

Talking about Competition: Discursive Shifts in the Economic Imaginary of Competition



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spatial competition
and economic policies

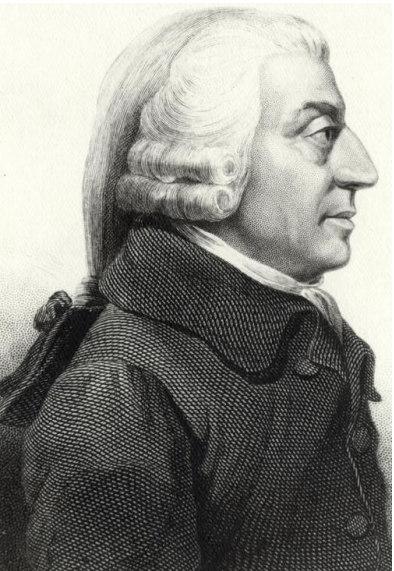


In a nutshell: contribution and research questions

- Competition as a theoretical concept was and is a central component of economic theory formation
 - Focus on economic experts' imaginaries and framings of *competition* and *competitiveness* in public discourse
- ➔ Economists “talking about competition” to a non-academic audience
- (1) which different forms of competitive logic are present in public economists' discourses?
 - (2) how do economic experts frame competition in public discourses?
 - (3) have there been any shifts in the dominant economic imaginary of competition in recent years?

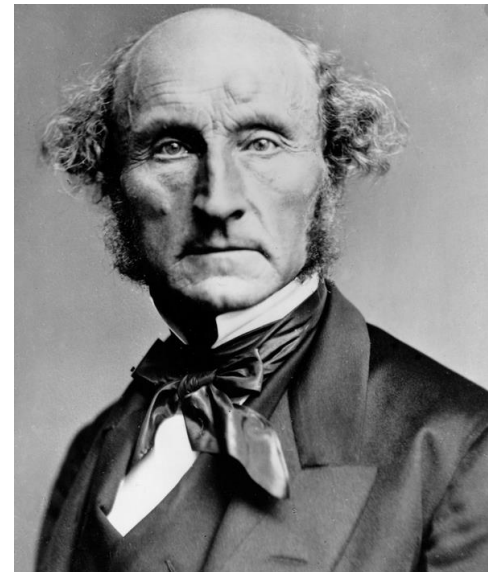
Motivation

- Competition as core but contested concept played a crucial role in the process of professionalization of the economics discipline



“the price of monopoly is upon every occasion the highest which can be got. The natural price, or the price of free competition, on the contrary, is the lowest” (Smith 2014 [1776]: 56).

“only through the principle of competition has political economy any pretension to the character of a science” (Mill 1909 [1848]: 191)



Motivation

- Competition as core but contested concept played a crucial role in the process of professionalization of the economics discipline
 - Preventing monopolies and excessive pricing for consumers (fight against privileges of nobelty, clergy → “landed gentry“): ***fair price/distribution*** (Smith, Mill)
 - Core axiom in early neoclassical General Equilibrium Theory and modern mainstream economics: ***efficient allocation*** (Walras, Jevons, Arrow/Debreu)
 - “an ever-present threat“ to economic actors: ***dynamics and innovation*** (Schumpeter, Hayek)
 - Rational choice economics interprets ***human behavior as utility maximization*** guided by competition (Becker, Stigler, Buchanan)
 - Marxian economics stresses the “***warlike nature***“ of ***real competition*** in capitalist economies (Marx, Shaikh)

Theorizing Competition

- At least three different understandings of the expansion of a “competitive logic” from an interdisciplinary perspective
 - Increase in economic deregulation and expansion of neoliberal governmentality (Jessop 2015, Gane 2019, Davies 2017)
 - A spread of competitive formats (Tauschek 2012, Werron 2015)
 - Self-optimizing behavior in a competitive society (Bröckling 2016, Lavrence/Lozanski 2014)
 - Universal conceptions of competition expanding the economic realm (Becker)
- ➔ expansion of competition as prime mode of social and economic organization
- ➔ discursive power of competition/competitiveness in public policy debates

Economic Expert Discourses

- Economic experts as multiple actors in the trans-epistemic field of academia, media, politics and the public (Maesse 2015, Lebaron 2017, Wilkinson 2017)
- Several channel of influence for the transmission of economic knowledge (Hirschman/Berman 2014)
- Economists as “public intellectuals” have the capacity “to make a public intervention“ (Eyal/Buchholz 2010, Mata/Medema 2014)
- Economic experts coin “economic imaginaries” (Jessop/Sum 2014)

“Economists are the producers of economic beliefs that are received, interpreted, used by various kinds of social actors in everyday life” (Lebaron 2001, 91)

Methodological Approach: CDA

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Weiss and Wodak 2008; van Dijk 1993; van Dijk 2006; Fairclough and Wodak 1997)

- Applied in this paper to deconstruct „economic imaginaries“ (Sum and Jessop 2013) on competition and competitiveness in public media discourse
 - Focus on economists as experts and their knowledge/statements
- ➔ Identification of core concepts and dimensions of competition as well as patterns of arguments in economists' public discourse

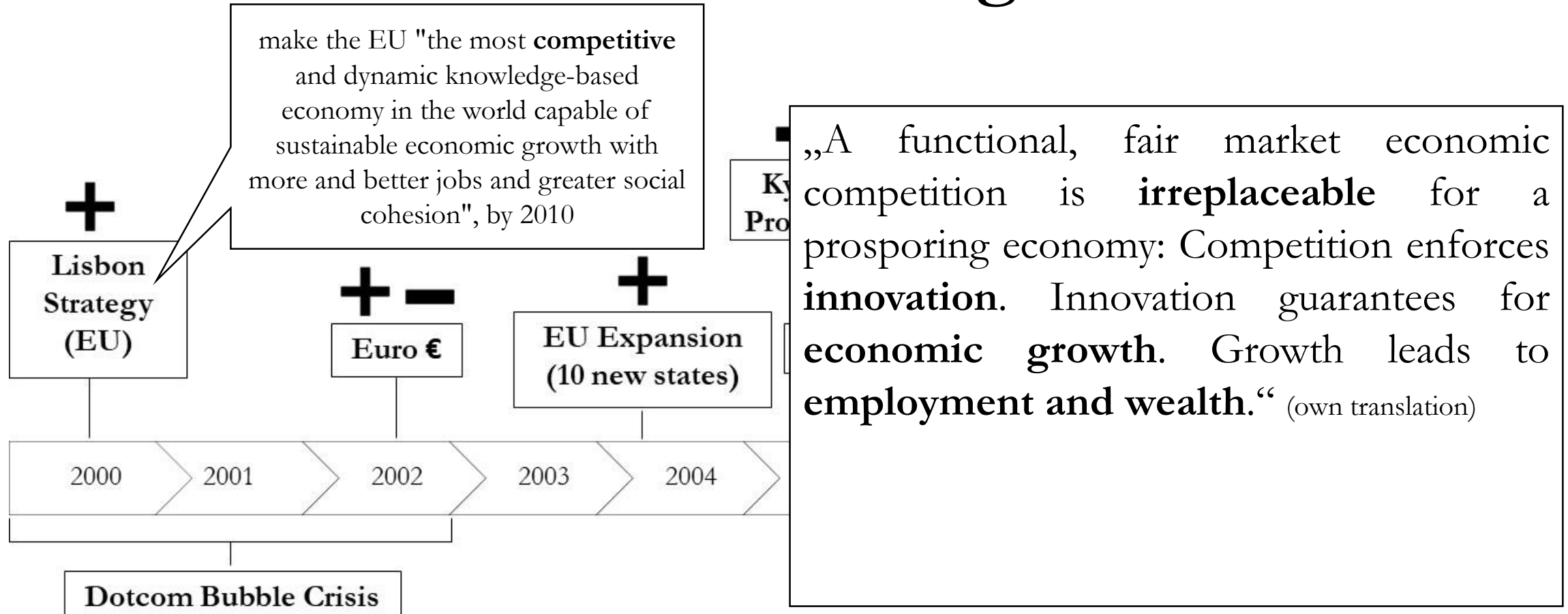
Research Design

- Text corpus of two opinion-leading Austrian quality journalism newspaper
 - „Die Presse“: conservative-liberal
 - „Der Standard“: left-liberal + specific section “comments of the others”
- Standardised catchword retrieval to isolate articles about competition
 - “competition”, “economics”, “economic”, “economist”, “market”
- 2002-2020: 870 in „Der Standard“ / 1057 in „Die Presse“

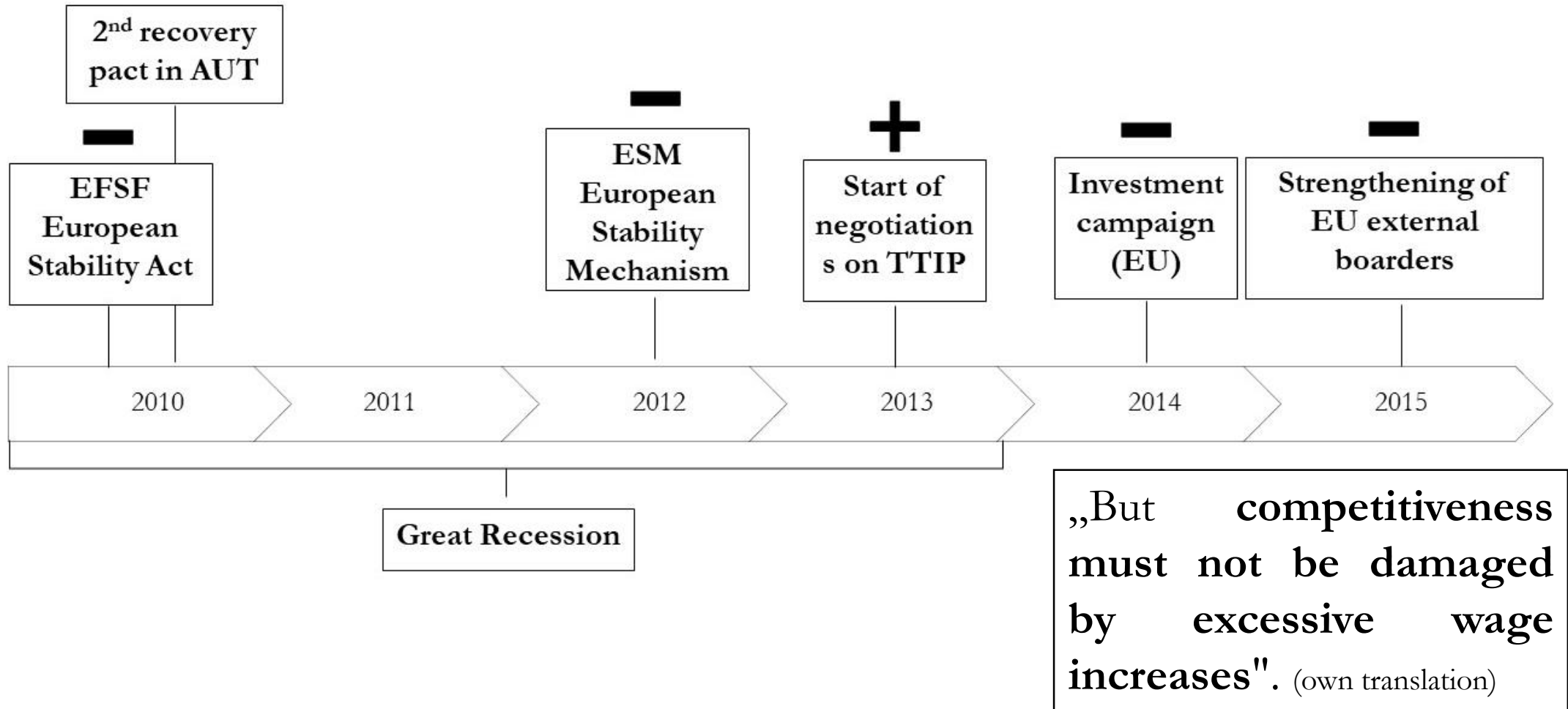
Preliminary Qualitative Results

- 3 phases of argumentation patterns of competition:
 - **PHASE 1: Functionalistic Argumentation** (2002-2008)
 - **PHASE 2: (International) Competitiveness** (2009-2015)
 - **PHASE 3: Neo-Protectionism and Market Power** (2016-2020)

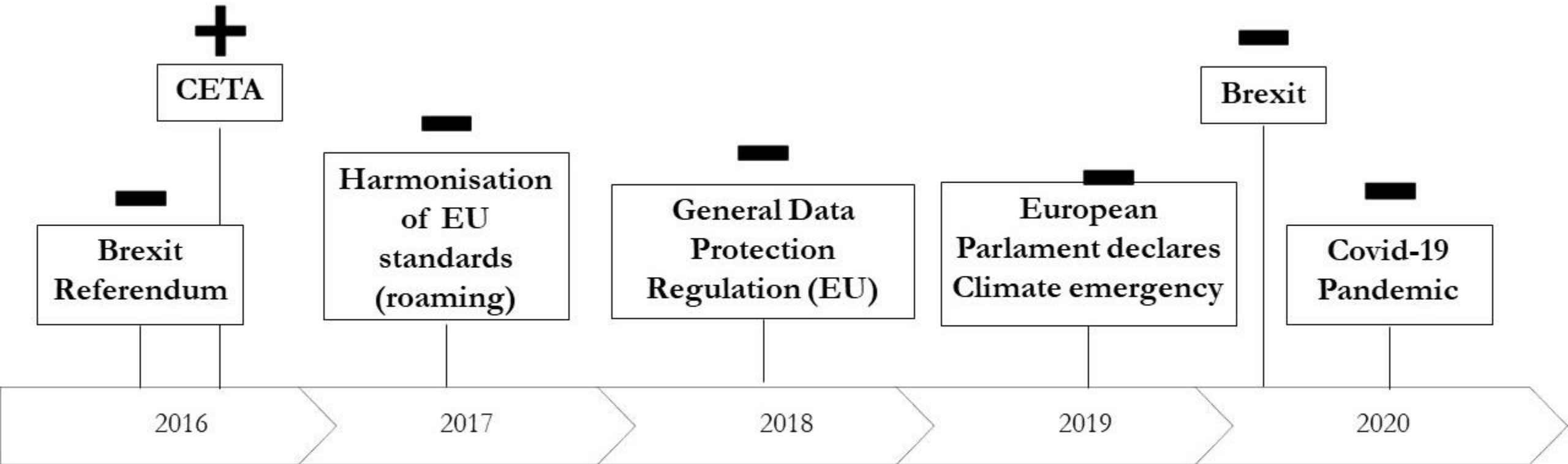
PHASE 1: Functionalistic Argumentation



PHASE 2: (International) Competitiveness



PHASE 3: Neo-Protectionism and Market Power



Concluding Remarks

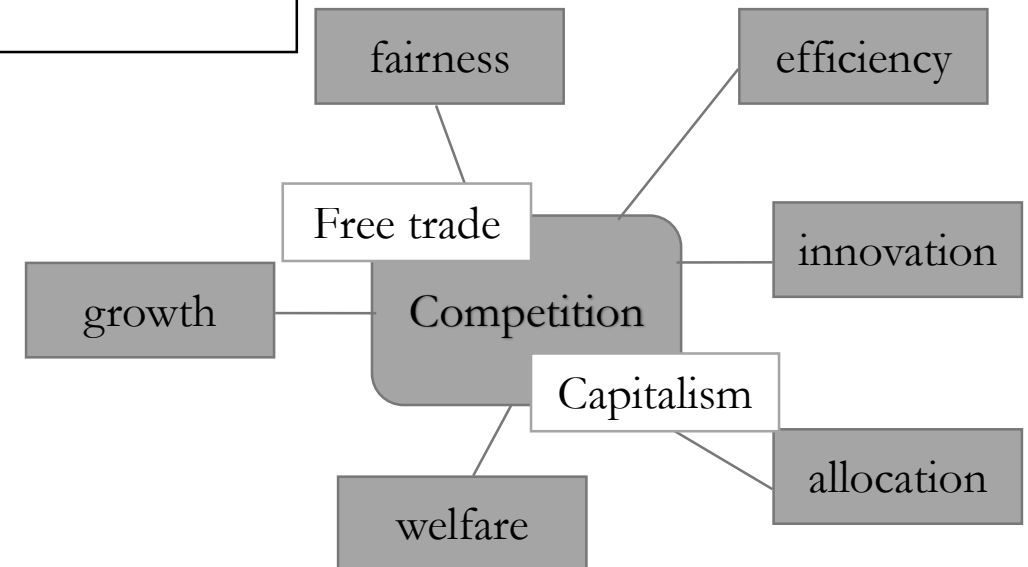
“But in fact, all our research on free trade is only about possible side effects and how to deal with them. But it never leads to the conclusion: let's close the borders. **And it does not change the 200-year-old insight that free trade is beneficial overall.**”

(own translation)

„Like 99% of economists since the days of Adam Smith, I am a free trader down to my toes”

(Alan Blinder 2007)

- Subframes:
 - Who is allowed to compete?
 - What is fair competition?
 - How to become competitive?



Thank you for your Attention!
Remarks and Comments are welcomed.



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