

Scepticism of EU membership in the North-Atlantic due to the EU Common Fisheries Policy

BOOK REVIEW

Author: **Dr. Christian Rebhan**

Title: **North Atlantic Euroscepticism: The rejection of EU Membership in the Faroe Islands and Greenland**

Reviewer: **Dr. Ágúst Einarsson, Professor emeritus, University of Bifröst.**

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North Atlantic Euroscepticism: The rejection of EU Membership in the Faroe Islands and Greenland is a book by Christian Rebhan based on his doctoral thesis, which he defended at the Faculty of Political Science of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Iceland. Rebhan's doctorate was earned through a joint-Ph.D. arrangement between the Humboldt University of Berlin and the University of Iceland. The book explores the interesting question of why the Faroe Islands and Greenland opted to stay outside the European Union (EU) at a time when most European countries aspired to join the EU before an era of growing extremism and opt-out debates.

Although the focus of the analysis is on the positions taken by the Faroe Islands and Greenland, there is also some discussion of a similar attitude that has prevailed in Iceland. Since both the Faroe Islands and Greenland are a part of Denmark these countries or regions could not pursue an independent policy until their control by Denmark had been modified and the Faroe Islands and Greenland earned the right to decide whether to join or not to join the EU. This happened for the Faroes in 1974, and subsequently the Faroese decided to remain outside the EU and they have not changed their mind since. Greenland received similar rights in 1979, and in 1985 Greenland decided to leave the EU, the only region that has ever made such a decision. Much has happened in the development of the EU, such as the recent decision of the United Kingdom (UK) to



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leave the EU, but this falls outside the scope of the book since it was written before that time.

In the opinion of the author of the book, EU membership by the Faroe Islands and Greenland would not create any difficulties for the EU, neither political nor institutional, as the two regions are a part of Denmark. Opposition to EU membership has always been high in the countries of North Atlantic, Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland, both among the public and government. In the case of Iceland, the author points out the research conducted by Baldur Thorhallsson, where it is rightly pointed out that the opposition to EU membership in Iceland has often been greater in government and the political parties than among the public.

One of the questions that arise regarding the opposition of countries and regions in the North Atlantic to EU membership is the extent to which control over fishing grounds comes into question. This discussion is well known in Iceland and it has been discussed continuously for decades. The struggle for control of the fishing grounds around Iceland lasted from the second half of the 19th century into to the seventies of the last century, when Iceland finally gained full control of its 200-mile exclusive economic zone. The question of control over the fishing grounds has therefore been part of the Icelandic psyche for a long time.

It would have been interesting if the author had discussed the status of Norway in this context, as he does for Iceland, as opposition to EU membership has been prevalent in that country, especially among the public. Norway is in many ways in the same situation as Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland, as the Norwegian fishing industry is significant, particularly in the rural regions of northern Norway, which have a major influence on Norwegian politics. A similar situation applies in Iceland.

It is correctly noted in the book how ineffective the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) of the EU has been in protecting fish stocks while at the same time ensuring efficiency in the fisheries sector. The CFP was revised in the early years of this century and the policy has improved, although many shortcomings still remain. Rebhan's discussion is rooted in Andrew Moravcsik's theory of liberal intergovernmentalism, where economic reasons are cited as the main factors that affect the position of countries regarding EU membership, although nationalistic perspectives are not entirely excluded as an important factor, as pointed out by other scholars, including Eiríkur Bergmann Einarsson. When the Faroe Islands and Greenland are examined in the context of fisheries the author's analysis reveals that these regions are almost entirely dependent on the fishing industry economically, and far more so than Iceland and Norway.

The book provides important insights into the position taken by the Faroe Islands and Greenland, especially as this material has not received much scholarly attention. Rebhan's book is therefore an important contribution to the theoretical debate on the attitude of smaller countries and regions to recent developments and trends in European cooperation. Rebhan addresses three research questions. First, what is the cause of the European policy of the Faroe Islands and Greenland? Second, do economic or political

interests dominate in shaping the European policy of the governments of the Faroe Islands and Greenland? And third, is the rejection of EU membership more political than economic in nature, due to the CFP? The response to the third research question is in fact a clarification of the second.

When the author explores how policy changed in the Faroe Islands and Greenland with regard to the EU, he divides the time from the early sixties to the current era into three periods. The first period, from 1959-1968, is characterized by support for the EU, both in the Faroe Islands and Greenland. From 1970 to 1974 the Faroese rejected EU membership, and the same situation has continued from the eighties of the last century to the present day. The same is true of Greenland. As in the case of the Faroe Islands, Greenland has rejected membership of the EU from the early nineties to the present. This division into periods is clear, and the author describes the trends in each region regarding attitudes to EU membership and gives a good description of developments in Denmark over the three periods and explores the positions adopted by the parliaments of the Faroe Islands and Greenland.

Changes occurred in the positions taken by most of the Nordic countries to the EU in the nineties. Sweden and Finland became EU members in 1994, while Denmark has been a member since 1973. All the Nordic countries are members of the EEA (European Economic Area). The Faroe Islands and Greenland have had a long and fruitful relationship with the EU, but neither nation could accept the adoption of the European Union's CFP, which would have transferred power over the fishing grounds from Tórshavn and Nuuk to Brussels. This attitude of the two nations has become increasingly evident in recent decades, as clearly outlined in Rebhan's analysis.

The method that the author applies, the congruence method, fits well within the methodology of social science. When the research questions are examined in the light of the outcome of Rebhan's analysis the conclusions reveal that economic interests carried the greatest weight in the Faroe Islands at the beginning and this is in accordance with liberal intergovernmentalism. This changed, however, and political reasons began to have a greater influence on shaping the position of the Faroe Islands regarding the EU in the subsequent two periods. Greenland was from the beginning of the first period, from the sixties to the present, strongly opposed to EU membership, and in fact Greenland exited the EU as soon as that became possible. The opposition was based on economic arguments, but only to a limited extent. The main reason was the political argument that it was inconceivable to lose formal control over fishery resources to a central power in Brussels. This development does not fit the methodology of liberal intergovernmentalism, where economic reasons are regarded as the main factor in shaping attitudes to EU membership. Thus, nationalistic and formal attitudes to control over fishing grounds shaped the position of the Faroe Islands and Greenland. This attitude comes as no surprise to Iceland, where the formal control of the fishing grounds alone has characterised the debate in Iceland for decades.

This opposition to formal authority regarding decisions on fisheries being vested

in the EU government in Brussels concerns not only Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland, but also Norway, which has twice, in 1972 and 1994, rejected membership of the EU in separate national referenda. Although the interests of Norway in fisheries are proportionally smaller than the interests of Iceland, and far smaller than the interests of the Faroe Islands and Greenland, the interests of fisheries ruled, and still rule, the position taken by Norway.

Various ways have been suggested of transferring decision-making from Brussels to individual nations by defining the ocean areas around the countries and regions in northern Europe as specific areas to be excluded from CFP. No consensus has been reached on any such policies. These issues would have been discussed in the negotiations between Iceland and EU at the beginning of this decade, but since the talks were discontinued in 2013 it never came to that.

The author discusses views that the Faroe Islands and Greenland should become independent states. This would be a problem for the EU, because these two regions are extremely sparsely populated, with respective populations of about 50,000, and it would be difficult to adapt the infrastructure and organization of the EU to micro states of this size. Iceland, with about 330,000 inhabitants, does not quite fall into this category, but is close. For comparison, Cyprus and Luxembourg, both full members of the EU, have populations of just over half a million and just over one million people, respectively. The author outlines how the Faroe Islands and Greenland are financially dependent on the government in Copenhagen. About 12% of the budget of the Faroes is funded by the Danish state, and the Danes pay all the running cost of the judicial and legal systems. This percentage is even higher in Greenland, or 43% of the country's budget.

After reading this fine book it is worthwhile to consider the trends in other regions in the process of European integration. Since the UK decided to initiate the process of exiting the EU the Scots have declared that they are entirely against the exit, and they could even leave the UK and establish an independent state. In this context, they often mention possibilities of further cooperation with the Nordic countries. Perhaps cooperation in Europe will develop to a point where the regions inhabited by distinct nations, as in the case of the Faroe Islands and Greenland, can decide independently whether to form a part of the EU or remain outside. It is possible to imagine Scotland as a full EU member state, but with an organized connection with the UK to some degree. Catalonia in Spain, which boasts one of the strongest economies in that country, has sought greater autonomy and it is quite possible to visualise a continued membership of the EU even if the province were to secede from Spain. The same could possibly apply to the Basques, a distinct nation with an independent culture, language and history, but spread over several regions of Spain and France.

The position in Europe is now characterised more by nations than by geographic areas. To give an example, Czechoslovakia became the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993, with separate nations forming the majority populations of each respective country. In the Balkans, where many nations and religious groups made up Yugoslavia, nations were separated and new states established after a bloody civil war in 1991-2001. If

we look at other regions of the world, the turmoil and civil wars in Africa in recent decades have resulted mainly from nations breaking apart from other nations and redrawing haphazard borders drawn by colonialists in the 19th century. There are many endeavours in progress across the world to find a suitable form of cooperation.

Christian Rebhan's discussion shows that the cooperation within Europe can be observed from many viewpoints, and there are many reasons underlying the positions taken individual countries and regions. This book is an important contribution to the current debate and can play a role in presenting new alternatives for the Europe of the future. The author provides good reasoning in his main conclusion for the contention that if the EU is not prepared to change its fisheries policy and transfer formal authority over decisions on fisheries to the local populations that depend on fisheries for a living, it is unlikely that the Faroe Islands and Greenland will abandon their opposition to EU membership, even if economic interests weigh increasingly heavily in relations between nations. The book is well written in simple and clear language. The author can be very satisfied with his work, which is a significant contribution to research in the social sciences and the study of relations between the countries of Europe.

