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Diplomacy through the back door: Norway and the bilateral route to EU decision-making

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Norway, a veteran EU outsider by choice, works on a day-to-day basis to compensate for its lack of formal voice in EU institutions. After Norwegian voters' second rejection of EU membership in a national referendum in 1994, Prime Minister Brundtland observed that Norway now must be prepared to use "the back door" to reach EU policy-makers. I suggest that for Norway, a key alternative route to the EU decision-making table has gone through bilateral partnerships. I identify two chief variants of this bilateral trajectory, what I term *long-term* and *rotating bilateralism*. Firstly, Norway has pursued long-term ties with selected bilateral partners within the EU system. Secondly, it has systematically strengthened its diplomatic presence in the member state holding or about to take over the rotating presidency of the EU Council. I conclude with some reflections on the relevance of Norway's "bilateral experience" for Britain, as a future EU outsider.

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How do EU outsiders work diplomacy-wise to access and acquire information about EU decision-making processes deemed important to their national interests? In the near future, the EU will in all likelihood have a new non-member state. While Britain's terms of withdrawal and future association model are not yet settled, Brexit is already changing Britain's political and diplomatic room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis the EU. As negotiations begin, Britain has stepped down from chief tasks and duties in the EU,¹ and the remaining 27 member states have signalled that they will be meeting to discuss the process without Britain present. Such adjustments foreshadow the political and diplomatic future awaiting Britain as an EU outsider: Without formal access to EU decision-making bodies, Britain must find other ways and other fora to access its former EU partners when needed.

Against this backdrop, the present article examines how Norway, a veteran EU outsider by choice, works on a day-to-day basis to compensate for its lack of formal voice in EU institutions. While Norway is a small state relative to Britain, operates under other framework conditions and has a different power repertoire, its diplomatic experience as an outsider should nonetheless be highly relevant. Non-member states may be more or less "Europeanized" and they may have varying degrees of bargaining power, but membership

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remains an absolute requirement for formal access to the EU's decision-making bodies. Size does not matter in this respect. While having formally opted for autonomy over integration in its relations with the EU, Norway has for all intents and purposes been an adaptive non-member – which not only contributes financially to the EU but also complies loyally with EU law and routinely joins EU foreign policy positions. This, in turn, raises the question of the nature of the relationship between formal autonomy and voice, and of what alternative channels are available to EU outsiders like Norway, for making their voices heard in Brussels. After Norwegian voters' second rejection of EU membership in a national referendum in 1994, Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland observed that Norway from now on must be prepared to use “the back door” to reach EU policy-makers (Brundtland, 1995). In what follows, I argue that for Norway, a key alternative route to the EU decision-making table has gone through bilateral partnerships with selected EU member states. I identify two chief variants of this bilateral trajectory, what I term *long-term* and *rotating bilateralism*. Firstly, Norway has actively pursued long-term ties with selected bilateral partners within the EU system. Secondly, it has systematically strengthened its diplomatic presence in the member state holding or about to take over the rotating presidency of the EU Council. I conclude with some reflections on the relevance of the Norwegian bilateral experience for Britain, as a future EU outsider.

Inside, outside: the diplomatic room for manoeuvre

EU membership is not a prerequisite for European integration. Members and non-members may be more or less integrated into EU laws, regulations and practices, and may be deemed more or less “Europeanized” in terms of their national identity. Member states may choose to opt out of certain areas of cooperation, and non-members may choose to opt in to the same or other areas. For instance, Britain and Denmark have systematically opted out of EU cooperation on important areas (e.g. the Euro), giving them a reputation as “difficult member states” in EU circles (Adler-Nissen, 2014). By contrast, the non-member Norway is in some respects as integrated into the EU as many member states – it adopts most EU laws and regulations and has opted for cooperation which is not part of the EEA Agreement. In the research literature, this state of affairs has earned Norway a reputation as an “adaptive non-member” (Kux & Sverdrup, 2000; Rieker, 2006).

To some extent, then, European integration could be seen as a matter of degree rather than a question of membership. And yet, formal membership *is* an absolute requirement for voting rights in the EU decision-making bodies. To opt for “exit” (or outsidership) precludes having a “voice” to use Hirschman's (1970) terms. If outsiders still wish to have access to decision-making and, potentially, have their voices heard, they need to develop diplomatic routines and practices for their interaction with the EU institutions and individual member states. While various formal arrangements in lieu of full EU membership have been thoroughly assessed in the scholarly literature, less systematic attention has been paid to EU outsiders' informal access to and diplomatic room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis the EU. What political and diplomatic leeway is available to outsiders? How can they acquire access to decision-making processes? Beyond the relatively limited opportunities for formalized participation offered by individual association models, third-country access to EU decision-making often goes through informal channels. In Norway's case, the Norwegian Mission to the EU “safeguards Norwegian interests” in negotiations with the EU

institutions in areas covered by the EEA and Schengen Agreement, and it “works closely” with them on the further development of the CFSP/CSDP (Mission of Norway to the EU, n.d.). However, and as the official Norwegian review of the EEA agreement (NOU, 2012) noted, Norway often finds itself having to work through informal contact points at the political as well as at the civil servant and expert levels. Contacts with key personnel in EU institutions and “extensive bilateral cooperation with a number of EU countries” were identified as particularly important in this respect (NOU, 2012, pp. 167–168). In the following, I shall focus on the second of these access points: bilateral consultation and consolidation. The EU28 positions and policies are increasingly shaped and adjusted – in advance and in parallel – through bilateral and small-group exchanges between individual member states. Such channels represent a window of opportunity for non-members, providing opportunities to acquire information about and feed their views into EU decision-making processes.

The bilateral route to EU decision-making

As Smith and Tsatsas noted back in 2002, there is little new about bilateral diplomacy as such in the context of the EU; after all, bilateral diplomatic relations predate the European integration process. That said, the nature of bilateralism inside the EU has evidently changed in a number of ways over the last decades. Above all, several rounds of enlargement, along with changes to the EU institutional dynamics, have made EU decision-making increasingly complex and time-consuming. Hence, it is not unexpected that bilateral or small-group consultation increasingly has become part of the intra-EU diplomatic procedure.² This need not conflict with or obstruct EU decision-making. As Smith and Tsatsas point out, it could be seen as an integral and natural part of the overall machinery (2002). For instance, studies have noted “an increase in the intensity of interactions among EU member states”, alongside a more general “domestication of European policy” (Blair, 2004, p. 199). Summitry – direct encounters between heads of state or government – has also become an increasingly important part of this picture (Dunn & Lock-Pullan, 2016). Furthermore, while bilateral embassies continue to play an important role also within the EU (Bratberg, 2008), their activity appears to be shifting in the direction of “EU-oriented”, “new” or “embedded” bilateralism, aimed at strengthening multilateral institutions and decision-making in the EU (Bátora & Hocking, 2009; Krotz & Schild, 2013; Smith & Tsatsas, 2002). Within the EU, the French–German relationship is commonly referred to as the “engine” of the integration process. Similarly, French–British cooperation on security and defence has been crucial to driving the development of a common European security and defence policy, especially since the 1998 St Malo Agreement. As Whitman (2016, p. 3) notes, because Britain and France were “the EU’s two most capable military powers”, the bilateral agreement between them effectively “laid the ground for what was to become the EU’s CSDP”. Intra-EU constellations may be based on temporary strategic agreement on an issue under discussion, or they may reflect dividing lines such as small/big or new/old member states (Grabbe, 2004, p. 59) or geographical location.³

If we accept the premise that bilateral diplomacy remains an integrated part of intra-EU decision-making, then it follows logically that EU outsiders too must take this into account when they seek access and influence. For these states, bilateral diplomacy can offer an opening, an alternative way of connecting with the process and communicating their

own views and concerns. How, then, are partners identified? As the examples above indicate, bilateral cooperation in the context of the EU may well be motivated by shared concerns or interests in a given policy area. Assumptions about the other state's relative political and diplomatic clout are likely to count as well – it is hardly coincidental that, in recent years, many states have sought to strengthen their bilateral ties with and diplomatic presence in Berlin. However, strategic incentives alone seem to be a poor fundament for fruitful long-term cooperation. Cooperation patterns over time suggest that states prefer partners they perceive as “likeminded” and with whom they already have a track record of successful cooperation. While political initiatives matter, maintaining rapport and trust requires continuous renewal through everyday practical interaction at the diplomatic and bureaucratic levels (Haugevik 2014). For EU outsiders, who often spend a considerable amount of time seeking access and information, reliable, long-term partners on the inside are particularly valuable.

When exit precludes voice: Norway's outsider experience

Norway is not a member of the EU. It is eligible for membership and has applied three times, but has remained outside after a majority of the voting public said “no” to membership in referenda in 1972 and 1994. On both occasions, the Norwegian government recommended and campaigned for membership. In 1994, the pragmatic alternative to membership became the EEA Agreement, which secures the three EFTA states Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein access to the EU's single market, and covers cooperation on the internal market, as well as a set of “flanking and horizontal policies” – including budgetary matters, education, research and innovation and public health. Cooperation on agriculture and fisheries, the customs union, trade, foreign and security policy, justice and home affairs, and the monetary union are not covered by the EEA Agreement (EFTA, n.d.). Beyond the EEA Agreement, Norway has concluded bilateral agreements with EU in various other policy areas. For instance, Norway is party to the Schengen cooperation, it participates in EU civilian and military crisis-management operations, and it has a cooperation agreement with the European Defence Agency (EDA). Norway also routinely joins EU positions and statements on foreign policy and, since 2005, has been a contributor to the Swedish-led Nordic EU Battle Group (Regjeringen, 2016a; see also Rieker, 2017).

The EEA Agreement has now been in place for more than two decades. In the Norwegian public debate, its costs and benefits are regularly discussed; with Brexit pending, the issue has again risen on the domestic political agenda. Supporters and opponents of membership tend to agree that the EEA Agreement has weaknesses, not least as regards democratic control, but they use this observation to argue for opposite alternatives. For instance, in its 2017–2021 party programme, the Norwegian Conservative Party (the largest party in the current coalition government) calls it a “democracy problem” that “Norwegian society is shaped by decisions made within a political system where Norwegian voters are not represented”. For this reason, the party wishes to replace the EEA Agreement with full EU membership (Høyre, 2017–2021, p. 13). By contrast, the Norwegian Centre Party, the chief EU-sceptical political party in the Storting (the Norwegian Parliament), offers a similar assessment of the EEA agreement, but draws the opposite conclusion:

Our basic belief in democracy is the most important reason why the Centre Party thinks Norway should remain outside of the EU, and why we wish to terminate the EEA Agreement and replace it with trade and cooperation agreements with the EU. The EU should not be making the rules for Norwegian society. Our own elected representatives, who know our society and answer to Norwegian voters, should decide how Norway is to be governed. (Sentertpartiet, 2013–2017, p. 34)

The claim that the Brundtland government, by signing the EEA Agreement, for all intents and purposes took Norway into the EU “through the back door”, has been a recurring one in the Norwegian public debate. The harshest critics have argued that what happened was a “political coup”, and that, with the EEA Agreement, the government, effectively created “bulgeway” into the EU (see, e.g. Nationen, 2016).

The discrepancy between the Norwegian electorate’s rejection of EU membership, with democratic control as a chief stated reason, and Norway’s high degree of compliance with EU law without having access to policy-making has received considerable scholarly attention. Eriksen and Fossum (2014, p. 22) refer to this as “the Norwegian paradox”, pointing out how Norway’s current arrangement involves almost as much integration and bureaucracy as membership would, but with significantly less influence on day-to-day decision-making in the EU. Differently put, by accepting the people’s advice and remaining outside of the EU in 1994, the Norwegian government formally made a choice of autonomy over integration. However, Norway’s many “opt ins” and its high degree of compliance with EU law could be seen to have left it with *less* room for manoeuvre (or autonomy) than the member states, since it does not have a formal voice in EU decision-making. This is a description that Norwegian government officials themselves also acknowledge – in fact, they seem to take a certain pride in Norway’s ability to comply with EU law. In 2015, Foreign Minister Børge Brende told the *BBC* that Norway not only implements “all the EU directives”, but it is in fact among “the fastest ones in doing so” (cited in *BBC*, 2015). Minister for EEA and EU Affairs Vidar Helgesen made a similar observation, while also hinting at the tensions between outsidership, compliance and democratic control:

Every day for twenty years, the Norwegian parliament has passed five EU laws. “Five a day”. That’s healthy for the Norwegian economy. Whether it is healthy for Norwegian democracy is a different matter. (cited in *Dagsavisen*, 2015)

In the context of Brexit, the consistent advice from Norwegian political officials has been that Britain should not “look to Norway” as far as its formal EU arrangements are concerned. In 2012, Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide warned Britain against following Norway’s example, pointing out that Norway in many respects is as integrated in the EU as most member states, yet absent “when decisions are made” (cited in *BBC*, 2012). Similarly, in early 2014, Prime Minister Erna Solberg warned Britain against replacing EU membership with a Norwegian model. Highlighting Norway’s high degree of adaptation to EU law and its lack of a seat at the table in Brussels, Solberg predicted that Britain, “with its old empire mind-set”, would find similar premises difficult to accept (cited in *Huffington Post*, 2014). This assessment has largely been echoed on the British side. Already in his Bloomberg speech in 2013, when he first indicated a referendum on Britain’s future in the EU, then Prime Minister David Cameron made it clear that a Norwegian-style association model had limited transfer value for

Britain, not least because of Norway's lack of a say in Brussels (Cameron, 2013). Cameron's successor, Theresa May, has also on many occasions ruled out following Norway's example, signalling that she will seek a tailor-made arrangement for Britain instead. But alternative association models aside, in the absence of formal voice and representation in the EU institutions, non-members must find other ways to access and influence EU decision-making when needed. Here, there might be some lessons to learn from the Norwegian experience.

Through the back door

Since the 1994 referendum, Norwegian governments have routinely described their policy on European affairs and the EU as “constructive” and “proactive”. The current government's stated ambition is to “cooperate closely with the EU and participate actively in policy debates at the European level” (NMFA, 2015). This policy is put into practice through various channels. To start with, Norway's existing agreements with the EU provides it with certain predefined channels for political dialogue. For instance, under the EEA Agreement, biannual political dialogue is arranged between Norway and the EU on foreign affairs; Norway and the EU also have expert-level meetings with the European External Action Service (EEAS) on key foreign policy issues “as needed” (Regjeringen, 2016a; see also Rieker, 2017). The question is how useful these channels have been for Norway – or perhaps how effectively Norway has made use of them. As for the latter point, the EEA Review (2012) found that between 2007 and 2011, Norway was invited to take part in 69% of the informal meetings at the ministerial level in the EU Council, but sent cabinet ministers to only 40% of the meetings, state secretaries to 34% and lower-level officials to 23% of meetings (NOU, 2012, p. 179). The government at the time responded to subsequent criticism by arguing, firstly, that what mattered was to participate at the political level – seniority was less important – and, secondly, that Norway also had “plenty of other arenas” at which it could communicate with the EU (Eide, 2013b). The point could of course be made that if the opportunity to influence decision-making through voice in these informal meetings had been seen as real, then Norway would have prioritized participation and sent its most senior politicians. At any rate, the opposition at the time claimed that the Norwegian government, through its handling of these invitations, had lost an opportunity, not so much to directly influence EU decision-making but to become part of important informal networks more broadly. The Leader of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs in the Storting pointed out that these informal meetings provided an opportunity for Norway to “promote Norwegian positions and interests in a broader context” (Søreide, 2013). By not being represented at the highest possible political level, she said, Norway had failed to avail itself of the available room for manoeuvre:

Participation in informal ministerial meetings is of course not always of immediate value in the short run, but participation is long-term, and continuity is a keyword. These meetings provide us with a unique opportunity to acquire information about issues, and about who is and potentially can become important allies for Norway, and in specific cases, networks are established [at these meetings] which means that when a case of particular importance to Norway emerges, we have an ally who sits at the table where the decision is made. (Søreide, 2013)

The second half of this statement could be seen to echo that of Prime Minister Brundtland some two decades earlier. After the 1994 referendum, and with the Nordic neighbours Finland and Sweden set to join the EU, Brundtland warned that Norway from now on would be facing a very different political and diplomatic reality. “Those who are not present where other states meet may have to use the back door”, she said, adding: “We are now dependent on the goodwill, time and priorities of other states” (Brundtland, 1995). Against the backdrop of Brundtland’s prediction, it is interesting to note how Norwegian government ministers in recent years have increasingly noted the importance of “bilateral and regional contacts [...] under the radar screen of common policy-making in the EU” (Støre, 2011). In the remainder of this article, I explore how this bilateral strategy has been put into practice as, respectively, “long-term” and “rotating” bilateralism.

Long-term bilateralism: revitalizing Norden, courting Berlin

The current (summer 2017) Norwegian government has stated in its government platform that it aims to “deepen bilateral relations with key European states”, as part of its active policy towards Europe and the EU (Regjeringen, 2013, p. 71). Previous governments have been less explicit about this strategy, but in 2013, Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide observed how

... EU cooperation increasingly occurs other places than within those institutions Norway is connected to through the EEA agreement. We must follow this development closely. If necessary, we must identify new ways of promoting Norwegian interests. If the EU changes, then our working methods must be adapted. Within this picture, it will be important for us to further develop our good and close relations with key partner countries also as part of our policy on Europe. (Eide, 2013a)

When government officials meet, most bilateral partnerships tend to be described as “good” and “well-functioning”. Hence, and for reasons of diplomacy, governments tend to be cautious about openly ranking their allies. In Norway’s case, references to chief partners inside the EU have often been broadly phrased – for instance, government ministers and MPs have referred to the value of bilateral cooperation with EU members in the Nordic or Nordic–Baltic region, the “Northern group”,⁴ or with the EEA and Norway Grant recipient countries.⁵ A recurrent phrase in the context of bilateral or cluster cooperation is simply that of “likeminded” states, often without further specification. However, in a recent White Paper on foreign and security policy, the Norwegian government states its intention to step up its dialogue on foreign and security issues with a handful of allies, identifying Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands as its chief bilateral priorities within the EU. The Nordics and Baltics are also highlighted (NMFA, 2017). This list resonates well with the realities of financial bonds: in 2015, Norway’s five largest markets in the EU for export of traditional goods were Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, France and Sweden (SSB, 2016a), while the five largest import markets were Sweden, Germany, Britain, Denmark and the Netherlands (SSB, 2016b).

These overall patterns are reflected also in the broader political debate. From references to individual European allies in Storting debates over the past decade, a handful of states clearly stand out as particularly valued and trusted partners. In the inner circle, we find the

Nordic EU members Sweden, Denmark and Finland, as well as EU frontrunner Germany, and then follow Britain, the Netherlands, Poland and the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), although the pattern here is less striking.

In Storting debates, Sweden and, to somewhat lesser extent, Denmark and Finland are frequently singled out as chief bilateral partners for Norway within the EU. They also feature as frequent reference points in Storting debates; they are states with which Norway routinely compares its performance also in domestic policy areas. Nordic cooperation has long been a chief pillar of Norwegian foreign policy. Back in the 1970s, as the only Nordic EEC member at the time, Denmark tried to “act as a bridge-builder between the Nordic region and Europe” (Jørgensen, cited in *Nordisk Samarbeid*, n.d.). Norway’s current Foreign Minister has confirmed that “Nordic cooperation on EU matters is a priority” and that “the Nordic circuit is an important meeting place for discussing the issues on the EU’s foreign policy agenda” (Brende, 2016). In the broader political debate, in January 2017, an MP observed in the Storting that for non-member Norway, the path to the EU’s “inner circles” has often gone through its “good neighbours” in the Nordic region (Navarsete, 2017). Another MP saw regular contact with the Nordic EU members as “particularly important” and maintained that Norway “acquires information about ongoing EU discussions” from its Nordic neighbours (Brataas, 2017). Security/defence is one area where the importance of the Nordic member states tends to be highlighted. For instance, in 2007, Norwegian MPs across the political spectrum commended Norway’s contribution to the Nordic–Baltic battle group in the EU, led by Sweden and consisting of Norway, Finland, Estonia and Ireland. One MP saw this as an example of how “sharp boundaries between members and non-members disappear when likeminded countries wish to lend a hand together” (Samuelsen, 2007). Another MP pointed out how, “in a multinational battle group, it is important that attitudes and cultures correspond” (Sahl, 2007). On the issue of the High North, in 2007, the Foreign Minister said he felt Denmark, Finland and Sweden were keeping “an alertness to Norwegian views” inside the EU (Støre, 2007a). The Nordics are familiar with Norway’s views and positions, and with its institutional arrangements and practices in relation to the EU. However, Norwegian government officials have also warned that there are limits as to how much Norway might expect to achieve through bilateral channels in the EU, even with its Nordic neighbours. As the Foreign Minister pointed out in 2008:

When Sweden, Finland and Denmark look for allies in the EU policy-making process, they will, before they look to Norway and Iceland, look to other EU countries, who are part of the policy-making process in the EU. But we will of course use the Nordic countries as important channels to promote our views, in addition to us working with a range of other EU countries. (Støre, 2008b)

Among the larger EU member states, Germany is most frequently singled out as a chief ally for Norway in the EU. Historically, in the early 1900s, Norway had close ties to Germany, especially in the fields of academia and the arts (Riste, 2001, p. 61), but it took time to rebuild the bilateral relationship in the post-war era. Since the end of the cold war, however, Germany has become increasingly important in Norwegian foreign policy discourse. The Norwegian government has had an official “Germany strategy” since 1999; the most recent version, from 2014, identifies Germany as

Norway's "most important partner in Europe", and states that the government aims to "intensify and expand the bilateral contacts with Germany at all levels", so as to strengthen Berlin's "understanding for and support to Norwegian viewpoints on strategic issues, including, EU/EEA matters and in the High North" (Regjeringen, 2014). In 2015, the Minister for EU and EEA affairs observed that "in many ways, Norway's road to Europe and to EU decision-making processes goes through Berlin" (Helgesen, 2015a). Also in the Storting, there seems to be broad agreement that Germany is a stable and reliable ally for Norway in the EU. It has even been argued that Germany at times speaks Norway's case "better than what for instance Sweden does" (Myrli, 2009). Norwegian diplomats describe Germany as an "obvious" ally within the EU system and as a country that is generally "open and attentive" to Norwegian views. Norway's political access to Berlin is described as "surprisingly good", and diplomats feel that the good political contacts at the top level spill over to the lower political and diplomatic levels.⁶ When Prime Minister Erna Solberg took office in 2013, her first foreign visit was to Germany.

By contrast, while Britain had historically been Norway's closest partner in Europe, as the 1960s came to an end, the narrative of Britain as Norway's "saviour" during the Second World War was fading in the domestic political debate, as were representations of Britain as Norway's political "lodestar" in Europe (Haugevik, 2015). Before the Brexit debate erupted after the general elections in 2015, Britain was rarely singled out as a chief bilateral partner for Norway in the EU. In Storting debates, this was rarely mentioned at all. On the diplomatic side, a frequent assessment has been that Norway is interested in "what the British are thinking", but it tends perhaps to see the relationship as more "special" than it actually is. Norwegian government officials have said Norway would have preferred to have Britain present at the decision-making table in Brussels also in the future, not least since the two countries have similar transatlantic and anti-federalist instincts. Furthermore, they have appreciated Britain as a "no nonsense" voice in Brussels on cutting red tape and regulations (BBC, 2015), noting that Norwegian interests in general would be "better served" with Britain inside the EU (Aspaker, 2016a; Helgesen, 2015b). Now, with Brexit impending, there seems to be more interest in the bilateral relationship on both sides. Government ministers have confirmed that Norway already has and will continue to have far more bilateral contact with Britain than before – in fact, according to the Minister for EEA and EU Affairs, "hardly any country has had more meetings with Britain at the government level after the Brexit referendum than Norway" (Bakke-Jensen, 2017). While the government has been careful to stress that Norway also has had bilateral talks about Brexit "in Berlin, Paris, Warsaw and in the Nordic circuit" (Aspaker, 2016b), a renewed focus on British–Norwegian bilateral relations seems likely. Britain is also singled out as a partner of priority in the 2017 White Paper on future foreign policy choices (NMFA, 2017).

Other recurring Norwegian partners in the EU could very well have been noted: Poland is increasingly mentioned as a prioritized partner for Norway in the EU, as manifested in the Norwegian government's recent Poland strategy (NMFA, 2016). The Netherlands is also frequently identified as a likeminded ally. The Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – often pop up as an extension of the Nordics. As for the EEA and Norway Grant recipient countries, these are habitually presented as states with which Norway will seek to strengthen its bilateral ties, so as to build new partnerships that

might prove valuable in the context of the EU (see Johnsen & Rieker, 2015, p. 421). While there is little evidence thus far to indicate that the EEA and Norway Grants have produced any new strategic bilateral partnerships for Norway in relation to the EU, these grants do appear to be an asset in already prioritized partnerships, most notably with Poland and the Baltic countries.

Rotating bilateralism

In addition to building long-term partnerships with selected EU member states, Norway has worked systematically to strengthen its bilateral ties with the EU member state currently holding or preparing for the rotating EU presidency.⁷ In 2007, the Foreign Minister pointed out the need to have tailored strategies:

We must ask ourselves: What can we achieve when this country takes on the presidency, or takes lead in an alliance on a specific issue area? Where, how and when can we best influence the process? (Støre, 2007b).

He exemplified this by referring to how Norway under the German Presidency in the first half of 2007 had focused on “energy, energy security and the High North”; under the Portuguese Presidency in the second half of 2007, it had focused on issues such as “sea and coast, fisheries, shipping, the transatlantic focus”, deemed more important to Portugal (Støre, 2007b).

A concrete manifestation of the Norwegian strategy of rotating bilateralism would be the increased contact at the top political level between Norway and the incoming or current Council Presidency. The Norwegian Minister for EEA and EU affairs now routinely visits the incoming presidency about six months before the official takeover, and the Prime Minister pays an official visit immediately after. Top-level meetings are held throughout the six-month period. For instance, under the Portuguese Council Presidency in 2007, Norway took part in as many as 18 meetings “at the prime ministerial, government minister and state secretary level” (Støre, 2008a). Following her preparatory visit to Malta, the Norwegian Minister for EEA and EU affairs noted that “Good contact with colleagues in states about to hold the EU presidency forms an important part of the government’s active policy on Europe”, and added: “such meetings in advance are particularly important for Norway, which is outside of the internal political meeting places in the EU” (cited in Regjeringen, 2016b). Norway is invited to participate in many of the informal ministerial meetings that are organized by/in the state holding the presidency.

Another concrete manifestation of Norway’s rotating bilateralism strategy is the temporary strengthening of its diplomatic presence in the member state holding or about to take over the Council Presidency. As such diplomatic efforts in the capital of the member state in question generates considerable extra work for the Norwegian embassy or diplomatic mission in that country, this mission normally gets one additional staff member for the six-month period of the presidency. In the Norwegian MFA, one specific diplomat has held this position as a “rotating staff member”, moving around in Europe along with the EU presidency (NMFA, 2012). When Sweden held the Council Presidency in 2009, Norway had “personnel deployed in Swedish MFA, both in the preparatory phase of the Presidency and now during the Presidency” (Støre, 2009). An MP noted that under

Sweden's Council Presidency, Norway's access to EU decision-making had "been better than in a very long time" (Helleland, 2009), and another MP observed that close contact had been particularly useful for Norway when the Council Presidency had been held by one of the Nordic countries (Gustavsen, 2013). Norway's diplomatic efforts towards the Council Presidency have been more fruitful when a long-term bilateral partner has had that position. From autumn 2017, the strategy of strengthening the Norwegian embassy in the member state holding the presidency with a "rotating diplomat" will be ended, at least temporarily. Instead, Norway will strengthen its embassy in London with a special "Brexit envoy" who will follow the British withdrawal negotiations.⁸

Concluding remarks

As former Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre pointed out, while non-EU members in principle could never rise "above number 28" on the EU's priority list, Norway's de facto experience was that it was in many areas "far more centrally positioned than that" (Støre, 2008a). In this article, I have explored how Norway has used bilateral partnerships as a means to acquire access to and influence decision-making in Brussels. This "bilateral trajectory" has come in two chief versions: Firstly, Norway has sought to nurture long-term bilateral partnerships with selected partners within the EU, especially the Nordic EU member states and Germany. Secondly, Norway has worked systematically to strengthen its bilateral ties with the EU state holding or about to assume the Presidency of the Council of the EU. The stated purpose has been to help secure Norwegian participation in informal meetings and events and, more broadly, to raise EU awareness of Norwegian priorities and concerns. This approach has found expression in systematic visits by Norwegian ministers and other officials, and, until recently, in routinely strengthening Norway's diplomatic mission in the member state in question. Often, the two strategies complement one another: Norwegian governments report of better access to decision-making when a long-term bilateral ally has held the EU presidency. It should of course be noted that access does not equal influence. Indeed, it is difficult to find evidence of concrete cases in which Norway has influenced EU decision-making processes *as a result of* its bilateral strategies. As Trondal and Stie (2015) has pointed out, for Norway, an "active" policy towards Europe has in practice often been more about form than about content; it is more about "finding alternative channels for information and dialogue with the EU system", than it is about leaving "a Norwegian imprint on the EU's agenda" (Trondal & Stie, 2015, p. 126).

Leaving the EU is of course a very different matter from never joining in the first place. For one thing, Britain today has many diplomats with first-hand knowledge about and experience from intra-EU diplomacy. Britain is also a great power, whose new presence as a third country operating in the EU lobby halls will be noticeable. All the same, Norway's diplomatic experience as an outsider might prove valuable for Britain which, when it leaves the EU, will also leave behind its formal voice and access to EU decision-making processes. The EU institutions and remaining member states have been crystal clear on that point: leaving means that formal rights will cease. Hence, like Norway, Britain might find itself having to rely increasingly on informal, bilateral channels when seeking to acquire information about or access to policy processes in the EU.

Notes

1. For example, the British EU Commissioner resigned after the referendum, and his replacement was given “lighter tasks”. Britain will not assume the rotating EU Presidency in Autumn 2017, as originally scheduled.
2. Such preparatory consultation practices in smaller “clubs” or “camps” are well known also from other organizations, for example, NATO (see Græger & Haugevik, 2009).
3. For example, North/South, East/West, “Benelux”, “the Visegrad Four” or “the Nordics”.
4. An informal term for a constellation consisting of the Nordic and Baltic countries, along with Britain, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland.
5. These are the 16 EU member states in Central and Southern Europe and the Baltics which have been deemed the “less prosperous” among the 28.
6. Interview with a Norwegian diplomat, 28 April 2017.
7. The Presidency of the Council of the EU (hereafter Council Presidency) alternates among member states every six months. The state holding the Presidency chairs meetings at every level in the Council of the EU, and has some opportunities to help shape the EU agenda (see e.g. Båtora, 2017).
8. Interview with a Norwegian diplomat, 28 April 2017.

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