

Illiberal Human Rights Norms in Trade and the Effectiveness of Western Conditionalities> Are international organizations still able to promote liberal norms? The European Union (EU) is a leading actor in linking human rights issues to external relations, particularly through conditionalities in preferential trade agreements. In this paper, using novel data on all EU trading partners between 1990 and 2020, I argue that EU trading partners are more likely to resist the EU's human rights-trade linkages when they are deeply embedded in regional trade agreements (RTAs) with human rights-violating members. These RTAs reinforce countervailing illiberal human rights institutions—authoritarian laws and norms that adopt relativist approaches to human rights and sovereignty—loosely tied to economic integration. This nexus of trade and illiberal human rights norms undermines Western trade-human rights linkages as mirror images, lowering the cost of noncompliance by providing attractive economic alternatives and collective bargaining power, while also diminishing domestic public pressure and reputational costs through the diffusion of illiberal norms. My findings indicate that high levels of embeddedness reduce the effectiveness of EU human rights conditionalities and increase the likelihood of trade negotiation failures. Moreover, the stringency of conditionalities does not significantly impact compliance. However, this embeddedness does not negate the positive effects of EU pressure during negotiations, as EU agreements improve human rights outcomes in countries with low embeddedness. This suggests that the EU's normative influence through trade agreements is short-lived but existent. This study contributes to the literature on the declining liberal international order and offers new insights into the effectiveness of trade-human rights linkages.