



CHAIR OF FOREST AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Prof. Dr. Karl-Reinhard Volz

Tennenbacher Straße 4

D-79085 Freiburg i.Br. / Germany

Fon ++49 761 203-3712

Fax ++49 761 203-3705

Email: karl-reinhard.volz@ifp.uni-freiburg.de

[http:// portal.uni-freiburg.de/ifp/FuU.de](http://portal.uni-freiburg.de/ifp/FuU.de)

Contact: Sabine.Dehn@ifp.uni-freiburg.de

Extension: ++49 203 3713

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Topic: European Union's environmental governance of global illegal timber harvesting and trade

Problem statement and objectives:

Inspired by the US Lacey Act, the European Union' Parliament and Council adopted in 2010 a Community policy aiming to counter the trade in illegally harvested timber and timber products and regulate the entry and marketing of timber products from third countries, mostly tropical and Eastern European countries. The European Unions' Regulation No 995/2010, known as EU (Illegal) Timber Regulation (EU-TR), laid down prohibits of placing illegally harvested timber and timber products on the EU market and obligations of economic operators who place timber products on the EU market for the first time to exercise "due diligence". The application of the EU-TR in the member states started on 3rd March 2013.

This novel policy development is however puzzling and represent an interesting case to study major policy and governance changes. We know that the European Parliament passed the EU-TR with widespread political support earning 644 votes in favor, 25 votes against, and 16 abstentions. Almost all EU' Member States supported the Regulation in the Council, with the exception of Sweden and Portugal. A high demand for illegal timber in combination with weak national laws to prevent the importation of illegal wood drove the EU to take serious measures and to adopt this piece of legislation on the EU level.

Research focus and questions:

Theoretically and empirically, little is known about the political and socio-economic drivers behind the adoption and development of the EU-TR. The role of leading environmental groups and business interests and their strategies to influence EU institutions to adopt and implement the EU-TR remains largely unexplored. The thesis should hence address the following questions: how and why the EU-TR was adopted? How has this environmental regulatory policy with market implications recently developed?

A very plausible and novel hypothesis for the widespread political support can be formulated from a political economy governance perspective: the cooperation of “unholy” coalition of environmental groups and large forest-based industry backed by policy brokers from member states’ authorities and international consultants is likely to have been instrumental for the adoption of major policy changes and recent developments. In other words, the EU Regulation could have provided for a compelling combination of environmental groups’ concerns about negative environmental consequences resulting from the use and importation of illegally logged wood and the business interests’ needs for leveling the playing field in the timber sector by regulating unfair competition from companies that use cheap illegally sourced timber.

The topic, as described above, is suitable for an MSc thesis. Detailed questions could be explored as a BSc thesis.

Methods: Qualitative interviews with key informants, analysis of policy documents, process tracing.

Cooperation: EU Parliament, Commission, Council and several key stakeholder groups in Brussels; Yale University, USA; University of Oxford, UK.

Contact: Dr. Metodi Sotirov, Tel: 203-37-19; Metodi.sotirov@ifp.uni-freiburg.de