

Principal strengths and weaknesses of norwegian integration politics essay



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The foreign policy of the European Union (EU) compromises two major tools. First, deepening dictates a horizontal (among members) process where member states tie up their relations on stronger grounds. Second, enlargement is associated with a vertical growth (between members of the EU and the candidate countries) that absorbs new members into the Union creating new markets, new employment potential, and a wider geographical status. The basic difference between these two processes is that the latter must also include the satisfaction of an outsider (i. e. the candidate country). As strange as it may sound to a Turkish citizen, some countries are willing to opt out the so-called “ opportunity” of becoming an EU member.

Any expression of opposition to the European Union or to the project of European integration, generally labeled Euroscepticism, comes from many different quarters and spans across the political spectrum. One basic idea is that European integration might be accompanied by a certain disintegration of the political system at the national level. In the recent European Parliament elections, many Eurosceptics entered the European Parliament, thus suggesting that Euroscepticism is on the rise across Europe.

In surveying the nature of Euroscepticism across European states, Szczerbiak and Taggart (2000) identified Soft and Hard Euroscepticism which implicitly suggest particular features of Eurosceptical attitudes to Europe.

For Hard Eurosceptics, the EU may be opposed because it embodies some previously identified « enemy» (e. g. capitalism for communism, socialism for the right, bureaucracy for populists, supranationalism for nationalists, or neo-

liberalism for socialists). For Soft Eurosceptics, the EU is problematic when its development runs counter to interests, policies or issues they support.

(Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008)

Euroscepticism in Norway

In the Norwegian context, Euroscepticism is usually associated with the question of membership. To the question why the membership issue was and is so hotly debated in Norway there is no single answer, but rather several partial ones.

A leading expert in the field of political behavior, Professor Henry Valen, points to the “ interplay of history, geography and social structure”(Miles 1996). Historically, centuries of foreign rule first by the Danes, then by the Swedes and the fact of being a young nation (i. e. Norway’s comparatively recent independence since 1905) made many Norwegians fierce patriots. To this should be added the large geographical distance to mainland Europe. The country has traditionally pursued a policy of non-involvement in European conflicts.

Furthermore, the Norwegian Euroscepticism can be traced to both the economic and cultural territorial cleavages that shape the Norwegian party system, thus cutting across the main left-right dimension in Norway i. e. socio-economic competition between Labour and the Conservatives.

(Eliassen and Sitter 2003). The centre-periphery cleavages derived from the “ national revolution” and the rural-urban cleavages that were arose during the industrial revolution are other two explanatory dimensions of

Euroscepticism in Norway (Rokkan and Urwin 1983). Domestic politics reflect <https://assignbuster.com/principal-strengths-and-weaknesses-of-norwegian-integration-politics-essay/>

economic inequalities and conflicts of interest stemming from the huge geographic extension of the country from south to north and the gap in living conditions between the densely inhabited and industrialized areas of south and the thinly populated rural and coastal districts. Furthermore, throughout the EU debates there were unusual but strong alliances between farmers and fisherman, urban radicals, and partisans of linguistic, religious and teetotalist “counter-cultures”. Miles (1996) finds that on most of these dimensions there has been a remarkable stability since the early 1970s.

The economic dimension of Norwegian Euroscepticism is illustrated in the sectors that face uncertainty or decreased subsidies if exposed to free trade and competition, primarily agriculture and fisheries, but also to a smaller extent the public sector. Fear that integration might undermine Norway’s regional policy, which entails both economic transfers and positive discrimination in the forms of tax-breaks and other financial incentives, provides further grounds for economic opposition.

In terms of identity or culture, European integration has been perceived as a potential or actual threat to Norway’s “moral-religious heritage” (Eliassen and Sitter 2003).

Foreign and security policy added as further dimension to the Norwegian Euroscepticism. Until 2000, there was scarce evidence of that Norway was responding to the end of the Cold War and changing military and security realities of the 1990s, and the distance between Norwegian and EU security policy was greater than at the beginning of the decade (Eliassen and Sitter 2003). This is rooted partly in the perception that Norway is a “different

country”, in terms of either geopolitics or its international profile. The EU and the US’s changing approaches to security and defense (beyond sole focus on traditional concerns of defense of state boundaries), has little effect on the Norwegian foreign and security policy. However, even in narrow terms of security concerns, Norway is finding that its non-NATO neighbours are increasingly addressing regional concerns through the EU institutions. Given its NATO membership and geostrategic position, Norway would be in a prime position to play a strong role in shaping the EU’s emerging security and defense policy. Thus, even in the absence of EU membership, Norway joined the Schengen agreement on police cooperation and border control and performs surveillance on the European It has also established close cooperation with the EU on its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

Historical outline of Norway’s foreign economic relations since independence

“ Norway is no stranger to complex relations with the outside world” (Claes and Fossum 2002). Its foreign policy has historically striven to strike a balance between internationalism and national self-assertion. Although united under a common king as early as 872, it lost its independence in the late Middle Ages, was ruled by Denmark from 1390 to 1814, and then was the possession of the Swedish king until obtaining independence in 1905.

In order to find the connection between a nation’s national identity and her foreign policy, one must first deal with whether Norwegian identity formation has yet ended up with a solid national identity. Anthony Smith (1993)

outlines fundamental features of a “ national identity” as such: a historic territory (homeland); common myths and historical memories; a common

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mass public culture including dialect languages and shared customs/traditions; common legal rights and duties for all members; and a common economy with territorial mobility for members. Internalizing Smith's features of national identity as well as making, Norwegian society has come up with an accomplished national identity without question.

The main priority in Norwegian foreign and security policy after the Second World War was always the "Atlantic" relationship, built around NATO membership and a strong reliance on the United Kingdom and the United States. In 1960 Norway joined the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) which included the United Kingdom, Finland, Sweden, Austria, and Liechtenstein. However, Norway's applications to join the European Community in 1962 and 1967 and vetoed by France indicated that there was potential for conflict in the Norwegian political system concerning stronger orientation towards the European Community. The opposition was not limited to the internal dimensions. Externally, membership meant a potential break with the traditional "non-supranational" Nordic and EFTA approaches. As a consequence, it was felt by many Norwegians that Nordic cooperation might be jeopardized by opting for EC membership.

The 1972 Trauma

In the 1972 referendum on EC membership, a majority of 53 percent of the population voted against. Community to ensure duty-free trade for manufactured goods, 'the European question' receded from its political agenda. The negative referendum outcome caused something like a political earthquake in Norway. It marked a broad popular protest against the

exclusive competence of the government to handle questions of foreign
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policy and international economics generally and against EC membership specifically. The “ No” in a way became part of the Constitution, standing above the government, the Storting (parliament) and the political parties.

Despite the rejection in 1972, and the following silent treatment of the membership issue, the prospect of the Single European Market triggered negotiations to link the EFTA states with the EC through the creation of the European Economic Area agreement (EEA). As an intergovernmental agreement between the EU and the three remaining EFTA partners (Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway), the EEA became the backbone of Norway ‘ s economic relationship with the EU.

The vote against membership of the European Community in the 1972 set the scene for an approach to European integration based on an ever closer cooperation short of actual membership. Despite the rejection of membership, Norway was required to respond to and accommodate European integration. What started as bilateral relationships between each EFTA member and the EU evolved into coordinated multilateral interaction in the early 1980s. [...]

(Eliassen and Sitter 2003)

The 1994 “ No” referendum to EU membership

In the wake of the 1994 referendum , in Norway, enormous offshore oil and gas resources had been developed, increasing the level of Norwegian exports and adding one more sensitive sector to the Norwegian negotiation agenda with the EU. In the EU, a more ambitious direction was employed

both to harmonize economic regulations of the members in order to create a <https://assignbuster.com/principal-strengths-and-weaknesses-of-norwegian-integration-politics-essay/>

common market and economic union, and also to create a political union with common foreign policy. The impact of these changes together with political considerations, including loss of sovereignty in critical decision-making areas, made the distance between Norway and the Union extended. The “ No” slogan EU campaign’s 1994 slogan centered on three words – environment, solidarity and national rule – all of which were threatened by the Union.

“ Norwegian Method” of European Integration

The combination in increasingly close cooperation in a growing range of policy sectors while excluding the possibility of full membership has come to represent a “ join-as-much-as-we-can-get-away-with” approach to European integration on the government’s part has been called the “ Norwegian method” of European integration (Eliassen and Sitter 2001). The results in both 1972 and 1994 referendums were marginal “ No” majorities, and this has been combined with a permanent pro-integration majority in Parliament, hence the basis for the “ Norwegian method” of European integration.

Strengths of the “ Norwegian method” in European integration

The European Economic Area (EEA) has been, is and will be the cornerstone of Norwegian involvement in European integration. The deal entails comprehensive membership in the EU’s Single European Market, and most Norwegian parties consider a well-functioning EEA an essential prerequisite for Norway not applying for full membership of the EU. Enlargement of the Single European Market was, of course, both for the EU and the EFTA countries, the key motive behind the EEA agreement (leaving aside the <https://assignbuster.com/principal-strengths-and-weaknesses-of-norwegian-integration-politics-essay/>

broader political goals of extending European integration), and this is perhaps the aspect of the EU – Norway relationship that has worked best.

Nevertheless, under the EEA arrangement Norway has seen much better economic development over the last decade than the EU average. The Norwegian North Sea oil wealth is almost a “ blessing” for the Norwegian economy, but not the only, explanation for this. In most sectors, the differences between the EEA and EU arrangements for trade in the Single Market are minor. In several respects, Norway has even outperformed the EU. Interest rates have fluctuated, but with some lag they have followed the Euro-zone. The government debt was eliminated, the foreign trade surplus grew, non-petroleum industrial investment increased and business did not emigrate to the Euro-zone. To be sure, the economic slowdown in the opening years of this century also hit Norway, but less severely than most of the EU member states. Unemployment in Norway stand (relatively stable) at the end of 2009 at around 3 percent, about half the EU average. This can be put down largely to the relatively tight fiscal policy pursued in Norway, even in the face of the temptation to use more oil money. In fact, a large degree of convergence between Norway and the Euro-zone in terms of monetary policy has taken place despite the lack of a formal relationship.

Norway's has secured ad-hoc participation in several EU policy initiatives beyond those covered by the EEA The most spectacular of these, are the Schengen arrangement on passport free travel and associated policies and Norway's close cooperation with the EU on its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

Perhaps most significantly, the EU-Norway relationship is dynamic. Although this means that the EEA treaty is upgraded when the EU enlarges, most of the responsibility is on the three EFTA members unilaterally to adapt to developments in the EU. This means both EU Treaty change and substantial developments in EU policy.

Weaknesses of the “ Norwegian method” in European integration

The Norwegian “ quasi-membership” in the EU (Eliassen and Sitter 2004) entails ever-closer cooperation, and the advantages of the supposed discretion that such arrangements entail shrinks with the deepening and widening of the EU.

The first challenge is associated with the deepening of the EU. Although the EU as a whole is generally pleased with Norway’s performance, it shows little interest in developing this system much further to accommodate deepening of European integration. The EEA and Schengen systems are static compared to the very dynamic developments within the EU. Both arrangements are becoming ever smaller parts of the “ whole”, and this is particularly evident when the EU moves into new areas such as counter-terrorism. In other rapidly developing areas such as foreign, security and defense policy, the overall Norwegian strategy is not always clearly developed, and the EU side justifiable questions whether Oslo is prepared to accept the full implications of ad hoc participation in any given initiative.

The price for access the Single Market is accepting EU market regulation and competition policy. In terms of the free movement of goods, services, capital

and labour, there is little difference between the EEA agreements and full EU membership, and the EEA competition policy has brought a degree of supranationalism to an otherwise intergovernmental agreement. Although Norway has adopted less to EU's competition policy than most member states, it has partially adopted the EU's "prohibition approach" and remains under pressure to follow EU states in adapting to the EU system (Eliassen and Sitter 2003).

The EU's eastern enlargement, or widening, makes up the second element of the challenge of the future and the dilemma of quasi-membership. The tenfold increase in the fee for Norway's access to the EU Single Market agreed as part of the EEA enlargement deal not only illustrates the shifting balance between the costs and benefits of quasi-membership (and some EU state's perception of Norway as a rich relative who is unwilling to contribute to the common good), but also the potential consequences of the growing asymmetry between the EU and EFTA partners in the EEA.

Conclusion – Are Norwegians as Eurosceptic as we often think?

The question of how and to what extent Norway should participate in European integration has been the most important issue in national politics since the Second World War. The current "Norwegian method" of European integration lies between the alternatives of full membership and withdrawal from the EEA.

At the same time, Norway's non-membership of the EU – understood as economically sensible for a country rich on natural resources – is seen by

most of the EU members as an indicator of self-reliance and national independence which suggests cultural introversion and a lack of need to actively trade and communicate in cultural, scientific and commercial matters with the rest of Europe.

Despite this quite false picture that is developing, are Norwegians as Eurosceptic as we often think? In light of this, I have identified four arguments against the standard story of Norwegian Euroscepticism:

High degree of integration with European markets when looking at the share of import and export from/to EU of total (2000-2009);

High degree of compliance with EU Norms, revealed through the percentage of EU directives not transported (EU and EEA scoreboards) between 1997-2009;

Considerable pragmatism by Norwegian political parties (i. e. there is a difference between talking and acting). All parties have governed on the EEA and if it was not supported, at least it was accepted as a compromise;

Norwegian citizens have average attitudes towards European unification (European Social Survey 2008).

Thus, a general lesson for the study of Euroscepticism is that it fails to grasp the distinction between opposition to European integration and opposition to EU membership. It tends to overemphasize the significance of formal membership and ignore many different Norwegian ties to the EU.

Membership is not so much a question about the EU, but primarily about domestic issues in Norway, as in most of the member states.

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