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Norway in Europe. The Norwegian Government's Strategy for Cooperation with the EU 2014-2017

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Introduction

Europe is experiencing a time of change. Shifts in the global balance of power are reducing the role and influence of European countries. Many of them are still dealing with the economic, social and political repercussions of the financial crisis. Russia's conduct in Ukraine in the spring of 2014 has shown that the principles of the rule of law and democracy are still being challenged on our own continent.

Faced with these challenges, we must defend our own fundamental values, with individual freedom and responsibility at the core – values that build up trust between people and between countries. When European countries have to deal with shifting global power structures, an economic downturn or a military threat, their first instinct is to find ways of cooperating, rather than assuming that politics is a zero-sum game. This instinct is one of Europe's strengths. Thus, the financial crisis has resulted in closer economic cooperation within the EU. In the face of growing competition from emerging economic powers, the EU and the US have initiated negotiations to establish what would be the world's largest free trade area to boost growth and employment. Russia's actions in neighbouring countries have made the security and foreign policy dialogue between EU member states even more important. In addition, the EU countries have given higher priority to the goal of closer energy policy cooperation.

There is broad support both in the Norwegian people and in the Storting for Norway to continue to be part of European cooperation through the EEA Agreement, the Schengen agreement and other agreements with the EU. The Government pursues its European policy within the framework of these agreements. We cooperate with the EU and its member states because we share a common set of values and because we need joint solutions to shared challenges. We cooperate because it is in our own national interest to do so.

The EEA Agreement is the mainstay of our cooperation. It ensures that Norway enjoys the benefits of free movement of persons, goods, services and capital. It gives Norwegian businesses access to a 'domestic market' consisting of 31 countries with a population of 500 million. Common European rules ensure that they compete on the same terms as firms from EU countries. In this way, we are safeguarding Norwegian jobs and welfare. The EEA Agreement also includes rules for consumer protection and common environmental rules. It entitles Norwegians to live, work and study in other European countries. The Agreement thus provides opportunities for large groups of people. It also facilitates cooperation on civil protection and emergency planning. The Government actively seeks to safeguard Norwegian rights and further develop Norwegian participation within the framework set by the Norwegian Constitution and the EEA Agreement itself.

Norway has chosen to collaborate with its European partners in more areas than those covered by the EEA Agreement. Through the Schengen agreement, Norway is part of a European area without internal borders, and has a share of the responsibility for external border control. The abolition of internal border checks makes it easier for Europeans to travel to each other's countries and trade with each other. Our participation in the Schengen cooperation also opens the way for broader cooperation between justice and police authorities to deal with common challenges. In addition, Norway cooperates closely with the EU on foreign and security policy issues. Our views frequently coincide, and by acting together, we can have more influence internationally.

European legislation and policy is constantly developing. This has consequences for Norway. To influence developments, we must show political leadership and participate in the arenas that are open to us, given the limitations of our association with the EU. We must pursue an open and inclusive European policy. Norway's European policy is a collective national effort. This strategy presents the Government's main priorities for cooperation with the EU in the period 2014–17 and describes how we will seek to gain acceptance for our views and interests.

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Main priorities

Politics is all about defending the values we believe in and maintaining the value creation we depend on for the future. This is the basis for the five main priorities of the Government's European policy.

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Increased competitiveness and growth

Cooperating with the EU ensures economic growth and secure jobs in Norway. This is easier when companies, investors and employees know there are common rules that create a predictable situation for all parties in the European market. A Norwegian company that exports goods to Germany should not meet other product requirements than its competitors in EU countries. Norwegians who want to work in the Netherlands should be confident that they will enjoy the same working conditions as Dutch and other EU citizens. The same applies to EU citizens who are working in Norway. To ensure equal treatment and strengthen Norway's competitiveness, the Government will give high priority to making new EEA rules applicable in Norway as soon as possible after they are implemented in the EU.

However, common rules are not enough when Norwegian businesses are competing on the European market. They must also be competitive in themselves. This means that Norwegian businesses must be innovative and constantly develop new products and better production methods. To achieve this, we will cooperate closely with the EU and its member states on innovation, research and education. We will improve conditions for businesses and employees by cooperating on infrastructure development, transport and cutting red tape at European level. We will play an active role in developing new solutions, together with European partners, and will exchange best practices of modernisation, innovation and productivity in the public sector. We will also play a part in developing sound consumer policies at European level. Confident consumers contribute to growth.

It is in Norway's interest that the internal market comprises a common labour market as well. People who are willing to cross national borders to find work help to boost employment and growth both in Norway and in the rest of Europe. The Government will seek to ensure respect for the right of nationals of other EEA countries to enjoy the same working conditions as Norwegian employees. We will fight against social dumping and promote well-regulated employment conditions. We will also consider the implications of labour migration for the way the Norwegian welfare state is organised. The goal is to maintain a welfare state that is sustainable while at the same time ensuring equal treatment for all EEA nationals.

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Higher quality research and education

The Government's aim is for Norway to be one of the most innovative countries in Europe. Major investments in research by both the public and the private sector will help to secure the basis for employment in the future. Norway will never have the cheapest labour, so knowledge is our most important competitive advantage. Cross-border research cooperation helps to raise the quality of Norwegian education and research, and to increase the competitiveness of Norwegian businesses.

Research and education is an important part of Norway's cooperation with the EU. Norway's contributions to the major EU programmes for research and innovation, education, and culture will total around EUR 3.2 billion (NOK 26 billion at the current rate of exchange) in the period 2014–20. We must ensure that we take full advantage of our participation in these programmes. We need to make sure, that teachers, students, researchers, business leaders, local and regional authorities and civil society are aware of opportunities for project funding from the EU, and help Norwegian research communities to succeed in the competition for funding. The Government will take steps to ensure the best possible use of the opportunities offered by programme cooperation, through a separate strategy for cooperation with the EU on research and innovation.

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An ambitious climate and energy policy