To understand stakeholder positions on trade-NTPO linkages and their views on its effectiveness, we focus on three statements presented to participants by our survey instrument, outlined in Figure 1 below. These concern support for the strategy of using trade policies to achieve NTPOs (panel 1), the perceived effectiveness of trade-NTPO linkages (panel 2) and if inclusion of NTPOs reduces the effectiveness of EU trade policy (panel 3).⁵ The results are consistent with the growing literature highlighting civic society's influence on the design of EU trade policy, but also reveal both expected and surprising differences in stakeholder preferences over NTPOs.

We start by presenting descriptive evidence from the survey. Moreover, to understand the association between stakeholder groups and their support for the questionnaire statements on NTPOs we complement our descriptive analysis with the results of ordered probit regression models. We integrate both the descriptive and regression analysis with the study of relevant subcategories that are identifiable in our data by splitting the respondents into groups. We report separate results for SMEs and for large firms; public stakeholders in western versus those in eastern European EU member states; and government officials from partner countries with high versus low levels of economic development.⁶

Support for Linking NTPOs to Trade Policy

The first question we analyse is on support for linking NTPOs to trade policy. With regard to conditioning access to the EU market on non-trade issues, EU member state government officials and EU institutions' views are aligned most closely with those of CSO respondents in supporting the linkage strategy (Figure 1, panel 1.1). Amongst business interests SMEs are the least positive towards conditionality, while large firms are more supportive of trade-NTPO linkages. While we refrain from generalizing, given our small sample size on firms, large companies (which are likely to be multinationals) may be more able to meet the costs associated with burdensome regulations and hence less likely to oppose them than SMEs. Partner country officials are highly sceptical of these links as well, consistent with hypotheses that national comparative advantages may be curbed by non-trade regulations (Harrison *et al.*, 2019). Nonetheless, most respondents in all six groups support or are agnostic about linking NTPOs with market access.

The results from the associated probit models (panel 1.1 of Figure 2) point to a statistically significant preference alignment between CSOs and EU policymakers. On the negative side of the spectrum, the ordered probit model suggests there is a statistically significant alignment between respondents of partner country governments and companies. There is no statistically significant difference between SMEs and large firms, low and high-income partner countries, or western versus eastern EU member states. In the

⁴While these two categories of respondents represent groups with less directly affected by EU trade policy, they can be the source of policy advice which shapes preferences and actions of stakeholders. One caveat here is the fact that academia and think tanks are relatively overrepresented in our data. All patterns discussed in this research note are robust to the exclusion of these two categories from the data.

⁵The survey has questions on many more dimensions of EU trade and external policies that may be of interest from a research perspective. See Fiorini *et al.* (2019).

⁶Model specification details and alternative operationalizations are provided in the online appendix (Supplementary material S.1).

different panels lack of statistically significant differences is indicated by the overlap of the confidence intervals around the point estimate for a given group overlap (see Figure 2, panel 1.2).

Do Actors Think Pursuing NTPOs through Trade Policy Works?

Turning to views on the efficacy of the trade-NTPO linkage strategy a different pattern obtains. From panel 2 of Figure 1 and Figure 2 we can observe that respondents from EU institutions are more aligned with businesses (especially business associations) in thinking trade policy supports the realization of NTPOs. In contrast, CSOs are less inclined to believe that the strategy is effective. Thus, while CSOs are in favour of trade-NTPO linkage, they are not convinced of its efficacy – in contrast to EU policymakers. The data suggest there is no significant divergence between subcategories of firms, partner countries and EU member states.⁷

Does the Pursuit of NTPOs Come at the Cost of Trade Goals?

Panel 3 of Figures 1 and 2 shows stakeholder responses to the question whether EU trade policy is less effective when linked to NTPOs. Mirroring the results shown on panel 2, businesses and government officials of EU partner countries perceive that trade policy becomes less effective when linked to pursuit of non-trade goals. The business result is clearly driven by SMEs (panel 3.2 of Figure 2), suggesting that smaller firms are particularly sensitive to trade–NTPO trade-offs. CSOs, on the other hand, disagree strongly. While many of them do not think the strategy pays off in achieving NTPOs (as shown in panel 2.1), they do not believe it adversely affects the realization of trade objectives. In other words, CSO responses suggest that trade policy *can* be used to induce change in non-trade related areas, such as human rights and environmental protection. On this there is again alignment with respondents from EU institutions.

The patterns of preferences across the eight main categories of professional affiliation highlighted so far are robust to alternative exercises, including ordered probit models with responses coded to take only three values instead of five, as well as binomial probit specifications on dichotomized outcome variables.⁸ These robustness tests provide evidence of heterogeneity in the preferences of subcategories of professional affiliations. SMEs and high-income partner countries show relatively weak support for the conditionality strategy. Low numbers of observations as well as heterogeneous results in alternative models indicate that further work is needed to investigate the preferences of different subcategories of stakeholders.

⁷The small number of data points for each subcategory implies very limited statistical power and thus generates rather imprecise estimates.

⁸We replicated the ordered probit regressions reported in Figure 2 after aggregating responses to three values for support: $y=1$ if 'strongly disagree' or 'agree'; $y=2$ if 'neutral'; and $y=3$ if 'agree' or 'strongly agree'. Standard statistical tests for the parallel regressions assumption for each specification with both the five and the three-values outcome variables support the assumption to be verified for each specification for at least one of the two definitions of the outcome variable. The results do not change if binomial probit regressions are run by dropping neutral answers and recoding remaining responses to take only two values: $y=0$ if 'strongly disagree' or 'agree'; and $y=1$ if 'agree' or 'strongly agree'. Results are available upon request.

IV. Which Policy Instruments Are Preferred?

CSO respondents, companies and business associations all support the trade–NTPO linkage strategy in principle, but CSOs seem less confident that it is effective. This raises a corollary question regarding the instruments that are perceived to be most salient to pursue NTPOs.⁹ Much, if not most of the literature on EU trade policy and NTPOs views matters through the lens of market access linkages: trade agreements that encompass sustainable development chapters and trade preferences that are conditional on NTPO commitments (the general system of preferences+programme).¹⁰ The EU has access to many instruments in addition to trade agreement conditionality. In order to explore stakeholders' views on alternative policy instruments to achieve NTPOs the survey includes a question on the appropriate (most effective) trade-relevant policy instruments available for use by the EU, including technical assistance, trade promotion, investment promotion, training and expert dialogues.¹¹ The results are presented in Table 1.

Overall, all eight categories of actors identify the same top two instruments for promoting the realization of NTPOs: targeted assistance to NGOs and expert dialogues between the EU and partner countries. CSO respondents reveal a strong preference for targeted assistance to NGOs (ie, themselves), suggesting they are sceptical of instruments that involve other stakeholders (such as partner country governments or business groups) for addressing NTPOs. Respondents from enterprises and business associations show a strong preference for expert dialogues and technical assistance. Respondents put trade agreements in sixth place (seventh if considering only subcategories) when ranking EU policy instruments in terms of their salience for realizing NTPOs. Neither SMEs or large firms favour preferential trade agreements either and are more likely to support targeted or technical assistance. Respondents affiliated to EU institutions are the outlier, being the only group that puts trade agreements as their top choice. Other actors – notably policymakers from partner countries – consider trade agreements are less effective than assistance to relevant NGOs, regulatory bodies in partner countries, expert dialogues and technical assistance more generally. This is consistent with expectations that partner countries and businesses seek to avoid the inclusion of costly labour or environmental standards in trade agreements, but the fact that other instruments dominate in the responses of all stakeholder groups suggests there is a broad alignment in views that trade agreements are not the most effective instrument for attaining NTPOs.

These findings are only suggestive, given the small sample size, but they point to diverging preferences on what particular instruments to use to pursue NTPOs, and the salience of efforts by the EU to enhance policy coherence (Carbone and Keijzer, 2016) by complementing trade agreements with aid for trade (Hynes and Holden, 2016). A potential

⁹The research agenda proposed by Dür *et al.* (2019) does not address the question of the instrument's effectiveness or interdependencies between instruments.

¹⁰The survey makes it clear that EU trade agreements encompass the recent vintage agreements that include sustainable development chapters.

¹¹The list of instruments included in the survey question was developed in collaboration with members of the RESPECT consortium (see <http://respect.eu.eu/>). Instruments designed specifically to address trade only, such as unilateral trade preferences under the general system of preferences were excluded, as these are not linked to NTPOs. Sector-specific trade instruments that are directly linked to NTPOs, such as import restrictions for timber (eg, the EU forest law enforcement, governance and trade programme or conflict minerals) were also excluded, as our main interest was to assess views on horizontal, non-sector-specific instruments that can be used to achieve NTPOs and complement trade agreements, which by design cover all sectors.

Table 1: Instruments for Realizing Non-trade Policy Objectives

	Targeted assistance for NGOs/unions/regulatory bodies	Expert dialogues between EU and partner country stakeholders	Technical assistance	EU assistance funds (e.g. European Development Fund)	Bilateral development assistance programs of EU member states	Trade agreements	Study tours and student exchanges	Development assistance for infrastructure improvement	Direct investment by European multinational firms	Twining of cities and similar partnership initiatives	Other instruments	National export promotion activities	Total number of respondents by professional category	Total number of responses by professional category
EU institutions	20	20	11	15	5	16	2	4	5	0	2	0	33	96
GVT EU member state	20	15	12	9	15	7	8	3	3	5	1	2	39	143
GVT partner countries	18	15	15	10	10	0	8	8	10	5	0	0	13	39
Firms	17	19	12	7	5	8	12	3	7	5	3	1	33	95
Business associations	16	18	14	8	8	8	8	4	6	6	4	0	33	106
CSOs	23	14	10	10	8	9	9	3	5	2	4	3	25	92
Academia	17	15	12	12	8	9	9	8	4	4	2	0	150	466
IOs	13	15	13	8	13	8	7	5	8	3	3	2	18	60
Total no. of respondents from main categories	196	174	132	116	99	96	87	61	55	44	27	10		
SMEs	21	21	13	10	2	8	6	2	10	2	2	2	18	48
Large firms	13	17	11	4	9	9	17	4	4	9	4	0	15	47
Western EU member state	1	16	11	8	16	4	7	4	3	5	1	3	26	95
Eastern EU member state	18	9	18	9	18	14	5	5	0	5	0	0	7	22
High-income partners	21	17	17	8	13	0	8	0	8	8	0	0	7	24

Table 1: (Continued)

	Targeted assistance for NGOs/ unions/ regulatory bodies	Expert dialogues between EU country stakeholders	Technical assistance	EU assistance funds (e.g. European Development Fund)	Bilateral development programs of EU member states	Trade agreements	Study tours and student exchanges	Development assistance for infrastructure improvement	Direct investment by European multinational firms	Twinning of cities and similar partnership initiatives	Other instruments	National export promotion activities	Total number of respondents by professional category	Total number of responses by professional category
Low-income partners	8	0	17	17	8	0	8	25	17	0	0	0	4	12
Total no. of respondents from subcategories	46	39	31	21	28	15	22	11	14	13	4	4		

Note: The numbers reported in the main body of the table are percentage shares of each instrument (columns) as chosen by a respondent category (row) over the total choices made by that category (e.g. 20% of all choices made by respondents from EU institutions indicated targeted assistance for NGOs, unions and regulatory bodies as one instrument most effectively promoting non-trade objectives). The instruments (columns) are sorted according to the total number of respondents selecting each instrument across the eight main professional categories in our analysis. The two rows entitles "total no. of respondents" report the total number of respondents choosing each instrument across the main categories and the six subcategories, respectively. The final two columns report the total number of respondents and responses per professional category. There are more responses than respondents, as each respondent could select more than one instrument.CSOs, civil society organizations; IO: international organization; EU, European Union.

reason why respondents are not convinced that trade agreements are an effective tool is the view expressed by many respondents that the EU does not effectively monitor how the implementation of trade agreements impacts on non-trade outcomes (see Fiorini et al. 2019).

V. An Expanding Research Agenda

The survey results suggest that EU policymakers and CSOs concerned with EU trade policy have similar views on the trade–NTPO linkage strategy but differ on its effectiveness. The findings confirm recent observations on evolving alignments between EU policymakers, business and CSOs on NTPOs. EU policymakers, CSOs and even various business actors seem to hold similar views on the role of NTPOs in trade policy. These alignment patterns vary considerably in terms of preferred policy instruments, which suggests there are differences in views on the specific instruments for pursuing NTPOs through trade policies. These observations call for further investigation as to why actors prefer different policy instruments. What informs their choices? To what extent are their perceptions supported by evidence of the effectiveness of alternative instruments? These questions are not only of academic interest. They are relevant for policy design. For example, research has shown that EU trade policy is more effective if complemented with supporting policies, such as service sector regulation in the context of services trade policy reform (Fiorini and Hoekman, 2020).

Future research should consider EU trade policy-related instruments more broadly than encompassing mainly access to the EU market, suggesting an agenda that goes beyond the predominant focus on (reciprocal) trade agreements and (non-reciprocal) trade preferences in the literature. Understanding differences in the determinants of actor preferences across these traditional trade policy tools is important (Dür *et al.*, 2019) but risks being too narrow. Research is needed as well on the design of different types of linkage strategies in the pursuit of non-trade objectives (Aidt *et al.*, 2019) and the underlying mechanisms explaining stakeholder choices over a broader range of salient policy instruments. Moreover, as noted above, our design is unable to consider substantial differences in firm-level preferences of NTPOs. While we can observe business preferences overall, and certain differences between SMEs and larger firms, further research will benefit greatly from untangling firms' preferences and mobilization over policies linked to trade.

Finally, the survey reveals both the importance and the challenge of getting a comprehensive overview of stakeholder interests. Previous research often focuses on a subset of stakeholders involved in trade policy-making (e.g., Raess *et al.*, 2018). The survey results complement existing studies by generating empirical evidence on perceptions and actor preferences on non-trade issues for many relevant stakeholders in a single study. The low number of responses we gathered from experts illustrates the difficulty in reaching the parties involved in or affected by the design and implementation of EU trade policies, and in a broad sense, mapping their views on using trade as an instrument to achieve NTPOs.

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Supporting Information

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

Data S1 Supporting information