



Blog

# FISHING FOR INFLUENCE: THE EU'S ROLE IN SHAPING THE FAROESE FISHING ECONOMY

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## Introduction

The Faroe Islands, located in the North Atlantic, have long relied on fishing as the cornerstone of their economy, shaping their economic and social identity. However, the decline in employment in this sector in recent decades, coupled with the global problems of overfishing, underlines the fragility of this dependence. The Faroe Islands' decision to withdraw from the European Communities in 1973 and to prioritise control of its waters reflects the wider struggle for sovereignty that continues to shape its complex and influential relationship with the EU. This relationship, particularly in the fisheries sector, has become a key battleground for Euroscepticism. Quotas and regulations imposed by the EU are widely perceived as a direct threat to Faroese autonomy, reinforcing fears of an erosion of national sovereignty.<sup>1 2</sup> Thus, the EU's involvement in fisheries management not only reinforces Eurosceptic sentiment, but also captures the broader issue at the heart of this article: To what extent does EU fisheries policy challenge the Faroes' quest for self-determination in the context of euroscepticism?

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<sup>1</sup> Danielsen, Rannvá, and Sveinn Agnarsson. "Fisheries Policy in the Faroe Islands: Managing for Failure?" *Marine Policy* 94 (May 21, 2018): 204–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2018.05.010>.

<sup>2</sup> EEAS. "The European Union and the Faroe Islands," n.d. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-union-and-faroe-islands\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-union-and-faroe-islands_en).



## The Faroese fishing economy and its strategic importance

Fisheries have long been the backbone of the Faroese economy, representing around half of exports and employing 11% of the population.<sup>3</sup> Despite reforms, overfishing remains a critical issue, undermining the sustainability of key stocks and highlighting the need for more effective management. Subsidies that are essential for economic stability have historically strained the Faroese budget, as seen in the 1980s debt crisis.<sup>4</sup> Beyond economics, fishing is a pivotal political tool in the Faroes' push for autonomy, with resistance to EU membership rooted in fears of losing control over territorial waters to the Common Fisheries Policy.<sup>5 6</sup> This steadfast emphasis on sovereignty reflects a broader struggle to balance self-governance with external dependencies, particularly on the EU. As the Faroese navigate these challenges, the fishing sector exemplifies the intricate ties between economic policy and national identity, forming the Euroscepticism and quest for greater independence.

## EU influence on Faroese fisheries policy

The relationship between the EU and the Faroe Islands is shaped by a series of agreements, notably on fisheries and trade, which provide economic benefits like market access for Faroese fish products. However, these benefits come with significant constraints, as EU-imposed quotas and sustainability measures often

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<sup>3</sup> Danielsen, Rannvá, and Sveinn Agnarsson. "Fisheries Policy in the Faroe Islands: Managing for Failure?" *Marine Policy* 94 (May 21, 2018): 204–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2018.05.010>.

<sup>4</sup> idem

<sup>5</sup> Danielsen, Rannvá, and Sveinn Agnarsson. "Fisheries Policy in the Faroe Islands: Managing for Failure?" *Marine Policy* 94 (May 21, 2018): 204–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2018.05.010>.

<sup>6</sup> Adler-Nissen, Rebecca. "The Faroe Islands: Independence Dreams, Globalist Separatism and the Europeanization of Postcolonial Home Rule." *Cooperation and Conflict* 49, no. 1 (2014): 55–79. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45084243>.

clash with Faroese interests, as seen during the 2013 "mackerel war," when unilateral Faroese decisions led to EU sanctions.<sup>7</sup> Such conflicts highlight the Faroes' resistance to external control and their determination to protect sovereignty. At the same time, the economic reliance on the EU cannot be ignored.

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This dynamic underscores a broader tension – the Faroes aim to preserve autonomy while benefiting from the economic ties that the EU provides. This situation reflects the reality of smaller actors in international relations, who must carefully navigate a balance between independence and interdependence. The Faroes' strategy of leveraging their unique position to negotiate favorable terms while safeguarding sovereignty is not only pragmatic but also essential for maintaining economic stability and self-determination in an increasingly interconnected world.

Bilateral agreements provide flexibility that EU membership would not, as the Faroes would have to adhere to the EU's Common Fisheries Policy, a system that they view as a threat to their sovereignty. For the Faroes, maintaining this flexibility is crucial, not only for economic reasons but also to preserve their sense of national pride, with fishing being a symbol of their self-sufficiency and independence. This issue of sovereignty is not just about fish stocks, but it is also deeply tied to political and cultural identity, providing ammunition for Eurosceptic movements that capitalize on concerns about the Faroes' loss of control. The rising influence of these movements highlights the importance of framing these agreements in a way that respects and reinforces national autonomy.

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<sup>7</sup> Stephan, Sarah. "Greenland, the Faroes and Åland in Nordic and European Co-operation – Two Approaches Towards Accommodating Autonomies." *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 24, no. 3 (August 2017): 273–301. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26557867.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> idem

<sup>9</sup> Malloy, Tove H. "Nordic (Minority) Autonomies and Territorial Management in Europe: Empowerment Through Regionalisation?" *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 20, no. 1 (2013): 85–106. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24675674>.

## Euroscepticism and perception of EU influence

Euroscepticism of the Faroe Islands is deeply rooted in both historical and contemporary factors, particularly in relation to fisheries. While the islands' decision to stay out of the EU when Denmark joined in 1973 was primarily driven by the desire to protect sovereignty over fishing rights, this Euroscepticism is not simply a reaction to past colonial ties.<sup>10</sup> Rather, it is shaped by a consistent concern for preserving economic and political independence.<sup>11</sup> The EU's attempts to influence Faroese fisheries policy, such as through quotas and sustainability targets, are perceived as direct threats to their autonomy. This concern is supported by statistics showing that the EU is the Faroe Islands' largest trading partner - in 2023, trade with the EU accounted for 36.9% of the islands' total foreign trade. Of these, 52.5% of imports to the Faroe Islands came from the EU and 24.1% of exports went to the EU.<sup>12</sup> Although this shows economic interdependence, long-term concerns include the impact on the islands' exclusive economic zone, which is significantly larger than their own land area.<sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup> Therefore, the resistance to these EU-imposed regulations reflects a legitimate fear of losing control over crucial resources and decision-making power.

This opposition, however, is not merely a reflection of past grievances but has become politically mobilized. The “mackerel war” in 2013, for example, not only exacerbated tensions between the Faroes and the EU but also served as a rallying point for populist political movements within the islands. For many, this

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<sup>10</sup> Rebhan, Christian. “North Atlantic Euroscepticism: The Rejection of EU Membership in the Faroe Islands and Greenland.” *Fróðskapur – Faroe University Press*, 2016. ISBN 978-99918-65-76-8.

<sup>11</sup> idem

<sup>12</sup> European Commission. “Faroe Islands: EU trade relations with the Faroe Islands. Facts, figures and latest developments,” n.d. [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/faroe-islands\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/faroe-islands_en).

<sup>13</sup> Danielsen, Rannvá, and Sveinn Agnarsson. “Fisheries Policy in the Faroe Islands: Managing for Failure?” *Marine Policy* 94 (May 21, 2018): 204–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2018.05.010>.

<sup>14</sup> Rebhan, Christian. “North Atlantic Euroscepticism: The Rejection of EU Membership in the Faroe Islands and Greenland.” *Fróðskapur – Faroe University Press*, 2016. ISBN 978-99918-65-76-8.

confrontation with the EU was framed as a defence of national sovereignty against a larger, powerful entity – the EU was perceived as an aggressive actor trying to advance its interests at the expense of Faroese fishermen.<sup>15 16</sup> It's important to question whether this opposition is driven by genuine concerns for autonomy or if it has become a convenient tool for political actors to mobilize voters and gain support. In this context, Euroscepticism may be viewed as both a legitimate claim to self-determination and as a political strategy that benefits certain factions in the Faroese political landscape.

Furthermore, the Faroe Islands' position of regional Euroscepticism has larger implications. While it allows them to preserve a certain level of autonomy, it may also risk pushing them into political isolation, especially when compared to similarly Eurosceptic regions like Iceland and Greenland.

The Euroscepticism of the Faroe Islands is deeply rooted in their historical experience of Danish colonialism and their subsequent attempts to distance themselves from European structures. However, this perspective must be contextualized within the geopolitical and economic realities of the region. The example of Greenland, which, despite its Eurosceptic stance, has managed to establish bilateral agreements with the EU, offers a potential path forward for the Faroes. Such an approach could enable the islands to preserve their autonomy while fostering greater economic cooperation. This balance between independence and collaboration not only reflects the Faroes' unique position but also aligns them with a broader North Atlantic trend, linking their Euroscepticism with that of regions like Iceland and Greenland. By navigating these complexities,

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<sup>15</sup> Stephan, Sarah. "Greenland, the Faroes and Åland in Nordic and European Co-operation – Two Approaches Towards Accommodating Autonomies." *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 24, no. 3 (August 2017): 273–301. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26557867.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Adler-Nissen, Rebecca. "The Faroe Islands: Independence Dreams, Globalist Separatism and the Europeanization of Postcolonial Home Rule." *Cooperation and Conflict* 49, no. 1 (2014): 55–79. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45084243>.

the Faroes have the opportunity to redefine their relationship with the EU in a way that serves both their political aspirations and economic needs.<sup>17</sup>

This dynamic raises an important question: who ultimately benefits from this isolation? While these regions maintain their independence, they also forgot the potential economic and geopolitical advantages of closer ties with the EU. In the long run, this approach could undermine their economic stability and limit their global influence. The Faroes must balance their historical and political desire for autonomy with the practical realities of a world increasingly shaped by economic interdependence. Whether they can find a middle ground, like Greenland with its bilateral agreements with the EU, will determine their future role in the North Atlantic.

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<sup>17</sup> Rebhan, Christian. "North Atlantic Euroscepticism: The Rejection of EU Membership in the Faroe Islands and Greenland." *Fróðskapur – Faroe University Press*, 2016. ISBN 978-99918-65-76-8.



## Conclusion

The relationship between the Faroe Islands and the EU, particularly in the domain of fisheries, is a complex blend of economic benefits and political tensions. The Faroe Islands' reliance on fishing is not merely an economic necessity but a deeply ingrained part of their identity and autonomy. While conflicts like the 2013 "mackerel war" demonstrate the tension between EU regulations and Faroese interests, the real issue is the struggle over sovereignty. This opposition to EU regulations fuels Eurosceptic sentiment, emphasizing fears of losing control over resources and governance, which remain central to the Faroese political and cultural identity. The Faroes are caught in a dilemma: they benefit from access to the EU market through bilateral agreements, but these agreements allow them to maintain greater control over their fishing rights and broader political independence, which they fear losing if they were to join the EU directly.

In the future, the Faroes' relationship with the EU will likely continue to evolve around these two pillars: economic cooperation and sovereignty. If they are to deepen economic ties without compromising their autonomy, they must continue to navigate the fine line between cooperation and independence. Whether the Faroes can manage this balance successfully will determine not only their political future but also their ability to maintain economic stability while resisting pressure to conform to broader European integration.