

Iceland blooming on the outside



Director of Heimssýn, the Icelandic ‘No’ movement, **Hjörtur J. Guðmundsson**, proposes that it is not easy to understand why there are people in Iceland, Norway or Switzerland who would like to join the EU, which, on top of everything else is not really renowned for economic or political success. As an independent nation, Iceland has the liberty to take decisions solely according to its own national interests.

Last February the *Sunday Telegraph* wrote that in 2006 two European countries were named by the United Nations as the first and second best places on earth to live, a recurrence from the year before. This would have been a reason to celebrate for the European Union if the countries in question – Norway which came first and Iceland which came second – would have been among its member states. But the fact is that neither is and neither has been eager to join up.

In the same article, Norway’s Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg, a stringent Europhile, admitted that the Norwegian people were today reaping the benefits of having rejected EU membership – not only once but twice in referendums – in a strong economy, low unemployment, and high economic growth. By staying outside the EU, Norway has also saved its fish industry he conceded. Still he did not hide that he himself very much wanted his country to join the EU without putting forward any tenable arguments why, something which is quite typical for many Europhiles. The EU itself is their primary goal, not national interests which for them are at best a side issue.

Much the same goes for Iceland. However, unlike our cousins in Norway we have never put in an application for EU membership. The debate in Iceland has never gone further than just discussing the matter and as an example of that the supporters of EU membership have so far never actually tried to put the issue on the agenda in run-ups to general elections. They are simply quite aware of the fact that the EU is not exactly a promising card to play if the idea is to win elections in Iceland.

Just as in the case of Mr. Stoltenberg, it is obvious that EU membership as such is the goal of many Icelandic Europhiles.

It doesn’t matter what Brussels decides to do they are willing to defend it and support it. As a token of that all their reservations to joining the EU vanish if they realise it means ruling out membership. For example they used to claim that EU membership was completely out of the question unless Iceland held full authority over Icelandic waters, but not anymore. Their aspiration for joining is simply above everything else.

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The EU is by far Iceland’s most important trading partner. Our access to the union’s Single Market is guaranteed by our membership of the European Economic Area (EEA) which only obliges us to adopt a token amount of EU rules. However, those rules do not automatically become laws in Iceland and first have to be implemented by Icelandic authorities to take effect. We are also spared from disastrous policies such as the Common Agriculture Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy. Finally we always have the option of withdrawing unilaterally if it would turn out to be necessary to protect Icelandic interests.

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The economic prosperity in Iceland is also the result of radical reforms in our economy in the last couple of decades. We have in recent years scored high in as good as all international researches on how well countries of the world

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Liquids on Aeroplanes: When the EU (Almost) Repealed a Regulation

The European Parliament adopted on 5 September a resolution on restrictions imposed by the EU on liquids that passengers can take on board aeroplanes. The European Parliament considered that a regulation (Regulation (EC) No 1546/2006) for laying down measures for the implementation of the common basic standards on aviation security (liquids ban regulation) has not been implemented equally and consistently across all the EU's airports and has asked for this implementation. MEPs pointed out that “controls of liquids in hand luggage by X-ray equipment cannot detect explosives in liquids.” Hence, the European Parliament called on the European Commission to review that regulation without delay and “if no further conclusive facts are brought forward” the regulation should be repealed.

Naturally it is and will always be debated exactly how such researches are executed. However, combined they give a certain general evidence of how things are developing. And it is quite interesting that Iceland, Norway and Switzerland, which are members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and therefore not the EU, are almost always among the top ten countries in such studies. On the other hand, unfortunately of course, only two or three EU Member States usually are.

Switzerland is, however, not a member of the EEA but has instead concluded a number of bilateral agreements with the EU covering those areas where the Swiss want to cooperate. So the EEA is not even a necessary condition for prosperity. Switzerland's agreements are such a success that even the chairman of the country's European Movement, Christa Markwalder Bär, admitted in her visit to Iceland last autumn that the Swiss' experience of the agreements was very positive and that they enjoyed a solid support among the people. Nevertheless, just like Mr. Stoltenberg, she wants to join the EU.

In the light of all this it is not easy to understand why there are people in Iceland – or for that matter in Norway and Switzerland – who would like to join the EU which on top of everything else is not really renowned for economic success – or even success at all. Where our influence would be almost none as a result of our small population and where the interests of all the other Member States would weigh heavier from Brussels' point of view – perhaps with the sole exception of Malta.

Evidently in the event of EU membership, Iceland would no longer be an independent and sovereign country which is simply something we are not willing to accept.

Hjörtur J. Guðmundsson is Director of Heimssýn, the Icelandic No movement

The MEPs have noticed that the implementation of the regulation causes increased costs not only to airports and operators but also to passengers resulting in confiscation of private property. MEPs are concerned “that the costs incurred as a result of Regulation (EC) No 1546/2006 may not be proportionate to its added value in terms of the additional security obtained through its implementation.” Timothy Kirkhope, MEP, said: “the current measures to restrict liquids on board flights are undoubtedly a great inconvenience for passengers and a huge financial burden for European airport authorities...” However, the European Commission has already made clear that it is not intending to change the rules. According to Jacques Barrot, European Commissioner in charge of transport, the document cannot be repealed as there is still a threat of liquid explosives would be used for a terror attack on planes and until a new method has been developed, we will continue to face such a risk.