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Governing the Ungovernable - Recontextualizations of 'Competition' in European Policy Discourse

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Laura Porak

Governing the Ungovernable - Recontextualizations of 'Competition' in European Policy Discourse

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Governing the Ungovernable - Recontextualizations of 'Competition' in European Policy Discourse

Laura Porak[a]

[a]*Institute for Comprehensive Analysis of the Economy, Johannes Kepler University, Linz, Austria*

E-Mail: laura.porak@jku.at**, ORCID**: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1535-2554

Laura Porak is working in the research project 'SPACE' (Spatial Competition and Economic Policy) for the Institute for Comprehensive Analysis of the Economy at the JKU Linz. The interdisciplinary research team consisting of economists, sociologists and ethnography scholars is concerned with the performativity of competition in socioeconomic transformation processes. Additionally, she just started her PHD thesis in socio-economics at the JKU. Her thesis will focus on the topic "performativity of competition in European political discourse". Before, she has studied sociology, economics and political economy in Vienna and Bernkastel-Kues. Moreover, she is actively engaged in the German 'Netzwerk für Plurale Ökonomik' since 2017. Since 2019, she also is part of economists for future.

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Governing the Ungovernable

The role of the state and political authorities has always been highly ambivalent in different strands of neoliberalism. This paper aims to highlight contradictory political stances towards competition and associated modes of governance by analyzing policy discourse of the European Commission. While economic knowledge gained social relevance over the last decades, economic theory and thus also competition is characterized by its polysemy. Hence, different strands of economic thought are based on different 'economic imaginaries'. By conducting a Critical Discourse Analysis of the most recent 'governance structure' of the EU, 'Europe 2020', I found that competition is naturalized as mode of economic organization. The main contribution of this paper is the reconstruction of two 'economic imaginaries'. First, the European Commission as political sovereign and second, as an actor in the (world) market. Each 'economic imaginary' has distinct ideas about the functioning of the economy and the role of the political sovereign. Hence, they also have different policy implications. Moreover, I identify five discursive strategies employed to legitimize contradictory stances towards (the governance) of competition. Both the 'economic imaginaries' and the discursive strategies are clearly indicating a strong neoliberal influence on the 'governance structure' 'Europe 2020'.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; European Commission; Europe 2020; Performativity of Economics; Competition; Competitiveness

1. Competition as an Object of Governance

Since the neoliberal era in the 1970s, competition has constantly been increased through political ambitions for liberalization and deregulation. Altreiter et al. (2020) describe this development as 'competitization'. From the neoliberal perspective, competition appears beneficial to society overall, as it is said to increase wealth and welfare, enhance innovation and limit economic (hence monopoly) as well as societal power. Thus, neoliberalism is characterized by its deep trust in the benefits of competitive markets (Foucault 2010; Gane 2020). However, other than in classical liberalism, competitive markets do not appear as spontaneous order, but 'neoliberalism in its varieties paradoxically includes an active role for the state in designing, promoting and guaranteeing the free and efficient operation of the market' (Cerny 2020, 8). Unsurprisingly, the question of the political sovereign has always been highly ambivalent in neoliberalism. While it is acknowledged that markets have to be established, intervention in the market mechanism is not deemed as desirable. Accordingly, market-making and governing by organizing framework conditions (e.g. a constitutional system or maintaining the rule of law) are seen as the most important political tasks. Hence, Foucault (2010) argues that neoliberalism has no economic sovereign. However, recently a revival of industrial policy is diagnosed (Aiginger and Rodrik 2020; Mosconi 2020; Wigger 2019). This once Keynesian idea entails targeted political action and thus is at odds with the neoliberal conviction of the ungovernable market. These new political ambitions materialize in the competition state (Fougner 2006; Linsi 2020) that seeks to

persist and maximize domestic economic growth in the liberalized world market. This international development reflects that world market integration increasingly impacts national macroeconomic policy and eventually results in an international convergence of monetary and fiscal policies (Cerny 2020). However, the power and sovereignty have also shifted through globalization from the nation state to 'a new multi-layered regulatory apparatus, which operates on a transnational scale' (Fraser 2003, 167). Thus, the location of governmentality has been divided into several levels and international organizations that influence policymaking and the sovereignty of nation states. In the European Union (EU), this development is reflected in the 'Lisbon Strategy' (2000), which most important policy goal was to increase European competitiveness (Borrás and Radaelli 2011). In response to the financial crises 2008/09 and the European sovereign debt crisis, this development of power relations and the objectives of the 'Lisbon Strategy' have been reinforced with 'Europe 2020' (2010), thereby becoming key goals of European policy.

Various scholars (e.g. Linsi, 2020; Maeße, 2013; Sum, 2009; Sum and Jessop, 2013) emphasize the impact of economic theory on the just briefly outlined process of socioeconomic transformation. Thus, the performativity of economics (Callon 1998; MacKenzie 2008) allows to understand these recent developments and political reactions. Performativity in this context means that economic ideas 'do not merely record a reality (...) but contribute powerfully to shaping, simply by measuring, the reality' (Callon 1998, 23). Thus, economic theory on competition is said to impact socioeconomic reality, as knowledge entails implications for action and every action is based on specific knowledge. However, Maeße (2013) argues that economics is not a monolithic body of thought, but a product of different influences. Also, competition, a core concept in economics, is characterized by its polysemy. Despite the various different concepts (Altreiter et al. 2020; Ergen and Kohl 2020), Backhouse (1990) distinguishes two main strands of thought: a static equilibrium-oriented approach associated with neoclassical economics and a dynamic process-oriented approach based on Schumpeter's theory of creative destruction (1912). These vary in their political-ideological origin as well as in their policy implications. Cultural political economy scholars (Jessop 2010; Sum 2009; Sum and Jessop 2013) would argue that each strand of thought is based on a distinct 'economic imaginary'. 'Economic imaginaries' are an abstraction of the highly complex social reality that emphasizes certain elements and relations over others (Jessop 2010). This allows for a reasonable description of the economy, functions as mechanism to transmit economic knowledge to other societal realms (Jessop 2010) and gives economic knowledge a public role (Maeße 2013).

Against this background, I argue that the different stances on (the governance of) competition are a product of different 'economic imaginaries' co-existing in the discourse. For the analysis, this paper draws on the key strategic policy papers around 'Europe 2020', as this 'governance architecture' (Borrás and Radaelli 2011) is pointing the way towards the future of Europe. In this context, the question

of the political sovereign in relation to competition is analyzed. Thus, the distinct role of competition and associated modes of governance in the predominant 'economic imaginary' (Jessop 2010) are reconstructed. This way, I seek to go beyond analyses focusing on the dominance of policy paradigms (Hall 1993; Princen and van Esch 2016), as the character of the EU cannot be reduced to such rigid frameworks (Jessop 2019; Maeße 2013). Instead, I emphasize the different in discourse circulating 'economic imaginaries' on competition and their politico-ideological origin, which remain under-analyzed in many cases (Altreiter et al. 2020; Borrás and Radaelli 2011; Linsi 2020).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, I review the debate on neoliberal governance and the European Union. Second, I introduce the applied methodological approach. Third, I present the findings of the analysis. Fourth, I will discuss the introduced results.

2. Neoliberal Governance and the EU

Neoliberal ideas have been a central political and ideological influence in the EU (Havertz 2020; Jessop 2019; McNamara 1998). However, despite the core dynamics of marketization and the general opposition to intervention into the market mechanism, neoliberalism varies in time and space (Cerny 2020; Jessop 2019). In the history of European Economic Governance American neoliberalism and ordoliberalism are the most relevant strands of thought: In American neoliberalism the political sovereign is only responsible for basic tasks, for instance ensuring property rights. Hence, the state has a minimal role (Cerny 2020). Moreover, the economic logic is extended to other societal realms, which results in their subjectification to economic rationality (Foucault 2010). Ordoliberalism, which origins in Germany, defines political responsibilities much broader. Hence, the ordo principle entails organizing the framework conditions of the market to ensure its proper functioning (Kapeller, Puehringer, and Grimm 2021). Thereby, the market logic is focused on the economic realm, that appears to be embedded in society (Jessop 2019).

The impact of neoliberalism on European integration varies over time. In the Treaty of Rome (1957), a well-functioning competitive Single Market was already a major goal demanded by German ordoliberal economists (Havertz 2020). Likewise, competition policy, another key topic of ordoliberalism, has been an important European responsibility since then (Buch-Hansen and Wigger 2010). Though, in early European integration, this politico-ideological influence, which reflects the German influence on the integration process, was balanced with more interventionist approaches (Havertz 2020). However, since the rise of the neoliberal era in the 1970s, competitive dynamics have been increased at different levels (Jessop 2019). On the one hand, competition has gained importance as governmental rationality in the Single Market through liberalization, deregulation and the establishment of 'disciplinary neoliberalism' (Gill 1995). For example, in the European Monetary Union, the market was promoted as governance mechanism at the expense of state intervention (Fraser

2003). Thereby, supranational rules (e.g. competition law or the Stability and Growth Pact) should ensure a well-functioning market. Also after the sovereign debt crisis, ordoliberalism guided the reform of European Economic governance (Jessop 2019) and dominates these institutions until today (Havertz 2020). On the other hand, with increasing world market completion, the political goal of competition is recontextualized into competitiveness (Sum 2009). This is reflected in the 'Lisbon Strategy' (2000), the key EU strategy at that time that introduced the goal of becoming 'the most competitive knowledge-based economy' in the world (COM_2000). This productivity-focused, neomercantilist[i] strategy that encouraged a knowledge-based economy and aimed to renew the European social model should sustain European welfare (Jessop 2019). Thus, the EU seeks to build a regional bloc to prevail in international competition (Palan, Abbott, and Deans 1996). However, the strategy did not fulfil any of its goals and instead embraced financialization (Birch and Mykhnenko 2014), indicating the impact of American neoliberalism in the EU despite not being directly articulated. This reflects the neoliberal turn, that was just experienced by the 'new' European Social Democrats, who introduced the strategy (Séville 2017). Accordingly, social concerns are aligned with economic questions (Birch and Mykhnenko 2014). Moreover, 'soft governance' is introduced using the open method of coordination. This way, the European Commission (EC) was given the opportunity to influence policymaking without formal competency. Therefore, the informal importance of the European level has increased (Natali 2009).

Borrás and Radaelli (2011) argue that a 'governance architecture' was established with the 'Lisbon Strategy'. 'Governance architectures' are strategic and long-term institutional arrangements built by international organizations to address political issues holistically. They often entail a renewed approach to the 'raison d'etre of organizations' (470). This kind of politics has recently grown in importance. 'Governance architectures' consist of organizational and ideational elements. The former are tied to and create institutional path dependencies for future developments, while the latter have no clear-cut meaning. Instead, those elements are discursively malleable and thus prone to strategic use. Hence, the same discursive elements (for instance competition) might figure in different 'economic imaginaries' (Jessop 2010).

In 2010, 'Europe 2020' was introduced by the EC as a continuation of the 'Lisbon Strategy' and in response to the financial crisis of 2008/09. Although 'Europe 2020' is similar to the 'Lisbon Strategy' in many aspects, I argue that it constitutes a new 'governance architecture'. This is reflected in five 'ambitious' (COM_2010a: 3) measurable targets in the fields of employment, research and development, climate change and energy sustainability, education and fighting poverty. Hence, in comparison with the 'Lisbon Strategy', more emphasis is placed on innovation, green technology and social cohesion (Borrás and Radaelli 2011). The goals are formulated within a long-term frame of 10 years. For implementation, old and new elements of governance are combined by introducing the European Semester, which nowadays has become the most important instrument to implement European

policy. The European Semester was suggested by the EC. It allows the early review of national structural reforms and budget plans to ensure the budgetary discipline of nation states and improve economic efficiency. For this purpose, compulsory and non-compulsory elements are combined, reinforcing the importance of the European level (Salines, Glöckler, and Truchlewski 2012). In 2019, the EC reformulated the existing policy goals in the 'European Green Deal'. The focus is now on climate change mitigation and adaption, although the main levers for reform and problem definitions are similar to those in 'Europe 2020'. Likewise, energy efficiency for sustainability and the social dimension of the socioeconomic transformation are emphasized. Moreover, the same instruments are used to implement the reforms. Therefore, I argue that the 'European Green Deal' is part of the 'Europe 2020' 'governance architecture'.

The EC, the most important body in this 'governance structure' (Bauer and Becker 2014; Borrás and Radaelli 2011; Savage and Verdun 2016), shapes the future development of the EU significantly. The EC comprises a president and one commissioner from each remaining member state. However, it is formally independent of member states and commissioners are obliged to act in the common interest of the EU. Its political importance in the EU grew through a powershift from the European Council to the EC during the implementation of the 'Lisbon Strategy' between 2000 and 2010. This development is closely related to the introduction of the open method of coordination (Borrás and Radaelli 2011), as this 'soft law' allows the EC to influence policy areas without formal competency (Natali 2009). This mode of policymaking was later adapted in the European Semester. At a formal level, the relevance of the EC stems from its three, central function for the Union. First, the Lisbon Treaty (2009) passed executive power to the EC, which was previously a competency of the European Council. This reflects the recent powershift (Borrás and Radaelli 2011). Second, the Commission has legislative initiative and can therefore make formal legislative proposals alone. For this reason, the agenda put forward in policy proposals and communications is pointing the way for the future development of the Union (Savage and Verdun 2016). This task is formalized in the Lisbon Treaty (2009), which assigns the EC the responsibility to develop medium-term strategies. Third, the enforcement of European law is an important task of the Commission. Moreover, the power position of the EC at the European level is reinforced, as the financial endowment and number of officials are far larger than for any other European body. This allows strategic action. Hence, although the Commission is not independent of member states, it occupies the most important position from which to shape European policy (Savage and Verdun 2016).

3. Methodological Approach

The methodological approach employed in this paper is based on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2013; Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 2006; Wodak, 2006). CDA is a sociolinguistic approach that conceptualizes language not as a mere neutral instrument to describe

social reality, but claims that social reality is constructed by discourse (Fairclough 2013). Yet, discourse cannot be reduced to language, but is constituted by circulating statements and discursive practices that generate hierarchical systems of knowledge and form the perception and interpretation of social reality. Discourse thus functions as a trans-subjective producer of social reality. Moreover, discursive elements always entail certain patterns of action. This dimension of discourse is described as performative and productive, as the described reality is also produced. Power relations regulate discourse and thus determine interpretative patterns for material reality and legitimate action (Fairclough 2013). The main aim of CDA is to highlight hierarchical orders of knowledge in discourse and deconstruct power relations this way (van Dijk 2006).

I employed a software-assisted (MAXQDA) CDA under which I drew on a text corpus of key policy papers published by the EC since 'Europe 2020' (2010), as indicated in Table 1. The 15 analyzed policy papers comprise 92,231 words in total. These documents were chosen because of the importance of the EC at the European level (Bauer and Becker 2014; Borrás and Radaelli 2011; Savage and Verdun 2016). Hence, these discourse fragments mark the outside border for possible policy action within the Union with which the positions in all other – often more concrete – policy papers have to comply. For this reason, the 'European Green Deal' was also considered (COM_2019b: 3). The time period was chosen based on the new 'governance architecture' established with 'Europe 2020'. Likewise, 'Europe 2020' was also described as beginning of a new 'regulatory policy' by Manuel Barroso, the Commission president at that time.

[insert table 1]

The CDA in this paper proceeds in two steps. First, the 'economic imaginary' (Jessop 2010) prevailing in the 'governance architecture' was reconstructed, with emphasis placed on the distinctive role of competition and associated modes of governance. This way, insights into the politico-ideological foundations of the circulating knowledge are given. Second, political and discursive strategies to legitimize competition and associated modes of governance were analyzed. For the analysis, a theory-driven code system considering effects and functions of competition (Altreiter et al. 2020), attempts to govern competition (Jessop 2015) and used political instruments was constructed. Moreover, language, metaphors (Hardt 2014; Lakoff and Johnson 2003) and rhetoric were considered. Table 2 outlines the used categories.

[insert table 2]

4. Results

The presentation of the results is organized into four sections. First, I briefly outline the structure of the analyzed discourse and hint at two in the policy papers co-existing 'economic imaginaries' (Jessop

2010). Second, I introduce the 'economic imaginary' as the political sovereign and third, that as an actor in international competition. Fourth, the discursive strategies to legitimize these contradictory stances towards competition, but also challenge the existing economic order are discussed. To illustrate the results of the CDA, exemplary quotes from the policy papers will be used.

4.1 Competition as an irrevocable Reality

In the analyzed policy discourse of the European Commission, competition is rarely addressed explicitly as principle of economic organization; instead, phrases such as 'well-functioning Single Market' (e.g. COM_2011: 7) and 'dynamic business environment' (e.g. COM_2016: 5) are used to refer to competition. Moreover, competition is discursively constructed, for instance, by describing the economy as a 'competitive environment' (e.g. COM_2012: 5) or by striving to 'reduce fragmentation' (COM_2015: 8) in the Single Market. Moreover, market actors are described as 'competitors' (e.g. COM_2010: 16) and compared to each other using quantitative indicators. This applies to different policy fields (e.g. education or the labor market). The general stance on competition in the policy documents is positive. More competition is often a political goal, while competitiveness is an important objective at different scales. However, what 'competition' means in the analyzed discourse is unclear. Instead, the EC takes two positions, as indicated in figure 1.

[insert figure 1]

(1) As the political sovereign, the European Commission is located outside and, to a certain extent, 'above' the market. Therefore, the functioning of the market and thus competition as a principle of economic organizations can be structured. Hence, the most important instrument to govern competition is competition law (Jessop 2015). This stance mostly focuses on the Single Market, but occasionally extends to the world market. At this scope, competition is mostly limited to the economic realm, exceptions are research and higher education institutions. Hence, firms and individuals (mostly in the labor market) are said to compete.

(2) In the realm of the world market European enterprises, but also Europe as a whole appear as actors among others in international competition. Here, competition is described as a struggle for market share, profit and competitive advantage, which exposes actors to an existential threat. Although competition is mostly limited to the economic realm, the EC is also acting as competition state (Cerny 2010; Fougner 2006; Jessop 2015). Thus, not only firms and individuals, but also nation states appear to be in competition. This way, the line between the economic and political realms is blurred.

In Sections 4.2 and 4.3, the 'economic imaginaries' underlying these two discourse positions and associated modes of governance are outlined in more detail.

4.2 Idealizing Competition

As political sovereign, market-making is the ultimate political aim and instrument to maximize wealth and welfare. Therefore, the European Commission seeks to institutionalize competitive markets globally and in Europe**.** Thus, political cooperation appears as a precondition for economic competition.

> To gear the single market to serve the Europe 2020 goals requires well-functioning and well-connected markets where competition and consumer access stimulate growth and innovation. (COM_2010a: 23)

This quote from 'Europe 2020' indicates that the liberalization and deregulation of the Single Market is said to support important political goals, also during the at that time present European sovereign debt crisis. The phrasing 'well-functioning and well-connected markets' suggests that free and hence competitive markets lead to the most efficient allocation of resources. Therefore, special focus should be paid to the reorganization of economic sectors crucial in the 21st century such as services (COM_2010a: 23) or the digital economy (COM_2019a: 3). However, market-making also requires organizing the conditions for competition to take place, as indicated by the phrasing 'to gear'. This implies a clear distribution of responsibilities between politics and the economy. While the private sector facilitates growth and innovation, the political sovereign has to establish framework conditions such as a legal order and guide the market mechanism towards political objectives such as sustainability and high employment rates. Thus, the political sovereign, as the border between the political and economic realms, is clearly defined. While intervention in the market mechanism is undesirable, politics plays an active role in market-making and organizing. These two modes of political action are described in the following subsections.

4.2.1 Promoting Competition

Market-making essentially means promoting competition through liberalization and deregulation. This is legitimized by the Commission by the following two arguments. Competition is said to bring about (1) societal and economic benefits through allocative efficiency and (2) innovation through selection. In the analyzed discourse, these arguments are mostly used to extend markets to fields that are not strictly economic.

> The Commission will deepen work on implementation and enforcement in the Single Market in 2012. The Commission will propose initiatives to connect up national research systems and create a

structured, mobile and efficient European Research Area based on greater competition and collaboration to catalyze excellent science and world beating innovation. (…) Full implementation of the Single European Sky would not only end inefficiencies that cost some €3.8bn a year, it would cut CO2 emissions, boost safety, and reduce delays for passengers. (COM_2012: 5f.)

As illustrated in this quote under the headline 'A Single Market for Growth' (COM_2012: 5), establishing a market is first said to create economic and societal benefits. Benefits are mainly assessed in economic terms. Efficiency gains reduce production costs for producers and prices for consumers, while increasing overall welfare. However, it is also argued that social and environmental standards should be considered in market-making (e.g. COM_2014: 2). Nevertheless, in the end, these mostly appear as positive side effects of economic benefits. Similar arguments are used to legitimize liberalization at the global scale. Second, as also indicated in this quote, competition is said to serve as mechanism of selection between rival ideas and thus enhance innovation. Likewise, market deregulation is seen as an instrument to promote innovation, which benefits consumers, as prices fall and new products are introduced. Eventually, it is argued that increased competition in the Single Market benefits all economic actors including enterprises, consumers and politicians. Thus, 'competitization' appears as a positive-sum game and instrument to deal with political and economic problems, as for instance with the sovereign debt crisis (COM_2010a) or climate change (COM_2019b).

4.2.2 The making of Perfect Competition

As political sovereign, competition law is an important instrument to 'gear the market' (COM_2010a: 23), or govern competition.

Through the implementation of competition policy, the Commission will ensure that the single market remains an open market, preserving equal opportunities for firms and combating national protectionism. But competition policy will do more (…). Competition policy ensures that markets provide the right environment for innovation (…). Preventing market abuse and anticompetitive agreements between firms provides a reassurance to incentivise innovation. (COM_2010a: 23)

As indicated in this quote, fair competition is characterized by equal access to market opportunities. This notion reflects the liberal idea of equality of opportunity (Foucault 2010) and realizes two axioms of neoclassical perfect competition (Walras 2010): no entry barriers to and free exchange within the market. Moreover, comprehensive information appears vital for actors – especially consumers – to make decisions (e.g. COM_2019b: 8). This aim reflects a third axiom of perfect competition (Walras 2010). By meeting these requirements, competition policy is said to support well-functioning markets that improve overall wealth and welfare (e.g. by promoting innovation). This approach towards governing competition is coined by ordoliberalism (Havertz 2020). Moreover, the market framework also has to be adapted to the most recent economic developments, as for instance the 'still-nascent economic recovery', but also 'migration flows' and a 'heightened terrorist threat' (COM_2107: 2). Also, future challenges are anticipated, which is for instance reflected in the aim of a 'circular economy'

(COM_2019b: 7) to adapt climate change. However, in this context, the multiple functions given to the Single Market cause ambivalences to arise.

> A Europe that protects our economies and ensures a fair playing field for workers and business. (COM_2017: 10)

In this quote, the Single Market has the function to protect European actors and nation states from international competition. Nevertheless, competition is also established and intensified by market making in Europe. Yet, competition in the Single Market is organized according to rules that ensure social and environmental standards and prevent a 'race to the bottom'. This ordoliberal idea (Princen and van Esch 2016) is manifested in the game metaphor used in this quote: games adhere to the rules set by an authority and are occasionally adapted to new circumstances. Moreover, games are normally based on the principle of equality of actors. Ultimately, this quote suggests that only fair competition is seen as desirable by the EC.

4.3 Competition as an ever-present Threat

From the perspective of an actor in the (world) market, competition appears in the policy documents as ungovernable and an ever-present threat. In this context, the market is described as a constantly changing environment influenced by such external developments as digitalization and climate change. These developments do not appear to be malleable by political authorities, so that adaption becomes an imperative and a precondition to prevail in a competitive environment.

> Europe is left with clear yet challenging choices. Either we face up collectively (…) to long-term challenges – globalization, pressure on resources, ageing, – (...) regain competitiveness, boost productivity and put the EU on an upward path of prosperity ("sustainable recovery"). Or we continue at a slow and largely uncoordinated pace of reforms, and we risk ending up with a permanent loss in wealth, a sluggish growth rate ("sluggish recovery") possibly leading to high levels of unemployment and social distress, and a relative decline on the world scene ("lost decade"). (COM_2010a: 11)

As this example indicates, participation in global competition is not questioned in discourse, but rather portrayed as imperative. Europe can only win or lose. The changing socioeconomic realities pose new challenges, which can be turned into opportunities through strategic foresight and appropriate policy choices to become more competitive. Thus, the policy goal of competitiveness does not appear – as suggested here – as a choice, but as a necessity to sustain European wealth. This is also an important motivation for the introduction of political strategies such as 'Europe 2020' and the 'European Green Deal'. In this context, competitiveness, on the one hand, means being able to produce cheaper (cost competitiveness) or more advanced goods (technological competitiveness) (Dosi, Pavitt, and Soete 1990). On the other hand, it entails facing the long-term challenges posed by external developments better than others. Hence, the concept is inevitably defined relatively and the ambitions for improvement are necessarily endless. Therefore, retaining and gaining competitiveness is a constant process.

Competitiveness today must be geared to competitiveness tomorrow. There is untapped potential for the EU economy to be more innovative, productive and competitive whilst using fewer resources and reducing environmental damage. (COM_2013: 8)

This quote points out that sustaining competitiveness means adapting the economy to new circumstances, optimally before the critical time period. For instance, because of climate change, resource efficiency should be increased to reduce environmental harm. However, this also increases productivity and reduces the costs of firms, meaning that cost competitiveness rises. Thus, the economic efficiency paradigm is reproduced and reinforced by these proposals. This reaction is a good example of the co-optation of a political claim (sustainability) and its reformulation in the rationale of competitiveness discourse (efficiency gains) (Sum 2009). Anyway, the importance of climate change prevention increases over time and finally materializes in the 'European Green Deal'.

In this context, two attempts to improve European competitiveness can be distinguished. First, European actors are supported in their world market performance. Second, the attractiveness of the Single Market as a business environment is increased. These are outlined in the following two subsections.

4.3.1 Strengthening European Actors

First, it is argued that the changing conditions of the world market and threat of international competition require strengthening the competitiveness of European economic actors. In particular, far-reaching challenges such as climate change require comprehensive economic transformations and thus targeted policy. For instance, the 'European Green Deal' was developed to address this transformation process.

In March 2020, the Commission will adopt an EU industrial strategy to address the twin challenge of the green and the digital transformation. Europe must leverage the potential of the digital transformation, which is a key enabler for reaching the Green Deal objectives. Together with the industrial strategy, a new circular economy action plan will help modernise the EU's economy and draw benefit from the opportunities of the circular economy domestically and globally. (COM_2019b: 7)

This quote suggests that industrial policy will be necessary to deal with future challenges. Innovation and digitalization are supported and incentivized, as they increase the ability of the economy to adapt to climate change. However, the efficiency gains associated with modernization and innovation should also lead to competitiveness (e.g. COM_2010: 5). For innovation, access to capital is described as vital. Therefore, 'the Commission will work to improve the ability of the financial system to finance the real economy and to increase the use of financial instruments to maximize the leverage effect of the EU budget' (COM_2014: 5). Although European firms in general are supported, aspirations clearly focus on those sectors expected to grow in the long run (COM_2019: 4). Examples include developing new markets and restructuring economic sectors towards future-orientated activities such as sustainable

farming and recycling. For this purpose, incentives are established to invest in critical areas and technology. Yet, fair competition in the Single Market should also enhance innovation. These two ideas (fair competition and industrial policy) are at odds, although no trade-off is introduced. Moreover, the Single Market is portrayed as an asset that provides opportunities for firms to scale up, while protecting them from international competition. Supporting European competitiveness by engaging in industrial policy is strongly associated Keynesianism (Linsi 2020); yet, market-based instruments are implemented to meet these goals. This indicates a strong neoliberal influence (Linsi 2020). Moreover, European Small and Medium Enterprises are supported based on normative arguments. This focus relates to ordoliberalism (Havertz 2020).

However, 'competitization' does not only impact European enterprises, but also individuals.

> We need to equip Europeans to adapt to the needs of the rapidly changing world and emerging labor markets. (COM_2016: 5)

In this quote, labor markets appear as a hostile environment that requires certain equipment to succeed. Thus, European workers are supported to acquire new and flexible skills (COM_2010a: 20). In this regard, 'empowering' (8) means the independent adaption to market circumstances. Thus, the imperative to compete is passed onto individuals, leading to competitization of everyday life (Altreiter et al. 2020).

4.3.2 Increasing the Attractiveness of Europe

The EC also portrays Europe in competition to attract capital and retain economic power, growth and welfare. This requires targeted political action to increase the attractiveness of Europe as a business environment. Therefore, for the Single Market

> to reach its potential, it needs to foster the right environment for business – particularly smaller enterprises – and consumers, to fully implement reforms to promote sustainable growth, and to have effective and competitive infrastructure. (COM_2012: 5)

This quote reflects the neoliberal division between politics and the economy. While politics should provide the framework conditions, the economy creates growth and wealth. Therefore, a favorable business environment is required to sustain political goals such as societal welfare. This orientation thus means that the economic framework and society as a whole must adapt to the changing requirements of the world market. Hence, market dynamics impose external constraints and make European political action fundamentally insecure, as despite the aim of preparation, future developments appear unpredictable. In this context, the line between the economic and political realms is blurred and the EC becomes an actor in the world market. This approach towards competitiveness is coined by American neoliberalism (Linsi 2020).

Yet, despite aspirations to increase competitiveness through adaption, the distinctive institutional setting of the European Single Market is also described as a competitive advantage.

> Europe has a unique social market economy that allows us to combine social fairness, sustainability and economic growth. This helps drive our competitive sustainability. (COM_2020a: 6)

This quote indicates that the attractiveness of Europe is defined not only by its economic strength, but also by 'soft factors'. This implies a tension between adapting to external necessities, striving to be unique and enforcing European values and standards in the world market. Although never addressed, these are omnipresent in the discourse.

4.4 Legitimizing Competition

Common to the two discourse positions is the tendency not to question competition, but to only highlight associated benefits. For example, free trade is said to generally lead to benefits (e.g. COM_2017: 11). Thus, competition has hegemonic status (Laclau and Mouffe 2014) or appears as 'sedimented knowledge' (Jessop 2010) within the reconstructed 'economic imaginaries'. Nevertheless, between the different discourse positions, the European Commission takes an ambivalent stance on making and governing competition. This is legitimized by a discursive constellation characterized by five distinct features: (1) adapting the discourse to new circumstances, (2) narrowing possibilities to think about the economy, (3) providing a common ground for political action on competition, (4) depoliticizing the governance of competition and (5) creating a strong European identity. These five discursive strategies are outlined below.

First, the notion of competition is adapted to changing circumstances. A simple word count suggests that the analyzed discourse emphasizes competitiveness rather than competition. While 'competition' is only mentioned 26 times in all the documents, 'competitiveness' is referred to 61 times and 'competitive' 37 times. For this recontextualization, the increasing competitive dynamics though liberalization and deregulation are crucial (Sum 2009). This intensifies the struggle for market share and profit, raising the importance of competitiveness for realizing political goals such as higher employment and economic growth.

Second, another discursive strategy is to naturalize competition as principle of economic organization. This is expressed in different ways: While competition is never addressed, only constructed (see Section 3.2), the hegemonic nature of competitiveness is reflected in omnipresent references, without clearly defining the concept (Laclau and Mouffe 2014). Thereby, competition is neither challenged nor are any alternatives introduced. Instead, a chain of equivalences (Laclau and Mouffe 2014) between 'the economy', 'the market' and 'competition' is created. Hence, creating a

market always entails creating competition (e.g. COM_2015: 8). This strategy is underpinned by releasing general statements that make it impossible to think about the economy in any other way.

> Sustainable growth and job creation need to combine a stable macro-economic environment with the ability to compete in the global economy. (COM_2013: 4)

The general statement about the functioning of the economy in this quote suggests that the implied relations between different elements of the economy are 'natural'. Third, this quote entails clear political advice if the goals of growth and employment are to be reached. Hence, governing competition and thus attaining fair competition and competitiveness never appear as goals themselves; rather, they are necessary means to ensure European wealth and sustain the social market economy in a hostile environment. By subjecting all aspirations to govern competition to the major policy goals since 'Europe 2020' (growth and employment), the potential inconsistencies between the discourse positions are enclosed and political action gains a clear focus. Thus, these political goals successfully unite actors by providing the common ground required to maintain the hegemonic order of competition (Laclau and Mouffe 2014).

The fourth discursive strategy also concerns the governance of competition and is described by Séville (2017) as a variation of the neoliberal claim that 'there's no alternative': External constraints are used as argument to depoliticize and legitimize political decisions. In regard to competitiveness, this discursive strategy is omnipresent.

> Europe has no other option but to tackle the immediate challenge of the crisis and to face long-term challenges such as globalization, climate action, ageing, to make up for the recent losses, regain competitiveness and put the EU on an upward path of sustainable growth. (COM_2010b: 4)

This example illustrates that globalization, climate change and ageing are seen as external developments that cannot be shaped, so that fast and comprehensive adaption appears as imperative. Accordingly, the central antagonism is constructed between modernization, which means adaption, and maintaining old structures (Mouffe 2005). Modernization is said to benefit the society as a whole. Other economic antagonisms such as that between capital and labor are not addressed. This discursive strategy helps to depoliticize the governance of competition by narrowing the possibilities for political action. Fifth, succeeding, which in this case means ensuring competitiveness and hence economic growth, only appears possible if Europe acts as Union. Thus, the discourse around competitiveness also has the crucial function of creating a strong European identity.

Eventually, the polysemic nature of competition allows strategic action: On the one hand, the European Commission pursues European interests, on the other hand, the establishment of an alternative world order based on ordoliberal principles is aspired.

The European Union believes that free, fair and open trade can only function with a strong and effective World Trade Organization (WTO). The Commission intends to lead international efforts and work with partners to reform the WTO. (COM_2020a: 7)

As this example indicates, the EC intends to implement ordoliberal principles at the global scale. Thereby, the European Single Market should provide an example to other (economic) regions. Further, European social and environmental standards should be globally enforced through trade agreements (e.g. COM_2019b: 22). Thus, the European power position, as one of the largest and most important (consumer) markets in the global economy, is exploited to force firms to obey European standards and prevent a 'race to the bottom'. This desire to internationalize the European project of a 'social market economy' could be interpreted as an attempt to establish a counter-hegemonic order to the prevailing 'full-fledged finance-dominated capitalist economy' (Jessop 2015, 169).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper aimed to draw attention to the concept of competition and its distinctive political-ideological appearances in the 'governance architecture' of 'Europe 2020'. For this purpose, the predominant 'economic imaginaries' (Jessop 2010) in the policy discourse of the European Commission were reconstructed with an emphasis on competition and associated modes of governance. In general, competition appears as desirable mode of economic organization, as competitive markets are said to lead to innovation and increased wealth. Nevertheless, two 'economic imaginaries' on competition were identified as central finding of the CDA: one as political sovereign and another as actor in the market. Although both comprise diverse influences, they resemble to a large extent the two strands of economic thought on competition introduced by Backhouse (1990).

From the perspective of the political sovereign, competitive markets with decent regulatory frameworks are said to bring about economic and societal benefits through allocative efficiency. Therefore, competition appears as a positive-sum game that increases overall wealth and thus benefits society as a whole. This notion, which can be characterized as a 'stable equilibrium-orientated' approach (Backhouse 1990), reflects the theory of 'perfect competition' introduced by the neoclassical economist Leon Walras (2010). The associated argument of efficiency gains through competition is commonly used in neoliberal era to legitimize liberalization and deregulation (Altreiter et al. 2020). Although intervention in the market mechanism appears undesirable, this stance on competition also offers politics an active role. Hence, the most important task of the political sovereign is to establish markets by providing the institutional framework. The framework described by the European Commission is geared towards fair competition. Accordingly, certain social and environmental standards and/or values should inform its design to ensure that the market mechanism is guided towards overall societal beneficial outcomes. These standards should be adapted to new economic circumstances, as for instance

digitalization or climate change. Thus, in general the stance towards governing competition as political sovereign is inspired by ordoliberalism (Jessop 2019).

From the perspective of an actor in the market, competition is said to produce winners and losers; hence, it appears as a destructive force and an ever-present threat. This notion of competition resembles Schumpeter's (1912) theory of 'creative destruction' in which competition functions as selective mechanism between rival ideas or actors. Against this background, actors in the market must develop and exploit competitive advantages to prevail. Competition hence appears to distribute societal wealth among actors. Thus, it is a zero-sum game in which the competitiveness of actors decides their success. In this context, the political goal of competition is recontextualized into competitiveness (Sum 2009). Accordingly, the EC acts as a competition state (Cerny 2010; Fougner 2006; Jessop 2015) that seeks to strengthen European actors and increase the attractiveness of Europe as a business environment to secure European wealth and welfare. Yet, in most cases market-based policy is implemented. This reflects neoliberal influences on policy-making (Foucault 2010; Jessop 2019).

The perspective of the political sovereign is mostly applied to the Single Market, while that of an actor in the market exclusively focuses on the world market. Accordingly, an increase in competition in the Single Market is actively promoted, while international competition is discursively framed as an external constraint. Nevertheless, world market liberalization is pursued by the EU through engagement in the WTO and international free trade regimes such as the GATT and GATS. Hence, markets at both scales are actively created, as described in Table 3. I relate the different stances to the formative influence of the EC on the framework of the market and its outcomes.

[insert table 3]

Although, the two 'economic imaginaries' share the conviction, that adaption of political and societal institutions to the market is required to sustain wealth, growth and jobs, different policy is promoted to achieve these political goals. While ordoliberalism dominates the perspective of the political sovereign, policy as an actor in the market is oriented towards American neoliberalism. The latter position of the EC is characterized by a deep ambivalence between possibilities of action and the need to react to external challenges. This can be explained by the complex multilevel governance structures and international interdependencies (Fraser 2003). Eventually, in general neoliberal ideas dominate the 'economic imaginaries', as also indicated by the rhetoric of external constraints (Séville 2017) and serve as governmental rationality (Foucault 2010). Accordingly, market-making is not restricted to the economy, but appears as an instrument to solve any socioeconomic problems, as, for instance, indicated by attempts to mitigate climate change through CO_2 pricing.

Besides the dominant neoliberal stances, also other politico-ideological positions are reflected in discourse to a certain extent. The different positions as well as the ambivalences within the discourse positions lead to hybrid forms of institutions and practices that intensify and/or limit competitive market dynamics (Havertz 2020).Thus, 'Europe 2020' appears as result of path dependencies (Havertz 2020) and attempt to consider various interest groups affecting European integration. Hence, this 'governance structure' can be described as a hegemonic project (Laclau and Mouffe 2014). From the perspective of hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe 2014), theoretical contradictions in these hybrid institutions appear as a condition to reproduce the existing order of competitive markets. For instance, simply engaging in free trade would expose European firms to the threat of international competition, while no trade at all would limit the 'freedom' of producers and consumers. Otherwise, only strengthening European firms would create a strong industrial base, but financial resources may be lacking, as no foreign direct investment would be attracted and multinationals might refuse to locate in Europe. Thus, the contradictory attempts to both promote and limit competition at the same time could ensure the consent of a broad range of actors. In this context, the main policy goals of 'Europe 2020' appear as common ground for all political action, which allows us to enclose the contradictions arising between different discourse positions. Whether the hegemonic character of the 'governance architecture' has contributed to the rising importance of the European level must be explored by further research. However, the attempt to extend the 'European' social market economy with its distinct approach towards the governance of competition beyond Europe and consolidate it within international organizations such as the WTO appears a counter-hegemonic project to financialized neoliberalism. Yet, this objective does not challenge competition as such, leaving the hegemony of this economic principle unquestioned.

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Tables

Author	Title	Year of publication	acronym
EC (Barroso II)	Europe 2020 – A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth	2010	COM_2010a
EC (Barroso II)	Commission Work Programme 2010 – Time to act	2010	COM_2010b
EC (Barroso II)	Commission Work Programme 2011	2010	COM_2011
EC (Barroso II)	Commission Work Programme 2012 – Delivering European renewal	2011	COM_2012
EC (Barroso II)	Commission Work Programme 2013	2012	COM_2013
EC (Barroso II)	Commission Work Programme 2014	2013	COM_2014
EC (Juncker)	Commission Work Programme 2015 – A New Start	2015	COM_2015
EC (Juncker)	Commission Work Programme 2016 – No time for business as usual	2015	COM_2016
EC (Juncker)	Commission Work Programme 2017 – Delivering a Europe, that protects, empowers and defends	2016	COM_2017
EC (Juncker)	Commission Work Programme 2018 – An agenda for a more united, stronger and more democratic Europe	2017	COM_2018
EC (Juncker)	Commission Work Programme 2019 – Delivering what we promised and preparing for the future	2018	COM_2019a
EC (Von der Leyen)	The European Green Deal	2019	COM_2019b
EC (Von der Leyen)	Commission Work Programme 2020 – A Union that strives for more	2020	COM_2020a
EC (Von der Leyen)	Adjusted Commission Work Programme 2020	2020	COM_2020b
EC (Von der Leyen)	Commission Work Programme 2021 – A Union of vitality in a world of fragility	2020	COM_2021

Tab. 1.: Policy Papers chosen for the CDA

Code	Description of the codes
'Economic Imaginary'	Based on Jessop (2010)
Governance of Competition	All attempts to politically influence competition such as competition law and competition state (Cerny 2010; Jessop 2015)
Conditions for Competition	Preconditions for competition to take place
Functions of Competition	Functions given to competition
Effects of Competition	Effects associated with competition
Competitiveness	Different aspects associated with competitiveness
Political Instruments	Any political instruments proposed to reach political goals
Relationship of Actors	Any suggested relation between actors, mainly concerned with the question of cooperation or competition
Language/Rhetoric	Language patterns and rhetoric used
Language/Metaphors	Metaphors (Hardt 2014; Lakoff and Johnson 2003) used to describe competition and the economy

Table 2. Overview of the applied codes

	Single Market	World Market
Making of Competition	Liberalization of the economy in Europe	Bi- and multilateral trade agreements (e.g. WTO, GATS, GATT, TRIPS)
Governing of Competition	Competition law	Competition state
Stance on Competition	Competition maximizes societal benefits	Competition presents an existential threat

Table 3. Making and governing competition

Figures

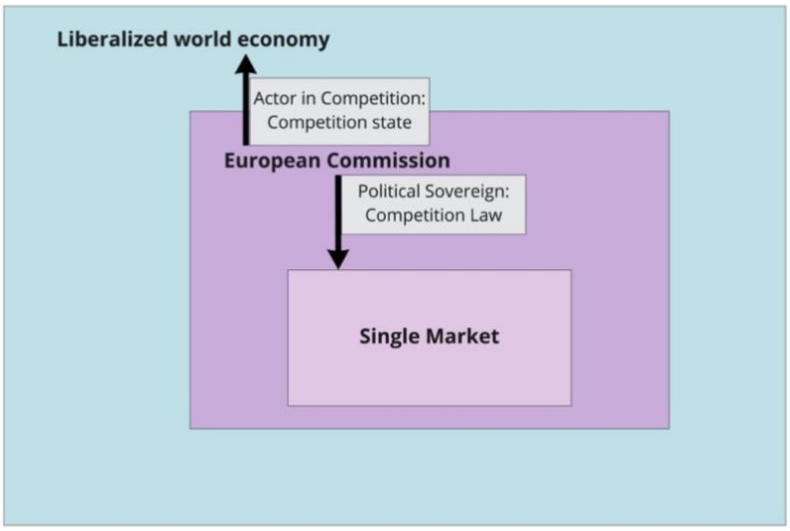

Fig. 1. Presentation of the two discourse positions of the European Commission

[i] Neomercantilist implies a focus on maximizing economic growth within the EU.