

Article

## Party Positions on Differentiated European Integration in the Nordic Countries: Growing Together, Growing Apart?

Benjamin Leruth <sup>1,\*</sup>, Jarle Trondal <sup>2,3</sup> and Stefan Gänzle <sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup> Faculty of Arts, University of Groningen, 9712 EK Groningen, The Netherlands; E-Mail: b.j.j.leruth@rug.nl<sup>2</sup> ARENA Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo, 0318 Oslo, Norway; E-Mail: jarle.trondal@arena.uio.no<sup>3</sup> Department of Political Science and Management, University of Agder, 4604 Kristiansand, Norway; E-Mails: jarle.trondal@uia.no (J.T.), stefan.ganzle@uia.no (S.G.)

\* Corresponding author

Submitted: 15 June 2020 | Accepted: 11 August 2020 | Published: 3 November 2020

### Abstract

The Nordic countries constitute an interesting laboratory for the study of differentiated European Integration. Even though Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden share some historical, cultural, socio-economic and political characteristics, all those countries have ultimately opted for a different kind of relationship with the EU. Whereas Finland, a member of the Eurozone since its inception in 1999, has been considered to be part of the Union's 'inner core' for quite some time, Iceland and Norway, in contrast, have opted to remain outside the EU albeit closely associated via the European Economic Area Agreement. The variation of relationships has also been reflected in Nordic parties' positioning vis-à-vis European integration in general and differentiation of European integration in particular. Broadly speaking, party families can be distinguished along traditional (e.g., agrarian, Christian democratic, conservative, and social democratic) and modern (e.g., socialist left, green, and populist radical right) ideological orientations. Although political parties belonging to both the traditional and modern Nordic party families have adopted different stances on European differentiated integration, we would assume—against the backdrop of Nordic cooperation—higher levels of transnational cooperation in European matters. Consequently, this article examines the similarities and differences between parties belonging to the same ideological family, and the extent of transnational party cooperation in the Nordic countries. Drawing on a series of interviews conducted with party representatives as well as on official party documents, this article shows that although institutionalized party cooperation mostly reflects divisions between party families, such institutionalization does not include a common vision for European integration. We conclude that the low level of partisan Nordic integration is primarily caused by domestic-level factors, such as intra-party divisions, government participation and public opinion.

### Keywords

democratic values; differentiation; European Union; Nordic cooperation; party politics

### Issue

This article is part of the issue "Rediscovering Nordic Cooperation" edited by Anne Elizabeth Stie (University of Agder, Norway) and Jarle Trondal (University of Agder, Norway/ARENA University of Oslo, Norway).

© 2020 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

For a long time, the Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden—have been broadly perceived as "a linguistic, cultural, economic, social, and political-ideological area, of considerable homogeneity" (Andrén, 1967, pp. 8–9). Clearly, this perception has

been reinforced by the fact that post-World War II Nordic cooperation predated the establishment of the European Community in 1957. In 1952 already, inter-parliamentary cooperation was formalized in the Nordic Council. The Council encompassed parliamentary representatives from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden as well as the autonomous areas of the Faroe

Islands, Greenland, and the Åland Islands. In 1971, intergovernmental cooperation amongst the Nordic countries was eventually supplemented by the creation of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Whereas Nordic cooperation failed in advancing cooperation towards a Scandinavian defense and economic union in the 1950s, it produced some remarkable successes in the field of passport-free travel and integration of labor markets. In July 1954, the Nordic labor market was established and four years later, building upon the passport-free travel area of 1952, the Nordic Passport Union came into place. These measures helped ensure that citizens of the Nordic countries were able to move and establish themselves freely in this area. Subsequently, a Nordic Convention on Social Security was endorsed and there were even ideas for creating a single market amongst the countries. Yet, they were abandoned in 1959 when Denmark, Norway, and Sweden decided to join the European Free Trade Area (EFTA), which was founded in 1960 and eventually joined by Finland one year later. EFTA was characterized by a strong injection of Scandinavian countries with Denmark, Norway and Sweden, which were joined by Austria, Portugal, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Together with the United Kingdom, the economic center of the EFTA, Denmark and Norway agreed to seek full membership in the European Community at the beginning of the 1960s. Eventually, Denmark became a member of the EC in 1973—whereas a popular referendum in Norway produced a majority opposing EC membership. Subsequently, Finland and Sweden became EU members in 1995, while the Norwegian population voted against membership in 1994 yet again, and Iceland only briefly considered joining the EU as a response to the global financial crisis in 2009. These different approaches have been explained by the varying political influence of industrial sectors across the five countries (Ingebritsen, 1998), the historical relevance of national sovereignty, autonomy and self-determination (Hansen & Wæver, 2002), the existence of an influent Eurosceptic base among the population (Raunio, 2007) as well as political constraints imposed by the post-World War II geopolitical context of the Nordic as well as Baltic region (Hubel, 2004). Thus, with regards to the EU, the Nordic countries have always had a tumultuous relationship with it, prompting Miljan (1977) to name them ‘reluctant Europeans,’ while Stegmann McCallion and Brianson (2018) refer to them as ‘awkward partners’ in the North. Yet, this does not mean that Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden share a common vision on European integration either.

Until fairly recently, the literature on party preferences towards the EU has mostly focused on views on membership (see e.g., Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). But the diverse responses to agreements between states and the EU occurring in the 1990s have eventually made the membership/non-membership dichotomy obsolete, also among the Nordic countries (Egeberg & Trondal, 1999). As demonstrated by Denmark’s opt-outs of the Maastricht Treaty and Sweden de facto opting out

of the third stage of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) following a set of national referendums, EU membership no longer means full participation in the process of European integration. Similarly, just as there are many ‘shades’ of qualified Euroscepticism (Leruth, Startin, & Usherwood, 2018), analyzing support or opposition to Europe requires one to have a look at the policy-area level rather than on the EU as a whole. As Europe has become an increasingly tangible issue in national politics, this article contributes to the study of European differentiation (Gänzle, Leruth, & Trondal, 2020) and Nordic cooperation (Stie & Trondal, 2020) with data exploring the role of political parties on the politics of European integration (Mair, 2007).

This article examines Nordic party positions on European differentiation, i.e., the general mode of integration (or disintegration) processes and strategies that exist within the EU (Stubb, 1996). Most particularly, it assesses the similarities and differences of such positions within party families, given the historical relevance of the Nordic party structure (see Berglund & Lindström, 1978). Eight party families can be identified: the six traditional—i.e., Conservative, Liberal, Agrarian, Social Democratic, Socialist Left (formerly Communists), and Christian Democrat—families, to which the Greens and Populist Radical Right can be added as a result of their increasing relevance since the early 1990s. This study relies on a content analysis of party manifestos released during general election campaigns held between 1990 and 2010, and draws on thirty-four semi-structured interviews conducted by the lead author. The interviews were held with high-level party representatives (members of parliament, existing/former ministers, existing/former party leaders) and party advisors in all five Nordic countries between 2011 and 2014 in the aftermath of the global financial and economic crisis of 2007/2008 and in the midst of the Eurozone crisis. Interviewees were asked about their respective party’s positions on differentiation and the level of transnational cooperation with their Nordic counterparts on the matter (Leruth, 2014). In terms of research design, four policy areas close to the “core state powers” (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2014) have been identified in these interviews: the European Economic Area (EEA) affiliation or full EU membership; the EMU; the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (AFSJ); and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The interviews were conducted in the early years of Europe’s polycrisis (i.e., before the so-called migration crisis and the Brexit vote) but at a time when the issue of European integration was heavily politicized, especially in Iceland (in the context of the country’s application for EU membership), Sweden, and Finland (given the rapid rise of Eurosceptic parties in both countries). This analysis could thus pave the way for future analyses of the lasting impact of the polycrisis on Nordic party positions towards European integration.

As the analysis covers 35 parties divided into eight party families across five countries, the article’s main ob-

jective is to offer a set of comparative accounts to determine whether belonging to a party family shapes a party's position on European integration. An in-depth analysis of the causes and consequences of party cooperation (or lack thereof) on European integration in Finland, Norway, and Sweden based on part of this material has been written by Leruth (2014). This article shows that although institutionalized party cooperation mostly reflects divisions between party families, such institutionalization does not include a common vision for European integration. It is argued that specific internal factors, such as intra-party divisions, public opinion, or participation in government can explain such divisions within existing party families. In sum, the study documents a surprisingly low level of partisan Nordic integration, primarily caused by domestic-level factors.

## 2. The Nordic Countries as 'Models' of Integration

The early 1990s saw the establishment and institutionalization of differentiated mechanisms of integration in the EU. Both the United Kingdom and Denmark, through their opposition towards some aspects of the Maastricht Treaty (albeit for diverging reasons), are considered as the pioneers of differentiation. Altogether four 'models' of integration that are championed by Nordic countries are discernible in the literature (see Leruth, Gänzle, & Trondal, 2019).

Most prominently, the 'EEA' or 'Norwegian Model,' which was the subject of much discussion and debate as a potential model for the United Kingdom following the 2016 Brexit vote, allows a non-member state of the EU to maintain a very close relationship—"quasi-membership" in the words of Lavenex (2004, p. 684)—with the Union through a dense web of institutionalized relations (e.g., Fossum & Graver, 2018). In addition to Norway, this model also embraces Iceland and Liechtenstein as non-EU members. As part of this relationship, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway get full access to the Single Market. In return, they are exempted from participation in policy areas such as the Common Agricultural Policy and are expected to only implement the EEA-relevant share of EU legislation. Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway are also exempted from having a formal say and influence in the decision-making process of EU institutions—a consequence of non-membership which has been coined as 'fax democracy' by some (pro-EU) Norwegian interviewees. Even though initially designed as a temporary form of integration, which would eventually pave the way for full EU membership, this model of differentiation has now become permanent, with both Norway and Iceland seeking to maintain the status quo rather than EU membership or any fundamental reforms to their existing relationship with the EU (Fossum & Graver, 2018). Moreover, because the EU at the time of negotiation in the early 1990s assumed the 'EEA model' to be a merely temporary arrangement, the agreement was designed fairly fa-

vorable to the EEA countries, for example by granting bureaucrats from EEA countries participatory rights in the decision-shaping committees of the Commission and the Council as well as the establishment of a parallel *bespoke* institutional construction. This idea was launched early by Jacques Delors in the EEA negotiations as "common decision-making and administration institutions" which would serve as a separate EEA decision-making structure between the EU and EFTA. However, this arrangement was for constitutional and political reasons reduced from "decision-making" structures to "decision-shaping" structures during the EEA negotiations (Wade & Støren, 2019, pp. 111–112).

The 'Danish model' can be considered as a form of quasi-permanent differentiation. As a response to a negative referendum on the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, the majority of Danish political parties prepared a compromise document which will ultimately be reflected in the so-called Edinburgh Agreement of 1992. This Agreement granted a series of permanent opt-outs of the Maastricht Treaty to Denmark with regards to participation in the third stage of the EMU, justice and home affairs, and the common security and defense policy, subject to the eventual ratification of the Treaty via a second referendum. Since the implementation of these opt-outs, however, successive Danish governments have been trying to transform some of these opt-outs into 'opt-ins,' as the model was deemed to ultimately harm Danish influence and interests (see e.g., Danish Institute for International Studies, 2008). Yet, such attempts were rebuked by the Danish population in two referendums held in 2000 (on joining the Eurozone) and 2015 (on AFSJ-related opt-outs). As such, and despite successive governments' opposition towards some of these opt-outs, the Danish model has become quasi-permanent.

The 'Swedish model' is legally complex as Sweden does not have any formal opt-outs of EU policies and is thus *de jure* bound to be part of the EU's inner core like Finland. However, the country is yet to join the third stage of the EMU, following the result of the 2003 non-binding referendum on the matter which was driven by internal divisions within the Swedish Social Democratic Party. This triggered an unprecedented form of *de facto* differentiation, as Sweden's decision not to join the Eurozone was tolerated by the European Commission. This model was followed by the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. However, the Swedish model of differentiation is unstable as it relies on political will (i.e., tolerated by Brussels) and not on legal grounds.

In contrast, Finland has been considered a core EU member state ever since it joined in 1995. Similar to non-aligned Austria joining the EU in the same year, the end of the Cold War provided Finland with the opportunity to apply for EU membership and thereby geopolitically step out of the Cold War shadow—which had forced the country to maintain close ties with the Soviet Union as a consequence of the 1948 Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance. Finland entered a phase of "EU

honeymoon” (Ojanen, 2005) pioneering important external relations initiatives in the field of the Common Foreign and Security Policy as well as the EU’s Northern Dimension to draw Russia closer to the EU. Most importantly, it was amongst the founding members of the Eurozone signaling the country’s ambition to leave its peripheral destiny and become part of the EU’s inner circle. In the aftermath of the Euro-crisis and the rise of the Eurosceptic Finns Party, some political voices (mostly within this party) uttered the idea of leaving the Eurozone without leaving the EU. More recently, the Finnish government has been eager to position itself closer to countries like the Netherlands and Austria, which are adamant in preserving financial rigor in light of discussions on how to support those EU member states who have been affected most severely by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Historically, Nordic Cooperation has not only always been restricted to low politics but also rather selective—perhaps reiterating broader European integration. As such, over the past three decades, the Nordic countries have played an important role in shaping differentiation in the EU, either by seeking a close relationship with the EU as outsiders (Norway and Iceland) or seeking *de facto* (Sweden) or *de jure* (Denmark) opt-outs of the EU. This shows that European integration falls outside the so-called Nordic or even Scandinavian model of government (see Arter, 2008). Although we have assigned the emblematic term of ‘model’ to three of the Scandinavian countries, we would issue a note of caution in applying them beyond these cases in a more generic sense. It only holds for the Norwegian and Danish model in that these patterns of relations with the EU are under-

pinned in legal terms by the EEA agreement in case of Norway and by the acceptance of *de jure* differentiation in the case of Denmark.

### 3. Nordic Party Families and Their Positions on Differentiation in the EU

The five Nordic political systems share a series of common characteristics. Among these is the prevalence of similar and well-established party families which predominantly compete on a left-right dimension (Grendstad, 2003), and a strong sense of cooperation among the five states, as illustrated by the long-lasting collaboration between parties through the Nordic Council (Olsen & Sverdrup, 1998). While the Nordic party systems have been prone to ‘earthquake’ elections in the 1970s, early 1990s and late 2000s (Knutsen, 2004), it has become widely accepted that eight well-established party families are present in these countries.

Table 1 offers an overview of the different Nordic party families. It is worth noting that some countries (especially Iceland) have seen the emergence of new political parties over the past few years; these parties have not been taken into consideration within the framework of this study as it is deemed too early to determine whether they will have a lasting impact on the Nordic party system, as demonstrated by the mixed fortunes of the Swedish and Icelandic Pirate parties.

At the transnational level, however, cooperation between Nordic political parties does not systematically follow ideological preferences. Table 2 summarizes party affiliations in the Nordic Council and at Euro-Party levels. Overall, affiliations mirror party families, but there are

**Table 1.** List of well-established political parties in the Nordic countries, per party family.

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Conservative	Conservative People’s Party	National Coalition Party	Independence Party	Conservative Party	Moderate Party
Social Democratic	Social Democrats	Social Democratic Party	Social Democratic Alliance	Labour Party	Social Democratic Party
Agrarian	Venstre	Centre Party	Progressive Party	Centre Party	Centre Party
Christian Democratic	N/A (no national seats since 2005)	Christian Democrats	N/A (non-existent)	Christian Democratic Party	Christian Democrats
Liberal	Danish Social Liberal Party	Swedish People’s Party	N/A (new parties since 2016)	Liberal Party	Liberal People’s Party
Socialist Left	Red-Green Alliance	Left Alliance	Left-Green Movement	Socialist Left Party	Left Party
Green	Socialist People’s Party	Green League	N/A (covered by the Left-Green Movement)	Green Party (national seat since 2013)	Green Party
Populist Radical Right	Danish People’s Party	Finns Party	N/A (none)	Progress Party	Sweden Democrats

Note: Authors’ own compilation.

**Table 2.** Nordic Party cooperation and affiliation in the Nordic Council and in the European Parliament.

Party family	Affiliation level	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Conservative	Euro-Party	European People's Party	European People's Party	European Conservatives and Reformists Party	European People's Party (associated)	European People's Party
	Nordic Council	Conservative Group	Conservative Group	Conservative Group	Conservative Group	Conservative Group
Social Democratic	Euro-Party	Party of European Socialists	Party of European Socialists	Party of European Socialists	Party of European Socialists	Party of European Socialists
	Nordic Council	Social Democrat Group	Social Democrat Group	Social Democrat Group	Social Democrat Group	Social Democrat Group
Agrarian	Euro-Party	ALDE party	ALDE Party	Unaffiliated	Unaffiliated	ALDE Party
	Nordic Council	Centre Group	Centre Group	Centre Group	Centre Group	Centre Group
Christian Democratic	Euro-Party		European People's Party		European People's Party (observer)	European People's Party
	Nordic Council		Centre Group		Centre Group	Centre Group
Liberal	Euro-Party	ALDE Party	ALDE Party		ALDE Party	ALDE Party
	Nordic Council	Centre Group	Centre Group		Centre Group	Centre Group
Socialist Left	Euro-Party	European Left/Nordic Green Left	European Left/Nordic Green Left	Nordic Green Left	Nordic Green Left	Nordic Green Left
	Nordic Council	Nordic Green Left	Nordic Green Left	Nordic Green Left	Nordic Green Left	Nordic Green Left
Green	Euro-Party	European Greens	European Greens		European Greens	European Greens
	Nordic Council	Nordic Green Left	Centre Group		Not represented	Centre Group
Populist Radical Right	Euro-Party	Identity & Democracy (associated)	Identity & Democracy (associated)		Unaffiliated	European Conservatives and Reformists Party
	Nordic Council	Nordic Freedom	Nordic Freedom		Unaffiliated	Nordic Freedom

Note: Authors' own compilation, based on data available from the European Parliament and Nordic Council's websites.

some exceptions. Parties that do not follow the pattern of their 'sister' parties are highlighted. This is the case of the Icelandic Independence Party, which joined the soft Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformists Party founded by David Cameron in 2009; the Icelandic Progressive and Norwegian Centre Parties, which are not affiliated with any Euro-Parties; and the Finnish and Swedish Greens, which are part of the Nordic Council's Centre Group rather than the Nordic Green Left. This table also shows there is no clear pattern of collaboration between Nordic populist radical right parties, despite the existence of the Nordic Freedom group in the Nordic Council. This is not a new phenomenon, as there have been some ideological divisions between these parties as well as reputational concerns with regards to being associated with parties that have an extreme right past (i.e., the Sweden Democrats; see McDonnell & Werner, 2018).

As Nordic Council party groups and Euro-Parties tend to share a similar political agenda, one could presume that overall (besides the aforementioned exceptions), parties belonging to the same family would share the same position on European integration. The following sub-sections summarize the empirical findings of our study in comparative perspective.

### 3.1. Social Democratic Parties

Across all five Nordic countries, the social democrats do not appear to share a common view on European cooperation. In Finland, EU membership and further European integration—in all policy areas—have been perceived for quite some time to be largely positive, amongst the party elites as well as amongst the grassroots. The only signs of reluctance were related to developments of the CFSP in the early 2000s (Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue, 2003). Yet, the Finnish Social Democrats have not advocated for differentiation in EU integration as there is a broad consensus within the party regarding the benefits of belonging in the inner core of the EU. The same applies to the Danish Social Democrats, whose position on European integration was constrained by the outcome of the initial referendum on the Maastricht Treaty and subsequent referendums on transforming opt-outs into opt-ins (see e.g., Svensson, 2002). In Iceland, while the Social Democratic Alliance initially agreed that the EEA offered a good compromise for the country's relationship with the EU, the situation changed with the financial crisis in 2008 (Jonsdottir, 2013). Under the leadership of Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, the party politicized the issue of EU membership as a response to the financial crisis, and eventually submitted a formal application after winning the early general election in 2009. In Sweden and Norway, however, the situation is more complex. Both social democratic parties have suffered from strong internal divisions over membership in the EU in particular and not over European integration more generally, and signs of Euroscepticism are perceptible on several levels: among its grassroots members, the elites, the mem-

bers of parliament (MPs), and among appointed ministers when in government. An example of such divisions was illustrated in the question of Sweden's participation in the third stage of the EMU, which led the party to adopt a strategy of compartmentalization and allowed anti-Euro members to campaign for the 'no' camp, which eventually played an important role in shaping the outcome of the 2003 referendum (Aylott, 2005). In Norway, the Labour Party's position was mostly constrained by the outcome of the 1994 membership referendum, although the party has ever after sought active collaboration with the EU:

[I]n our programme, we say that the best would have been for Norway to be member of the European Union, because that would have made us also a part of the political project and give us influence over decisions which concern us, but we are also a party where there are different views on this issue....After the 1994 referendum...every time the EU has expended its cooperation, we wanted to participate, and we would want to go for further integration. (Norwegian Labour Party MP, interview, October 23, 2012)

### 3.2. Conservative Parties

In contrast to the Social Democratic party family, Conservative parties are far more united on questions related to the EU and European integration. In Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, conservative parties tend to share similar positions in terms of support for further European integration; they strongly support full EU membership and believe that their respective country should belong to the 'inner core' of the Union. As such, differentiated European integration is not seen as a viable option or as a likely alternative for their respective countries. This position is also shared by a majority of the party members and by conservative MPs. Within the Norwegian Conservative party, EEA membership is considered as "not as a good alternative, but a good tool, as a necessary step for us towards membership" (two spokespersons from the Norwegian Conservative Party, interview, November 7, 2012). It is however worth noting that EU membership has been a non-salient issue for the Norwegian Conservatives since the late 1990s (see Fossum, 2010). By contrast, this has not been the case in Iceland, where the Independence Party marked its strong opposition to Iceland's application for EU membership in the late 2000s. When returning to power in 2013, the party (together with the agrarian Progressive Party) opted to freeze and eventually halt accession talks with the EU. Yet, the level of cohesion within the Conservative Party family is higher than for the Social Democrats.

### 3.3. Christian Democratic Parties

Compared both to social democratic and conservative parties, Christian Democratic parties are not as well-

established across all Nordic countries, and they are not even effectively represented in their national parliament in Iceland and as the Danish Christian Democrats since 2005. Moreover, the Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish Christian Democratic parties diverge in their views on European integration, even though interviewees suggest there are no significant internal divisions on the matter and that European integration is not a salient issue to them. In Finland, alongside the Finns Party, the party is considered to be the most well-established party opposing EU participation in several policy areas, but without rejecting EU membership per se. The party is particularly critical of participation in the Eurozone and in the CFSP. In Sweden, however, the Christian Democrats campaigned in favor of EU membership in the early 1990s and have supported full involvement in all EU policy areas since 2000, including in the Eurozone. Finally, the Norwegian Christian Democrats have adopted a much more pragmatic position. The party has always opposed EU membership but at the same time advocated for a close cooperation with Brussels in several policy areas while also safeguarding national sovereignty, such as through participation in Schengen:

[W]e need cooperation on security and justice and fighting crime, and so on, and that is what Schengen is all about. So I think our party has considered it as a tool to achieve those needs of cooperation but we also see some challenges, such as the lack of control of our own borders. (Policy Adviser from the Norwegian Christian Democratic Party, interview, July 17, 2013)

As such, the party supports Norway's position in the 'inner periphery' of the Union. These three parties thus differ remarkably regarding their support for European integration, demonstrating again that parties belonging to the same family may display diverging views on Europe.

### 3.4. Agrarian Parties

Much like the social democratic party family, the Nordic agrarian parties have also been divided and do not share common positions on European integration. In Norway, the Centre Party appears to be one among the most Eurosceptic parties as it is strongly opposed to any kind of institutionalised relations with Brussels, preferring "an all-European cooperation between independent nations" based on the principles of international law (see e.g., Senterpartiet, 1993). In Iceland, the Progressive Party rejected calls to join the EU after the financial crisis in 2008 and contributed to freezing talks when coming back in government with the Independence Party in 2013. This may explain why neither of the parties are affiliated to any Euro-Party, in contrast to agrarian parties in the remaining three Nordic countries: These are members of the pro-European Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. While in Denmark Venstre is a pro-European party that does not advocate differentia-

tion in EU integration, in Finland and Sweden these parties have been characterized by significant internal divisions on the issue. Furthermore, their party leaderships have often promoted differentiated integration by advocating EU membership but rejecting participation in some highly politicised policy areas, especially the EMU and developments in the CFSP. As mentioned by a Finnish Member of Parliament from the Centre Party, the party's initial opposition towards joining the Eurozone was:

A rather easy decision, as not many MPs in my party would have preferred to vote for joining the EMU, because we were not in the government, and because the actual decision to join the European Union was so difficult [due to internal divisions]. (Finnish Centre Party MP, interview, May 22, 2013)

Such intra-party divisions are further illustrated by the decision made by 22 out of 55 Centre Party MPs to vote against submitting Finland's application for EU membership in 1992 (Karttunen, 2009). In Sweden, the Centre Party's preference for differentiation in EU integration was also highlighted by an interviewee: "[W]e would like to see different types of integration within Europe. We could have a multi-core Union so to speak. So, more integration on some issues but less integration on some others" (spokesperson from the Swedish Centre Party, interview, April 7, 2014). In sum, Nordic agrarian parties do not share a common vision on European integration, with the Danish Venstre being the only party in this family fully committed to the idea of European integration.

### 3.5. Socialist Left Parties

As successors from former communist parties (with the exception of the Icelandic Left-Green Movement), the Nordic Socialist Left parties have generally tended to be opposed to European integration. In Finland, Norway, and Sweden, they were strongly opposed to joining the EU in the early 1990s. However, when it comes to support for cooperation within the EU in particular policy areas, their views tend to differ. The Swedish Left and the Norwegian Socialist Left parties have generally been the most critical and almost unanimously rejected any kind of institutionalised cooperation within the framework of the EU, which is mostly seen as a neoliberal tool. In Finland, however, the Left Alliance has adopted a more nuanced and pragmatic attitude. In the early 1990s, the party failed to adopt a common position on EU membership, which demonstrates the strong internal party divisions on this issue. Subsequently, the party came to change its stance towards European integration and became much more positive. Despite significant internal oppositions, it even supported EMU membership in order to remain in government. In subsequent years, the Left Alliance has remained opposed to participation in the CFSP. The Icelandic Left-Green Movement has also changed its position over time. In 2009, the party formed

the first left-wing coalition government in the country's history with the Social Democratic Alliance, and even though the party was mostly opposed to the idea, they accepted to submit a formal application for EU membership in 2009 before reverting back to its original pro-EEA stance in 2013. This temporal and short-lived switch was explained by a former Left-Green Movement MP:

First, the party has the opinion that Iceland is better outside the EU than inside. Second, we wanted to facilitate a broad democratic open discussion in the Icelandic society on the pros and cons of EU membership. And third, we want the Icelandic people to decide in a referendum on the future relations of the EU. (Left-Green Movement MP, interview, June 1, 2011)

### 3.6. Green Parties

The Green parties across the Nordic region have also been divided on European integration. In Finland, the Green League has shared a position similar to the one by the Socialist Left Alliance until the early 2000s, and they presented no official position on EU membership when the debate surfaced in the early 1990s. They were initially opposed to an EMU membership, before changing their position in order to stay in government; and they also opposed developments relating to the CFSP. However, from 2003 onwards the party has started to become more pro-integrationist and has supported cooperation within the EU in most policy areas. In Sweden, the Greens have been, and to some extent continue to be, largely opposed to European integration. The party opposed EU membership from the early 1990s onwards until 2008 when it removed the 'withdrawal clause' from its party manifesto. It also opposed most developments at the EU level—including participation in the third stage of the EMU—but has increasingly come to accept Sweden's EU membership. In Norway, the younger Green Party (established in 1988) favours active relationships with the EU while advocating reforms to the current EEA agreement in order to make it more transparent and focused on climate policy and the European 'Green Deal'. In Denmark, the Socialist People's Party opposed the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty before changing its party position given the role it played to draft the Edinburgh Agreement. The party has supported the existing Danish opt-outs from their membership of the EU since then.

### 3.7. Populist Radical Right Parties

As outlined above, the Nordic populist radical right parties have had a tumultuous relationship over the past decades, although all but the Norwegian Progress party cooperate in the Nordic Council. Unsurprisingly, they are united in their broad opposition to the process of European integration. Yet the scope of such opposition ought to be explored further, as key differences between Nordic parties are noticeable. The Progress Party was the

only Norwegian political party to not have adopted an official position on EU membership ahead of the 1994 membership referendum. Since then it has supported Norwegian participation in the EU through the EEA agreement. The Finns Party has been more critical to European integration than its Norwegian counterpart. The party (and more specifically its predecessor, the Rural Party) was opposed to EU membership, but subsequently came to accept the result of the 1994 EU membership referendum to join as full EU members and has not called for withdrawing Finland from the Union afterwards. More specifically, however, the Finns Party has been strongly opposed to developments in the CFSP, the AFSJ, and participation in the EMU but never formally sought a withdrawal from the bloc:

[W]e would like to renew the Union, to make it work better. If the Commission does not want to do it, then we might have to change our line, but at the moment we would like Finland to remain in the Union. (Finns Party MP, interview, May 21, 2013)

Since 2019, under Jussi Halla-Aho's leadership (which led to the emergence of a splinter party, Blue Reform), the party has become more critical and now calls for Finland to leave the Eurozone. As far as the Sweden Democrats are concerned, it should be noted that the party's success is more recent than in other Nordic countries, meaning it did not play a significant role in the 1994 EU membership referendum. Since the early 2000s, the Sweden Democrats have embraced an ambiguous approach to the Swedish 'EU debate,' ranging from support for the existing de facto Swedish opt-outs from the EU to advocating a 'Swexit' in 2018 following the outcome of the Brexit referendum (Leruth et al., 2019). In Denmark, the Danish People's Party has been in favour of the existing de jure Danish opt-outs from the EU, but since the Brexit vote, the party has become divided over whether it should support a Danish withdrawal from the EU altogether, or not. The party's official position has, however, been to remain within the EU but to play a role alongside other parties in the Identity & Democracy group to reform the EU into a Europe of Nations. In sum, although the Nordic populist radical right parties' position on European integration is (broadly speaking) Eurosceptic, we see significant points of divergence both across and within the parties.

## 4. Conclusion: No Nordic Model of Party Cooperation on EU Matters

The EU has always been a moving target and an evolving building-site of European political order (Olsen, 2007). It has also become an increasingly mixed order characterized by differentiation (be it differentiated integration or, more recently, disintegration; Gänzle et al., 2020; Schimmelfennig, 2018). Although the support and opposition towards European integration by Nordic political parties used to be measured on their views on EU mem-

bership, there can be significant distinctions between political parties belonging to the same Nordic party family. This article has compared Nordic party positions on European integration and differentiation by using party manifestos as well as interviews conducted with high-level party fonctionnaires.

Four sets of findings can be distinguished. Firstly, belonging to a Nordic party family does not impact on a party's position on European integration. There is no unified position on Europe among these parties, although the Conservative party family is overall more pro-European than other Nordic party families (with the exception of the Eurosceptic Independence Party in Iceland).

Secondly, some factors shaping party positions have been identified, and these strongly vary depending on the respective domestic contexts. For some political parties, government participation played an important role (e.g., the Finnish Green League and Left Alliance). For others, public opinion constrained their positions, especially with regards to deeper European integration (e.g., the Norwegian Conservative Party or the Danish Venstre). Intra-party divisions also play a role, especially within the Nordic Social Democratic party family, or the Finnish Centre Party's deep divisions regarding Finland's application for EU membership.

Thirdly, Nordic cooperation between political parties at a transnational level does not lead them to adopt a common position, thus suggesting that domestic factors matter more than pan-European ones of party-political preferences on European integration.

Finally, party positions on European integration are dynamic rather than fixed. This is particularly the case for the Nordic populist radical right party family, as these political parties have adapted their official position over time and thus within varying domestic political contexts, especially when crises arise.

In terms of future or complimentary research needs, it might be worthwhile first to embrace more recent data covering the implications of the so-called refugee crisis of the past decade (culminating in 2015) as well as the implications of the ongoing (at the time of writing) Covid-19 pandemic; and second, to establish to what extent alternative routes for cooperation—such as interparliamentary meetings and conferences (for example the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the EU) or parliamentary meetings at sub-regional level, such as in the context of Nordic or 'Northern' organizations, like the parliamentary assembly of the Baltic Sea States Subregional Cooperation—are being used to adjust party positions, if at all.

By all means, the late 2010s have seen the emergence of a new 'Northern' group of reluctant Europeans, the 'Frugal Four,' which includes two of the three Nordic EU member-states, namely Denmark and Sweden, sharing sides with the Netherlands and Austria—and recently supported by Finland. Austrian Chancellor Sebastian

Kurz is adamant in turning this group into a more permanent structure in order to counter the resurged prominence of the Franco-German coalition in EU decision-making. How permanent and stable this group will be still remains to be seen. By all means, it is following in the footsteps of the Hanseatic League of Eurozone member states which are conservative in terms of fiscal policy (see Schulz & Henökl, 2020). As discussions over the future of Europe in a post-Brexit and post-Covid-19 era loom large, it remains yet to be seen whether Nordic divisions over European integration will intensify.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their excellent comments and suggestions.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### References

- Andrén, N. (1967). Nordic integration. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 2(1), 1–25.
- Arter, D. (2008). *Scandinavian politics today* (2nd ed.). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Aylott, N. (2005). Lessons learned, lessons forgotten: The Swedish referendum on EMU of September 2003. *Government and Opposition*, 40(4), 540–556.
- Berglund, S., & Lindström, U. (1978). *The Scandinavian party system(s): A comparative study*. Lund: Studentlitt.
- Danish Institute for International Studies. (2008). *The Danish opt-outs from the European Union: Developments since 2000*. Copenhagen: Danish Institute for European Studies.
- Egeberg, M., & Trondal, J. (1999). Differentiated integration in Europe: The case of EEA country, Norway. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 37(1), 133–142.
- Fossum, J. E. (2010). Norway's European 'gag rules.' *European Review*, 18(1), 73–92.
- Fossum, J. E., & Graver, H. P. (2018). *Squaring the circle on Brexit: Could the Norway model work?* Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Gänzle, S., Leruth, B., & Trondal, J. (Eds.). (2020). *Differentiated integration and disintegration in a post-Brexit era*. London: Routledge.
- Genschel, P., & Jachtenfuchs, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Beyond the regulatory polity? The European integration of core state powers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grendstad, G. (2003). Reconsidering Nordic party space. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 26(3), 193–217.
- Hansen, L., & Wæver, O. (Eds.). (2002). *European integration and national identity: The challenge of the Nordic states*. London: Routledge.
- Hubel, H. (2004). The Baltic Sea subregion after dual enlargement. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 39(3), 283–298.

- Ingebritsen, C. (1998). *The Nordics states and European unity*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Jonsdottir, J. (2013). *Europeanization and the European Economic Area: Iceland's participation in the EU's policy process*. London: Routledge.
- Karttunen, M. (2009). *Evidence of partisan emphasis on EMU during 1994–1999: Comparing Finnish parties*. Helsinki: Department of Political Science, University of Helsinki.
- Knutsen, O. (2004). Voters and social cleavages. In K. Heidar (Ed.), *Nordic politics: Comparative perspectives* (pp. 60–80). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Lavenex, S. (2004). EU external governance in “wider Europe.” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11(4), 680–700.
- Leruth, B. (2014). *Differentiated integration in the European Union: A comparative study of party and government preferences in Finland, Sweden and Norway*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.
- Leruth, B., Gänzle, S., & Trondal, J. (2019). Differentiated integration and disintegration in the EU after Brexit: Risks versus opportunities. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 57(6), 1383–1394.
- Leruth, B., Startin, N., & Usherwood, S. (2018). *The Routledge handbook of Euroscepticism*. London: Routledge.
- Mair, P. (2007). Political parties and party systems. In P. Graziano & M. P. Vink (Eds.), *Europeanization: New research agendas* (pp. 154–166). Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McDonnell, D., & Werner, A. (2018). Respectable radicals: Why some radical right parties in the European Parliament forsake policy congruence. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(5), 747–763.
- Miljan, T. (1977). *The reluctant Europeans: The attitudes of the Nordic countries towards European integration*. London: Hurst.
- Ojanen, H. (2005). Finland: Rediscovering its Nordic neighbours after an EU honeymoon? *Security Dialogue*, 36(3), 407–411.
- Olsen, J. P. (2007). *Europe in search of political order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Olsen, J. P., & Sverdrup, B. O. (Eds.). (1998). *Europa i Norden—Europeisering av nordisk samarbeid* [Europe in the Nordic countries—Europeanisation of Nordic co-operation]. Oslo: Tano Aschehoug.
- Raunio, T. (2007). Softening but persistent: Euroscepticism in the Nordic EU countries. *Acta Politica*, 42(2), 191–210.
- Schimmelfennig, F. (2018). Brexit: Differentiated disintegration in the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(8), 1154–1173.
- Schimmelfennig, F., & Sedelmeier, U. (Eds.). (2005). *The politics of European Union enlargement: Theoretical approaches*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Schulz, D. F., & Henökl, T. (2020). New alliances in post-Brexit Europe: Does the new Hanseatic League revive Nordic political cooperation? *Politics and Governance*, 8(4), 409–419.
- Senterpartiet. (1993). *Senterpartiets Valgprogram 1993* [The Centre Party's election program]. Oslo: Senterpartiet.
- Stegmann McCallion, M., & Brianson, A. (2018). *The Nordic states and European integration: Awkward partners in the North?* Cham: Palgrave MacMillan and Springer.
- Stie, A. E., & Trondal, J. (Eds.). (2020). Rediscovering Nordic cooperation [Thematic Issue]. *Politics and Governance*, 8(4), 332–461.
- Stubb, A. (1996). A categorization of differentiated integration. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 34(2), 283–295.
- Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue. (2003). *SDP:n Vaaliohjelmalla 2003* [SDP election program 2003]. Helsinki: Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue.
- Svensson, P. (2002). Five Danish referendums on the European Community and European Union: A critical assessment of the Franklin Thesis. *European Journal of Political Research*, 41(6), 733–750.
- Wade, K., & Støren, B. N. (2019). *En fot utenfor. Historien om EØS-forhandlingene* [One foot outside. The history of the EEA negotiations]. Oslo: Frekk Forlag.

### About the Authors



**Benjamin Leruth** is Assistant Professor in European Politics and Society at the University of Groningen. His research focuses on Euroscepticism, differentiation, European social policy and transnationalism.



**Jarle Trondal** is Professor of Political Science at University of Agder and University of Oslo. His main fields of research are public administration, governance, European integration, organizational studies and international organizations.



**Stefan Gänzle** is Jean Monnet Chair, Professor of Political Science and Head of the Department of Political Science and Management, University of Agder. His research focuses on EU foreign and security policy, differentiated integration, European Territorial Cooperation and comparative regionalism.