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Unfolding the European Commission's storytelling on ethical trade relations with Vietnam

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Unfolding the European Commission's Storytelling on Ethical Trade Relations with Vietnam[1]

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Abstract

This paper constructs the narrative behind EU-Vietnam trade relations as told by the European Commission. A policy plot in three 'acts' focuses in particular on the two most recently concluded trade agreements, which share a common narration of 'a force for good.' The EU and Vietnam star as the main characters, who, in their joint attempts to make bilateral trade 'a force for good', live moments of heroism, encounter fleeting moments of victimhood, and defeat the villains on the path to ethical trade. We find that the Commission's narrative essentially reiterates the longstanding 'development' story, in which the EU as a protagonist shapes the world according to its own values. Identified challenges are to be addressed through Vietnam's 'development', using the EU's one-size-fits-all approach. The particularities of these challenges however remain largely obscured, making it impossible to 'name the culprits' and diverting attention away from inconsistencies and conflicts.

Résumé

Cet article déconstruit le discours de la Commission européenne sur les relations commerciales entre l'Union européenne (UE) et le Vietnam. L'analyse se concentre en particulier sur les deux accords commerciaux les plus récents, qui partagent un récit commun au travers duquel l'UE se dépeint comme une force bienveillante. L'UE et le Vietnam, les deux personnages principaux de ce récit, s'efforcent de faire du commerce bilatéral « une force au service du bien », vivent des moments d'héroïsme mais sont aussi parfois, de manière éphémère, les victimes de ces luttes pour vaincre les forces du mal sur la voie du commerce éthique. L'analyse montre comment la Commission réitère essentiellement le récit du « développement » dont l'UE est le protagoniste principal, façonnant le monde selon ses propres valeurs. Ainsi, les problèmes rencontrés par sa politique commerciale doivent être résolus par le « développement » du Vietnam qui repose lui-même sur les outils au bienfondé supposément universel des politiques européennes. Ce récit laisse ainsi dans l'ombre les particularités des défis qui entravent la politique commerciale de l'Union européenne. Il ne permet pas d'identifier les véritables causes des obstacles rencontrés et détourne l'attention des incohérences et des conflits.

INTRODUCTION

People are storytellers. As humans, we construct stories – or narratives – to make sense of chaotic, as well as complex realities, and to guide our everyday choices and activities (Somers 1994). Whether or not intentional, we usually want to create 'a good story' – a story which works, is easy to grasp and paints a positive picture of ourselves and our actions. The story of the European Union's (EU) ethical trade policy is such a story. It entails the reduction of complex, multifaceted situations into easy-to-understand tales with heroes, victims and villains. The heroes create a better world; the villains must be defeated; and bilateral trade is the instrument to leverage it all. The most vital attribute of a story is that it is highly selective in what it integrates in its plot. A narrative, intentionally or not, connects some events in a causal story and lapses – or obscures – other elements.

In this paper we will look at the narrative construction of the EU's trade policy for the case of Vietnam. In the face of human and civil rights violations, the suppression of free speech and freedom of association and the disappearance of political activists, Vietnam provides a particularly fertile ground for researching the narrative construction of ethical trade: in recent years, trade relations with Vietnam have been subject to significant contestation by civil society groups and Members of European Parliament alike (European Parliament 2016, 2017, 2018; Lawyers for Lawyers 2018; Tremosa 2018; Human Rights Watch 2019). In the face of this contestation, we will argue, that the Commission has constructed a particularly attractive performative story of progress and modernisation. In this story, the EU inevitably emerges as a progressive actor, promoting social and environmental sustainability, empowering civil society and defending civil and human rights.

This paper analyses the EU Commission's story telling through an interpretive narrative analysis of two trade agreements that were largely negotiated in parallel: the EU-Vietnam Free Trade

Agreement (FTA) and the (much lesser known) EU-Vietnam Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA). The two agreements have different policy objectives yet share a narrative construction by the European Commission as a 'force for good.' The FLEGT VPA is a sector-specific trade agreement, which aims to combat trade in illegally logged timber by monitoring timber value chains, verifying the legality of timber products coming into the EU market and increasing overall forest-sector transparency. Due to its explicit environmental – in addition to economic – focus and attention to participatory governance, it can be seen as the epitome of the ethical trade narrative. The VPA's economic twin sister, the FTA, entails several provisions for making trade ethical, the most notable of which is the Chapter on Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD), as well as linkages to the more politically-oriented EU-Vietnam Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA). These efforts led former Commissioner for Trade Phil Hogan to argue that the EU-Vietnam FTA: 'proves that trade policy can be a force for good' (European Commission 2020a). In both agreements, an overall positive picture is painted, where the EU and Vietnam are heroes in a shared 'coalition of the good', defeating abstract villains through trade cooperation. Meanwhile, human victims and villains are largely invisible.

The paper continues as follows. Firstly, the paper discusses some of the literature that narrates the EU's role as an ethical actor. It shows how since the introduction of the 'Normative Power Europe' concept (Manners 2002), the perception of the EU as an ethical actor has taken on a performative character. Secondly, the paper introduces narrativity as an ontological and epistemological condition and narrative analysis a research method. Thirdly, the paper provides an in-depth analysis of the ethical trade narrative, which is analysed through the building blocks of the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (Jones et al. 2014; Jones & McBeth 2010) and reconstructed in a causally linked policy plot in three 'acts'. In a fourth step, the paper discusses the underlying assumptions of this

policy story by pinpointing what is illuminated and what is obscured, before concluding the paper with a reflection on the implication of these findings in wider research on the EU's identity in its external relations.

1. THE EU AS AN ETHICAL TRADE ACTOR

Since the 2000s, the EU's behaviour on the global stage has often been characterised as 'normative', or 'ethical' (Manners 2002; Aggestam 2008) in EU scholarship. It was notably Ian Manners' concept of 'normative power Europe', that suggested the EU's external actions and policies reflect EUropean internal norms, such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law (Manners 2002, 2011). The sustainable development chapters in FTAs and the FLEGT system can also be understood as mirroring these values. A second wave of literature turns this argument around, arguing that these concepts have also become performative, meaning that they have given a collective purpose to the EU's foreign policy (Whitman 2013). Legitimacy for the EU's existence is created through appropriation of theoretical concepts such as the 'EU's normative power', implying that the EU is a 'force for good' (Aggestam 2008, 1). Notably, the former theoretical concept seems to have become a fundamental part of the EU's self-representation of its belief-systems in its trade policy (Lawrence 2020).

The critical perspective opened the door for a new reflection on the EU's identity creation. Aggestam demonstrates how a shift took place from a focus on 'what it is' to 'what it does' (Aggestam 2008). Bickerton (2011) coined this shift as a functional effect, where these normative theoretical concepts began to define 'what the EU is' (see also Bengtsson & Elgström 2012; Hoang 2016; Larsen 2014). In this vein, five performative narratives (stories) have been identified in EU literature: the EU as an actor who 1) provides security, 2) provides democracy, 3) contributes and assures global peace, 4)

acts as a good neighbour, and finally 5) contributes to the well-being of people worldwide (Niţoiu 2013, 241). These narratives are not random appropriations but reflect underlying belief-systems that have become a legitimization of the EU's action. The interconnected 'free trade', 'neoliberal', 'Eurocentric, modernist and colonial' paradigm asserted elsewhere (Bollen, Ville and Orbie 2016; De Ville and Siles-Brügge 2018; Delputte and Orbie 2020; Jacobs 2020) are legitimised through the narrative of 'the EU as a force for good'.

Our paper furthers this literature on the 'performative' character of the EU's external actions. By applying a narrative lens on the Commission's discourse on an ethical trade agreement with Vietnam, it will on one hand identify the specific narrative that allows the EU to present itself as an ethical trade power and on the other hand engage with underlying ideas, ideology and belief- systems behind those narratives. Our analysis does not aim to examine the merit or appropriateness of these ideas and belief-systems, as was done in earlier research on, for example, TSD chapters (Ford 2013; Lawrence 2020). Neither shall our aim shall be to dive into the discussion that focuses on efficiency and impact of the 'ethical' trade policy instruments (Garcia and Masselot 2015; Bastiaens and Postnikov 2017; Oehri 2017; Harrison et al. 2018; Yildirim et al. 2020), their coherency (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2006; Carbone and Orbie 2014; Robles 2014; Woolcock 2020), or origins (Charnovitz 1992; Bhagwati 1995; Young and Peterson 2013; Holden 2019). Similarly, we do not engage with debates on the underlying structural inequalities of ethical trade policy measures (Maryudi and Myers 2018; McDermott, Hirons and Setyowati 2019; Ramcilovic-Suominen, Lovric and Mustalahti 2019) or on their applicability in particular contexts (Buhmann and Nathan 2012; Lesniewska and McDermott 2014) as has been the case in research on the FLEGT VPAs. Instead, our analysis wishes to review the 'performative' ethical trade policy discourse in the case of EU-Vietnam relations. We do this by shedding light on the EU's narrative on ethical trade, i.e. the EU Commission's emplotment

of scattered events into a whole and complete story, resulting from human meaning-making and narration.

2. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

1.1 Policies as Stories

Narratives are stories, comprised of a beginning, middle and end, causally linked in a plot (Stone 1989; Patterson and Monroe 1998; Hagström and Gustafsson 2019). They can be understood as a specific variant of discourse with sequentially and chronologically organized events (Roe 1994). In line with other schools of discourse analysis, we understand the social world as primarily created by the human mind (Burck 2005; see also Lynggaard 2019); within this view, we perceive narratives as an ontological and epistemological condition (Haste, Jones and Renwick Monroe 2015). This view suggests that life is inherently patterned in narratives, as humans construct them in order to make sense of a complex and ambiguous reality and to organise our often contradictory and fragmented perceptions of the world into a more or less coherent whole (White 1980; Somers 1994; Mishler 1995).

Narratives are not born in a time-space vacuum, but are linked to the identity of the narrator, shaped at different levels of socially constructed and institutionalised belief-systems (Somers 1994; Patterson and Monroe 1998). This perception alludes to our interpretative understanding of the world and the subsequent necessity to look at subjective narratives (see Dunn 1997). We consider narrative analysis a useful tool for revealing the self-consciousness of the storyteller, their perception of the actors whom they stand in relation to, and their beliefs on cause and effect as reflected by truth-claims and the sequential order of narrative events. Rejecting the idea that an objective truth can be recognised by the human mind, including that of the researcher (Somers 1994; Shenhav

2006), we will not try to test the 'truthfulness' or 'fidelity' of a particular narrative vis-á-vis an alleged 'objective' reality, nor will we attempt to explain the use or success of a particular narrative in a positivist manner. Instead, we wish to unravel the narrative construction of 'ethical trade' by the European Commission.

In this research, we follow the assumption of, amongst others, Stone (1989), Roe (1994), Hajer (1995) and the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (Jones et al. 2014; Jones & McBeth 2010) that discourses on public policies can be treated as narratives as they entail a structuring of reality into a more or less coherent story. A vital attribute of such a policy story is that it is highly selective of what it integrates in its plot. Narratives, intentionally or not, connect some events in a causal story while eclipsing others: in creating an illusion of coherency, a policy narrative diverts attention away from inconsistencies and incommensurable values (Yanow 1992). These moments of eclipse or obscuration are therefore as meaningful to understanding the narrative construction of policies as moments of narrative illumination (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006), as they show the narrative patterning of reality while at the same time revealing its limitations in capturing reality in all its complex chaos.

1.2 Research methods

For the concrete analysis we use the narrative building blocks as suggested by the NPF. According to the NPF, a policy narrative entails four essential components: setting, characters, policy solution and a plot (Shanahan, Jones and McBeth 2018). The setting situates a specific policy problem in a specific context (Jones, Shanahan and McBeth 2014). It can be understood as the presentation of 'taken-for-granted facts' (Jones, Shanahan and McBeth 2014, p. 6) that are not questioned – the opening décor of the theatre stage before the play begins. The characters play a crucial role in influencing the

audience's perception of the policy problem and solution, which is why special attention will be given to the characters in our analysis. Characters include villains (those creating the policy problem), victims (those affected by the policy problem) and heroes (those who potentially solve the policy problem) (Jones, Shanahan and McBeth 2014). In this research, we plead for an analytical distinction between these characters on the one hand and their roles (as protagonist, deuteragonist, supporting role and antagonist) on the other, as this allows us to see how different characters and roles intersect within the same narrative. The policy solution represents the moral of the story, generally enacted by the heroes (Jones, Shanahan and McBeth 2014). Finally, the three elements combined make up the plot of the story through a causal narrative (Jones and McBeth 2010; Shanahan, Jones and McBeth 2018).

In our research, we have focused on identifying the dominant policy narrative for EU-Vietnam trade relations through abductive thematic coding in NVIVO-software, based on the first three elements of narrativity (setting, characters, policy solution), which we then reconstruct in a causally linked policy plot in three parts (or 'acts'). We chose the European Commission as our level of analysis because of its role as the main developer and defender of the EU's trade policy. The narration of EU-Vietnam trade relations was respectively researched in the period from the beginning of negotiations to the date of entry into force of the two agreements (from 2012-2020 for the FTA and 2010-2019 for the VPA). We identified in total 91 publications of a heterogenous nature addressing EU-Vietnam trade negotiations, including press releases and background information sheets intended to inform the media and interested publics; staff working documents aimed at specialists and stakeholders; the Commission's interventions during Parliamentary debates; and other speeches with a stronger persuasion function. Heterogenous corpora have the advantage of being more representative and

having less 'bias related to a single type of source' (Crespy, 2015 p. 112). For both agreements, those communications not authored by the EU Commission were excluded.

As suggested in the previous sections, we do not understand any discourse (e.g. fact sheets) as a narrative (Patterson and Monroe 1998) as they do not fulfil the requirements of having a setting, policy solution and characters. Based on Shanahan et al. (2018), we included only those publications that encompassed at least one character and furthermore a point of view on a specific policy issue. The latter is revealed through the setting and policy solution. Moreover, we did not pay attention to the novelty of information provided in the documents as our aim was not to conduct a frequency analysis. The documents considered for the analysis are those speaking of trade relations with Vietnam published on the EU Commission and the DG Trade Press Corner website (see table 1). All the initially identified 83 publications referred to Vietnam as an emerging nation. Among those, 53 mentioned democracy, human rights, rule of law, social or environmental aspects in the context of trade with Vietnam, while 30 described Vietnam purely an economic emerging nation, but did not mention other aspects, and two referred to other ethical aspects without mention of trade. Whereas the 53 documents were coded deductively drawing from the NPF component (setting, characters, policy solution), the latter 30 documents were not manually coded, but still considered in the discussion of the storyline presented by the Commission (see annex 1 for the total corpus).

Table 1: Composition of the corpus coded with NVIVO

Year	Press Releases	Speeches, Interventions		Webpage	Working Documents, Position Papers, Memo's	Total n
2011	0	1		0	0	**1**
2012	6	1		0	0	**7**
2013	0	2		0	1	**3**
2014	1	7		0	0	**8**
2015	2	1		1	0	**4**
2016	2	2		0	2	**6**
2017	2	0		0	1	**3**
2018	1	3		0	2	**6**
2019	1	9		0	0	**10**
2020	2	1		2	0	**4**
Total n	**17**	**27**		**3**	**6**	**53**

Source: authors' data

2. TRADE AS 'A FORCE FOR GOOD'? A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

2.1 Act I: The Quest for Strengthened Trade Relations

The curtain rises. The setting – the primary, taken-for-granted policy objective – is revealed. The policy objective is to facilitate trade with Vietnam, a country that is considered an 'emerging market of the future' (De Gucht, 2014b see also European Commission 2020c). From an economic perspective, facilitating trade with this emerging market is considered a must-have in a changing global order, which will 'create new opportunities for workers, consumers and entrepreneurs' (Malmström 2015). Regarding the VPA, the strengthened trade relations are formulated as

environmental in nature as they are a part of the EU's response to illegal logging globally: the VPA is constructed as a 'further building block in the EU's fight against illegal logging and associated trade' (European Commission 2016c, 2017) and as an extension of the wider FLEGT Action Plan (Potočnik 2011; European Commission 2016b, 2016c, 2017, 2018a). Here too, Vietnam's position as an emerging country undergoing 'exponential growth of its forest-based industries' (European Commission 2016c, 2016b, 2017; Ansip 2019) makes it an extra valuable trading partner, as this will increase the agreement's impact.

The protagonist of the story is the EU, which is on a quest for strengthened trade relations with Vietnam. In the following sections, we will discuss how this pursuit for strengthened trade results in a quest for ethical trade. We will discuss the problems related to institutionalised trade with Vietnam, including social and environmental sustainability, democracy and human rights, as narrative villains that pose challenges for the EU and show how the EU narrates defeating these villains through ethical trade. Throughout the narrative, strengthened trade itself will remain the unquestioned goal, the unmovable 'setting': once the villains are defeated, so the audience learns in the course of the narrative, EU-Vietnam trade relations will no doubt have positive and change-bringing potential for both parties.

2.2 Act II: Trade Under Attack: Non-Human Villains and Abstracted Antagonists

In the second Act of the story, a policy twist occurs, in which the EU is confronted with ethical challenges on the way to strengthened trade relations. These challenges can be considered villains or antagonists in a non-human form: while they have no human agency and cannot take direct action, their villainous attributes prevent the heroes from obtaining their goals (Shanahan, Jones and McBeth 2018).

For the FTA, the encountered villains relate to unsustainability in Vietnam. The EU, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, understands labour and environmental matters as indicators for sustainable development. Specifically, the issue of labour rights is mentioned, as trade is narrated to 'forg[e] connections between consumers in Europe and workers around the world' which 'may include child labourers or workers in unsafe conditions' (Malmström 2015). Unsustainable development, an abstract villain, would therefore be the non-ratification of fundamental labour rights, i.e. eight labour right conventions addressing freedom from child labour (Conventions 138 & 182), forced labour (Conventions 29 & 105), discrimination (Conventions 100 & 111) and freedom of association and right to collective bargains (Conventions No. 87 & 98) (see ILO) have been considered as quasi-fundamental human rights (Gross 2001; Fudge 2007; Mantouvalou 2013; Islam and Hossain 2016). In addition to these labour-related rights, the issue of human rights is more generally mentioned as an 'area of concern' in the overall relations with Vietnam (Hogan 2020) for which 'improvements are central' (European Commission 2020c). In particular, freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly and the situation of human rights defenders are mentioned (European Commission 2020c). Thirdly, environmental protection is mentioned as related to trade, as 'purchasing choices made in Europe impact the environment elsewhere' (Malmström 2015). Although in these examples the problems are explicitly narrated, often these concerns about 'unsustainability' remain tacit and are only made visible through the policy solutions offered.

Regarding the VPA, the main villain is more strongly narrated: 'illegal logging' and, by extension, trade in illegally logged timber, needs to be 'battled' (Ansip 2019), 'fought' (European Commission 2017; Ansip 2019) or 'combatted' (European Commission 2012). Similarly to the problematisation of 'unsustainability' in the case of the FTA, the problem of 'illegality' is not specific to the context of

Vietnam, but is a structural global problem that is considered a 'significant driving force behind deforestation' (Ansip 2019) and 'deprives the government of revenue, threatens biodiversity and creates conflict with forest communities' (European Commission 2016b).

These villains on the road to ethically strengthened trade relations do not appear out of nowhere but find their roots in an additional non-human villain, lifted to a higher level of abstraction: the status of Vietnam as still under 'development' (Barroso 2014; De Gucht 2014c) or as an 'emerging economy' (De Gucht 2014a). Once Vietnam properly 'develops', or so the narrative tells, ethical challenges to trade will disappear. With regard to the human rights situation, for instance, former EU Trade Commissioner Hogan expressed that 'we must take into account where the country has come from and see clear evidence of progress in the last 25 years, notably in the socioeconomic domain ' (Hogan 2020). In this statement, we see Vietnam emerging as a victim of poverty and underdevelopment that deserves empathy and praise for its gradual emancipation from these villains. Hence, if Vietnam is the victim, it cannot be held accountable. Instead, development programmes become necessary (De Gucht 2014b). Similarly, in the VPA, the illegality villain is also fed by the underdevelopment villain, as it has its roots in failing forest governance and law enforcement practices that need to be 'improved' (European Commission 2016a) and 'reinforced' (European Commission 2017).

2.3 Act III: Fighting Back: Trade as a 'Force for Good'

The emergence of villains does not deter our protagonist from its quest to strengthen trade relations; on the contrary, strengthening trade relations is narrated as the solution for fighting these villains. The mission to strengthen trade relations will be 'about improving people's lives in Europe and Vietnam' (Malmström 2015). This conception of trade as a 'force for good' relies on heroes using it as such; the EU is the primary hero who, through trade, propels the fight against illegal logging

(European Commission 2012) and 'strengthen[s] respect for human, environmental and workers' rights' (Juncker 2019). The EU does not act alone, however: Vietnam as deuteragonist appears as a second hero, fighting alongside the EU. A coalition of heroes therefore emerges, with shared values and a common goal. Concerning the FTA, it is mentioned that 'Vietnam has already made a lot of effort to improve its labour rights record thanks to our trade talks and, I trust, will continue its most needed reforms' (European Commission 2020b). Similarly, the VPA is narrated to be 'consistent with the EU and Vietnam's joint commitment to the sustainable management of all types of forests' (European Commission 2016c), and Vietnam as 'fully committed to ensure that no illegally harvested timber will enter the Vietnamese market' (European Commission 2018a).

Despite shared values, the relation between the EU and Vietnam is not an equal one. While the EU is narrated as a fully knowledgeable and capable hero, most of Vietnam's 'hero moments' entail a clear presence of the EU as a mentor, guiding, assisting and monitoring its mentee. An asymmetric dynamic appears with the EU depicted as the developed entity and Vietnam as the developing one (Malmström 2015). This mentor-mentee relationship is visible in the pride expressed by the EU on perceived achievements, such as Vietnam's evolving stakeholder inclusion in the VPA process (Ansip 2019) or Vietnam's recent labour right reforms (European Commission 2020b), as well as in explicit commitments to help and monitor Vietnam. In this regard, communications on the FTA state that 'the Commission will also closely engage and support Vietnam in its commitment to eliminate child labour by 2025' (European Commission 2020c), while a press release on the VPA mentions that 'We [the Commission] will be monitoring closely how the country works to implement the agreement' (European Commission 2016b, see also Ansip 2019; European Commission 2018a).

The story's heroes are supported in their endeavours by European and Vietnamese civil society actors. Civil society is narrated as a rather technical and abstract part of a structural system to improve trade, as well as an unemancipated actor in need of liberation through participation in the 'coalition'. In the case of the FTA, civil society is described as part of the TSD chapter, which foresees Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) as 'a mechanism for each Party to request and receive inputs from representatives of its civil society on any matter concerning the implementation of the Chapter' (European Commission 2016a). To make sure that civil society is able to contribute, 'The Commission is considering activities [...] so that they can become aware of their rights and of the judicial remedies available' (European Commission 2016a). Regarding the VPA, the Commission talks about 'a credible and robust system, which involves all stakeholders' (European Commission 2016b); these stakeholders participate in 'mechanisms for consultation and participation' (European Commission 2017) and are an important part of the 'checks and balances' that should ensure proper functioning of the legality assurance systems (European Commission 2013, 2016c, 2017, 2018c). In its emancipatory capacity, the participation process is further narrated as having 'contributed to opening the political space for dialogue between the government and civil society on forest governance' (European Commission 2016a).

The idea of trade as 'a force for good' is that, if social and environmental problems are the result of 'underdevelopment', then 'development' provides the solution. Strengthened trade relations, in this regard, provide the 'logical next step in our contribution to Vietnam's ongoing development' (Malmström 2015). For the FTA, this development is in a first instance economic in nature: it is argued that 'major benefits are expected to accrue for Vietnam' through 'accelerated structural transformation processes as the country moves towards becoming a market economy' (European

Commission 2013). In this light, the FTA entails gradual tariff elimination for Vietnam, to allow it to most benefit from the agreement's developmental potential (European Commission 2013).

The assumed change-bringing potential of ethically strengthened EU-Vietnam trade relations extends beyond economic benefits, as they will support Vietnam's transition to a fully modernised and developed society. Under the leadership of the EU protagonist, several provisions are put in place to make this happen. For the FTA, a TSD chapter is added, which comprises three components: a commitment to international agreements in the field of labour (ILO conventions) and the environment (Multilateral Environmental Agreements), which serve as baselines for ethical behaviour, a clause 'to avoid 'a race to the bottom' in the labour and environmental areas' (European Commission 2016a), and dispute resolution procedures (European Commission 2018b). The Commission (DG Trade) also stresses that it will encourage investment in greener production (European Commission 2013, 2016a). As an underpinning policy, projects in Vietnam financed by DG DEVCO are supposed to further foster sustainable development (European Commission 2016a, 11–14).

Additionally, linkages are made with other agreements, most notably the more political Partnership and Co-operation Agreement, which 'gives the EU a clear legal basis for raising human rights issues' (European Commission 2016a) and allows the EU to end the trade agreement if violations occur. In this regard, former Commissioner for Trade Cecilia Malmström mentioned that 'an approach of engagement and trade [...] can have the strongest positive influence' and that 'our free trade agreement will accelerate the modernisation of the country and support reforms including in human rights' (Malmström 2015).

The VPA does not so much provide provisions for ethical trade but is in itself a means to make trade more ethical. The agreement is based on the premise of verification of individual timber products in the supply chain. Concretely, Vietnam needs to set up a Legality Assurance System, intended to ensure timber products exported from Vietnam to the EU have been legally harvested and processed (European Commission 2016c, 2017). These mechanisms are intended to 'fight' illegal logging and 'promote trade in timber products that are from sustainably managed forests' (European Commission 2017). It is up to the EU as a mentor to make sure the system is waterproof: it is mentioned that 'we are aware that it will be our duty to ensure that its implementation does not fall short of the high due diligence standards established by our own EU Timber Regulation' (Ansip 2019) and that 'the EU will maintain close contact with Vietnam and support their efforts in delivering results on the ground' (European Commission 2018a).

Finally, the VPA is also intended to 'promote improved forest governance' (European Commission 2016a), notably by supporting legal and policy reform, building capacity, increasing transparency and promoting stakeholder involvement (European Commission 2016c, 2017, 2018a). As such, the FLEGT Action Plan of which the VPA is a part is considered a 'prime example of environment, development and trade policies acting in a mutually supportive way' (Ansip 2019). The FTA and the VPA therefore entail a strong developmental and modernisation component, which should allow Vietnam to fight villains hindering the road to ethical trade.

3. ILLUMINATION & ECLIPSE: A PERSISTENT 'DEVELOPMENT' STORY

In the sections above, we showed how the Commission has constructed a narrative of ethical trade between the EU and Vietnam. In this section, we would like to peak behind the curtain and shed light on what is illuminated and what is obscured – what is and what is not said within this narrative. We

find that the Commission's narrative is essentially a reiteration of the longstanding 'development' story, in which the EU protagonist shapes the world according to its own values. In this adaption of the story, it is Vietnam's position as 'emerging' or 'underdeveloped' that gives rise to ethical hindrances to strengthened trade relations such as potential environmental and social unsustainability.

The proposed policy solutions are by no means unique to the context of Vietnam: as has been identified elsewhere in literature, the EU continues to use a one-size-fits-all approach in its engagement with external partners (Börzel and Risse 2004; Bicchi 2006; He 2016). This one-size-fits-all approach has also been called Eurocentric, in that the evaluation of the 'other' is based on one's own culturally shaped norms and the assumption of their superiority. The evaluation criteria are shaped by norms of industrial capitalism and enlightenment philosophy, which have become a universal character, notably through imperialism (Delputte & Orbie 2020; Onar & Nicolaïdis 2013). This valuation model is characterized by the assumption of not only inferiority but also of the historical backwardness of non-European cultures and the mission of their civilization (Melber 1992; Ziai 2004, 2013). That means that the 'other', in this case Vietnam, is not only different, but in an earlier 'stage of development,' as we once were ourselves. This idea, as defended by post-development scholars (Kothari et al. 2019) suggests that with 'good guidance' third countries will adopt (new) European norms such as ecological sustainability (environmental agreements in the TSD chapter and VPA), equal opportunities, individual gender equality, pluralistic-independent civil society (ILO conventions) and so forth. This development belief-system further sees a liberal-capitalist representative, plural party-system as the ideal form of governance.

Particularly, the latter idea conflicts with the political self-identification of Vietnam: despite the economic opening of 1986 (Doi Moi), Vietnam remains a single-party socialist republic with the supremacy of the Communist Party (Bui 2016). This puts into question the Commission's identified 'villains' or policy problems, and the preferred coalition allies and policy solutions, all of which assume the necessity and possibility of an independent Vietnamese civil society. Within the FTA, this is visible in the villainization of Vietnam's outstanding ratification of ILO conventions 98 and 87, aimed at an independent civil society, and in the role of civil society in the enforcement of the TSD Chapter. In the VPA, it is visible in civil society's role in negotiating the agreement and monitoring implementation. While the relation between the Party and the various societal actors in Vietnam is by no means straightforward, scholars generally agree that Western expectations of 'civil society' cannot simply be copy-pasted onto their Vietnamese counterparts, due to the supremacy of the Vietnamese state (Bui 2016; Vu 2019; Waibel et al. 2014). In line with the development doctrine, the Commission's narrative seems to suggest that Vietnam needs to 'modernise' out of this political 'otherness' to safeguard ethical trade.

Despite this villainization of Vietnam's 'otherness' as 'underdeveloped', moments of obscuration make it impossible to 'name the culprits' (Svarstad and Benjaminsen 2020) involved in enacting the (un)sustainability endangering ethical trade: aside from general concerns regarding the ratification of international agreements, we hear very little on the concrete situation of workers or environmental problems in Vietnam. Even for the VPA, the Commission's communications do not go into any detail on the concrete shapes the illegality villain takes, as there is no explanation regarding the particularities of illegal logging or forest rights abuses in the country. Meanwhile, any European villains are eclipsed altogether from the narrative: the Sustainable Impact Assessment conducted for the EU Commission clearly states that several sectors, such as the Vietnamese agriculture sector, will

likely suffer from the FTA. Those negative economic impacts are not caused by Vietnam's political system, but by the EU's subventions for its own agricultural sector. However, such issues are not addressed within the sustainable development chapters because the EU Commission chooses to omit them from the narrative.

4. CONCLUSION: THE EU, AN ETHICAL TRADE LEVIATHAN?

This paper has demonstrated that the EU's ethical trade policy can also be understood as a narrative that tells the audience a coherent story of why trade is 'a force for good'. This powerful narrative reveals vital information on the self-consciousness of the EU. It suggests that ethical concerns would arise if the EU stops being an actor on the international scene. Hence, the EU is needed to overcome the anarchy and anomy of the international economic system. Subsequently, one could argue that the EU somehow takes the self-prescribed role of a democratic world trade 'leviathan' in its narrative, making sure that all actors are respecting international rules and norms.

The 'force for good' story can be seen as performative in the sense that the narrative enacts or reproduces the concept of the EU as a force for good. This performative character becomes even more visible as a narrative when one considers that the EU's trade policy does not fully address the self-ascribed identity of the partner country, nor does it go in depth in unpacking any of the ethical problems the policy intends to solve, such as workers' and human rights and environmental protection. By no means does this put into question the appropriateness of the ethical character (as moral principles) of the EU's trade policy. Rather, the policy solution is in accordance with EUropean values. The story tells us that 'trade' and 'economic' problems of the world can only be solved by and with the EU, because of the EU's 'ethical nature' and 'ethical actions'. The persuasive power of this narrative lies in a sense of belonging to the European audience, which is clearly its target.

Earlier research has identified neoliberal and 'Eurocentric development' paradigms, which are also identifiable in our findings. Our analysis has attempted to contribute to this discussion by dismantling the ethical trade policy as a story being told. We found that the story of ethical trade unfolds against the assumption that trade is necessary for economic growth and that the biggest danger for ethical concerns are social and environmental sustainability and underdevelopment. From this perspective, the empirical debate on efficiency echoes this basic assumption and looks at ways of making existing mechanisms more effective (see e.g. debates on tougher sanctions and conditionality as trade instruments for change). This in turn leads to more questions for further research: do counter-narratives exist within the EU, notably in the European Parliament, but also among civil society? How do these narratives intersect with the Commission's narrative? Furthermore, how does the political affiliation of respective Commissioners influence the narrative?

Powerful narratives are both convincing and appealing to humans, but can be dangerous in a political context, as they simplify and omit events. They dictate the continuance of specific policies and debates, while often overshadowing vast political realities. This becomes highly problematic when such narratives are adopted by political elites, academia, and civil society, often leading to a narrow measurement of 'success' by these actors within the existing narrative boundaries.

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Appendix

The appendix is available upon request.