



Bjørn Rogde: The EU as a Peace Project

Norway voted twice on whether to join the EU. The second referendum took place in 1994 and ended with a nearly even split on the issue: 52 % voted no, and 48 % yes. Possibly, the result could have been different if the election had taken place 6 weeks later, as the yes camp was gaining towards the end. In the early days after the referendum, Norwegians still spent a lot of time discussing the EU. But little by little, interest has

waned, and in 2012 a poll showed that 70 % would now vote no.

What happened? Why is no one writing or talking about the EU anymore? After all Norway implements about 75 % of EU legislation. It also contributes about 347 million Euros annually to the EU via EEA support. Yet it has no power at all to influence the decisions taken in Brussels.

One reason is that Norway wants to protect its agricultural sector and doesn't want to share its fishing rights. Another reason is that Norway, thanks to its oil-industry, has done very well economically as compared to most European countries. Even the recent crisis has had little impact with the unemployment rate remaining stable around 3 % in recent years. It really seems as if the EU doesn't have much to offer that would tempt Norwegians.

But one thing that no one in Norway can disagree with is the EU's role as an institution for making peace in Europe. When the Nobel Peace prize was given to the European Union in 2012, for the first time in a long time, Norwegians were wondering whether they were doing the right thing by staying on the outside. After all, a commitment to peace has officially been part of Norway's foreign policy since 2002, when it was decided to establish a 'Peace and Reconciliation Unit' to coordinate the foreign ministry's efforts.

Norwegians are proud of their country's image as a peacemaker, as we see in the words from former state secretary Jan Egeland:

The Oslo Agreement, the Guatemala Agreements, and our efforts in South Africa, our efforts on Balkan, show that little Norway may play a role that the super powers cannot in a range of different situations, and we have played such a role the last four-five years, clearer than any other small nation, ever, I think, in world history. (Liland and Kjerland, 2003: 84)

Similar quotes exist from several foreign ministers, highlighting the importance of Norway as a peace promoter.

If economic incentives are not powerful enough to join the EU, maybe it is the EU's role as a peacemaker and mediator that can change opinion. Enhancing the EU effectiveness as peacemaker could also be a driver to create an image for the EU, mobilise people, and give them something to be proud of. Like we have seen in Norway.

Norway has played an important role as an independent mediator; a role that larger countries would find difficult to take over. Will Norway be more likely to continue this important role in the future by staying outside the Union? Possibly – but it is just as possible that the opposite is true. Just consider how tense the relationship with China was after Norway gave the Peace Nobel Prize to Chinese human rights activist Liu Xiaobo in 2010. In all likelihood, China could not have put such massive pressure on Norway if it had been a member of the EU.

What if Europe in the future could play a bigger role as a peace engager, not only in Europe, but also in other parts of the world? Could an institution like the EIP get people from different sides in conflicts to sit down and start talking? If Europe could extend its role as a peacemaker outside its own borders, it would be harder for Norway to stay outside. The moral obligation of joining might finally outweigh the economic reasons for staying outside.