

Tom Theuns (2019) The legitimacy of free trade agreements as tools of EU democracy promotion, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:1, 3-21, DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2018.1552247

This article questions whether the European Union (EU) strategy of using free trade agreements (FTAs) as tools of democracy promotion is, currently, normatively coherent and legitimate. It focuses on FTAs with proximate autocracies and makes four main claims. First, FTAs raise significant legitimacy concerns in that they can ordinarily be expected to generate both economic 'winners' and 'losers' in the target country without democratic processes in place to legitimate these costs. Second, the EU risks empowering autocrats (rather than catalysing democratic transition) in the way it negotiates FTAs. Third, 'leverage' strategies of withholding or suspending cooperation as a result of violations of democratic and human rights norms are applied inconsistently by the EU, undermining leverage credibility. Fourth, the best-case impact of regulatory convergence with the EU *acquis communautaire* on the democratic character of sector-level policymaking is mixed: increased transparency and accountability can improve democratic credentials, while, paradoxically, increased stakeholder participation is normatively suspect in the absence of a democratic framework.

Link: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09557571.2018.1552247>