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Talking about Competition? Discursive shifts in the economic imaginary of competition in public debates

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Talking about Competition? Discursive shifts in the economic imaginary of competition in public debates

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Abstract

In this paper, we apply a discourse analytical framework to explore the performativity of the economic concept of competition in public policy discourses. We focus on the role of professional economists as opinion leaders to analyze how concepts of competition have entered public discourses. The main economic imaginary ascribes to competition the function of a primary mode for economic and social coordination, ensuring prosperity and wealth. Competitiveness is predominately interpreted not as a means but an end in itself. Furthermore, three partly conflicting discursive positions on how competition should be organized arise in the discourse: first, the *neoliberal* position interprets every non-efficient market outcome as the result of institutional intervention, hindering *effective* competition; second, the *ordoliberal* position of *fair* competition evaluates governance intervention positively, as long as they promote the functioning of competition; third, the *Keynesian* position promotes *corrected* competition, i.e. diverse policy intervention to compensate for market failure outcomes. .

Keywords: competition, competitiveness, media debates, consulting, economic experts, critical discourse analysis

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1 The Role of Competition in Public Discourse

Competition is a core concept of economic reasoning and played a crucial role in the process of institutionalization of the discipline in the course of the nineteenth century. While originating from a rather everyday-language use as rivalling behavior of individual economic actors by Adam Smith (e.g. Dennis, 1975; Backhouse, 1990), classical political economists such as John St. Mill referred to competition as a prime mode of social and economic organization. This way, Mill refers to the concept of competition in a functional sense by associating it with the means to ensure the natural price, thereby establishing a link between competition and efficient allocation.

In the course of the neoclassical revolution, this functionalist account on competition became even more important as it served as a vital cornerstone of the axiomatic core of the General Equilibrium Theory (GET), which today remains a central concept in mainstream economics. However, despite several criticisms against GET from within the economics discipline (e.g. institutional economics, Marxian political economy, Keynesian and Post-Keynesian economics), as well as from other social sciences that emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century (e.g. sociology and cultural studies), the mainly positive normative ascription to competition influenced political discourses at least in capitalist economies. This way, the core message of the welfare theorems in GET in mainstream economics, which claimed that an increase in competition automatically enhances efficiency and thus overall social welfare (see also: Foley, 2010), served as an ideational base for the political support of liberalization policies.

The performative impact of the economic concept of competition is closely related to the expansion of the economics discipline in general (Fourcade, 2006, 2009) and the crucial role of economic knowledge and economic experts in neoliberal economic governance after WWII (Christensen, 2017) and, in particular, after the "neoliberal turn" in the 1970s and 1980s. Against this background, since the 2000s different scholars have developed the concept of "performativity of economics," which suggests that economic models "do not merely record a reality […] but contribute powerfully to shaping, simply by measuring, the reality" (Callon, 1998, p. 23). Hence, it is argued that economic knowledge is not only a powerful resource of symbolic capital in politics and the public but also has an immediate impact on the way the economy works, and not least on the way economic phenomena are perceived and discursively framed (e.g. Mackenzie *et al.,* 2008).

Other authors expand the scope of the analysis of the concept of competition. Foucault (2010), for instance, analyzes the rise of competition as a prime mode of social organization and stresses the central role of competition as a core part of the governmental rationality of liberal capitalist societies. Based on these considerations, Gane (2019) further develops Foucault's genealogy of liberalism and neoliberalism and stresses the implications of different conceptualizations of competition. Thus, he provides a sociological history of neoliberalism centered around the history of the concept and the tensions within neoliberal reasoning associated with different accounts on competition.

In a similar vein, despite coming from a political economy perspective, Davies (2017) argues that the shift from a "quasi-liberal" to a "quasi-violent" approach to competition in politico-economic thought paved the way for social and economic distortions, particularly the stark rise of socio-economic inequality. Focusing on the discourse on competitiveness, Linsi (2020) moreover has shown that particularly in the course of the globalization of the 1990s, nation states are increasingly confronted with the need to act according to the logic of competition.

Recent scholarship in economic sociology is more concerned with the social structure and order of markets (e.g. Callon, 1998; Fligstein and Dauter, 2007; Beckert, 2009; Fligstein, 2018), where competition is analyzed as a main characteristic of economic markets.

Following this rich literature, modern capitalist societies, firms, organizations, and individuals are confronted with what we call a *polysemy of competition* ranging from a formal interpretation as an axiomatic assumption of "perfect competition" (a mechanism enhancing efficiency and welfare gains, and a process associated with "fair" economic outcome) to an authoritative claim directed at individuals, firms, and nation states

alike to "be competitive." Yet, given this obviously wide range of possible references to the concept of competition on the macro, meso, and micro levels, it seems an important task to highlight the different channels through which the logic of competition enters into public discourses. Hence, we argue that the polysemy of competition serves as an "economic imaginary" (Jessop, 2013; Sum and Jessop, 2013) in the process of transmission of economic knowledge into political and social practice. Following a Bourdieusian capital-approach, Lebaron (2001, 2008) as well as Maesse (2015) stress the role of economic experts as multiple actors in the fields of academia, media, politics, and the public in this process of transmission. This way, economic expert discourses in the media serve as powerful devices for sense and meaning making and the production of "economic beliefs that are received, interpreted, [and] used by various kinds of social actors in everyday life" (Lebaron, 2001, p. 91).

Against this background, this paper provides some answers to the following pertinent questions. First, how are distinct forms of a competitive logic discursively framed by economic experts? What conditions, implications, and effects of competition are discussed? And finally, what are the main patterns of argument and core narratives in the public discourse on competition, and what policy reforms do they (implicitly) suggest?

To answer these questions, we applied a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the economic experts' discourse on competition in the media. Thus, we compiled a text corpus of newspaper articles from two opinion-leading Austrian daily newspapers over the last two decades. In a first step, we coded relevant discourse fragments, in which economic experts refer to competition in a broad sense. Consecutively, we examined these discourse fragments and developed a theory-driven coding system to systematize the polysemy of competition. Eventually, we used our coding system to highlight the dominant patterns of argument and narratives underlying the expert discourse on competition. Additionally, we also examined the institutional background of the main actors in the discourse and provide some contextualization of the specific characteristics of the field of economic policy advice in Austria.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: In Section 2 we introduce our methodological approach. Section 3 provides our empirical results, comprising a timeline of main discursive events related to competition policies and the main patterns of arguments in the discourse about competition. Furthermore, we also present our empirical analysis of core argumentation patterns applied when talking about competition. In Section 4, we offer a summary of our main results as well as some concluding remarks.

2 Methodology and Research Design

The methodological approach of this paper is based on a CDA (van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2006; Weiss and Wodak, 2008) of a set of articles in two opinion-leading Austrian newspapers (*Der Standard* and *Die Presse*) during the last two decades. CDA is a socio-linguistic approach, focusing on the role of language as socially performative and productive; in other words, conceptualizing language as a tool to construct different perceptions of social reality, and to also achieve social and interpersonal objectives including hegemonic processes of legitimation and power (Willig, 2015). Public discourses are thus interpreted as a complex set of statements and discursive practices forming and reinforcing different views on social reality, including hierarchies and power relations (e.g. van Dijk, 2006). The main aim of CDA is to deconstruct those power relations and highlight hierarchical orders of knowledge in discourses.

In this paper, we thus apply a CDA approach to examine different "patterns of discourse" as well as economic narratives of concepts of competition and competitiveness in public media discourses. Following a Foucauldian tradition, we argue that economic experts, who are presented as experts for competition and competitive logic, are the main actors in the transmission of economic imaginaries of competition to a broader public (van Dijk, 2006; Wodak, 2006; Maesse, 2015).

The analysis of narratives and discursive patterns in economic experts' discourse on competition is furthermore accompanied by an analysis of a broad timeline of important political, social, and economic events. Along with the derived timeline, we aim to draw some connections to potential shifts of focal points in the public discourses. Fairclough and Wodak (1997, p. 258) claim,

"describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it." This approach allows us to combine the analysis of dominant economic narratives and imaginaries related to competition and competitiveness with the politico-economic and institutional setting within which they are developed.

We employed a software-assisted (MAXQDA), corpus-based CDA approach (as suggested by e.g. Baker *et al.,* 2008; Mulderrig, 2011) and draw on a text corpus of articles in two opinion-leading newspapers in Austria. Thus, we applied a standardized catchword retrieval to isolate articles about competition, in which economists are presented as experts. Accordingly, we used the keywords "*Wettbewerb*" ("competition"), "*Ökono**," and "*wirtschaft**" ("Economics," "economic," "economist"), and "*Markt*" ("market"), as well as combinations of them.[i] The range of the text corpus was 2002 to 2020 (reference date: 1st January) using the WISONET database[ii] and returned 870 articles in *Der Standard* and 1,057 articles in *Die Presse*. The two newspapers chosen are the two main opinion-leading newspapers and both belong to the segment of quality newspapers in Austria. Furthermore, *Der Standard* has its own section entitled "*Kommentar der Anderen*" ("Others' Comments"), which is open to external experts and thus provides a broader range of perspectives. The two newspapers represent different ideological positions: while *Die Presse* is labelled as conservative, *Der Standard* is left-liberal (e.g. Plasser and Pallaver, 2012; Lengauer and Johann, 2013). Thus, we have chosen them to represent the main/middle spectrum of the Austrian media landscape and also to cover different perspectives and ideological leanings within the public discourse.

For our further analysis, we manually reduced our text corpus to articles directly addressing the issue of competition and chose paragraphs as the coding unit for discourse fragments, with 316 articles from *Der Standard* and 416 articles from *Die Presse* analyzed. The examination of main patterns of discourse and narratives in this paper is based on a theory-driven coding system of different levels of reference to competition as suggested by Altreiter *et al.* (2020), which was inductively supplemented with additional codes. Table 1 provides an overview and a short description of our analytical categorization system.

Table 1: Deductive Category Formation

Categorization system of references to competition		
Category	**Code**	**Rule**
Scope	Economic	References made to economic realm
	Social	References made to social realm/non-economic realm
Reference System	Micro	References to individuals or individual behavior
	Meso	References to institutions (social norms, firms, etc.)
	Macro	References to inter- and supranational structures (EU, etc.)
Normative Connotation	Pro-competition	Positive implications of (an expansion of) competition, implicit or explicit (e.g. liberty, efficiency gains, etc.)
	Anti-competition	Negative evaluation of competition and its consequences, implicit or explicit (e.g. competitive logic leads to egoistic behavior, constant threat to social cohesion, etc.)
Competition and Politics	Free markets vs. planning	Free markets as a necessary condition; conflict of polit-economic systems, competition/capitalism vs planning/socialism
	Ordoliberal position: fair competition	Fair competition needs a clear institutional framework, competition regimes, prevention of monopolies and oligopolies; arguments of market structure
	Competition and freedom vs. coercion	Competition guarantees (individual) freedom, and prevents coercion and fraud

Functionality of competition	Competition induces technological progress	Competition induces technological progress and innovation
	Competition as an "ever-present-threat"	Schumpeterian position: creative destruction, dynamic processes of competition; "ever-present-threat" of competitors
	Efficiency gains	Stationary; competition leads to pareto-optimal allocation; equilibrium (prices and quantities)
Critiques against competition	Fairness and equity	Competition is unsocial, unfair, etc.
	Market power vs. competition	(Multinational) companies have market power, are not confronted with competitors
	Economic imperialism	Economic concepts and theories transmitting to other areas of social or political life
	Unrealistic heuristics of competition	Heterodox critique; concepts of Monopolistic Competition, imperfect competition; unrealistic assumptions

3 Idiosyncrasies and Main Actors in Austrian Economic Policy Debates

According to the prominent welfare state typology offered by Esping-Andersen (1990), Austria is classified as a conservative welfare state with a long-lasting tradition of social partnership. The Austrian Social partnership, or "Austro-corporatism," originated after WWII and is characterized as the codetermination of main economic policy issues by interest groups representing both labor (the Austrian chamber of labor, AK, and the Austrian federation of trade unions, ÖGB) and capital (the Austrian Chamber of Commerce, WKÖ, and the Federation of Austrian Industries, IV) (Tálos and Kittel, 2002). While the former traditionally had close links to the Austrian Social-Democratic Party (SPÖ), the latter had similar links to the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). Particularly until the late 1990s, these interest organizations were strongly involved in governmental policy formulation and policy making, despite their apparent conflicting interests aimed at a consensual mode of conflict resolution, consequently also labelled as "Consociational democracy." (Tálos and Kittel, 2002; Unger and Heitzmann, 2003). On the level of scientific economic policy advice up to the 2000s, there have only been two economic research institutions (WIFO and IHS), both of which are mainly funded by the government, with a considerable impact on Austrian economic policy (Karlhofer, 2007). With government involvement of the formerly right-liberal Austria Freedom Party (FPÖ) in the early 2000s and the foundation of new privately founded market-liberal think tanks such as Agenda Austria, the impact of the social partners declined (Karlhofer, 2007).[iii]

Against this background, in a first step we applied an actor-centered analysis of the affiliation of the most visible economic experts in the public discourse evolving around the topic of competition. This way, social partners and economic research institutes maintain their media impact.

Following our methodological approach, we first scanned our set of newspaper articles for distinct economic experts. In a consecutive step, we counted the mentions of these actors and also aligned them with their primary institutional affiliation. In all, we found that throughout the debate about competition, 111 economists were mentioned at least three times, totaling 398 references to different economists in *Der Standard* and 376 references in *Die Presse*.[iv] Among these 111 economic experts, only a very small share (6 or 5.4%) were female, with banking economist Gertrude Tumpel-Gugerell (in 15th position) the most frequently mentioned female economist. The frequency ranking (Table 2) is headed by the former president of the German Ifo Munich, Hans-Werner Sinn – arguably the most prominent public economist in the German-speaking area – and the presidents of the two big Austrian economic research institutes, WIFO (Karl

Aiginger) and IHS (Christian Keuschnigg). Beside four historical economists (Hayek, Keynes, Schumpeter, and Marx), there is also a relatively high number of prominent international (mainly U.S.) economists such as Joseph Stiglitz, Jeremy Rifkin, Paul Krugman, Kenneth Rogoff, and Thomas Piketty.

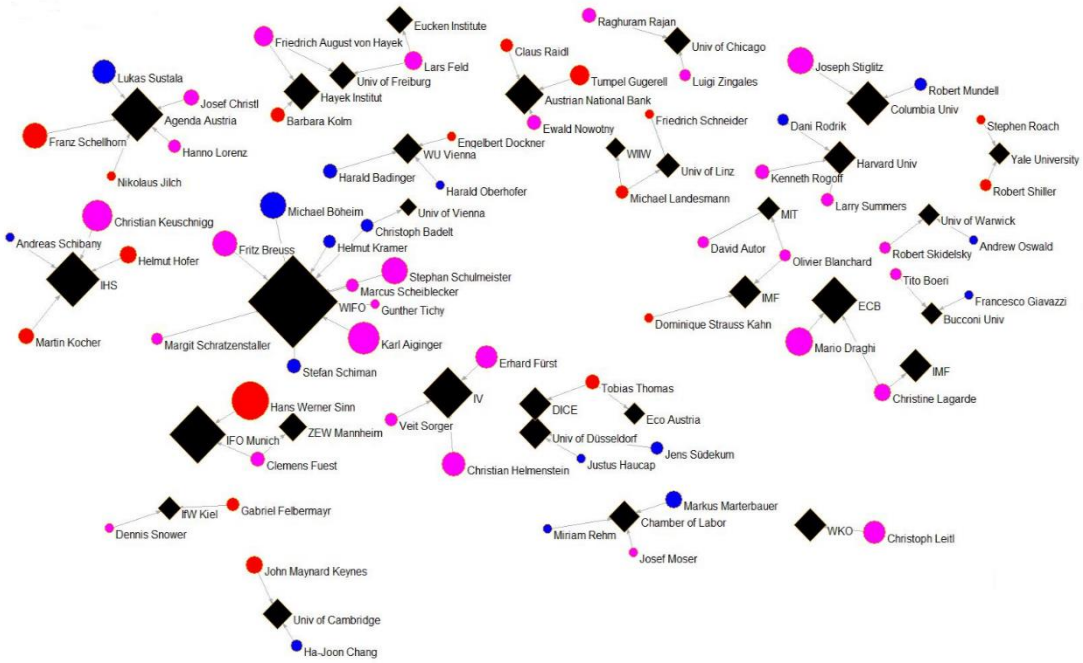
Table 2: Ranking of the 20 most frequently mentioned economists in the debate on competition

Economic expert	Institutional Affiliation	Total	*Der Standard*	*Die Presse*
Hans-Werner Sinn	IFO Munich	43	9	34
Karl Aiginger	WIFO	31	19	12
Christian Keuschnigg	IHS	29	18	11
Mario Draghi	ECB	24	12	12
Michael Böheim	WIFO	23	19	4
Joseph Stiglitz	Columbia University	23	15	8
Stephan Schulmeister	WIFO	23	12	11
Fritz Breuss	WIFO	19	11	8
Franz Schellhorn*	Agenda Austria	19	0	19
Lukas Sustala*	Agenda Austria	18	17	1
Christian Helmenstein	IV	17	5	12
Christoph Leitl	Chamber of Commerce	16	7	9
Erhard Fürst	IV	16	10	6
Friedrich August von Hayek	University of Freiburg/ Hayek Institut	13	6	7
Gertrude Tumpel-Gugerell	Austrian National Bank	12	0	12
Michael Hüther	IW Cologne	12	4	8
Christian Felber	Common Good Economy	11	11	0
Lars Feld	University of Freiburg/ Eucken Institute	11	6	5
John Maynard Keynes	University of Cambridge	9	2	7
Christine Lagarde	IMF	9	5	4

*Source: Own calculations. Economists are only counted once per article. * Both were economic journalists before working for Agenda Austria*

The composition of the institutional affiliation of our sample of publicly visible economic experts is rather diverse. The institutions, to which most visible economists in the debate are affiliated, are prominent Austrian and partly also German economic research institutes, but also traditional Austrian "social partners" such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Chamber of Labor, or the Federation of Austrian Industries (IV). Figure 1 represents a personal-institutional network of the most visible actors in the media debate on competition. In all, this actor-centered analysis shows that social partners and economic research institutes maintain a strong media impact.

Figure 1: Personal-institutional network of most visible actors in the debate on competition



Source: Own calculations. Size of nodes represents the number of mentions in the debate. Color indicates whether economists are more often mentioned in Der Standard *(>75% of all mentions, blue) or* Die Presse *(>75% of all mentions, red) or similarly (purple). Only institutions with at least two affiliated economic experts.*

To sum up, this actor-centred analysis shows that social partners and economic research institutes maintain a strong media impact. However, neoliberal Think Tanks such as the Hayek Institute or Agenda Austria are also present in Austrian public policy debates on competition, particularly in the conservative newspaper *Die Presse*. In contrast, economic experts from the Austrian Chamber of Commerce (WKO) rather enter the debate in the left-liberal *Der Standard*.

4 Empirical Results

The presentation of the main empirical findings of our paper is split into two main parts. In Section 4.1. we provide an overview of the overall structure of the economic expert discourse and the main socio-political events during the time-span of our analysis. In Section 4.2., we highlight dominant argumentation patterns in the discourse.

4.1. Structure of the Discourse

In a first step, we conducted a simple analysis of frequencies of different word combinations in the data material. In doing so, one finding is the strong presence of "competitiveness" (besides "competition") in the public discourse. In almost half of the cases (41%) there is a reference to "competitiveness" rather than "competition" in the articles. Furthermore, most statements are made with reference to the economic realm (712 discourse fragments), rather than the non-economic realm (92) and with reference to the macro level (588) rather than the meso (411) or micro (125) levels. Most of our empirical examples in the discussion part therefore refer to economic issue put forward from economic experts in the discourse. One example of the rare non-economic topics regarding competition is the process of competitization of universities in the course of the Bologna reform.

In a next step, we constructed a timeline of the public discourse, where we sketch out main socio-political events and the course of the economic expert discourse related to the issue of competition policies.

From 2000 until the financial crisis of 2008/09, public discourses about competition were mainly concerned with positive effects of competitive markets as well as the lack of an adequate alternative to govern individual transactions (TINA-argumentation). Several arguments are made towards flexibilization and liberalization of markets to guarantee innovation, growth, employment, and welfare. These tendencies are also reflected in socio-political measures implemented in this time period, for example reforms on labor markets (Hartz IV in Germany), the liberalization of postal services in Austria, or the conclusion of the Lisbon Strategy stating that the European Union aims to be:

> " […] the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion." (European Union, 2007)

Table 3: Timeline of socio-political events and main sub-discourses of economists

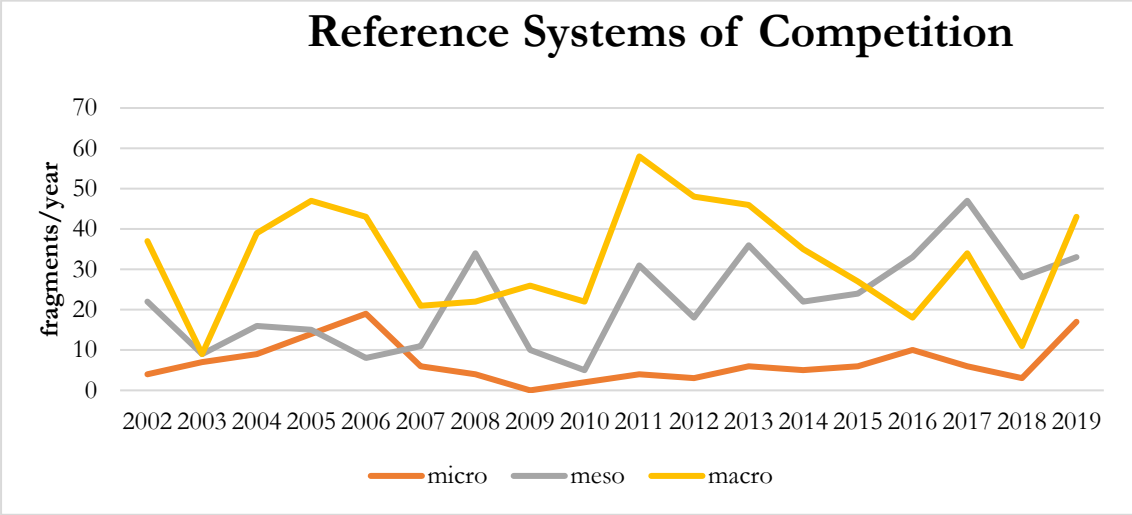
Time	Socio-political discursive events	Sub-discourses of economic experts
2002	Dot-Com Crisis Introduction of the Euro	Flexibilization of currency markets, globalization, and increasing competition
2003	Agenda 2010 in Germany (rigid labor market reforms, Hartz IV)	Competitiveness in labor markets
2004	EU-Expansion (10 new members)	Market expansion, openness outsourcing
2005	Kyoto Protocol GATS Relaunch Lisbon Strategy	Liberalization of markets, innovation, and investment
2006		Rising oil prices, inflation
2007	Lehman Brothers Bankruptcy	Monetary and fiscal policies, growth, agricultural sector
2008	Financial Crisis (2008-2009) European Stability Act	Housing markets, regulation of (financial) markets

2009	Tax Reform and stimulus packages in AUT	Government debt, role of institutions
2010	EFSF European Stability and Growth Pact 2nd Stimulus and recovery pact in AUT	Cooperation and harmonization of European countries
2011	Great Recession (2010-2013)	International competitiveness, Euro exchange rate, government debts
2012	European Stability Mechanism	Innovation policies, investment in digitalization, structural reforms
2013	Start of TTIP negotiations	Labor market and flexibilization
2014	Investment campaign (EU)	Low inflation rates, (critique about) the economic performance of Greece, debate about the European Central Bank, structural reforms
2015	"Migration Crisis"	Education and research as competitive advantages
2016	BREXIT Referendum CETA	Unfair international competition, market power/monopolies
2017	Harmonization of EU standards (Roaming)	Innovation and human capital, productivity, digitalization
2018	General Data Protection Regulation (EU)	Market power, platform economies, Network effects, USA and China (protectionism)
2019	European Parliament declares Climate emergency	Competition for standards and tax levels to the bottom, Brexit and its consequences

The financial crisis marks an important turning point in the discussion about competition. The focus shifts from the (positive) effects of competition towards the question of necessary conditions for fair competition and international competitiveness. The role of institutions to provide a proper framework is re-evaluated.

We also found a trend in the increase of references to competition at the meso level particularly after 2010 (see Figure 2), which could cautiously be interpreted as a stronger focus on economic institutions in the debate on competition (see also Section 4.2)

Figure 2: Reference Systems of Competition Over Time



Overall, the great majority of normative evaluations of the effects of competition (about 80%) are positive. Yet, while negative connotations of competition remain rather stable on a low level, the number of positive connotations is more volatile. Particularly, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, competition is critically discussed on two levels. First, demands for regulations in the financial sector arise. Second, many economic experts push for cooperation and coordinated actions at the European level in order to stimulate the economy, for example by a coordinated investment strategy or by a harmonization of wage levels within EU countries. Along with these increasing forms of cooperation at the European level goes a 'race to the bottom' of standards and regulatory laws (e.g. welfare state, environmental regulations) at the international level for the sake of international competitiveness.

By the end of 2015, positive evaluations of competition and statements made at the meso-level increased. One cause of this might be the intensified debate about the

pros and cons of protectionism with the beginning of Brexit negotiations and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Next to the dominance of some countries ("Great Nations" such as China) and the protectionist measures demanded in order to counteract this power of nation states, the rise of several international companies and their dominant market position

(mainly the big-tech companies Google, Apple, Amazon, and Facebook) are critically discussed. One illustrative example is the conflict of traditional sectors subject to existing regulations (e.g. the hotel industry, taxi enterprises) with new innovative platforms (e.g. AirBnB, Uber), which threaten their market shares.

4.2. Argumentation Patterns of Competition

In the following, we present a detailed discussion of the main argumentation patterns of competition and provide several examples from the analyzed text corpus.

4.2.1. Becoming and Staying Competitive as a Political Task

Unsurprisingly, most statements in the field of politics and competition are made in reference to the meso level of institutions, dealing with the question of an optimal level of regulation of competitive markets, thus referring to the economic realm.

One subframe is the degree of state intervention spanning from free competition and capitalism to socialism. Pro-capitalist arguments are often based on Hayek's theory on the incompatibility of socialism, democracy, and freedom (e.g. in Hayek, 1944), and therefore its inability to mark an adequate alternative to a capitalist system. State interventions in the functioning mechanisms of self-regulating markets are critically examined from this stance. Consequently, it is argued that competition in free market economies preserves individual freedom from coercion and prevents corruption, as (political and

economic) power is decentralized. This concept of government failure is a central aspect in the discourse as expressed in the following quotation:

> "In general, I'm skeptical when someone thinks, they know better than the market does. Politics distrusts the market-based competition; that is the actual main psychological problem." (Standard, 2007_0165)[v]

On the other hand, a few economists put forward a critique against the concept of competition, arguing that market efficiency is not sufficient as a key indicator of general welfare.

The most dominant political-ideological positions of economists with regard to competition can be categorized in three main groups: an ordoliberal position, a Keynesian position, and a neoliberal position. Ordoliberal scholars distinguish between the "ordo-principle," understood as the overall economic and institutional order and economic policy, i.e. active intervention in the business cycle (Hien and Joerges, 2018). Against this background, the ordoliberal position evaluates government intervention positively, as long as it promotes the functioning of competition and reduces market power. Thus, in a nutshell, the ordoliberal position can be summarized as establishing rule-based state activities that "plan to compete" in order to achieve *fair competition*.[vi] The discussion of fairness and how to provide clear and matching rules, such as a coordinated legal order or competition regime for fair competition, is reflected in the following quotation:

> "The state's most important task is to assure a functioning, sustained competition, by effective regulation policies." (Standard, 0341_2011)

This differentiates the ordoliberal from Keynesian policy advice (e.g. Jessop, 2015; Princen and van Esch, 2016) The latter promotes more diverse policy intervention to compensate for market failure outcomes, for example by taking countermeasures to prevent unemployment in order to achieve *corrected competition*. The importance of a strong institutional setting, as well as the strongly established social partnership in Austria, are emphasized, and thus the Keynesian position aims at "coordinating to compete." Eventually, the neoliberal position interprets every non-efficient market outcome as a result of institutional intervention, hindering the market mechanism and preventing it from functioning effectively. The state's responsibilities are limited to providing conditions in order to establish markets, such as securing property rights and providing adequate incentives for individual behavior (e.g. Mackenzie, 2008). Therefore, neoliberal economists demand the flexibilization, liberalization, and privatization of markets to "compete to compete," in order to achieve *effective competition*:

> "The only way to deal with this is to make the economy more competitive, and make the labor market more flexible. The social system is too generous. We need more incentives to make people work longer and unemployed people try harder to find a job. We want to reduce the role of the state in the economy: This could mean reducing costs and cutting taxes." (Standard, 0222_2008)

On an international level, the leading topic in the discourse is concerned with a need for international competitiveness at the macro-level to secure ultimately long-term growth and development. Furthermore, there is a distinction between "artificial," political measures that only seem to increase competitiveness, and measures that actually increase productivity. For example, protectionist measures are criticized:

> "But today, there are many tendencies to protectionism; US-president Trump is one prime example. This, of course, is the opposite of increasing one's own competitiveness." (Presse, 1053_2019)

Overall, the discourse of competition and politics revolves around the aim of a functional competition at the national level as well as the goal of international competitiveness, respectively. Different approaches are pursued in order to provide the conditions and regulatory frameworks needed, namely "planning to compete" (ordoliberal), "coordinating to compete" (Keynesian), or "competing to compete" (neoliberal).

In the course of time, the goal of competitive markets is less scrutinized but increasingly described as a goal in itself, especially with regards to competitiveness. In this context, austerity measures are often claimed to be inevitable measures for (international) competitiveness. This implies an efficient state and a low level of public debt, and therefore government savings and reducing public debt deficits are required:

> "According to Nowotny [the former president of the Austrian National Bank, remark by the authors] there's no alternative to public saving: 'We need to do everything to keep our household budget in order. We do it for ourselves, not for any rating agency. It is true that public saving can slow down economic dynamics. But if we don't cut costs, the negative consequences will be much worse.'" (Presse, 0542_2012)

Along these lines of argumentation, many economists argue for wage cuts for European countries like Greece, in order to increase their productivity and harmonize levels of competitiveness within the Eurozone. Especially in Die Presse, a strong connection of government debt, competitiveness, inflation, and growth is disseminated, whereas in Der Standard the general infrastructure is presented as the main driver of competitiveness. In both media, however, economists emphasize the importance of investment and innovative activities (often with regards to "the American model"), based on, amongst others, a functional education system and state assistance and grants, in order to increase productivity and hence competitiveness:

> "But productivity is mainly connected with innovation and investment. This is again shown by US-Americans. Investments of today are, as is well known the jobs of tomorrow." (Presse, 0739_2014)

4.2.2. Cooperate to Compete

The previous examples further highlight a paradox in the logic of competitiveness. Several economic experts demand cooperation at the lower levels in order to increase competitiveness at higher levels, a strategy we label "cooperate to compete."

In the course of the financial crisis of 2008/09, for instance, the omission of the possibility to harmonize different price levels across different member states by depreciation was said to provoke inflationary tendencies within the Monetary Union. To counteract this, many economists call for some form of cooperation to achieve a harmonization of productivity levels within Europe to strengthen the Euro and increase international competitiveness:

> "'Higher wages and higher inflation in Northern Europe would help the adjustment,' says Bertola. This would require the inflation rates in Germany and Austria to be higher than 2% in the following years, to facilitate the adjustment in countries like Portugal or Greece. Because, actually only in Ireland and Spain was the price- and productivity gap between Germany closed quiet rapidly." (Standard, 0456_2013)

In particular, the wage level is interpreted as both an effect and a consequence of international competitiveness. Within the discourse, however, wage increases or lower labor hours are framed as contradicting the (superior) goal of international competitiveness. Conversely, the need for a high level of international competitiveness and productivity often represents a justification for low wage levels.

> "But competitiveness must not be damaged by excessive wage increases." (Standard, 0337_2011)

The strategy "cooperate to compete" is further reflected in a coordinated European strategy of investment in innovation (e.g. a focus on green technologies) to establish a lead position, and hence a competitive advantage towards other Great Nations (e.g. China and the United States). Here again, the institutional framework is decisive, as some countries achieve their competitive advantage via lowering social or environmental standards, or undercutting taxes ('race to the bottom'). To escape this situation, multilateral consent is needed.

4.2.3. Static vs. Dynamic Concepts of Competition

In the analyzed expert discourse, competition is assigned a range of different functions. In this regard, there are two major conceptualizations: either competition is pictured in a static, equilibrium-orientated manner or in an evolutionary, process-orientated manner.

Within the static concept, free markets – and hence competition – are said to enable the most efficient allocation of scarce resources. Wealth is determined through the market structure, whereas a greater extent of competition (e.g. via liberalization or openness on international markets) appears as a proxy for increased welfare:

> "The concept of the European single market is based on the position held since Adam Smith: larger markets lead to greater prosperity through greater division of labor and stronger competition." (Presse, 0140_2005)

By referring to scientific authorities such as Adam Smith, economic experts aim to present their claim as common economic knowledge. Furthermore, the reference to "greater prosperity" evokes the impression that competition generates additional wealth, which is beneficial overall. Only a few economists mention the need to compensate the losers of these processes with the help of the ones who experience above average benefits. Moreover, free competition is also said to ensure fairness and equality by keeping the prices of production factors, products, and services low:

> "This also benefits consumers, as competition forces companies to pass on at least part of the cost savings to them in the form of lower prices." (Standard, 0631_2015)

Consumer welfare is likewise increased by the process of specialization and diversification as it enables consumers to choose between a wide range of products. So, a strong narrative of consumers being the primary beneficiaries of a free and competitive (global) market is established. In general, the price level resulting from the production process is a strong determinant for competitiveness:

> "Competitiveness decreases, because potential customers are buying the goods somewhere else at better prices." (Presse, 0604_2012)

Furthermore, competition between different factors of production – either capital and labor, skilled and unskilled labor or renew-able and non-renewable energy – is said to lead to their most efficient allocation by individual profit maximization of firms. In this context, the distribution of income between capital and labor, as well as the substitutability of capital and labor, are discussed. Furthermore, the market process under the condition of free and fair competition is said to achieve the best and most fair situation. In particular, gains from free trade and the international division of labor are highlighted in this context:

> "Without globalization we have no increase in productivity, and without increase in productivity we have no increase in prosperity. Productivity growth is our only way to create more wealth. We cannot better manage inequality by making the cake that has to be distributed smaller." (Presse, 1048_2019)

In this example trade, market liberalization and therefore increased competition is not seen as a zero-sum game, but as a process that leads to an overall gain in productivity and wealth.

In the dynamic concept, in contrast, competition leads to the structural development of the economy and society by selecting between different economic entities based on their ability to fulfil the requirements posed by the market (also referred to as competitiveness). Therefore, the threat of competition also bears a disciplinary function, which applies for both firms and nation states.[vii] Furthermore, the ability of competitive pressure to induce innovation, technological progress, and development is emphasized. This simple causal relationship appears as a prime example for the effects of competition and can be found in many references, including the following:

> "A functioning, fair market-based competition is irreplaceable for a prospering economy: competition forces innovation. Innovation enables economic growth. Growth leads to employment and prosperity." (Standard, 0341_2011)

Following the dynamic perspective, the ability to generate a competitive advantage in order to gain market shares is a basic element of competitive processes. At the micro level, it is argued that individual competitiveness regarding education and individuals' skills should be competitive with other employees on an international labor market, as well as with other factors of production. At the firm level, the idea of competition "cleaning the market" or inducing "creative destruction" is regularly stated. At the national/supranational level, the design of the institutional regulations and taxes, as well as investment in technology and education, represent competitive advantages.

4.2.4. Disruptive Effects of Competition

Despite the predominant positive depiction of competition, some lines of critique can be found within the expert discourse, highlighting in particular the destructive aspects of competition. In this context, the naturalization of the market and the claim of inherent necessities of market requirements (e.g. framing globalization as necessary), despite boosting competition, are predominantly problematized.

> "Market liberal economic theory (laissez faire) dominates. As the 'navigation map' of the elites, it coordinates the behavior of politics, companies and households in a way that allows the entire system to slide deeper and deeper into depression along a downward spiral." (Presse, 0671_2013)

Overall, such critical points are made only on rare occasions by economists and thus mark a "discursive limit" (e.g. Jäger and Maier, 2016), i.e. the limits of what can be said within the expert discourse, without losing one's credibility as a economist. In most references, the concept of competition is not questioned, only its application to reality and functionality in different economic, political, and societal areas.

> "We find a particularly serious example of market failure in the area of environmental protection. Markets are generally efficient when companies' revenues reflect all the benefits that third parties derive from their products and when their costs reflect all the damage […] But if production causes environmental damage that companies do not have to pay for, incentives are distorted." (Presse, 0766_2015)

In this example, markets are applied to environmental protection, which appears as market failure as prices do not reflect the true costs of economic actions. Given the threat of market failure, the state has the legitimation to correct the results of the market process by giving incentives and penalties. Other areas prone to market failure according to critical voices in the analyzed discourse are public health service, education, research, or financial markets. For these, cased regulation and state intervention are said to be necessary to maintain the functioning of important societal areas.

Furthermore, concentration tendencies due to competition and competitive pressure are discussed. A self-reinforcing mechanism of accumulative effects for larger companies leads to an increase in market concentration. This development is said to lower the bargaining power of labor and hence lead to higher profits, while the wage level decreases. In this context, the increased power of multinational firms is also problematized. A similar argument is put forward concerning "infant industries," whereas protection of the domestic economy or certain sectors should give the possibility to develop and attain some level of competitiveness.

> "We need asymmetrical protection. Poorer countries should be allowed to protect their economies more than richer ones." (Standard, 0580_2014)

These examples point to disruptive effects of competition, generating market concentration and deepening the existing imbalances in international trade.

5 Discussion of Results

In all, our analysis of the economic expert discourse yields four main results: (1) competition appears as a superior economic and social order, (2) there are three distinct political-ideological positions reflected in the discourse, (3) competition is said to have distinct functions and effects, and (4) there are various contradictions within the concept(s) of competition.

First, competition is only rarely questioned as a superior economic and social order, but rather "well-functioning" competition is presented as a necessary precondition for societal wealth and progress. This position is in line with the tradition of economic theory since classical political economy[viii] (Smith, Ricardo), stressing the importance of competition and the danger of monopolies for the functioning of the market (Backhouse, 1990; Gane, 2019; Altreiter *et al.,* 2020); a continuity emphasized by direct reference to academic authorities such as Adam Smith or David Ricardo.

> "But in fact, all our research on free trade is only about possible side effects and how to deal with them. But it never leads to the conclusion: let's close the borders. **And it does not change the 200-year-old insight that free trade is beneficial overall**." (Presse, 0932_2017; emphasis added)

Hence, the basic imaginary of competition as something positive is no more discussed in the economists' discourse but has become self-evident in the course of time, marking a "discursive limit" (Jäger and Maier, 2016) in the economic expert discourse. Thus, even though the effects of competition are criticized, the benefits of this social order seem to outweigh the costs. Moreover, while claiming to provide positivist analyses, competition in total appears in most cases implicitly as a positively connoted concept, which brings benefits to both the economy and the society. In this regard, terms like "free trade," "market," or "capitalism" are used as synonyms for "competition."

Strongly connected to this notion is the tendency to describe competition not only as one possible form of social or economic organization, but as something "without alternative", so the "economy," "market," and "competition" are nearly equated within the discourse (Polanyi, 1977), prohibiting other ways of thinking and talking about "the economy." These findings match the diagnosis of an increasingly strong reliance on competition as the prime mode of social organization, which is observable in policies and public discourse (Davies, 2017; Altreiter *et al.,* 2020, p. 4). Therefore, both the concept of social organization and the benefits of competition appear as "sedimented knowledge" of economic experts (Jessop, 2010), while questioning the concept of competition as such marks a "discursive limit" in the economic expert discourse. Thus, in most cases in which economists spoke critically about competitive logic, their arguments were instantly criticized. In some cases, the discussion even resulted in a denial of their expertise on economic issues in general.

In those intense debates, not necessarily exclusive to economists but sometimes also involving journalists, the limit of "what can be said" discourse can be dismantled. One illustrative example for this mechanism was the dispute between economist Stephan Schulmeister and journalist Eric Frey. Schulmeister responded to Frey's critical article of Schulmeister's first statement in *Der Standard*, which no longer revolved around competition but rather his scientific authority and expert position. Hence, Schulmeister was obliged to defend his involvement in the discourse as an economic expert:

> "He [Frey] speaks of the 'financial economy demonized by Schulmeister and co.' **One can read between the lines: 'Schulmeister is not an economist who you can take seriously.'** Frey seems to believe that my remarks represent my private pleasure, the main source of which is my stomach. **In fact, I have been working on this topic as an economist for 25 years** and have published quite a few scientific papers." (Standard, 0211_2008; emphasis added)

Quite often, this limit of what can be said in the discourse corresponds with the exclusionary mechanisms in mainstream economics, which have resulted in a steady marginalization of several "heterodox" economics approaches such as post-Keynesianism or Marxist political economy over the last decades (Lee *et al.,* 2013; FAPE, 2014; Heise and Thieme, 2016).

However, within the border of what can be said there are different political-ideological positions with distinct underlying "economic imaginaries" (Jessop, 2010), which are reflected in political advice. This brings us to our second main take away. Those actors not questioning the concept of competition can be classified in three distinct political-ideological positions, which can be specified by the assumed relations to and specifications about the concept of competition: neoliberalism, ordoliberalism, and Keynesianism. In this regard, the dominance of liberal – both neoliberal and ordoliberal – economists in our sample is striking. This is not only reflected in the dominant notions about competition, but also the institutional background of the actors (see Figure 1).

Figure 3 indicates that the neoliberal position is reflected in the strict adherence to free markets and hence competition, which are said to lead to the most effective results. In this regard, competitiveness is also to be enhanced by competition, while competition law aims to govern competitive behavior in dynamic markets (Jessop, 2015). Hence, neoliberal arguments mostly stress the benefits for society and economy brought by competition and thus emphasize the virtues of liberalization and deregulation. Moreover, the expansion of competition to different spheres of society is supported (Jessop, 2015); (Çalışkan and Callon, 2009).

While ordoliberalism can also be characterized by a deep trust in the positive effects of markets, it deviates from the neoliberal position insofar as in ordoliberalism markets need a "strong" framework for their proper and hence "fair" functioning (see also Bonefeld ((2012) for the ordoliberal claim for a "strong state"). The provision of this regulatory framework should be facilitated by the state. However, politics should not intervene in the market mechanism (Princen and van Esch, 2016, pp. 355–375) but should secure the conditions for perfect competition (Jessop, 2015). In this regard, competition is 'planned' by the state. This is also applied to improve competitiveness.

Figure 3: The spectrum of politico-ideological positions in the discourse about competition

Strategy for competitiveness	compete to compete	plan to compete	coordinate to compete	revolt not to compete
Paradigm **ideology**	neoliberalism	ordoliberalism	Keynesianism	Radical political economy/ Marxism
Ideal type of competition	effective	fair	corrected	destructive

Free market Planning

The Keynesian position takes a more critical stance towards the outcomes of competition and hence stands for more diverse policy interventions to influence the market mechanism, facilitate corrected competition, and compensate market failure outcomes. Moreover, the importance of strong institutional settings is emphasized (Princen and van Esch, 2016).In this regard, coordination, which is reflected in efforts to harmonize economic action of different actors, appears as the prime mode to foster regional or national competitiveness. In our sample, economists from a Keynesian tradition emphasize effects on the social realm more often and also talk about potential negative effects of competition. In particular, the relationship between competition and inequality is highlighted.

The third main take-away is that within those political positions, two main conceptions of competition can be found: either competition is portrayed in a *static, equilibrium-orientated* or in an *evolutionary, process-orientated* manner (Backhouse, 1990). In a static concept, free market forces and hence competition are said to facilitate the most efficient allocation of scarce resources, an idea dating back to the concept of perfect competition in GET, which is still at the heart of many mainstream economic models. Hence, competition appears as beneficial as it allows efficiency gains and offers a strong normative heuristic in favor of free markets (Davies, 2017; Gane, 2019; Altreiter *et al.,* 2020).

In contrast, the dynamic concept of competition is inspired by evolutionary and institutional economic thinking. Here, it is argued that competition leads to the structural development of the economy and/or society by inducing and enforcing a selection mechanism between different agents according to their "competitiveness." Hereby, the idea that markets lead to stable equilibrium is rejected (Jessop, 2015), and instead their function in enabling evolutionary development is highlighted.

However, economic experts in the media discourse refer to two slightly different conceptualizations of the

evolutionary understanding of competition by the two Austrian economists Joseph Schumpeter and Friedrich Hayek, the latter also being one of the most important neoliberal thinkers. Schumpeter highlights the importance of competition for economic development, as it forces entrepreneurs to implement innovations and thus leads to technological progress. So, the market also has a 'disciplinary function' caused by the threat of competition. However, he also takes into account the negative impacts of competition (e.g. such as bankruptcies of firms), a process he calls "creative destruction" to indicate that totally new, improved technology and forms of organization are created (Schumpeter, 1994 [1954]). This notion is often put forward by economists to legitimate disruptive developments, for example in the context of digitalization. In contrast, Hayek frames competition as a "process of discovery" (Hayek, 2002[1968]), not only of prices but also preferences of economic actors. This discovered knowledge bears certain economic actions and therefore has a selective function, while the market allows the circulation and spreading of ideas or knowledge. However, Hayek also takes a clear positive stance towards the market mechanism as a prime mode of economic and social organization and consequently rejects any form of government interventions that potential threaten the functioning of the market. This way, Hayek's theory is often referred to by economic experts when criticizing the alleged ineffectiveness of economic planning or stressing the inevitability of distinct policies (see also Blyth, 2013; Rommerskirchen, 2015; Pühringer, 2019 for the European austerity discourse).

The fourth main result of our analysis is related to the polysemic nature of the concept of competition, which leads to several inconsistencies in the economic expert discourse on competition. Notwithstanding the different ideological camps to which distinct economists belong, three contradictions appear especially striking to us. The first contradiction we found in the economic expert discourse aligns with the analysis of different liberal conceptions of competition outlined by Gane (2019). Competition in this regard is on the one hand conceptualized as a natural process associated with the idea of a perfect market, while on the other hand puts forward the need for management and enforcement of both markets and competition.

Furthermore, the relationship between (perfect) competition and competitiveness, which has become an important object of state action since the end of the 1990s (Jessop, 2015), also appears contradictory. In general, the concept of competitiveness seems at odds with the dominant economic conceptualizations of competition. In this regard, the state appears to be an actor in competition, while in general political decision-making is located outside the market. This could be caused by the fact that "competitiveness" was brought up by management and business scholars in the 1990s and therefore builds on a different theoretical approach. This concept then was used for policy advice and hence started to influence political action (Linsi, 2020). Today, the claim for competitiveness serves as a discursive frame to legitimate the subordination of the nation state to an economic efficiency-rationale (Linsi, 2020). In the aftermath of this discursive shift, two functions are assigned to the state (Jessop, 2015): on the one hand, states should regulate competition ("competition law"), while on the other hand states have to promote and ensure competitiveness on several levels ("competition state"). While the "competition law" matches our static conceptualization of competition and hence builds on the micro-economic concept, the "competition state" reflects the dynamic position and draws on this analysis to justify strategies and policies to promote competitiveness (Jessop, 2015). Our analysis of the economic expert discourse shows that competitiveness, which varies across different levels of economic organization, becomes the target of strategies and policies to enhance competitive capacities (Jessop, 2015).

The third contradiction arises as the concept of competition is applied to multiple levels, including the micro-level (individuals and firms) and the macro-level (nation-states), but also to international organizations (e.g. the EU or the WTO). At each level, different actors compete against each other according to a certain set of rules, such as competition law, but also free trade agreements within the WTO. However, internal cooperation among the sub-units of that level (e.g. within the European Union, nation states, or firms) can be found. On many occasions, economic experts call for these forms of cooperation to coordinate action and enhance the competitiveness of different actors at a higher level (e.g. European coordination to strengthen the international competitiveness of Europe). Hence, cooperation seems

to be a necessary condition to obtaining competitiveness and ultimately succeeding in competition (Bröckling, 2014). In this regard, actors both rely on participatory-egalitarian and hierarchical modes of governance (ibid.)

6 Conclusion

To sum up, in our analysis of the public discourse of economic experts on competition, we found that the concept of competition is framed as a superior economic and social order. Therefore, it is mostly referred to in a positive way and described as something "without alternative," and so questioning the concept of competition marks a discursive limit in the economic experts. More critical accounts on the effects of competition are typically brought forward by experts from other academic disciplines, such as sociologists, philosophers, or political scientists. While an analysis of different evaluations of competition might be a promising avenue for future research, we argue that given the political and societal impact of economic knowledge, economic expert discourses have a formative impact on the formation of an economic imaginary of competition.

How exactly different relations and interdependencies are framed in the public discourse of economic experts depends on the political-ideological position of distinct economists. Within this border, there are three political-ideological positions reflected in the discourse, namely ordoliberalism ("plan to compete"), Keynesianism ("coordinate to compete"), and neoliberalism ("compete to compete"), of which ordoliberalism is the most prevailing one in our sample. According to the political-ideological position, different functions and effects are assigned to competition. However, there are also various contradictions within the concept of competition, which arise from different discourse strands and "economic imaginaries" intermingling in public and expert discourse. One striking paradox is the argumentation of cooperation (e.g. at the EU level) in order to be (internationally) competitive.

Moreover, we also found a strong identification with Europe, the European Economy, and the European welfare state in the expert discourse. Hence, even from a neoliberal perspective, a certain degree of social standards and sustainability is framed as a competitive advantage of the "European model." The opponent to this model is a strong focus on innovation, entrepreneurship, and private investment, to secure economic growth and therefore gain competitive advantages at an international level. This pattern is often described as the "American model" but is slowly but steadily being adopted by China as well. In this context, the emergence of market power in the form of monopolies and oligopolies is interpreted as an indicator of creativity and success and therefore justified and reasonable. This is an interesting observation, but not fully developed in our paper due to our focus on competition and could be an avenue for future research.

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[i] The actual affiliation and academic position were not relevant for our categorization of "economic experts," since we are interested in analyzing the discursive effect of economists as experts. We also included articles with direct references to famos economists (for example, "as proposed by Hayek"), as well as articles in which authors refer to the economists, as an abstract term, to support their argument (for example, "economists claim that" or "from an economist's perspective").

ii https://www.wiso-net.de/

[iii] Particularly Agenda Austria, funded by the IV, industrial companies, and wealthy private donors, which in recent years also challenged the dominant position of the traditional economic research institutes (see e.g. (Pühringer and Stelzer-Orthofer, 2016).

[iv] We counted a reference to an economic expert only once for each distinct article to avoid a quantitative distortion caused by interviews with numerous mentions of the name of an individual economist.

v All quotations and titles were translated by the authors. Year and number refer to our sample of newspaper articles, and all documents can be provided by the authors upon request.

vi For a comparative analysis of competition policies in the United States and Germany, see also (Ergen and Kohl, 2019).

vii Concerning nation states, this function is mostly referred to in relation to the financial crisis and the question of "bail-outs" within the Eurozone.

[viii] In this context, we only refer to the classical political economy, namely Adam Smith and David Ricardo, but not to the critique of political economy, namely Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The latter, as well as Marxist scholars today, indeed stress the negative effects of competition ((Engels, 1969[1891]; Shaikh, 2016).