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Insights from our experts

Kevin Verbelen Orgalim Trade Policy Working Group

1. How long have you been in your role as Chair of the Orgalim Trade Policy Working Group and what does the role entail?

I have been chairing Orgalim's Trade Policy Working Group since February 2025, almost two years now. The role is essentially about bringing together trade policy experts from Europe's technology industries, identifying our common interests and translating sometimes very different national and sectoral perspectives into coherent European policy positions.

What makes the role particularly interesting is that trade policy is no longer simply about tariffs, market access and trade agreements. It has become inseparable from industrial competitiveness, economic security and geopolitics. Our challenge is to ensure that Europe's response to these developments reflects the realities of companies operating in complex international value chains, rather than political assumptions about how those value chains work.

2. What is the most interesting piece of advocacy or policy work you are doing at the moment?

Our work on trade defence instruments is particularly interesting, but I see it as part of a much bigger question: how do we ensure that Europe's technology industries can continue to thrive over the next ten years in a fundamentally different geopolitical environment?

We have spent decades building an economic model that relied heavily on American security, Russian energy and Chinese manufacturing. All three relationships are changing, and Europe now faces some very difficult strategic choices.

I worry that we are responding with individual policy instruments without first establishing a sufficiently coherent industrial strategy. Trade defence is a good example. Protecting one part of a value chain can inadvertently undermine the competitiveness of another. We risk protecting the production of certain materials while making it harder for European manufacturers to turn those materials into globally competitive technologies.

We need a serious, well-engineered approach that understands these interdependencies, makes deliberate strategic choices and gives businesses a credible long-term perspective. At present, I am not convinced we are getting that right.

3. To what extent is the EU proactive on trade right now, versus reactive or defensive?

We are becoming increasingly defensive, and I think we are confusing activity with strategy. The EU has developed an impressive range of trade and economic security instruments. Many are necessary, and some are overdue. But too often our policy discussions begin with a crisis: American tariffs, Chinese overcapacity, export restrictions or another disruption to our supply chains. We then design a response, sometimes without sufficiently considering how it interacts with our other objectives.

The real test of a proactive trade policy is not how quickly we can erect a defensive barrier. It is whether we can anticipate vulnerabilities, create credible alternatives, open new markets and strengthen our own industrial capabilities before the next crisis arrives. Strategic autonomy should mean preserving our freedom to choose, not attempting to produce everything ourselves. And we must be careful not to replace dependencies we have learned to regret with new ones that we have not properly understood. Europe needs to become more strategic without becoming less open.

4. What would you like to see the EU achieve for trade policy in the next 3-5 years?

Orgalim calls for a more ambitious and comprehensive approach to trade defence that goes. I would like to see Europe move from managing crises to implementing a genuine long-term strategy for industrial competitiveness, with trade policy playing a central role. That means three things:

First, defend fair competition without undermining our own industries. Trade defence must become more effective against structural market distortions, but every intervention must consider its consequences for the entire industrial value chain, including downstream manufacturers and exporters.

Second, make diversification a commercial reality. We should pursue ambitious trade agreements, strengthen partnerships with reliable partners and help companies develop alternatives to critical dependencies. But diversification cannot simply become another regulatory obligation. Alternatives must actually exist, be competitive and be commercially viable.

Third, restore Europe's attractiveness as a place to invest, manufacture and innovate. Trade policy cannot compensate indefinitely for expensive energy, regulatory complexity or insufficient industrial investment. These policies need to work together.

Ultimately, I would like the EU to understand that strategic autonomy is not about withdrawing from globalisation. It is about becoming indispensable in parts of the global economy while retaining the freedom to choose our partners. If we can achieve that, we will have done considerably more for European economic security than any tariff wall could accomplish.

Orgalim represents Europe's technology industries, comprised of 770,000 innovative companies spanning the mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, electronics, ICT and metal technology branches. Together they represent the EU's largest manufacturing sector, generating annual turnover of over €2,972 billion, manufacturing one-third of all European exports and providing over 11,9 million direct jobs. Orgalim is registered under the European Union Transparency Register – ID number: 20210641335-88.