

OSLO (AFP) - If neighbouring Iceland succeeds in becoming a member of the EU, Norway risks finding itself increasingly alone in Europe -- an idea that doesn't seem to bother anyone here.



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After two referendums in 1972 and 1994 that ended with resounding "no" votes, the subject of European Union membership has been largely absent from the campaign ahead of the September 14 legislative election.

Contrary to crisis-ridden Iceland which has seen the EU as a safe haven from the economic storm, Norway has been relatively spared from the global crisis thanks to its massive oil revenues.

Norway's outgoing left-wing government coalition and the opposition populist Progress Party have pretty much ignored the issue of EU membership in their election campaigning.

The government coalition is made up of the Labour Party, which is divided on the issue of EU membership, and two small eurosceptic parties.

Their joint campaign programme addresses this issue in one single line: "Our cooperation is founded on an agreement ... that Norway will not join the EU."

Meanwhile, the Progress Party refuses to take a stance, saying any decision would have to be taken by the people in a referendum to be held far in the future.

Norway turns deaf ear to Brussels

Written by AFP / The Swedish Wire

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"It's a symptom of the very special role the EU has in Norway's political history. The question is traumatic," says Henning Olaussen, head of the No to EU movement.

Both plebiscites left society deeply divided following heated debates over agriculture, fishing and Brussels' allegedly undemocratic and bureaucratic traits.

"The referendums were almost civil wars," says Paal Frisvold, head of the pro-European Movement for Europe.

In 1972, "I remember that my grandfather wouldn't come eat dinner with us for six months because my father was in favour of membership," he tells AFP.

With the political parties themselves split on the issue and public opinion polls consistently giving the "no" side a majority, nobody thinks Norway will seek membership during the next government mandate that runs until 2013.

The pro-Europe camp is meanwhile hoping that Iceland's membership bid -- Reykjavik aims to become a member in 2012 -- will help revive the debate in Norway.

If Iceland joins, Norway would be left alone with Lichtenstein in the European Economic Area (EEA) cooperation accord that links the countries to the EU.

Under the deal, Oslo already applies a large number of the EU directives agreed upon in Brussels.

"It's high time to realise that ... Norway is in reality already a member of the EU with just four exemptions: fisheries, agriculture, the euro, and tragically, voting rights in Brussels," a candidate for the Conservative Party, Lars Groth, wrote in an op-ed piece recently.

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The Conservatives are the only political party openly in favour of membership, though their stance carries little weight.

With its oil wealth, Norway has weathered the global economic storm better than most other countries in Europe, especially Iceland, which has flung itself into the EU's arms after its economy's sudden collapse in October 2008.

By dipping into its oil dollars which it dutifully sets aside in a state pension fund -- the world's second-largest sovereign wealth fund, worth 277 billion euros (395 billion dollars) -- the government has been able to limit the recession's length and scope.

Eurosceptics who labelled the EU a "club for the rich" in the 1994 referendum now risk seeing the label used on them.

"I have heard the argument mentioned. But Norway is the country that contributes most to the UN per capita. We give one percent of our gross domestic product to development aid and we give billions of kroner to Eastern European countries through the EEA," Olaussen argues.

"The accusation doesn't stand up to scrutiny," he says.

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