

EU seeks Amazon protections pledge from Bolsonaro in push to ratify trade deal

Brazilian president's stance on deforestation remains stumbling block for South America agreement



An aerial image of burnt areas of Amazon rainforest, near Porto Velho, in Brazil's Rondonia state, taken last year. Photograph: Carlos Fabal/AFP/Getty

Daniel Boffey in Brussels

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Brussels is in talks with Brazil's far-right nationalist president, **Jair Bolsonaro**, over commitments on the future of the **Amazon** as it seeks to persuade Emmanuel Macron and other EU leaders and parliaments to ratify the trade deal the bloc has negotiated with South America.

The ratification of the draft trade agreement between the EU and the "Mercosur" or Southern Common Market free-trade zone – which spans **Brazil**, Uruguay, Paraguay and Argentina – has been in doubt almost since it was announced last June.

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France, Ireland and Austria have said they **will block parliamentary ratification** unless Bolsonaro agrees to do more to tackle Amazonian deforestation and record numbers of fires. The Brazilian president has repeatedly scorned international appeals over the protection of the Amazon and championed his country's right to exploit its natural resources.

The European commissioner for trade, Valdis Dombrovskis, in an interview to mark his first week in the job since replacing the Irish politician Phil Hogan, said he recognised that ratification of the Mercosur trade deal, secured after 20 years of haggling, was now unlikely.

But Dombrovskis, a former prime minister of Latvia, said the deal, which slashes import taxes on a huge range of goods, was one worth fighting for and that the commission was seeking hard pledges from Bolsonaro in pursuit of its ratification.

He said: “We know that [there are] a number of concerns, especially concerning deforestation in the Amazon and adherence of Mercosur countries to the Paris agreement [on the climate emergency] and this is something we need to enforce because on the [European] commission side we share these concerns.

“So we are currently engaging with the Mercosur authorities, I would say, especially with **Brazil**. Well, informally, currently, to see what kind of meaningful commitments, Mercosur countries can take in order to ensure a successful ratification of this agreement.

“I think it's clear ... that if we would not do anything now, just follow things through procedurally and put this agreement to ratification, there are chances that it will not be ratified, and that would be a regrettable outcome. Therefore we need to see what kind of preconditions or pre-commitments that can be from the Mercosur side to ensure successful ratification of the agreement.”

In a statement issued last month, the French government said it had “major concerns” about the deforestation of the Amazon and a rise in production of beef in the region, one of the Brazilian products for which the Mercosur trade deal would offer greater EU market access.

“The draft agreement has no provision to impose discipline on the practices of the Mercosur countries in the fight against deforestation,” the French government said in a statement. “This is the major shortcoming in this agreement and this is the main reason why, as it stands, **France** opposes the draft agreement.”



Emmanuel Macron sits with Jair Bolsonaro (back L) at the G20 Summit in Osaka in 2019. Photograph: Dominique Jacovides/AFP via Getty Images

Macron has also personally clashed with Bolsonaro, a climate change sceptic, describing him as “extraordinarily rude” after the Brazilian leader personally expressed approval for a Facebook post implying that the French president’s wife, Brigitte Macron, was not as attractive as his own wife, Michelle.

But Dombrovskis said that despite the obstacles, the trade deal negotiated with the Mercosur countries actually offered the EU leverage in changing damaging behaviour.

“If we were just to walk away from this deal after negotiating for 20 years ... then what kind of credibility, what kind of leverage, would we have to engage with Brazil or other Mercosur authorities on those topics? The very fact that we negotiated a deal allows us to engage in a more meaningful manner.”