

Norway and 20 years of EEA

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This Policy Brief is based on a speech held on Europe Day, 9 May 2014, at Oslo Militære Samfund.

Policy recommendations:

- The global geopolitical situation is changing, with a growing role for China, India and others whose investments are seen also in Norway. Europe and the European states are credible partners in the pursuit of mutually reinforcing interests.
- The political events and social and ethnic tensions in our near surroundings call for strong European efforts to aid and assist in economic development, welfare and the lessening of tensions. Norway is definitely a European player.
- The pressing issues of climate change and energy create various venues for Norway and the EU. Our climate policy positions are close – and Norway's energy position is favourable. This means we can act together.
- The Norwegian tax payer is already contributing more to European regional development than the average European citizen. This should not be seen as an entry fee to the European market, but as an investment in a more prosperous and regionally balanced Europe, to our own benefit as well.
- Norway should strengthen its efforts to take part in the decisions that shape the EU/EEA-processes.
- If we want equal democratic rights for Norway, only full EU membership will suffice.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

A few years ago, my grown-up children convinced me to join Facebook and Twitter to prove that I was not completely outdated, socially speaking. I posted one of my very few tweets on 2 May 2012, on the 20th anniversary of my signing, on behalf of Norway, the EEA Agreement in Oporto. In no uncertain terms I praised the positive effects of the Agreement. To that tweet I received no reactions whatsoever, whether positive or negative.

There are at least two possible explanations for that lack of response. First, the EEA is like the weather. You cannot do much about it, whether you like it or not. Second, even more seriously, the Twitter public, or at least most of them, do not have a clue about the most far-reaching agreement Norway ever signed, as regards domestic and foreign policy.

Norway certainly is a European state. But we look peculiar in the eyes of many. What other European nations have been begging for, Norway has turned down twice, against the will of two governments that had parliamentary majorities.

Norwegian foreign policy can be understood only in a historical context. We are a young nation-state. Full independence was refused in 1814, since it did not fit with the European architecture of the time. Our first foreign minister after independence in 1905, Jørgen Løvland, told the parliament that he deemed it of paramount importance for Norway to stay away from what he, not very diplomatically, described as the war-mongering states of Europe. At the same time, Norway pursued extensive trade and shipping interests, in Europe and globally.

It took two world wars to change Norway's one-sided neutralist, trade-oriented perception of national needs. Neutrality did not keep us unscathed in the First World War; many Norwegian sailors lost their lives. Norway came out in strong support of the League of Nations, of international law, arbitration, humanitarian work and conflict resolution, in the spirit of Fridtjof Nansen. These efforts were not enough to hinder the Second World War. Eventually, Norway became a founding member of both the United Nations and NATO, with strong security guarantees.

My colleague at the Institute for Defense Studies, Professor Olav Riste, describes this development as the three formative phases of Norwegian foreign policy: the neutralist phase up to the First World War, then the missionary phase, and finally the alliance phase after the Second World War. Features from these formative phases are predominant in almost all foreign policy discussions in Norway. The anti-EU slogan from 1972 and 1994, 'Nei til salg av Norge' ('No to the sale of Norway') certainly has its roots in the neutralist phase.

We might have expected a fourth formative phase in Norwegian foreign policy in the 1990s or after the EU enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe. The Single Market, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the broadening and deepening of the EU have opened new opportunities. They represent geopolitical events of the first order.

Norway grasped only the first opportunity, the Single Market, since securing market access and a level playing field with Sweden, Germany and Spain was obviously in the national interest. To avoid new borders with our Nordic neighbours, with whom we have had a passport union since the 1950s, we opted for Schengen participation. We tend to go for the obvious, while reserving our political rights if we are insecure or even hostile, leaving the issue of EU membership to the future. The EEA institutions, a remarkable invention of then-Commission President Jacques Delors and others, must be understood as a political project for building bridges to the cautious seven EFTA free-traders. Those institutions lost considerable impact when Sweden, Finland and Austria surprisingly went in for rapid EU membership, and the Swiss even dropped the EEA project.

The government of Gro Harlem Brundtland felt we had no better option than to follow our Nordic neighbours – with the known negative result in the 1994 referendum. Was EU membership envisaged as the sole logical conclusion of the EEA? Not entirely, and not at that stage. The EEA enjoyed the strong support of many nay-sayers to the EU – in the trade unions, in the Labour Party, in the Christian People's Party and the Liberal Party. If the original EEA concept worked for some years, that could make it more natural to go for membership – or settle for a final no. This process was aborted by events.

After that referendum I was sent by the prime minister to explain the Norwegian position to colleagues in Paris, London and Berlin – not exactly a triumphant journey. Foreign minister Alain Juppe politely regretted the results, and wished Norway all the best. Douglas Hurd was deeply sympathetic and understanding: after all, many in Britain held similarly reserved feelings toward the EU. But Klaus Kinkel in Bonn was fuming. 'Bjørn Tore, what is the matter with you? By now I'm on a first-name basis with every Norwegian fish – and then you say no!' More than any of the others, he and Chancellor Helmut Kohl had supported Norway in the tough negotiations, and the disappointment was correspondingly great. Norway really belongs to the German concept of a European Union.

Even with the 52 per cent 'no' vote of 1994, the past 20 years have shown that the Norwegian authorities neither can nor wish to isolate Norway from the increasingly close and binding integration processes in the EU, as explained in detail in the Report of the EEA Review Committee, submitted in January 2012.

The democratic deficit implicit here is well known, but the political chemistry of Norway seems to go against change in the foreseeable future – perhaps this democratic deficit is not so painful after all. European common sense in most political issues corresponds to the attitudes and opinions of the average Norwegian. New EU agreements or legislation entailing significant new obligations for Norway number a full 287 items for the years 1992–2011. Of these, 265 were adopted unanimously, and the remainder were generally supported by a broad majority.

The fact that the broader political development of the EU has been remarkable when it comes to environment and resource issues, regional policies, social responsibility and governance has eased the impression that Norway and the EU have different priorities and agendas. We are not 'annerledeslandet', – the other, very different country: Norway is part of a European development.

By far the biggest challenge as I see it is the lack of awareness of the importance of our own relations to the EU. Norway's political parties, particularly on the yes-side, seem relieved that fierce new confrontations can be avoided, while at the same time forgetting their responsibility to raise important issues or create greater awareness of our daily relations with the EU. With some exceptions, the media seem generally provincial, with little European focus. Our educational institutions have not caught up, and textbooks are weak on modern Europe. By the end of this anniversary year, Norwegian pupils will know more about the year 1814 than about the EEA – in fact, they probably did already.

I have been asked to comment on the future and I shall try to touch briefly on a few points.

First, the geopolitical situation is changing, with a growing role for China, India and others. Their investments, students and labour are seen globally, also in Norway. Europe and the European states are credible partners in the pursuit of mutually reinforcing interests. A strong EU will boost such a development.

Second, political events and social and ethnic tensions in our near surroundings call for strong European efforts to aid and assist in economic development, welfare and lessening of tensions. Coordinating foreign and security policies in the EU has never been easy, since the nation-state is a strong factor in major EU member countries. The Ukraine has shown a will to act together that can only be applauded. Norway finds it easy to align itself with EU foreign policy, and our resources and political willpower are needed. We are definitely a European player.

Thirdly, the pressing issues of climate and energy create various possible venues for Norway and the EU. Our climate policy positions are close – and our energy position is favourable. We can act together.

Fourth, because of Norway's advantageous resource position, the Norwegian tax payer is already contributing more to European regional development than the average European citizen. This should not be seen as an entry fee to the European market, but as an investment in a more prosperous and regionally balanced Europe, to our own benefit as well. Incidentally, it would not be totally improper to raise the issue of whether Norway should be allowed to process more of its own regional resources, notably in fisheries, with full European market access, so as to further strengthen our ability to contribute to future regional obligations.

Fifth, Norway should strengthen its efforts to take part in the decisions that shape the EU/EEA-processes. Important issues of principle should be introduced prior to decisions in the EU – not afterwards. Norwegian ministers should appear in person in Brussels on all possible occasions, instead of sending their civil servants.

Finally, could Norwegian membership in the EU ever materialize? I dislike letting others taking decision on my behalf. I felt this particularly strongly when I observed it from the angle of Norwegian ambassador to Germany, in 2003–2007. I saw the many important contributions we could make and the ease with which Norwegian ministers manoeuvred in Berlin.

My principal logical conclusion is this: only full EU membership will do if we want equal democratic rights for Norway.

But not to raise unfounded expectations, let me round off with a true story from one of my open-air street meetings on Oslo's Karl Johan Street in September 1994. Speaking to a sizeable gathering of people on the pavement, I argued, among other things, for the efficiency and practicality of being able to attend EU ministerials twice a month to take care of national interests, rather than trying to rally all EU member-state capitals bilaterally as a non-member. A quick young man grasped a microphone and delivered the final blow: "Minister, you may have a point there, but this is your problem, not ours!"

Or: As long as it is seen as more important to form viable government coalitions than entering into the daring project of a possible 'yes' in a new referendum, a new EU campaign is unlikely to occur in Norway.



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About the Author

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