

The Homemade Nobel Peace Prize

Why the European Union is This Year's Winner

Pieter de Wilde

After many previous nominations, the European Union (EU) has finally been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The Norwegian Nobel Committee cited the EU's contribution to peace between France and Germany and its influence on successful democratization in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe as the reason behind the decision. Yet, none of these events took place in 2012. Even if we credit the EU with these achievements, the award seems slightly awkward at a time when so many EU citizens are suffering under the harsh austerity measures intended to save the Eurozone. Taking into consideration the EU's long-term achievements and the current Eurozone predicament leads me to ask: Why now?

To answer this question, we need to understand the domestic politics of Norway. Norway is not a member of the EU. It has applied for membership twice, in the early 1970s and the early 1990s. Referendums on membership in 1972 and 1994 were close, and the population was deeply divided on the issue. Both times, votes against membership held a narrow majority, but the issue remained on the political agenda. Ever since the first referendum in 1972, EU membership has continuously been a bone of contention in Norway. Couples divorce, siblings stop talking to each other and flying an EU flag in public easily invites verbal, if not physical abuse. Permanent 'yes' and 'no' movements exist – *Europabevegelsen* and *Nei til EU* – with widespread cross-partisan membership and grass roots organization. Every political party has a clear position on the membership issue: *Arbeiderpartiet* (the labor party) and *Høyre* (the conservatives) are strong supporters of membership, while *Sosialistisk Venstre* (the socialist left), the *KRF* (Christian democrats) and *Senterpartiet* (the agrarian party) oppose membership. Only the liberals (*Venstre*) and the progressive party (*Fremskrittspartiet*) have less outspoken positions.

In the course of polarization of opinions about membership, the EU as a whole has become domestically politicized. Those who favor Norwegian membership continuously praise the EU for everything it does and stands for. To those who oppose membership, nothing could be possibly good or admirable about the EU. It has come to the point where it is next to impossible to enter Norwegian public debate about the EU without first declaring whether you support or oppose membership, after which the other side immediately stops listening. This, obviously, leads to frustration among those with a more nuanced position. In this context, we should understand the comment by the Nobel Prize committee chairman *Torbjørn Jagland* that "it is entirely possible to respect the role the EU has played for peace without supporting membership."

A five-member committee decides who will receive the Peace Prize. Following the explicit will of Alfred Nobel, this committee is elected by the Norwegian Parliament. The committee consists of former politicians who reflect the political balance of power within parliament. *Torbjørn Jagland* is a member of *Arbeiderpartiet*, Chairman of the Council of Europe and is a strong supporter of Norwegian EU membership. The other four current members are representatives of *Høyre*, *Fremskrittspartiet*, *Sosialistisk Venstre* and *Arbeiderpartiet*. This means that, of the five members of the Nobel Peace Prize committee, only one represents a party that clearly opposes EU membership. Yet, as the Norwegian public broadcasting company was quick to point out, this member – *Ågot Valle* (*Sosial-*



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istisk Venstre and former vice president of Nei til EU) – was sick when the committee voted on the prize. In response to questions, she declared that she would not have voted for the EU. Needless to say, this caused public outcry in Norway with the leaders of Sosialistisk Venstre and Nei til EU crying foul play and demanding Jagland's resignation. In this interpretation, Norwegian Eurosceptics were outsmarted by the pro-Europeans.

An alternative, yet equally cynical scenario also emphasizes the importance of timing. It features Eurosceptics as besting pro-European Norwegians. This scenario starts out with the enormous respect many Norwegians have for the Nobel Peace Prize and its laureates. Awarding the EU with the prize might convince many Norwegians of the EU's credentials and make them think more favorably of Norwegian EU membership. Yet, the percentage of Norwegians supporting EU membership is currently at an all-time low. In other words, the question of membership is less contested now than it has been for a long time. The 'no' side has clearly won for the time being. The chance that the Peace Prize would tip the scales towards membership in Norwegian public opinion is therefore very low. So perhaps Norwegian Eurosceptics thought it might not be such a bad idea to give this year's prize to the EU. The main advantage for Eurosceptics is that, if the EU gets the prize this year, it will not get it later when it might matter more in Norwegian domestic politics. Norway's position outside the EU would not be affected and a major weapon in the hands of the 'yes' campaign is forever neutralized.

Both scenarios point to how 2012 is different from the many previous years when the EU was nominated but did not win the prize. In effect, 2012 presented a unique domestic window of opportunity combining the absence of the most outspoken Eurosceptic in the Norwegian Nobel Committee with the comparatively low politicization of the EU in Norwegian public opinion.

Whether the explanation behind the belated awarding of the Peace Prize to the EU is that Norwegian pro-Europeans outsmarted Eurosceptics, or vice versa, does not really matter for the argument of this piece. The point is that the decision leading to the Nobel Peace Prize is an entirely domestic Norwegian affair, highly influenced by the country's party politics and public opinion. At the same time, the prize enjoys global esteem and its laureates are respected far beyond Norwegian borders. Many outside Norway are either unaware that the decision of the committee is a purely Norwegian affair, or they do not mind. Similarly, there is no substantial critical voice within Norway that challenges the way the Nobel Peace Prize is organized. There was just one protest after Barack Obama received the prize in 2008. Fredrik Heffermehl, a Norwegian professor, then brought the case before the Swedish Nobel Committee and demanded that, henceforth, Stockholm should grant the prize, because Norway is too NATO friendly. His campaign failed because the will of Alfred Nobel is very explicit. Following Nobel's wishes, the prize will remain in Oslo, decided by a committee of five people appointed by the Norwegian parliament. The only thing that can be changed is the tradition of electing former Norwegian politicians. Why not demand that all committee members be prize laureates themselves? In one stroke, this would internationalize the Nobel Peace Committee and create yet another incentive to pick worthy laureates. Yet, the Norwegian parliament would have to change its tradition voluntarily. Without any pressure from inside or outside Norway, this is highly unlikely.

If the prize and its committee remain so clearly Norwegian, perhaps the rest of the world should reconsider the esteem it holds for the prize. The Nobel Peace Prize simply reflects the latest fad in Oslo, like the Oscars reflect the latest fad in Hollywood. We can value such a prize and celebrate its laureates, but we should be aware of the particularistic cultural and political background in which it is given.