

Farm Interests as Bargaining Chips: France in the EU-Mercosur Free Trade Negotiations

DIETER KONOLD *International Politics, Humboldt University, Berlin*

ABSTRACT

In trade policy France ranks as one of the most protectionist countries in the European Union. From an outside perspective, the French attitude is usually explained as a consequence of the strength and influence of the agrarian lobby. The article argues that farm groups in France have lost their formerly privileged position and the power to pursue their interests politically. A closer look at domestic politics shows that agricultural reforms were successfully implemented against the opposition of the farm lobby during the last ten years. But at the same time, French policy-makers were keen to create the impression that they were unable to make concessions in international trade talks due to the resistance of the agricultural sector. The EU-Mercosur negotiations demonstrate how the French government fended off demands for liberalization using farm interests as bargaining chips.

Key words: Common Agricultural Policy, European Union, France, interest groups, Mercosur, trade policy

France is generally considered to be a classic example of a country where peasants' interests have a decisive impact within the political system. Whenever during the last decades the state found itself under attack for defending a high level of protectionism in agriculture, the executive and the farm lobby joined forces to make sure the status quo was preserved. The apparent close cooperation between public and private actors led to the impression that the former acted on behalf of the latter. Based on this assumption, the 'weak state thesis' was developed, according to which the French authorities are little more than mere agents of certain private interests, thus lacking any autonomy vis-à-vis these groups. This view has been challenged for being deterministic and therefore too simplistic an explanation for the exceptional role of France in the international political economy (Roederer-Rynning 2007). In fact, the image of a weak state hardly seems to match the Fifth Republic, which is traditionally regarded as a stereotypical political system that offers very limited opportunity for societal groups to exert influence. Following this interpretation, centralism, strong hierarchies and a powerful administration are the main

characteristics of the etatist state model of the French republic (Elgie and Griggs 2000; Balme and Woll 2005). Although the agricultural sector undoubtedly holds a special status in the decision-making process (Keeler 1987), the question arises whether the farm lobby does play such an outstanding role as is commonly assumed.

This article argues that it does not. Rather, the formerly influential farmers' associations have lost their power to profoundly shape agrarian politics. If there is still an astonishing degree of unanimity between what the peasants want and the government does, this can be explained by common interests and the bargaining tactics of French representatives in international negotiations: in order to maintain the system of subsidies in the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which not only benefits the farmers but also the French treasury, policy-makers refer to the impossibility of implementing reforms against the farm groups. Pointing to (putative) domestic constraints consequently improves the bargaining position and helps to fend off demands for concessions.

The aim of the article is twofold. First, it seeks to contribute to the debate on the role of civil society actors in European Union (EU) trade politics. Depending on the case studies chosen and the methods employed, different studies come to different conclusions (Dür and Zimmermann 2007). While some authors (Dür 2008; Van den Hoven 2002) emphasize the importance of private actors for the formulation of the EU's trade objectives, others (Grossman 2004; Woll 2007) argue that their significance is overestimated and that national governments and the European Commission can act autonomously. The results of the following study about the role of French farm groups in the EU-Mercosur negotiations on a free trade agreement (FTA) tend to favor the latter opinion. However, the findings cannot be easily generalized. On the one hand, conditions determining the possibilities of influence are dependent on a variety of factors (Mahoney 2007; Michalowitz 2007) and on the other hand, the decline of farmers' associations is an exception in so far as interest groups in general and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in particular have gained relevance in European trade politics (Ahnliid 2005). The second purpose of this article is to combine interest group research with negotiation theory. Building on the work of Thomas C. Schelling (1960) and Robert D. Putnam (1988), it will be shown that restricted autonomy (tying hands), as perceived by the negotiating partners, can be a successful bargaining strategy. The 'paradox of weakness' (Grande 1996) is the primary source of France's strong position in international negotiations on agriculture. To preserve this bargaining advantage, French governments, irrespective of their attitude towards agricultural policy, are keen to underscore the importance of the agri-sector.

The first section will provide theoretical considerations on two-level games and the role of domestic actors in international negotiations. The second section demonstrates how French peasant organizations have lost their privileged position during the last two decades. Farm groups are no longer an independent power within the political system; now the lobby's ability to exercise influence is determined by the willingness of the respective government to accept their proposals or not. Despite considerable differences in the way agrarian interests were incorporated domestically between the Gaullist and the Socialist governments in office during the period 1994 until 2004, at the international level the changes of government had no significant impact on the French position in the EU-Mercosur negotiations, thus giving strong evidence that farm interests were primarily used as bargaining chips.

Some theoretical considerations

The central thesis of this article is that French foreign trade policy is not determined by agricultural interests but by higher-level political strategies, which are, however, often congruent with farmers' claims. This statement raises important questions. How can we distinguish the government's preferences from those of interest groups? And how can we find out if the government is acting due to her own autonomous will or due to external pressure from societal actors (Van den Hoven 2002; Michalowitz 2007)? The basic problem is that influence can only be measured indirectly at best, taking into account a group's resources like knowledge and expertise on a certain topic or the power to sway elections by mobilizing voters in favor or against government policies (Pappi and Henning 1999; Grossman and Helpman 2002; Woll 2007). Without such resources to be offered in return for the privilege to take part in the decision-making process, public authorities will hardly be willing to accept an important role for these private actors (Van den Hoven 2002; Daugbjerg 1998). Another potential indicator of influence is access to decision-makers, which guarantees third parties the possibility to be heard. However, though direct contact with the government, ministries or authorities may be a necessary condition to be able to exert influence, it is not sufficient to affect change on its own (Bouwen 2002; Beyers 2002; Dür and De Bièvre 2007). Proving a positive causality between input of farm groups and policy output of the government is therefore very difficult, particularly in a complex political system like the EU where decision-making at different levels and the pursuit of consensus make it even more complicated to identify clear causal relationships.

If we cannot verify that the farm lobby has an influential role in France, it is at least possible to demonstrate the opposite. While farm-friendly policies cannot prove the strength of its lobby, deciding and implementing measures against the resistance of a group is a sure sign of its weakness. In contrast to the predictions of the ‘weak state thesis’, agricultural politics in France did frequently not reflect farmers’ demands (Roederer-Rynning 2007). At the national level, the Socialists in particular enacted several reforms which were deeply unpopular among the vast majority of the peasantry. This can hardly be explained if the agri-sector is as powerful as commonly assumed. Two caveats against this argument might be entered. We cannot expect that in a democratic system a single group is constantly able to assert its interests. Occasional setbacks are therefore part of the game and not necessarily a proof of impotence. Also, one could argue that domestic and international politics are two different animals and that losing in one arena does not automatically mean a defeat in the other. Indeed, replacing one oversimplified paradigm by another would hardly enhance our understanding of French politics. Strictly dichotomous classifications between weak states with strong societal actors and vice versa do not match empirical reality.¹ Recent studies therefore focus on the conditions under which certain groups are able to exercise interests (Woll 2007; Ehrlich 2007; Gawande et al. 2009; Börzel 2010). But demonstrating that the farm lobby was ignored domestically by the Socialist government in France nevertheless allows for further-reaching conclusions about the group’s influence beyond a single case. Firstly, there is no evidence that agricultural influence was more important at the international stage than it was at home. Neither the institutional setting (i.e. political responsibilities) nor farmers’ demands (maintenance of the status quo) differed among the two levels. Secondly, when a group loses its influence resources, this has political effects on all issues the group is dealing with. The farm lobby’s inability to prevent the government from undertaking reforms was not an ‘accident’ but the consequence of pervasive long-term trends leading to an ever weaker position of agricultural interests in France.

In the following section, it will be shown why farm groups have lost their power to shape politics during the last decades and how these developments resulted in a considerable expansion of the executive’s autonomy. But although the will to make use of this new freedom differed significantly between the reformist left government in office from 1997 until 2002 and her conservative predecessors and successors in the domestic arena, internationally the French attitude towards agricultural trade remained protectionist. Taking the free trade negotiations between the EU and Mercosur as an example, section four

demonstrates that no major shifts in the French bargaining position can be noticed. To reveal the positions and opinions of the actors involved, the study is mainly based on primary sources, namely on *Agra Europe*, a weekly news service on agriculture.

How can we explain, then, the high degree of continuity at the international level despite substantial inconsistencies in agrarian issues at home? Why did the Socialists introduce a national reform program against the opposition of the farmers' lobby while simultaneously supporting their protectionist policy in international negotiations? The answer presented in this article is that, in contrast to domestic affairs and irrespective of the government in power, French foreign trade policy is shaped by protectionist principles both sides have in common, albeit due to different reasons. For peasants high import tariffs and domestic support mean a secure and reliable income, for politicians these instruments provide a welcome source of net inflows from the Community budget. France has always been – and still is – the biggest beneficiary of the Common Agricultural Policy. Although the French share of total European expenditures on the CAP dropped from almost one fourth to below one fifth during the last ten years, in absolute terms it still amounts to more than ten billion Euros annually.² Since liberalizing the CAP means reducing the sum to be distributed, defending the status quo and its financial advantages is seen as a national concern. These material interests are embedded in a political culture of anti-laissez-faire sentiments and suspicion towards market liberal ideas in France.

On the one hand, farmers in France are keen to make use of this skepticism in order to back their arguments against free trade. On the other hand, however, French governments refer to peasants' protests as a constraining factor on any attempt to cut down the level of protectionism. An explanation for this attitude can be found in negotiation theory which claims that a country's bargaining position might be improved through the existence of powerful domestic actors. Thomas Schelling, after whom the following conjecture is named, stated that 'the power of a negotiator often rests on a manifest inability to make concessions and to meet demands' (Schelling 1960:19). Robert D. Putnam integrated this assumption into his two-level games approach and argued that a small win-set, defined 'as the set of all possible [...] agreements that would [...] gain the necessary majority among the constituents' (Putnam 1988:437), may constitute a bargaining advantage. Thus, a large win-set leaves the negotiator in a weak position since he can hardly avoid accepting the demands of his counterparts as long as he gets the final agreement ratified. Conversely, a negotiator whose maneuvering room is constrained and whose hands

are therefore tied will find it much easier to insist on his bargaining position. Hence, the win-set size depends – in addition to the domestic institutional setting and the negotiators’ strategies – on the distribution of power between the government and interest groups which can influence the ratification procedure (Putnam 1988; see also Zangl 1999; Meunier 2005).

For the French government as a negotiator, it is advantageous if her counterparts at the international level believe in the ‘weak state thesis’. Domestic opposition against an international agreement can help the government to take a tough stance on controversial topics, e.g. the maintenance of a high level of protection. If she succeeds in creating the impression that any move away from her original bargaining position would seriously threaten ratification, negotiating partners will be more likely to accept an outcome that is ‘at the edge’ of their own win-set. For this reason, French governments have a strong interest in emphasizing the importance of peasant organizations, which, accordingly, prevent any attempts to cut down subsidies in the agricultural sector.

This approach can only work if the partners at the negotiating table share the perception of a small win-set. A ‘tying hands’ strategy must be based on credible constraints to which the government is subjected. Only when the negotiating parties consider the French farm lobby as a relevant factor within the political system, are they willing to make concessions in order to reach an agreement. There is broad consensus that information plays a crucial role in bargaining processes. However, different views exist on the question whether a government can exploit information asymmetries for its own benefit. Moravcsik (1998) argues that in the EU a country’s preferences are well known to its neighbors and that no member state has an interest in hiding its intentions. Under the condition of complete information, misrepresenting a large win-set as a small one is, of course, doomed to failure (Iida 1993). On the other hand, intransparent decision-making procedures involving informal networks as well as a large number of actors and changing national coalitions and preferences, can make it difficult for outsiders to assess the exact negotiation room available to a government (Putnam 1988; Milner 1997).

The reason why the French win-set is generally perceived to be quite small is originated in the remarkably coherent ‘external communication’ of virtually all political actors. Very similar statements by government officials, authorities from different ministries and even members of opposition parties on the need to protect agriculture from the perils of free trade have often been interpreted as a sign of enormous influence of agrarian interests. But this defensive attitude can

be better explained by the factors mentioned above. There is no doubt that agricultural affairs have played an important role throughout the history of the Fifth Republic (Moravcsik 2000; Coleman and Chiasson 2002), while trade is traditionally ranking rather at the bottom of policy preferences (Lehmann 2005). As a result, any ‘superior’ national interest – like budgetary benefits – will be given priority to trade issues once conflicting matters arise. The French executive was ready to sacrifice sectoral interests – no matter which branch was affected – whenever the government’s preferences were at stake and overall benefits outweighed the costs imposed on these groups (Epstein 1997; Parsons 2000). This has repeatedly been the case when a decision had to be taken whether the government should engage in trade liberalization in order to promote better export conditions for the industrial sector or stick to protectionist measures in order to defend the peasantry. Due to the intransigent attitude of decision-makers in favor of the latter this was alleged to be ‘hijacking of French trade by agricultural policy’ (Messerlin 1996:301). In the next sections it will be argued that policy-makers seek to protect financial interests and that they act in accordance with a widespread skepticism about liberal economic policies, not due to lobby pressure.

Farm groups in France

The decline of farmers’ influence³

During the decades after WWII the peasants’ umbrella association FNSEA⁴ evolved into a major actor in all agriculturally related issues and gained an influential position as the mouthpiece of French farmers. In this period, close ties developed between the FNSEA and public actors, surpassing by far the degree of interest group incorporation common in other countries (Messerlin 1996). The FNSEA had the right to participate formally in ministerial consultations, maintained personal contacts with government officials, had control over the chambers of agriculture and thus could exert direct influence in various ways. This intimate relation has been described as neocorporatist (Keeler 1987).

But even in the early phase of the Fifth Republic, the government had some leeway and could take advantage of the fact that the FNSEA was a powerful actor but not the only interlocutor in agrarian affairs. When the FNSEA was reluctant to support the modernization policy in the 1960s, the government could rely on the young farmers’ group CNJA⁵, which was associated with but independent of the FNSEA (Muller 1984). In the following decades, agreement and co-operation between these two major organizations (and their member associations)

and public policy-makers was the rule, but in times of controversy the profession's power rested on its unity, since discord provided the government with the chance to form coalitions at her will. Culpepper (1993) therefore classified the French agricultural sector as a system of competition (rather than of neocorporatism) where a group's strength is determined by the preferences of state actors. Evidence for this hypothesis can be found in the first half of the 1980s, when the Socialists under President Mitterrand failed to deprive the established farm associations of their privileged status. After two years of intense conflicts and mass demonstrations, Agriculture Minister Cresson resigned due to the coordinated resistance of the groups concerned. But the leftist government was able to implement some measures against the opposition of the FNSEA by cooperating with alternative members of the agricultural policy community. To sum up, the FNSEA never really had the position of a veto player in French politics. Even the two-year stint of former FNSEA president Guillaume as Minister of Agriculture after the Socialists' defeat in the 1986 parliamentary elections rather weakened than strengthened the unity and capacity of peasants (Culpepper 1993).

However, at this point the farm lobby was facing some serious internal problems, which had already become apparent in the 1960s and particularly 1970s. Not only did the FNSEA lose members due to the ongoing structural change in France and the declining number of farmers⁶, but it turned out to be more and more difficult to reconcile the divergent and increasingly heterogeneous interests of its remaining associates. A growing diversification of production schemes and marketing strategies among French peasants restricted the group's ability to formulate consistent policies externally (Cleary 1989; Muller 1984). As a result, the formerly hierarchical structure of interest mediation in the agricultural sector was replaced by a more pluralistic organization along commodity lines (Coleman and Chiasson 2002; Roederer-Rynning 2005; Hennis 2005). This development was reflected in the emergence of new rival agricultural interest groups, which challenged the representation monopoly of the FNSEA and the CNJA in France. During the 1990s, the new farmers' groups were able to augment their share of votes steadily in the chambers of agriculture. Nevertheless, the former quasi-monopolist remained by far the strongest faction and could even consolidate its position in the last elections in 2007.

The loosening cohesion of the peasantry and hence the fragmentation of their organizational structure was reinforced by a gradual reformation of the European agricultural policy. With the 1992 MacSharry reform – named after the then European Commissioner of

Agriculture – the road was paved for systematic and functional changes to the CAP. Price supports were significantly reduced and partially replaced by compensatory direct income payments in order to decrease production incentives. Rearranging the system of financial aid had major effects that weakened the farmers' lobbying capacities. The introduction of direct payments revealed the true costs of the CAP. The whole system of subsidies became much more transparent and therefore vulnerable to critique and further reform proposals from a broader public (Delorme 2004; Roederer-Rynning 2005). Rising exogenous pressure was accompanied by quarrels inside the agricultural sector about the extremely uneven distribution of payments.⁷ Such discussions are potentially very dangerous as they undermine internal unity and external credibility. Within the FNSEA, the advocates of the status quo retained the upper hand but tensions were not far beneath the surface whenever distributional matters entered the agenda. (Agra Europe, 17 April 2001; 6 April 2009)

The Socialist victory in the 1997 parliamentary elections brought President Chirac a five-year period of *cohabitation* and FNSEA a significant loss of power. The new Jospin government welcomed the pluralism of agrarian interests and accepted the FNSEA's competitors as official dialogue partners, thus ending the association's privileged position (Coleman and Chiasson 2002; Delorme 2004; Roederer-Rynning 2005). Subsequently, relations between the government and France's most important farmers' lobby deteriorated dramatically, as will be shown in more detail later. Farmers' interests have therefore lost their long-held institutionally secured and outstanding position within the French political system, whereas the executive has gained autonomy and room for maneuver vis-à-vis agrarian organizations (Roederer-Rynning 2005; Hennis 2005). Due to these basic transitions, the end of the 'French exception' had already been predicted more than a decade ago (Messerlin 1996). And yet, the farm lobby in France is still considered to be the epitome of a mighty interest group which is able to influence and instrumentalize the government for their own purposes. In the next section, we will see that things have changed and can be interpreted in exactly the opposite manner.

Agricultural Politics

With the brief exception of the early Mitterrand years, French agricultural politics by and large followed a coherent strategy both in the domestic arena and on the international level until 1997. Priority was given to the promotion of competition by supporting export-oriented producers while at the same time it was sought to maintain a

high degree of protection against non-European agricultural goods. As long as these principles formed the background on which policy-makers took their decisions, they acted in concert with agrarian interests.

Tariffs and quotas help European peasants by insulating them from world markets and producers in third countries which are more competitive – not least due to lower standards in environment and animal protection. But maintaining the system of subsidies also benefits those member-states that are net recipients, with France getting the largest share of CAP payments. It is therefore in the interest of French politicians to secure these profits. During the continuous debates about reducing CAP expenditures in the last 20 years, France accepted several reforms (which were deeply unpopular among farmers) but always remained intransigent on one point (which would not have had negative income effects for French peasants): national co-financing, i.e. partially replacing European funds with national payments, was strictly refused. Even in times of intense conflicts over the future of the ‘European Model of Agriculture’, there was no disagreement between Gaullists and Socialists on the imperative to reject any financial renationalization, and both parties were ready to let the Agenda 2000 fail rather than to give in (Agra Europe, 1 March 1999). France prevailed and payment schemes remained untouched. Although the following CAP reform in 2003 was more radical, agricultural minister Gaymard afterwards expressed his satisfaction about the outcome as France had succeeded in securing its favorable financial position for the next ten years to come (Agra Europe, 14 July 2003). These examples show the importance of French budgetary concerns.

A second dimension, where farmers’ and politicians’ interests are congruent, derives from a joint assessment of what the EU’s role in the world trading system should be. Both sides emphasize their refusal to sacrifice European achievements, including the Common Agricultural Policy, on the altar of liberalism. But attributing the defensive approach in trade issues to the influence of the farm lobby would ignore the *choix de société* in France. Polls show that the French population is far more skeptical about the benefits of globalization and market opening than citizens in most other European countries.⁸ Since there is a broad consensus among parties and voters that free trade has overall negative effects, the rule is: ‘in French politics, if you are a protectionist, you are on safe political ground’ (Lehmann 2005:15). Fears of cheap agricultural imports and fears of a loss of cultural identity are therefore two sides of the same coin (Meunier 2000). When farmers’ claims correspond with societal interests, policy-makers are willing to adopt the arguments of agricultural groups in international trade talks and even actively encourage them to make themselves heard (Agra Europe, 31 March 2003).

At the domestic level, a new pattern evolved between 1997 and 2002 with the period of *cohabitation*, when Gaullist President Chirac had to cope with a Socialist government led by Jospin. During these years, major reforms in the agricultural sector were passed, driving a wedge between the peasantry and Chirac on the one hand and the leftist government on the other. Shortly after they had gained the majority in the *Assemblée Nationale*, the Socialists advanced their ideas of a new agricultural policy, which aimed at redistributing public financial transfers to the benefit of small peasants and linking these payments to the fulfillment of certain conditions in terms of ecological aspects. The instrument of promoting this policy was the *Loi d'orientation agricole* (LOA). Adopted in July 1999, the orientation law marked 'un tournant historique' (Delorme 2004: 126) and brought the French agrarian policy in line with the concept of multifunctionality, which highlights the various positive ecological and social effects of agricultural cultivation. Besides the mere production of foodstuffs, farming was to be committed to protecting the environment and promoting rural development through the creation and maintenance of employment and infrastructure in peripheral areas. To accomplish these goals, a new tool in the form of the so-called *Contrats Territoriaux d'Exploitation* (CTE) was created. Every farmer who signed one of these voluntary contracts had to observe both environmental and socio-economic objectives, depending on the specific conditions of the respective local circumstances, in return for additional allowances (Agra Europe, 22 November 1999). The concept of 'cross compliance' was funded by cuts in direct payments, making one billion French Francs (approximately 152 million euro) annually available. As the applied reduction rates depended on the farm size and the level of direct payments, modulating – in CAP terminology – agrarian expenditures had re-distributional effects among recipients of subsidies. Most affected by the implementation of these reforms were the cereal growers with large farms and intensive production practices, who used to get the lion's share of agricultural expenses in France. Unsurprisingly, those were the fiercest opponents of the new 'modulation' policy (Agra Europe, 28 June 1999; Roederer-Rynning 2007). The bulk of large cereal producers was organized within the FNSEA, and the association championed their interests by using its political weight in order to inhibit the implementation of the objectionable law. This attempt turned out to be a failure as the Socialists, unlike in earlier times, resisted all pressure of the farmers' lobby.

To mitigate the protests against their agrarian policy, the Jospin government pursued a strategy of 'locking in' domestic policy changes by establishing corresponding regulations on the European level. For

this purpose, the Socialists developed a reform program for the Agenda 2000 negotiations, including the obligatory introduction of Community-wide modulation and a 'degression' of direct payments. But these efforts were soon stymied by President Chirac, who made use of his role as head of state in the run-up to the Berlin Summit in March 1999 to further prevent major cuts for French peasants (Delorme 2004; Fischler 2006). When the Agenda 2000 was agreed upon, a second pillar in the CAP was established to provide an instrument for the development of rural areas but modulation was made optional for the member states. Therefore, the French Socialists had no possibility to refer to European constraints in order to defend their agricultural policy domestically.

The contest between the left government and the opposition was repeated during the early debates about reforming the CAP in the context of the mid term review, which evaluated the results of the previous arrangements. Whereas Glavany, the Minister of Agriculture, pressed for upgrading the second pillar and introducing modulation schemes mandatory for all EU countries (Agra Europe, 11 February 2001; 12 March 2001), Chirac emphasized that the Agenda 2000 decisions were valid until 2006 and should not be altered before, arguing that farmers could not be expected to constantly adapt to new rules and regulations (Agra Europe, 5 March 2001; 10 September 2001). However, both French parties agreed that the European budgetary framework for the CAP should be left untouched (Agra Europe, 23 April 2001; 30 April 2001), providing evidence that also for the Socialists securing the financial benefits was of superior interest.

Tensions between the French government and the farmers' lobby were not limited to issues concerning the future of the European agricultural model. The anger was concentrated on minister Glavany, who was blamed by the agrarian interest groups, and not only by the FNSEA, for ignoring their requests and preventing the profession from having a say in agricultural policy (Roederer-Rynning 2007). The calls for broader influence were becoming even more vociferous as new challenges of a completely different kind hit the agricultural sector: the foot-and-mouth disease and the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE). In particular the so-called 'mad cow disease' was a cause of major difficulties to many beef farmers who were affected directly by the epidemic and, even worse, indirectly by falling prices and the declining demand for bovine products. But Glavany only hesitantly agreed to take counter measures as urged by the branch, thus further fueling distrust between the minister and those who were targeted by his policy.⁹

Summarizing these findings, the *cohabitation* could be described as a period of more or less latent hostility between the peasants and their

associations on the one hand and the leftist government, and Glavany in particular, on the other. Unsurprisingly, the re-election of President Chirac and the following change of government after the parliamentary elections in 2002 meant a great relief for the vast majority of French farmers. Raffarin, who took the position as Prime Minister, was a representative of the rural population and together with the new Minister of Agriculture, Gaymard, he immediately initiated measures to comply with the most important demands made by the farmers' lobby. The modulation policy was withdrawn and the CTE system was modified, several plans to tighten environmental standards, such as water protection regulations, were cancelled.

But despite this roll-back in agricultural policy, the *gauche plurielle* undeniably left its mark on the relationship between state actors and civil society groups. The term 'révolution silencieuse' used by Glavany (2001:78) to describe the government's achievements might be exaggerated, but the Socialists had been able to implement a whole series of reforms against the vehement opposition of the farmers' associations. The FNSEA itself lamented a loss of influence in the relations with the government (Agra Europe, 17 July 2000). This reveals a wide range of autonomy for the executive and therefore contradicts the weak state thesis. It is not unreasonable to conclude that reforms are possible when the political will exists to implement them (Roederer-Rynning 2007).

THE EU-MERCOSUR NEGOTIATIONS

The results of the previous section suggest that the agrarian lobby in France lacks the political power to dictate their will to the government. One might therefore expect that their interests played a minor role in the negotiation tactics of the executive. However, the last part of this paper will illustrate how both the Gaullists and the Socialists based their bargaining strategy in the EU-Mercosur trade talks on arguments put forward by agricultural groups. In fact, they acted as if their hands were tied domestically by the farm lobby.

The conservative government Balladur / Juppé

Initial contacts between the European Community and the newly founded Mercado Común del Sur¹⁰ were established in 1991. Only three years later, a Solemn Joint Declaration was signed, which called for an interregional association as basis for a future rapprochement. Until the declaration was adopted in December 1994, there was no

significant interference by civil society actors. Only when the formulation of the agreement made clear that trade liberalization was expected to be an important part of the intended cooperation did opposition emerge (Faust 2004). The European association of farmers, as well as national agrarian interest groups, started lobbying against the establishment of a trade regime which would involve a facilitated market access for agricultural products from the Mercosur countries. As soon as the topic was discussed in the Council, it became evident that some member states did not, in contrast to the supporters of the enterprise, understand the Joint Declaration as a starting point for an inter-regional liberalization process. Especially strong objections were voiced by the French Minister of Agriculture, Puech, who criticized trade liberalization as 'extrêmement dangereux pour l'agriculture communautaire' (Le Monde, 13 April 1995). Equally explicit was a statement made by the French Prime Minister, Balladur, himself. In a letter to the President of the Commission, Santer, he pointed to the risks to European agriculture and warned of potentially negative effects for the EU bargaining position in international trade negotiations (Ventura 2005; Diedrichs 2003).

Despite these obstructions, which indicated that future steps towards closer relations would not go unchallenged, an Interregional Framework Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the Mercosur was signed in December 1995 in Madrid. Being the first agreement of this kind between two customs unions, this accord took EU-Mercosur relationships to a new level. Nevertheless, the framework agreement did not contain any specific commitments to remove trade barriers; it was rather meant to provide the conditions in order to do so. Immediately after the conclusion of the agreement, export-oriented producers on both sides of the Atlantic pushed for concrete and rapid progress in deepening the economic relations between the two regions. On the other hand, agricultural associations in the EU wanted the treaty to be interpreted as a preliminary finishing post for the interregional rapprochement (Klom 2003). They argued that a possible FTA with Mercosur would place too heavy a burden on EU agriculture, especially in view of future reforms and necessary adjustments of the CAP in the course of the European enlargement process (Faust 2004). Obviously, these concerns were taken into account. During the first meetings of the foreign ministers of the EU and the Mercosur, the European representatives avoided making any pledges towards trade liberalization as demanded by their counterparts. This cautious approach revealed a lack of willingness, after the swift conclusion of the framework agreement, to provoke further disputes within the Community. Rather, there was a need for a consolidation phase to define a

common position on the finality of the interregional project (Diedrichs 2003).

In March 1997, a breakthrough seemed to be in sight when President Chirac suggested holding a bilateral summit in order to deepen the relations between EU and Mercosur. The proposal was accepted and the summit was finally set for June 1999 in Rio de Janeiro. However, it soon became obvious that Chirac had not intended to advance the idea of a free trade zone, but rather to intensify the political dialogue. Chirac's initiative did not mean a renunciation of protectionist principles, as documented by a statement from Foreign Minister Hervé de Charette, who called for a time-out in the interregional talks with Mercosur. Barnier, Minister of European Affairs, clarified these considerations by stating that France would only accept decisions exceeding the ones already agreed upon after a break of no less than two or three years. For the first time, a member state publicly departed from the official policy pursued by the European Commission (Diedrichs 2003).

This attitude clearly showed that the Gaullist government had no interest in opening agricultural markets in return for closer political relations. The rather passive approach of both the government and the President was consistent with the demands of French farm groups, who repeatedly warned against potential risks for the CAP. It was feared that the higher level of competitiveness of agricultural goods from the Mercosur countries would threaten the future prospects for many European peasants. The second reason against bilateral trade liberalization, at first presented by Balladur, was that concessions made to the South American partners could hardly be refused to other countries asking for a trade agreement under the same conditions. Espousing this argument was the expression of a double strategy that not only aimed at protecting domestic agriculture, but also at securing an advantageous position in negotiations at the international level. From the outset of the talks, the logic of two-level games was defining the French government's bargaining stance.

The Socialist government Jospin

In June 1997, the Socialists under Jospin took office and a five year period of *cohabitation* commenced. But the change of government did not mean a shift in economic policy. For the case of Mercosur, this became apparent when the European Commission took action in spring 1998 in order to prepare a directive which would serve, after approval of the Council, as a mandate for free trade negotiations. The FNSEA increased its efforts to lobby against the agreement which was

described as 'désastreux' for European agriculture. In addition, with reference to the forthcoming Millennium round of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the planned schedule was harshly criticized for pre-empting possible negotiation tactics and therefore reducing the EU's room for maneuver in the multilateral talks. Consequently, the farmers' association warned, just like Balladur did three years before, that premature concessions to the Mercosur would weaken the European bargaining position towards other countries. For these reasons, the FNSEA called on the French policy-makers to oppose the Commission's plans and to inhibit the issuance of a mandate (Press releases FNSEA, 7 July and 16 July 1998; Agra Europe, 3 August 1998). The government reacted immediately and declared that a rethinking process in the European approach with regard to Mercosur was necessary. Agricultural minister Le Pensec presented a memorandum in the Council which emphasized the potentially disastrous (and very costly) consequences for the CAP, should an agreement cover 'substantially all the trade' as requested by the WTO. It was proposed to restrict the deepening of economic relations to non-tariff aspects until the Mercosur met such standards as the recognition of intellectual property rights, the application of sanitary and phytosanitary measures, rules of origin, technical norms and government procurement (Agra Europe, 20 July 1998).

These demands revealed significant differences between the objectives followed by the Commission on one hand and France on the other. In the Council of Agriculture a broad majority of ministers shared the French point of view and recommended to obtain an in-depth analysis of potential impacts for the CAP before any further steps towards the establishment of a FTA were taken. Only the representatives of Great Britain, Denmark, Sweden, and Spain argued in favor of opening negotiations (Ventura 2005; Diedrichs 2003). Notwithstanding these majority relationships, the Commission decided to submit a draft mandate to the Council. In response, the French government publicly announced not to approve the draft. Given the practice of decisions by consensus¹¹, this was de facto a veto threat (Sanchez Bajo 1999; Ventura 2005). Even before the topic was on the agenda in the Council, France suggested postponing the decision on liberalization until the Agenda 2000 reforms were implemented and progress in the WTO round could be foreseen. For the time being, discussions were to be held about non-tariff issues while possible future steps should only be considered after certain conditions were met (Diedrichs 2003). Again, the Socialists fell back on the same arguments which had been put forward by the agricultural lobby. But becoming an advocate of the farmers' position was part of their bargaining strategy rather than a consequence of domestic power relations.

In March 1999, the European Commission had to resign due to allegations of corruption and therefore failed to be the driving force in the run-up to the Rio summit in June. Only one week later, the Agenda 2000 was adopted in Berlin. With regard to agricultural policy, the results of the summit were rather modest but provided at least a reliable basis for planning in the medium term, which was considered a basic condition for any future trade agreements (Diedrichs 2003). Until June, diverging interests thwarted a compromise. Particularly controversial was the exact wording of how to name the future status of economic relations. Whereas the liberal EU states wanted to explicitly emphasize the goal of a free trade zone between the two regions, others, and primarily France, expressed their categorical opposition (Ventura 2005; Diedrichs 2003). It was President Chirac who vetoed an agreement at the EU summit in Cologne, thus putting further pressure on the timetable (Ventura 2005). The French head of state acted fully consistent with the left government and their legislative majority. A parliamentary report of the EU Committee warned of severe risks for European agriculture in case the plans of the Commission should be put into practice.¹² Similarly predictable was the second argument against a bilateral liberalization process presented in the report: any concession would undermine the bargaining position of the EU in the multilateral context (Assemblée Nationale, 17 June 1999). But Chirac found himself in a quandary, since he was the one who had been putting the meeting on the agenda and therefore could not be interested in a failure (Diedrichs 2003). As soon as the French claims were accepted, he therefore withdrew his veto. One week before the summit in Rio de Janeiro took place, a compromise was made and an Interregional Association Agreement was finally adopted. The summeeters decided to divide the future negotiation process into two stages. The first phase was dedicated to non-sensitive topics, while all other issues, including tariff reductions, were to be dealt with in the second phase beginning in July 2001. This procedure was supposed to guarantee that any progress in the WTO round, which was expected to be launched in November in Seattle and be finished by 2003, could be taken into consideration so that under no circumstances the EU-Mercosur negotiations would pre-empt potential results. One important French requirement was thus met. The second bargaining success was that the term 'free trade' was avoided when defining the goals of the economic cooperation (Diedrichs 2003).

This outcome meant that France had prevailed and that the tying hands strategy of both President Chirac and the Socialist government proved successful. The common line of argument followed by the FNSEA, President Chirac, and even Jospin obviously enhanced the

credibility of the tough French negotiation stance. Since the same government simultaneously pushed for agrarian reforms at the national and the European level, thereby pointing to international obligations, which required such measures, the closing of ranks between Socialists and their domestic critics must be seen as a tactical maneuver. The fact that the leftist government addressed farmers' concerns while she had no desire, as we have seen in the previous section, to strengthen the farmers' lobby clearly indicates that she was guided by strategic considerations. To put it more directly, the farmers' associations were instrumentalized in order to improve the French bargaining position.

In July 2001, the EU presented its first offer on tariff reduction which provided for the liberalization of bilateral trade within ten years, but with significant exceptions for agricultural goods.¹³ The second half of the year saw a dramatic worsening of the economic situation in Argentina resulting in the country's bankruptcy in December. Mercosur's counter-proposal of October fell short of expectations and was criticized for being insufficient not only by France (Agra Europe, 12 November 2001).

The conservative government Raffarin

Unsurprisingly, the conservative government under Raffarin, which replaced the *gauche plurielle* after the parliamentary elections in June 2002, did not move away from the protectionist stance in trade policy. Rather, domestic decisions were brought in line with demands at the international level. The turn in agricultural politics therefore had implications for the French peasants, whose interests gained significant weight but left the external dimension relatively unchanged.

Until the beginning of 2003, the interregional negotiations were stalled due to the deep crisis in the Mercosur and elections in France and Brazil. In March, both sides presented new liberalization offers (Agra Europe, 10 March 2003), which laid the basis for further discussions in the following months. But these attempts in order to reach an agreement were overshadowed by the final consultations within the EU on the mid term review of the European agricultural policy, which was intended to evaluate the Agenda 2000 measures and resulted in the most profound CAP reform since 1992 (Daugbjerg and Swinbank 2007). When the difficult compromise was in the end put into place, most governments were of the opinion that the EU, for its part, had made concessions in advance with this reform (Greer 2005; Agra Europe, 28 July 2003). Hence the mid term review was seen as defining, or rather limiting, the framework of any future international agreement. This point of view was also shared by the farmers' lobby,

which only reluctantly accepted the CAP resolution and all the more forcefully claimed that the new status should not be called into question again (Agra Europe, 22 September 2003).

In November 2003, the EU and Mercosur adopted the 'Brussels Programme' envisaged to finalize the negotiations by October 2004 and thereby within the Commission's remaining term of office. Given the slow progress in the WTO (in fact the trade round had been launched in Doha two years later than originally planned, and talks were 'temporarily discontinued' after the ministerial conference in Cancún in September 2003 had failed) this decision meant that further inter-regional negotiations were de facto decoupled from the multilateral context and that the desired parallelism was abandoned. This development was sharply criticized by the European farmers' associations who expressed their fears of being obliged to pay twice, first for the Mercosur agreement and then in the WTO (Agra Europe, 24 May 2004). In order to avoid this scenario, farm groups called for focussing solely on the rapid conclusion of the Doha Round using the CAP reform to press for extra concessions by the other WTO member states (Press releases COPA, 4 September 2003; FNSEA, 20 April 2004). Instead, the Commission adopted a 'single pocket' approach and launched a new and far-reaching offer to the Mercosur countries in May 2004 whose actual configuration was made dependent on the final results of the multilateral talks (Agra Europe, 24 May 2004; 1 June 2004).¹⁴ France's reaction to the initiative was clear: the Minister of Agriculture, Gaymard, considered the Commission's proposal as 'désarmement unilatéral' and strongly argued in favor of a new European trade strategy with a definite priority for the multilateral context.¹⁵ He also accused the Commission of overstepping the negotiation mandate (Agra Europe, 1 June 2004). A number of states joined the opinion that trade preferences granted to the Mercosur could hardly be refused to other WTO countries, thus constituting a risk of paying twice for the same concessions. According to this group, no obligation to liberalize trade should go beyond the scope of the 2003 CAP reform (Council of the European Union, Press releases 24 May and 21 June 2004).

Space for negotiations in the final phase of the interregional talks was therefore considerably restricted. While France had risked isolation in the run-up to the Rio Summit in 1999, several member states, in light of the Doha Round, now supported the point of view that the EU should preferably concentrate its bargaining resources on the WTO. Facing a potential veto threat from these countries, the Commission lacked the possibility of reviving the EU-Mercosur talks with a substantial new offer. Instead, the coalition between the agrarian

interest groups and the protectionist-oriented governments dominated the debate during the last months preceding the deadline set in the 'Brussels Programme'. Towards the end of 2004, there was a growing conviction on both sides that the schedule could not be met, especially since the failure of progress in the Doha Round prevented any new stimulation of the project. A broad majority within the EU, including even the Commission, regarded the final liberalization offers from the Mercosur states as not sufficient to serve as a basis for further talks (Agra Europe, 1 June 2004; 28 June 2004; 20 September 2004; Kutas 2006). Due to conflicting positions, representatives of the EU and the Mercosur announced the temporary failure of the interregional negotiations at a ministerial meeting in Lisbon in October 2004. Since then, talks have taken place regularly but without any results so far. In May 2010, the Commission announced the relaunch of negotiations.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that the importance of the farm lobby in France has significantly declined in the last twenty years, the resulting rise in autonomy for policy-makers did not lead to a more liberal foreign trade policy. In contrast, a remarkable continuity of agrarian protectionism can be noted, which largely remained stable over the two changes of government during the period of this study, thus creating the impression that the French win-set is very small due to constraints from farm groups. The reform policy implemented successfully by the Socialist government against the explicit opposition of peasant organizations, however, raises doubts about whether the executive leeway for action is really that limited. But assessing the results of the free trade negotiations between the EU and Mercosur countries, the French tying hands strategy worked: France could credibly take a tough bargaining stance, hence preventing any liberalization of the CAP, and consequently did not lose the financial advantages of the subsidy system.

The finding that France pays great attention to agricultural issues is not new. But in contrast to existing explanations, interest group pressure is not the relevant determinant for French trade policy. In order to understand the insistence on maintaining a high level of protectionism for the agri-sector, other factors have to be taken into account. Tangible budgetary interests embedded in a political culture of skepticism towards liberalism are responsible for the French bargaining attitude. Therefore, studies on French foreign policy should increasingly focus on the preferences of key executive actors and parties. If the farm lobby exerts influence, this is only the case because the government allows them to do so.

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NOTES

1. For an overview of this debate, see Daughjerg 1998.
2. European Commission, Financial Reports, available at http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/fin/finrep/eagf/index_en.htm.
3. This section has benefited a lot from the valuable comments of an anonymous reviewer.
4. Fédération nationale des syndicats d'exploitants agricoles.
5. Cercle, then Centre national des jeunes agriculteurs, since 2001 Jeunes agriculteurs (JA).
6. Between 1955 and 2005, the number of farms in France decreased by 75 per cent (Agra Europe, 29 January 2007).
7. In fact, more than 80 per cent of the funds go to less than 20 per cent of the farms; half of the budget is spent on only 5 per cent of recipients (Agra Europe, 7 October 2002; 28 April 2008).
8. See for example Eurobarometer 69.2, November 2008, available at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb69/eb69_globalisation_en.pdf.
9. Pierre Chevalier, president of the French beef farmers' association FNB, said about Glavany: 'avec l'ESB et la fièvre aphteuse, la troisième calamité du moment' (Le Monde, 7 April 2001).
10. Consisting of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.
11. Qualified majority voting is the formal rule in the Council, '[b]ut in practice unanimity is the basis for EU trade policy, at least as far as the interests of major sectors or major member-states are concerned' (Woolcock 2005:237).
12. 'L'instauration brutale d'une zone de libre échange entre l'Union européenne et le MERCOSUR, comme le demandent les pays sud-américains et ainsi que semble le souhaiter la Commission européenne, serait susceptible d'affaiblir gravement la politique agricole commune' – Assemblée Nationale, Onzième Législature, Nr.1721, p. 66.
13. For details, see Agra Europe, 9 July 2001.
14. Import quotas for certain sensitive products should only be granted following a WTO agreement which secured the EU's limited market access for these goods (Agra Europe, 24 May 2004).
15. <http://agriculture.gouv.fr/sections/presse/discours/conseil-informel-des-ministres-de-l-agriculture-intervention-d-herve-gaymard> (accessed 4 July 2009).

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DIETER KONOLD

Department of Social Sciences
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Unter den Linden 6
Berlin 10099
e-mail: dieter.konold@sowi.hu-berlin.de