

# There is little evidence that a ‘Nordicisation’ of the EU’s Africa policy has taken place.

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*The Nordic countries have traditionally had a distinct role in international affairs focused on peacekeeping and development assistance. Given this role, **Gorm Rye Olsen** assesses whether the EU’s Africa policy has been subject to a process of ‘Nordicisation’, in which EU actions in Africa have been driven by the Nordic countries. He finds that even in the case of development policy, there is little evidence that EU policies have been shaped predominantly by the Nordic countries. Rather there is evidence that the Nordic countries’ approach in Africa has to some extent been ‘Europeanised’, with a convergence of aims and policies between the national and European levels.*



For many years, the Nordic countries have been known to have a special position in international affairs. Nordic ‘exceptionalism’ meant that Denmark, Sweden and Norway were supposed to pursue a special ‘peace-driven’ approach to international affairs. A high profile policy of ‘international solidarity’ reflected the determination of the Nordic countries to play a role in overcoming the global North-South divide. Traditionally, international cooperation through international organisations such as the UN and the European Union has been one of the core characteristics of the Nordics’ special brand of internationalism.

Because the Africa policies of Western powers can be considered ‘soft policy’ (read not extremely important), it is natural to expect that the European Union’s policy towards Africa is the result of strong Nordic influence. ‘Nordicisation’ implies that the EU takes over the Nordic approach to conflict management, giving special emphasis to peace-keeping missions using a minimum of force in combination with a strong reliance on civilian instruments. Nordicisation also means that the common European Africa policy has adopted the Nordic aim of having a high level of development assistance measured by the ratio of official development assistance (ODA) to GDP, in combination with the pursuing of an efficient development policy.

The lengthy crisis related to Zimbabwe may illustrate the strength of Nordic influence or the convergence of policy positions among EU member states. For a long period, Sweden and Denmark maintained a high and very critical profile towards the regime in Harare based on clear principles like respect for human rights, democracy and good governance. During the later more pragmatic course, the Nordics exerted influence by building and participating in the ‘Friends of Zimbabwe’ coalition of countries. A balanced assessment would emphasise that the three Nordic countries exerted influence by working in close coalition with a number of like-minded countries. It would be difficult to argue that they forced the European Union to take over Nordic norms and priorities in its policy towards Zimbabwe.

Another case is the Swedish Presidency of the EU in 2009, when a number of Francophone countries were on the agenda. France considered Mauritius, Guinea Conakry, Niger and Madagascar as its genuine interests and therefore it was difficult for the Swedish presidency to find common ground among the member states for policy initiatives directed towards these four countries. At the same time, not only Sweden but also Norway cooperated closely with France in conflict management. It was the case in the two European Security and Defence Policy missions in [the Ituri in DR Congo](#) in 2003, and the huge [mission in Chad](#) in 2008-09, which were both strongly influenced by French policy priorities and national interests.

The Nordic countries’ generally positive attitude towards cooperating with France in military conflict management operations in Africa hardly reflects a Nordicisation of France’s bilateral policy towards the continent. Rather, it is the other way around implying that Sweden, Norway and Denmark have adopted French priorities and not least French values and policies, suggesting a convergence of policies and norms between the Nordics and France. It may be

added, it is possible to identify a similar convergence of norms and policies between the Nordic countries and the UK when it comes to military conflict management in Africa.

It is a crucial component in Nordic exceptionalism that Denmark, Sweden and Norway give high priority to working closely with the United Nations. It may be useful to use the years 2005-2006 as illustration when Denmark served as one of the elected members of the UN Security Council (UNSC). The two years in the UNSC suggest there are significant limitations to the influence of small states within the UN unless such states are capable of forming coalitions with strong states, as Denmark did with the UK and France. It indicates that even within a soft policy area like Africa policy, there are significant limitations to the influence of a small state when it comes to the promotion of soft values and norms.

When the African Union (AU) was established at the Durban summit in 2002, the AU became the natural focal point for the regional initiatives taken by the three Nordic countries. The bilateral policies of France and the UK call into question the idea that a Nordicism of the EU's policy towards the African Union has taken place. Rather, it seems appropriate to describe what has taken place as a convergence of priorities and policies meaning the Nordics have adopted European policies and priorities. It further suggests that there are clear limitations to the strength of the special Nordic values and ideas when it comes to the Africa policy of the EU.

Finally, for many years the Nordic countries have had a particularly high profile in international development cooperation. On the other hand, in the current century Denmark, Sweden and Norway have had close and positive working relationships with the UK, the Netherlands and Ireland on the issue of aid harmonization, and in particular on the improvement of the delivery of development aid. It appears that the Nordic discussions and the agenda-setting of Denmark, Norway and Sweden in cooperation with like-minded countries have led the European Union to support a number of initiatives. It is not to be ignored that the traditional Nordic aid cooperation has faltered and increasingly, new patterns of cooperation have developed indicating that close cooperation with the other Nordic countries is no longer a priority. Rather, the new priority is to cooperate with a larger group of countries like the Netherlands, the UK or just the European Union.

The cases presented here suggest that a considerable convergence has taken place with respect to a number of EU policies directed towards Africa. Even in the analysis of the traditionally high profile field of development policy there is little evidence that a Nordicism of common European policies has taken place. Analyses of foreign and security policies and of development policy would suggest instead that there has been a convergence of aims, priorities and policies between the national and the European levels.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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Refugee camp in Chad, Credit: European Commission DG ECHO (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

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