



Gamze Tanıl

## Why is Norway Outside the European Union?

Norwegian National Identity  
and the Question  
of European Integration



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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1. Research Area – A Social Laboratory

*‘The small nations that comprise the Scandinavian area constitute a social laboratory for the Western world.’*

Walter Galenson, *Labour in Norway* (1949)

*‘It is the ‘rooftop of the world’. Once the home of ruthless Vikings, now it is a haven of peace; once isolated off the routes of travel by land and sea, now on main air traffic lanes; once poor, now productive and prosperous beyond the average; barbarous late into European history, now an admired pattern of enlightened society. This is Scandinavia, Norden, the North’.*

Franklin Daniel Scott, *Scandinavia* (1980)

Most political scientists are engaged with the politics of big powers such as American, British, and Russian politics: Nordic countries attract little interest since they are not great powers, nor are key players in the international arena. But the pearl is hidden in the shell. When examined closely it is recognized that the small and sparsely populated Nordic countries punch beyond their weight due to their enviable political and economic characteristics. First of all, they symbolize for most people ‘the countries, which stand for peace, disarmament, and cooperation in the international arena’ (Wæver 1992:77). Secondly, they provide lessons to other countries with their ‘mature parliamentary democracy, competitive market economy, comprehensive welfare provisions, social and environmental standards, tradition of open democratic government, internationalism, and a shared preference for a free trade global economy’ (Miles 1996:7). For these reasons, researchers and scholars of Nordic politics describe the region as a ‘social laboratory’.

One salient aspect in this social laboratory is Norway’s rejection of the European Union membership twice in the recent history. This policy choice is important in two respects: For more than fifty years the European political arena has been dominated by the enthusiastic regional integration attempts, and almost all European countries, except for a few, have become members of this regional union. In such an international environment, Norway’s turning down the membership option is of significance. No other country, except Greenland which left the Union after a national referendum in 1982, has actually rejected membership. Secondly, Norway rejected the EU membership not only once but twice in

20-year period notwithstanding the changing domestic and international environment. The continuity of negative public attitude towards the European Union should be explained only with solid reasons and structural factors.

Norway's position as a 'willingly outsider' attracts attention of many scholars, and there's already a large amount of scholarly work on the subject<sup>1</sup>. This study differs from the previous work in that it takes a different route by employing 'social constructivist approach' together with 'national identity dynamic' in explaining this policy choice. I believe that the introduction of a psychological approach to the study of identity politics, which is not very common, is very interesting, and contributes well to the existing literature.

Existing literature on the subject is dominated by the Nordic scholars who extensively researched and wrote on the Norwegian rejection of EC/EU membership. As a result, it has become a very well known academic field among the Nordic audience. However, both the subject area, i.e. Nordic politics, and the policy choice of Norway, i.e. rejection of EU-membership, are quite virgin fields in other national contexts. This research provides a reflective and introductory work by a non-Nordic scholar for the non-Nordic audience. To be precise, this text is especially written for the non-Norwegian audience with an aim to introduce Norwegian case to non-Norwegians.

To summarize, this research aims to provide a new perspective to Norway's relations with the EU, and to introduce Norwegian European policy to the non-Norwegian scholarship and audience. With these two distinctive aims it contributes to the analysis and understanding of the Norwegian European policy.

## 2. Research Subject – A Way to the North<sup>2</sup>

Since its first manifestation as the European Coal and Steel Community following the signing of the Treaty of Paris on 18 April 1951 with six Member States – West Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg- the European Union (EU) have proceeded much becoming a unique international entity that directly affects the daily lives of over 500 million citizens today. However, there are some countries which have been reluctant to join this union.

Having been dominated by Danes for 400 years and by Swedes for 90 years until its independence in 1905, Norway has stayed at distance from both the prob-

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1 See Andersen 2000; Archer 2005; Archer and Sogner 1998; Beate and Listhaug 1995; Bjørklund 1996,1997; Egeberg 2005; Gestöhl 2002; Ingebritsen 1995,1998; Matlary 1993; Rokkan 1966; Saglie 2000; Saeter 1996.

2 The name of the country, 'Norway' means 'a way to the north'.

lems and the enthusiastic integration attempts in Europe. Luckily, Norway was outside of the terrible military and economic conflicts which were dominating Europe at that period. It had a comparatively lower military tension and comparatively favourable economic situation. Jørgen Løvland, the first Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs after Norway's independence from Sweden in 1905, stated his prime task as 'to keep Norway out the combinations and alliances that can drag the country into belligerent adventures together with any of the European warrior states' (quoted in Sverdrup 2000:84). So, the European integration attempts, basis of which is rooted in the desire of the French to keep German military power under control, had barely any relevance for Norway. Besides, occupation by Germany during the Second World War also bred the suspicion against the continental European countries. Main policy was not to involve in the war-making games of the big European countries.

The application of the close partner, Britain, followed by the close Scandinavian neighbour, Denmark, to the EC in 1967 caused a turning point in this foreign policy towards Europe. However, for a country which has a tradition of corporatist pluralism, making such a big decision was not that easy. The decision was not to be taken only by the state and government officials, but instead, it would be a collective decision with the contribution of all parts of the nation. After long and heated debates and campaigns on the issue, Norwegian citizens turned down the EC-membership option in a referendum in September 1972 with a 'No' majority of 53.5%.

Time for the second attempt came with the applications for full EU membership of the countries Austria, Sweden and Finland between 1989 and 1992. Although 57% of the Finish voters, 66,6% of the Austrian voters, and 52% of the Swedish voters favoured the EU membership, on 28 November 1994 52.2% of those voting in the Norwegian referendum on EU membership rejected once more the government's proposal that Norway should join the EU and, implicitly, the terms negotiated for membership. With this second case, deep reservations among Norwegian citizens against the EU membership became clear.

The explanations for this foreign policy choice vary widely among scholars. A sizeable but scattered number of contributions by electoral researchers building on the work of Stein Rokkan try to demonstrate how historical cross-cutting cleavages<sup>3</sup>, dormant in everyday Norwegian politics, have been activated to produce a winning majority for the no-side. Certain roles such as those of city-dweller or country-dweller, producer or consumer are supposed to inculcate

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3 Stein Rokkan and Henry Valen's model consists of two main axes: the territorial-cultural dimension (centre-periphery), which is related to the national revolution, and the economic-functional dimension (producers and consumers; employers and employees), which is associated with the industrial revolution (Rokkan 1967; Valen 1981).

in individuals certain interests, and because of these interests they are supposed to vote in a certain way. While this explanation is able to pinpoint the pattern of behaviour, it does not shed light on the question of motivation.

The negative connotation of 'union' is employed to explain Norwegian public's foreign policy choice: Tamnes and Egeberg argue that 'there was an enduring, underlying broad scepticism towards becoming part of a 'union' once more' (Tamnes 1997). It seems to them as if both the union with Denmark (1380-1814) and the union with Sweden (1814-1905) were still present in a negative way in the collective memory of the Norwegian people (Egeberg 2003:6). These arguments are supported by those who claim that usually not the nature but the form of cooperation matters for Norway: 'Norway's relationship to the EU fits a historical pattern, when it comes to forms of international cooperation. This pattern, which is characterised as 'nationalistic internationalism', has two elements: (1) In principle, Norway is for all kinds of international cooperation, but (2) the form of such cooperation is often problematic' (Andersen 2000:2). Therefore, it is argued that 'participation is reluctant and a central concern is to find special institutional arrangements and special solutions' (Lundestad 1985:45). However, this explanation is also insufficient to explain the underlying motivations.

Seeking to provide 'the most obvious explanation for EU-opposition' in Norway, Bjørklund confines his analysis to 'economic self-interests' of various social groups: 'Norwegian farmers, who are described as the world's most subsidized and perceive their business interests at stake; Norwegian fishermen, seeking protection of fishing resources from the fleets of EU countries; and the Norwegian public sector, characterized by a protected economy and afraid of the threat of cuts in public sector funding due to harmonization of the Norwegian to a common EU standard' were against the Norwegian EU-membership (Bjørklund 1997:145; Bjørklund 1996:29-30). Similarly, 'political economy based sectoral approach' of Ingebritsen focuses on the role of the leading sector (petroleum) and secondary sectors (agriculture and fisheries), and their political representation and influence on the country's elite which exert pressure on the decision over EU membership. According to her, 'the capacity of the state to pursue an integrationist strategy varied according to the political influence of leading sectors' (Ingebritsen 1998:33).

However, economic self-interest based analysis is not enough to explain Norwegian voters' persistent policy choice on EU-membership. First of all, such sectoral approaches almost seem to suggest that the political leaders of the country are the pawns of the leading sectors and play only a marginal role in the decision on EU membership. Secondly, only a small and shrinking percentage of Norwegians are involved in the primary economic sectors of fishery and agriculture. Instead of such economic self-interest based approaches, this research asserts that

an analysis of foreign policy choices does not imply an analysis of material facts only, but also the human interpretation (social construction) of these material conditions in any national context.

A more encompassing approach moves beyond rationalist premises and takes account of the identity politics. Iver Neumann tries to explain Norway's choice of staying outside the EU by analysing how the agriculture and fisheries sectors as well as others arguing in favour of a 'no' were able to 'capture the heart of the nation', and thus ensure that 'people with only the most flimsy material ties to these sectors nonetheless voted 'no' to EU membership in 1972 and 1994 referenda' (Neumann 2002:89). With such an approach, he perceives the naysayers 'not as aggregations of individual rational interests, but as instantiations of identity politics' (ibid:89).

Identity politics is also of great importance for Ole Wæver who argues that an analysis of domestic discourses regarding 'we' concepts, like state, nation, and Europe in major European states can explain their foreign policy choices. For him, in most cases, 'the question of European integration turns out to be the question of how the different state/nations in different ways have 'Europe' integrated into their 'we's' (Wæver 2002:25). His analysis is thus focused 'not simply on 'who' we are, but on the way(s) one conceives this 'we' through the articulation of different layers of identity in complex constellations of competition and mutual definition' (ibid:25). In his analysis there are three levels of constructions at the national context: (1) basic construction of the state/national identity, (2) construction of 'Europe' vis-à-vis the state/national identity, (3) construction of concrete policy for Europe, meaning that a specific European policy (level 3) involves a construction of a particular Europe (level 2) building upon a construction of the state-nation constellation (level 1).

Indeed, the perception of the EU as 'a threat to core Norwegian values, national traditions and state sovereignty' (Ingebritsen and Larson 1997:215) stood out as the first and foremost in both 1972 and 1994 EU-referendum debates in Norway. Kristen Nygaard, in a lecture at a conference in 1995, after mentioning the negative implications of the EU-membership on Norwegian natural resources, agriculture, fisheries, environment, justice and home affairs, economy, democracy and sovereignty, concluded that 'these aspects relate to very fundamental characteristics of Norwegian society, characteristics of which we pride ourselves and which we want to be strongly present in Norway also in the future' (Nygaard 1995:10).

Based on this background, this research analyzes Norwegians' conception of the European Union membership as a product of the ideas and identity with regards to themselves and the European Union.

At this point, it is important to clarify that this study is concerned with the perception of Norwegian people of themselves and of the EU, and their percep-