

Under the Northern Lights

Unlocking the Nordics'
Potential within the EU

Abstract

The Nordic region is quickly becoming a hotspot for geopolitical competition and a focus of rising global interest in its resources and strategic placement. The Nordic countries can no longer rely solely on NATO or the United States to guarantee their security – closer cooperation with the EU is now essential. Deeper Nordic–EU integration would strengthen Europe’s security, give the Nordics a stronger voice in EU decisions, and enhance the EU’s political and economic resilience. Concrete steps to achieve this include involving Norway and Iceland in all EU discussions on Arctic security, accelerating the adoption of the euro in Sweden and Denmark, and using a staged integration approach to EU accession for Norway and Iceland, allowing sensitive issues to be resolved while keeping the process swift and effective.



Lisa Lundgren
Policy and Research
Fellow at the European
Liberal Forum

Introduction

Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland (the Nordics) have long had unusual relationships with European integration. Sweden and Finland joined the EU in 1995 but did not join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) until 2024 and 2023 respectively. And Sweden has not yet adopted the euro. Denmark has been an EU member since 1973, yet it maintained a defence opt-out until 2022 and still has an opt-out from the euro.¹ Norway and Iceland participate in the internal market and free movement through agreements but are not (yet) EU Member States.

The rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape in Europe and the rest of the world might, however, be reshaping these relationships. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has accelerated security concerns across the continent and resulted in historic shifts in Nordic foreign and security policy. Sweden and Finland have both recently joined NATO, marking a decisive move away from decades of military non-alignment and signalling a broader willingness to collaborate with Europe in more policy areas.² Moreover, Iceland has announced plans to hold a referendum on EU accession talks later this year,³ public support for EU membership in Norway appears to be rising, and in Sweden the movement to join the euro is gaining ground.

These developments are taking place at a time when the Arctic is becoming increasingly important globally. Both the United States and Europe are showing growing interest in the region, mainly for security reasons but also for its natural resources and potential trade routes.⁴ As tensions rise due to increasing US interventionism, the Arctic is no longer considered a distant area in northern Europe, but a key geopolitical space.

Against this background, this policy paper aims to analyse some of the underlying factors for the recent shift in attitude towards European integration in the Nordic countries. It will also present policy recommendations for how a stronger and more united Europe could emerge through the fuller integration of the Nordic countries.

¹ Folketinget (2025), 'The Danish Opt-Outs from EU Cooperation', <https://www.thedanishparliament.dk/eu-information-centre/the-danish-opt-outs-from-eu-cooperation>.

² NATO (2024), 'NATO Member Countries', <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/organization/nato-member-countries>.

³ S. Starcevic (2026), 'Iceland to Hold Aug. 29 Referendum on Reviving EU Membership Talks', Politico, 6 March, <https://www.politico.eu/article/iceland-kristrun-frostadottir-august-29-referendum-eu-membership-talks/>.

⁴ L. Debanck (2025), 'Greenland and the EU's Arctic Ambitions', *Future Europe Journal*, 1 October, <https://feu-journal.eu/issues/securing-the-essentials-in-a-turbulent-world/greenland-and-the-eus-arctic-ambitions/>

Current situation and developments in the Nordics

The Nordic countries are currently experiencing an intensified security environment, which is changing attitudes on European integration. This section highlights recent developments in each country and how they influence the broader discussion on further integration with the EU. Finland, already being a full member of the EU and of NATO, will not be discussed in this overview.

Denmark

Denmark has been a member of the EU since 1973 and was one of the founding members of NATO in 1949. Despite being a committed EU member, Denmark had an opt-out from the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy until 2022 and still has an opt-out from the euro. The Danish krone is nevertheless tied to the euro through the European Exchange Rate Mechanism. In Denmark, the liberal Moderaterne party, most recently in government, is in favour of a referendum on adopting the euro.⁵ MEP and Moderaterne member Stine Bosse said in an interview that a Danish euro referendum must come sooner rather than later and referred to the security threats currently facing Europe.⁶

Public support for the EU is high in Denmark: 85% of Danes consider their country's EU membership to be a good thing, compared to 62% on average across the EU.⁷ Support for EU membership among the Danish public has also increased in recent years.

Historically, Denmark has been a strong ally of the United States by expressing support for American foreign policy and participating actively in US-led military operations abroad. Tension emerged earlier this year when US President Donald Trump threatened that the United States might take control of Greenland by military force.⁸ This triggered strong reactions across both NATO and the EU. Greenland, which is an autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark, is covered by Denmark's NATO membership but left the EU in 1985. However,

⁵ Moderaterne (2024), 'Skal Danmark stemme om euroen?' <https://moderaterne.dk/skal-danmark-stemme-om-euroen/#:~:text=Danmark%20f%C3%B8lger%20de%20facto%20den,Ogs%C3%A5%20n%C3%A5r%20samtales%20er%20sv%C3%A6r>.

⁶ Ritzau (2025). 'Moderaterne vil have folkeafstemning om euro inden for to år', TV2, 27 March. <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/politik/2025-03-27-moderaterne-vil-have-folkeafstemning-om-euro-inden-for-to-aar>.

⁷ Based on results from Eurobarometer 104.2 (2025), Autumn 2025 Survey.

⁸ S. Holland, J. Mason, and B. Erickson (2026), 'Trump Discussing How to Acquire Greenland, US Military Always an Option, White House Says', Reuters, 7 January, <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-advisers-discussing-options-acquiring-greenland-us-military-is-always-an-2026-01-06/>.

the political turbulence surrounding the US threats at the beginning of this year seemed to reinforce Greenland's alignment with Europe. In a speech, Greenland's prime minister declared: 'We choose the Kingdom of Denmark, we choose the EU, we choose to move towards rejoining the EU remains uncertain, but recent developments have clearly pushed Greenland's political debate in a more European direction.'

Sweden

Sweden joined the EU in 1995 after a close referendum and intense debates about the risks of giving up its policy of neutrality and non-alignment. Since then, Sweden has become increasingly integrated into the EU and, following a shift in public opinion after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, has also become a member of NATO. Public support for the EU in Sweden is on the same high levels as in Denmark, with 85% of Swedes considering EU membership to be a good thing.⁹

Sweden has not adopted the euro and does not have a formal opt-out, as Denmark does. Officially, Sweden is expected to adopt the euro once it meets the necessary conditions. In reality, public support for introducing the euro has long been weak, and there has been little active effort to meet the required criteria.

However, in recent years, public and political support for the euro has increased. The current euro debate in Sweden is increasingly driven by geopolitical and security considerations rather than discussion of purely financial or monetary benefits. According to Swedish professor and economist Lars Calmfors, the current geopolitical and security situation in Europe makes the benefits of adopting the euro outweigh the disadvantages. One factor contributing to this shift is the tariff threats from US President Donald Trump, since Sweden, as a non-euro country, has a more vulnerable and isolated position when responding to changes in the global financial environment.¹⁰ Currently, the Swedish liberal party Liberalerna advocates for a Swedish euro adoption; they have also been strong advocates for joining NATO since long before the Russian invasion.¹¹

Norway

The Norwegian public has rejected membership in the EU in two national referendums, held in 1972 and 1994. Despite not being an EU member, Norway

⁹ Based on results from Eurobarometer 104.2 (2025).

¹⁰ L. Calmfors (2025), 'Dags för euron?' Stiftelsen Fritt Näringsliv, <https://frittnaringsliv.se/dags-for-euron/>.

¹¹ Liberalerna, 'Stronger Europe. Stronger Sweden.' <https://www.liberalerna.se/stronger-europe-stronger-sweden>.

is closely integrated with European and transatlantic institutions, for example through their membership of NATO and of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and the European Economic Area (EEA) Agreement. Through these frameworks, Norway has adopted a significant share of EU legislation related to the single market and maintains extensive cooperation with the EU in areas such as trade and external policy.

The main reasons why Norway has not become a full EU member relate to concerns about national sovereignty. Voters have been reluctant to transfer decision-making authority over important policy sectors such as fisheries and natural resources to EU institutions. As citizens of a wealthy country, largely due to its oil and gas resources, many Norwegians have felt that EU membership is not necessary for economic prosperity.

Recent geopolitical events may, however, be reshaping the Norwegian EU debate. Norway's security policy has historically relied on close cooperation with the United States and NATO. Recent developments, including the Greenland crisis, have raised concerns in Norway about the reliability of their security partnerships. The leader of the pro-EU Green Party, Arild Hermstad, described the ruling Norwegian Labour Party's recent decision not to reopen a debate on EU membership as 'cowardly and irresponsible'¹², arguing that the current security environment requires Norway to prepare for a post-NATO world. The Norwegian Liberal Party, Venstre, is also a strong advocate for Norwegian EU membership, arguing that it is more democratic to have a say in rules that Norway later will have to follow. Venstre campaigned during the Storting elections in 2025 on holding a referendum on EU membership but lost the election.¹³ The governing Labour Party has historically been in favour of EU membership, but the issue is not currently being discussed and their position is unclear. There have been signs of a more pro-EU stance, though, for example earlier this year when minister of foreign affairs Espen Barth Eide mentioned that he would be open to a discussion about EU membership due to the changing world order.¹⁴

A poll from 2025 showed that 41.8% of Norwegians were opposed to EU membership and 34.9% were in favour. This is a shift from the early 2010s, when opposition generally was around 70% and support was around 15%. The data from 2025 also shows that support is higher among young people, where only one in four are against EU membership.¹⁵

¹² L.-M. Gimse (2026), 'Får pepper: "Det er uansvarlig"', Dagbladet.no, 10 January, <https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/far-pepper-det-er-uansvarlig/8407558>.

¹³ ALDE (2025), 'Venstre Pledge to Continue Fight after Norwegian Parliamentary Election', 10 September, <https://www.aldeparty.eu/blog/news-11/venstre-pledge-to-continue-fight-after-norwegian-parliamentary-elections-278>.

¹⁴ H.-P. Sjoli (2026), 'Han åpner for EU-debatten', Verdens Gang, 19 January, <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/i/d41m1/barth-eide-aapner-endelig-for-en-ny-eu-debatt>.

¹⁵ S.-M. Solberg (2025), 'Nei-siden på kraftig retrett i ny EU-måling', Nettavisen, 29 April, <https://www.nettavisen.no/nyheter/nei-siden-pa-kraftig-retrett-i-ny-eu-maling/s/5-95-2405582>.

Iceland

Iceland is not a member of the EU but, like Norway, participates in the European single market through membership in the EFTA and the EEA. One of the main concerns in Icelandic debates on EU membership is the EU's Common Fisheries Policy. Iceland's economy is highly dependent on fisheries, and maintaining national control over fishing resources is considered crucial. A small country without a standing army, Iceland is a member of NATO and relies on the alliance for its security.

Iceland applied for EU membership in 2009 in the aftermath of the Icelandic financial crisis, but accession negotiations were frozen in 2013 following a change in government and declining political support for EU membership. However, recent geopolitical developments have once again sparked an EU debate in Iceland. Statements by President Donald Trump about taking control of Greenland (and even mistakenly referring to Iceland in a speech)¹⁶ have raised new questions about Iceland's national security.

Public support for EU membership has increased in recent years. In 2014, 26% of Icelanders were in favour of joining the EU; by 2025 support had risen to 44%. In the same 2025 survey, only 36% of respondents said they were opposed to EU membership.¹⁷ A poll from March 2026 found that 52% of Icelanders supported continuing EU accession negotiations, while 48% favoured ending them.¹⁸

Iceland is governed by a coalition of the Social Democratic Alliance, the Reform Party, and the People's Party. The largest party, the Social Democratic Alliance, is pro-EU and state on their website that they aspire for Iceland to become a full EU member.¹⁹ The liberal Reform Party is also a strong advocate for EU membership and pushed to include a chapter in the coalition government's manifesto stating that Iceland would hold a national referendum on continuing the EU accession talks.²⁰ Consequently, in March 2026 the government announced that a referendum will be held on 29 August 2026 to decide whether Iceland should continue EU accession negotiations.²¹

¹⁶ C. Moses (2026), 'Trump Confused Iceland and Greenland in Davos Remark', New York Times, 21 January, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/21/us/politics/trump-greenland-iceland-confusion.html>.

¹⁷ D. Adam (2025), 'Survey Suggests More Favour than Oppose EU Membership', RUV, 8 April, <https://www.ruv.is/english/2025-04-08-survey-suggests-more-favour-than-oppose-eu-membership-441042>.

¹⁸ G. Sigurðsson (2026), 'Aðeins fleiri vilja að aðildarviðræðum verði framhaldið en að þeim verði hætt', RUV, 6 March, <https://www.ruv.is/frettir/innlent/2026-03-06-adeins-fleiri-vilja-ad-adildarvidraedum-verdi-framhaldid-en-ad-theim-verdi-haett-468979>.

¹⁹ Samfylkingin, 'Ísland í samfélagi þjóðanna', <https://xs.is/malefnin/island-i-samfelagi-tjodanna?issue=samfylkingin-er-evropusinnadur-flokkur>.

²⁰ 'Platform for the Coalition Government of the Social Democratic Alliance, the Reform Party and the People's Party' (2024), 21 December, https://www.government.is/library/05-Rikisstjorn/Platform-for-the-Coalition-Government_21-December-2024.pdf.

²¹ Starcevic (2025).

Bringing the Nordics closer: a win-win

From the EU's perspective, deeper integration of the Nordic countries would be a major strategic and geopolitical win. It would anchor the EU as the main security actor in the important Arctic region. At a time when great-power politics and territorial ambitions are increasingly dominant, not least those coming from the White House under President Trump, the EU can demonstrate a different path. Instead of expansion through military force, the EU shows that cooperation based on treaties, diplomacy, and democratic values remains attractive. The fact that stable and well-functioning democracies actively apply for EU membership would send a powerful signal. In this sense, the accession of Norway and Iceland to the EU would be not just another enlargement round but also a victory for the liberal, rules-based world order.

The economic case for bringing Norway and Iceland into the EU is also strong from the EU perspective. Both countries are highly developed economies with significant natural resources, and both would enter the Union as net contributors. Their membership would therefore strengthen the EU's financial capacity and enhance its economic resilience.

And lastly, their accession could reshape the broader EU enlargement narrative. By demonstrating that enlargement can be efficient, mutually beneficial, and politically stabilising, it could help shift scepticism within the EU and build momentum for further enlargement. In this way, bringing Norway and Iceland – and potentially Greenland in the longer term – closer to the EU could even accelerate the enlargement process for other candidate countries.

From the Nordic countries' standpoint, the main benefit of closer EU cooperation is that it would strengthen their security, both as a complement to NATO and potentially in the future as an alternative to it. By deepening cooperation with the EU, the Nordics can reduce their reliance on NATO and the US for their national security. Recent developments in Europe and globally illustrate how quickly security dynamics can change political priorities. Sweden and Finland's decisions to join NATO are clear examples of this. While NATO membership strengthens regional security in the short term, recent rhetoric from US President Trump suggesting that Europe must take responsibility for its own defence has raised concerns about NATO's cohesion. If the relationship with the US weakens, and if the



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idea of NATO as a collective security alliance is eroding, European states will need to rely more heavily on the EU, not only economically but also as a guarantee for security and strategic cooperation.

Closer EU integration would also bring important economic and political benefits for the Nordic states. For Sweden and Denmark, adopting the euro would enhance their economic stability, reduce transaction costs, and integrate their economies with the rest of the Union. For Norway and Iceland (and potentially Greenland), moving from close partnership to full EU membership would mean gaining a seat at the table where decisions in key areas such as trade, energy, and Arctic security policy are being made. Membership of the EU and of the euro would give Nordic countries greater influence over decisions that already affect them, allowing them to shape policies rather than only adapt to them. Taken together, closer Nordic–EU integration would not only strengthen security in the Nordic countries but also enhance democratic participation and European citizens’ sense of political influence. This makes closer Nordic-EU cooperation both strategically and democratically mutually beneficial.

Using the momentum

Against the backdrop of the mutual benefits of bringing the Nordics closer to the EU, the critical question is: What can and should be done to accelerate the Nordics’ integration with the EU?



Closer EU integration would also bring important economic and political benefits for the Nordic states.

In both Iceland and Norway, debates about EU membership have traditionally focused on economic concerns, trade, and national identity. Increasingly, however, these discussions are now shaped by security considerations. Pro-EU voices, such as Venstre in Norway and the Reform Party in Iceland (which is currently in government), must now use this momentum to push for EU membership. Legally, both

countries already comply with the EU’s rules to a large degree and the accession process could thus be rapid. Daniel Hegedüs at the US’s German Marshall Fund argues that, with sufficient political will, they could both join the EU within two to three years.²² According to Hegedüs, the two potential candidate countries

²² D. Hegedüs (2025), ‘Why It’s Time for Norway and Iceland to Join EU’, EUobserver, 26 March, <https://euobserver.com/23047/why-its-time-for-norway-and-iceland-to-join-eu/>.

should take inspiration from the NATO debate in Sweden and Finland in 2022. As the geopolitical circumstances changed dramatically (with Russia's invasion of Ukraine), pro-NATO experts and politicians used strategic communication to inform the public about the seriousness of the situation, which caused shifts in public opinion. This is a strategy that could now be copied by pro-EU politicians in Norway and Iceland.

The EU, on their side, must also act proactively and fast. The first thing the EU should do is to invite Norway and Iceland, as European countries, to all meetings of the European Council and the Council of the EU when discussing Arctic security.²³ Including Norway and Iceland at these meetings would provide a crucial platform for cooperation and could also help shift opinions on EU membership across the political spectrum by ensuring that some of the bigger and more EU-cautious parties in Norway and Iceland see the strategic importance of the EU.


Secondly, the EU must adopt a more flexible approach to enlargement. The concept of staged integration was introduced in 2022 by ELF and envisions a gradual path toward full EU membership.²⁴ Norway and Iceland are already deeply integrated with the EU through EFTA, EEA, Schengen, and other agreements, and they already meet several of the Copenhagen criteria to join the EU. Staged integration would allow Norway and Iceland to take part in EU decision-making early in the process and give them a sense of political participation and influence, while providing sufficient time to negotiate their most sensitive issues (natural resources and fisheries). This approach would allow for a quick start for cooperation in important areas such as security and foreign policy, while ensuring that the nationally sensitive sectors can be negotiated thoroughly.

Other potential actors in this process are the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers, both of which could be engaged more actively. As Iceland and Norway currently have prime ministers from parties that are EU-positive, their leaders could meet regularly with those of Denmark, Sweden, and Finland within the framework of the Nordic Council of Ministers and discuss how to advance the EU accession debate in their respective countries. This platform could also be used for government representatives to exchange expertise on how Norway and Iceland might approach enlargement negotiations with the EU, particularly in their sensitive policy sectors. Finally, the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers should issue joint statements voicing official support for EU membership for Norway and Iceland as a crucial part of broader Nordic and European security cooperation.

Liberal, pro-EU voices in Sweden and Denmark should now push for the adoption of the euro. This would send a clear signal that both countries are

²³ D. Hegedüs (2026), 'The Greenland Crisis is a Trigger for Iceland and Norway to Join EU Bloc', EUobserver, 21 January, <https://euobserver.com/197351/the-greenland-crisis-is-a-trigger-for-iceland-and-norway-to-join-eu-bloc/>.

²⁴ M. Alesina (2022), 'Staged Integration for Future EU Enlargement: Geopolitical Imperatives and Liberal Leadership', European Liberal Forum Policy Paper no. 20, November.



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choosing Europe and want deeper cooperation with their European partners. The current momentum in the euro debate, driven by a sense that closer European integration is a logical response to an increasingly insecure world, should be used strategically. In Denmark, the krone is already closely pegged to the euro and in practice the Danish central bank largely mirrors

the monetary policy of the European Central Bank, making the argument for full monetary independence difficult to sustain. In Sweden's case, the country has no formal opt-out and is, according to the EU treaties, expected to work towards eventual adoption. As the euro debate re-emerges, Swedish political parties should place the issue high on the agenda ahead of the September elections. The current momentum provides a timely opportunity to move this discussion forward.

Greenland should also be considered in a broader discussion on Nordic–EU relations, particularly given its growing strategic importance in the Arctic. As highlighted by Lena Debanck in a recent ELF journal article, Greenland is becoming increasingly central to discussions on critical resources, security, and political influence in the Arctic region. While Prime Minister Jens Frederik Nielsen has stated that Greenland currently has no plans to join the EU, recent global developments have shown how quickly political standpoints can change. It is therefore important that the EU prepares for the possibility of a future Greenlandic membership application.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

The current geopolitical environment provides a unique opportunity for Europe to take initiative. Closer EU integration of the Nordic countries would be a huge strategic gain for both. Located in an increasingly sensitive geopolitical region, the Nordics would strengthen their national security while also ensuring that they have a seat at the table where key decisions affecting them are made. For the EU, such integration would reinforce the liberal, rules-based world order, showing that stable democracies choose cooperation, diplomacy, and liberal values over military force and threats. Here is what the EU and the Nordic countries should do next to make closer cooperation a reality.

- The EU should invite Norway and Iceland to all meetings of the European Council and the Council of the EU covering Arctic security and should ensure that their perspectives are included.
- EU leaders should present staged integration as a feasible pathway to EU membership for the Nordic countries, which would allow negotiations in sensitive sectors to proceed without delaying the overall accession talks.
- Iceland and Norway should draw inspiration from how Sweden and Finland shifted their positions towards NATO in times of crisis, among both political leaders and the public, and adopt similar communication strategies to build support for EU membership in their countries.
- Leaders of the Nordic countries should engage more actively within the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers to frame EU membership as a Nordic security concern, officially express support for Iceland and Norway's EU membership, and share expertise and knowledge for the accession negotiations.
- Sweden and Denmark should move forward with adopting the euro to strengthen Nordic integration and signal their commitment to the EU.
- The EU should review its accession criteria and accession process to prepare for the possibility that Greenland might apply for membership.

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Author bio

Lisa Lundgren is a Policy and Research Fellow at the European Liberal Forum. Previously, she has worked with migration policy and EU opinion data at the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies and with outreach and inter-institutional relations for the Renew Europe group in the European Parliament.

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