**Civil Society Involvement in EU Trade Agreements:**

**Explaining Variation**

*Deborah Martens\*, Myriam Oehri°, Jan Orbie\*, Lore Van den Putte\*ˆ*

\*Centre for EU Studies, Ghent University (Belgium)

°Dept of Political Science, University of Geneva (Switzerland)

ˆInstitute for Research and Education on Negotiation, ESSEC Business School (France)

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite an overall trend towards more civil society involvement (CSI) in trade agreements signed by the European Union (EU), the extent to which civil society actors can engage in the context of the chapter on trade and sustainable development (SD) varies significantly. The CSI Index, analysing 10 EU trade agreements with 16 countries, reveals three degrees of CSI: high (Canada, Korea), medium (Georgia, Moldova, Vietnam, Ukraine), and low (Central America, Singapore, Peru-Colombia, Ecuador). This paper aims to provide explanations for this surprising and remarkable variation. Based on qualitative-interpretative assessments and drawing on interview data, primary documents, and secondary literature, it reveals that neither EU experience, protectionist interests, and normative preferences, nor EU-third country trade power relations can fully or exclusively account for the various degrees of CSI in EU trade agreements. Instead, the third-country-resonance explanation, focusing on the domestic civil society participation, corresponds best with the different CSI scores. And yet, there are exceptions such as the EU-Vietnam trade agreement that require a more multi-faceted interpretation.