

EU countries override France to greenlight Mercosur trade deal

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● The deal will create a vast market of more than 700 million people

● Farmers in several European countries mounted a final show of anger

AFP | Brussels, Belgium

The EU gave a long-delayed go ahead yesterday to a huge trade deal with South American bloc Mercosur championed by business groups but loathed by many European farmers -- overriding opposition led by key power France.

A majority of the European Union's 27 nations backed the pact following an ambassadors' meeting in Brussels, paving the way for it to be signed in coming days in Paraguay.

More than 25 years in the making, supporters see the deal as crucial to boost exports, support the continent's ailing economy and foster diplomatic ties at a time of global uncertainty.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen called it "proof that Europe charts its own course and stands as a reliable partner" and said she looked forward to the signing -- which Argentina said was planned January 17.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz likewise said the deal sent "an important signal of our strategic sovereignty and capacity to act," a message echoed by Spain which said it would "forge shared prosperity" with Latin America.

On the Mercosur side, Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva hailed "a historic day for multilateralism".

But the European Commission, which negotiated the text, failed to win over all of the bloc's member states.

Heavyweight France, where politicians across the divide are up in arms against a deal attacked as an assault on the country's influential farming sector, led an ultimately unsuccessful



Argentina's President Javier Milei, Paraguay's President Santiago Pena, Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Uruguay's President Yamandu Orsi pose for a family photo during the Mercosur Heads of State Summit at the Iguazu Falls in Foz do Iguazu, Parana State, Brazil

push to sink it.

Ireland, Poland, Hungary and Austria also voted against the accord.

That was not enough to block it, however, after holdout Italy ultimately threw its weight behind the pact.

'Economic clout'

The deal will create a vast market of more than 700 million people, making it one of the world's largest free trade areas.

Part of a broader push to diversify trade in the face of US tariffs, it will bring the 27-nation EU closer together with Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay, removing import tariffs on more than 90 percent of products.

This will save EU businesses four billion euros (\$4.6 billion) worth of duties per year and help exports of vehicles, machinery, wines and spirits to Latin America, according to the EU.

It will also help the bloc reduce its dependency on China for critical raw materials, said Agathe Demarais, of the European Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank.

"The conclusion of the

EU-Mercosur trade deal is great news for Europe's global geopolitical and economic clout," she said.

Germany, Spain and other backers believe the deal will provide a welcome boost to their industries hampered by Chinese competition and tariffs in the United States.

But France and other critics opposed it over concerns that their farmers would be undercut by a flow of cheaper goods, including meat, sugar, rice, honey and soybean, from agricultural giant Brazil and its neighbours.

The deal still needs approval from the European Parliament and France has warned against any attempt to bring it into force before then -- vowing the fight is not over.

'Pain' vs 'benefits'

Farmers in several European countries mounted a final show of anger against the text's approval, marching in protest in Warsaw and blocking roads in France and Belgium.

"There is a lot of pain," Judy Peeters, a representative for a Belgian young farmers group told AFP at a protest on a motor-

way south of Brussels. "There is a lot of anger."

Over the past months, the commission has been at pains to reassure farmers and their backers that pros outweigh cons.

It stressed the accord is expected to boost EU agri-food exports to South America by 50 percent, in part by protecting more than 340 iconic European products -- from Greek feta to French champagne -- from local imitations.

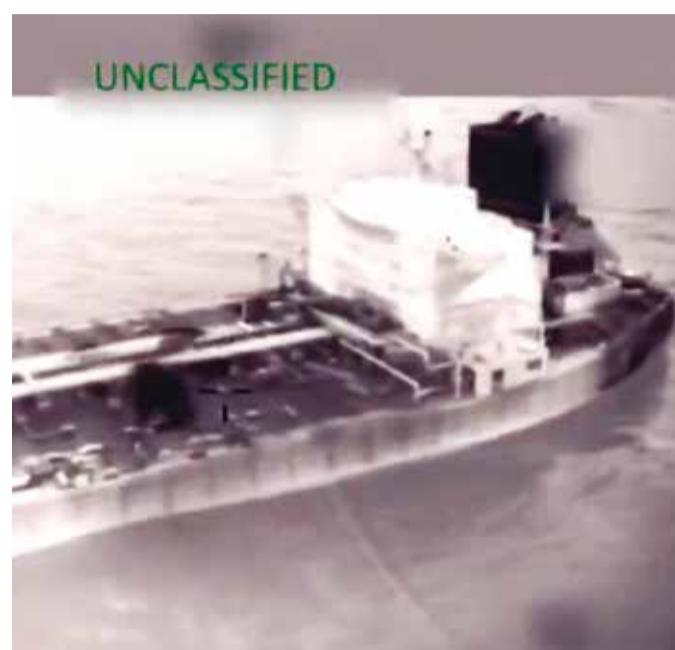
It also laid out plans to set up a 6.3 billion euro crisis fund and safeguards allowing for the suspension of preferential tariffs on agricultural products in case of a damaging surge in imports.

The latter were tightened further at the last minute by member states lowering the threshold for action, in a late concession to Italy.

Angry farmers disrupted traffic in Milan with their tractors Friday, dumping barrels of straw and pouring milk on the ground in front of the regional council building.

But Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni defended an agreement she hoped would "bring benefits in many areas" and "for everyone."

US says it seized another tanker that tried to break Venezuela blockade



US Coast Guard boarding and seizing the tanker Olina in international waters east of the Caribbean Sea

Washington, United States

The United States said yesterday it seized another tanker that tried to break an American naval blockade aimed at preventing sanctioned vessels from going to or departing Venezuela, the fifth ship apprehended in recent weeks.

Washington has deployed a huge naval force in the Caribbean, striking alleged drug-trafficking boats, seizing tankers and carrying out a stunning operation to capture Venezuela's leftist leader.

The latest vessel seized was the Olina, which US Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said was "another 'ghost fleet' tanker ship suspected of carrying embargoed oil" that "departed Venezuela attempting to evade US forces."

"The ghost fleets will not outrun justice. They will not hide under false claims of nationality," Noem wrote on X, saying the Coast Guard carried out the seizure.

US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), which is responsible for American forces in the region, said US Marines and Navy personnel also took part in the operation, launching from the USS Gerald R. Ford, the world's largest aircraft carrier.

"Once again, our joint interagency forces sent a clear message this morning: There is no safe haven for criminals,"

SOUTHCOM said in a post on X that included a video clip showing US forces roping down from a helicopter and taking control of the ship.

President Donald Trump said last month that he had ordered a "blockade" of sanctioned oil vessels heading to and from Venezuela, and American forces have taken control of five ships since then, including three this week.

Among them was a Russia-linked vessel that was seized in the North Atlantic on Wednesday in an operation condemned by Moscow, after being pursued by the United States from off the coast of Venezuela.



Venezuela has the world's largest proven oil reserves, estimated at around 303 billion barrels, surpassing Saudi Arabia, but its production has fallen sharply in recent years due to economic and political crises

Campaigner who started fighting junk food ads at 14 says McDonald's can still reach children

Manama

The activist who launched the campaign for today's junk food advertising ban when he was just 14 years old is warning the law has been gutted by corporate lobbying -- and McDonald's can still run ads that reach eight-year-olds.

Dev Sharma (20) spent six years fighting for these restrictions. He secured their inclusion in the Queen's Speech at 16. Today, as the government celebrates a "world-leading" victory, he says the victory has been stolen.

"This ban has more loopholes than a box of Cheerios," said Sharma. "McDonald's can still broadcast 'I'm Lovin' It' into the bedrooms of kids watching YouTube after school. They just can't show a burger. The manipulation hasn't stopped. It's got

smarter."

The loophole: The new law bans ads showing products high in fat, salt and sugar before 9pm on TV and online at all times. But a "brand exemption" -- inserted after intense food industry lobbying -- means companies can still flood children's screens with logos, jin-

gles, mascots and emotional imagery.

"From the moment we're born, junk food marketing has us surrounded," said Sharma. "It's forced down our throats. It's the cultural wallpaper. This ban was supposed to rip that wallpaper down. Instead, we've peeled off one layer and left the rest."

"It wasn't just online," said Sharma. "I'd see a fried chicken ad on Instagram at 3:15pm, right before the school bell rang. Then I'd walk out and see the same branding on the bus stop. They built a corridor of temp-

tation from my classroom to my front door."

Sharma started campaigning from his bedroom in Leicester during lockdown, watching junk food ads interrupting his GCSE revision on YouTube.

"I was 16, trying to watch a maths tutorial on YouTube," he recalls. "I couldn't learn a quadratic equation without being interrupted by a burger ad. My phone knew I was hungry before I did." Frustrated by the bombardment, he launched an open letter to Boris Johnson -- every signature automatically

emailed Downing Street and the Health Secretary. The campaign gathered tens of thousands of signatures and the backing of Jamie Oliver. He was invited to meet ministers, and the policy was announced in the Queen's Speech. Six years on, he says the same companies are using the same tactics on the same kids.

"I was 14 when I started this. I'm now 20. This law consumed my entire teenage years. And I'm watching the food giants walk through the backdoor we spent six years trying to close."

"While the government cel-

brates removing 7.2 billion calories, McDonald's is already running brand campaigns that do exactly what product ads did. The golden arches are more recognisable to British kids than the England flag. You don't need to show a Big Mac to sell one."

Sharma is calling for an immediate government review of the brand exemption within six months, with all loopholes closed by 2027.

"Children deserve protection that actually protects them. Not a ban with a backdoor."