

Dear guests.

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this Seminar on the European Economic Area, the EEA. I am speaking to you from the EFTA headquarters in Geneva, the initial home to EFTA since its foundation. Symbolically, Brussels has become its second home in the meantime.

Before we go into the EEA, let me tell you some words about the European Free Trade Association – EFTA.

The Association was founded in 1960, with the signing of the EFTA Convention in Stockholm, as an alternative to the newly formed European Economic Community.

At the outset, EFTA included seven Member States (Austria, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom). The objectives of the seven founding Members were to establish a free trade area, and to contribute to a broader European economic development and integration. It is interesting to note, that the basic economic aim of the EFTA Convention was the same as that of the Treaty of Rome: to create a market free of unnecessary barriers to trade. However, it was based on the traditional principles of intergovernmental cooperation, therefore differing from the Treaty of Rome.

Throughout these 60 years, EFTA has gone through several changes. One of the most noticeable changes is the fluctuation in member states. EFTA initially served as a framework for the trade relations among its members. It quickly evolved into a platform for EFTA members' relations with the EU, with the 1972 Free trade agreement between the EFTA States and the then EEC, culminating with the launch of the EEA Agreement 1994. Beyond European trade relations, EFTA became since the early 1990's the common platform of its members for their free trade relations outside Europe. Today, we have more than 30 FTAs covering trade with some 40 countries across all continents – one of the largest networks of free trade agreements in the world.

This is the historic set-up of EFTA. Today's challenges relate to a lesser extent to the architecture of European relations, and tend to relate more to key policy issues. As Europe is tackling the challenges of climate change, the digital revolution, the health union, social protection in an open market environment,

sustainability at large, a growing trade nationalism at global level, so do the EFTA countries.

In these turbulent circumstances, we at EFTA are convinced that EFTA membership has a great importance to its four Member States, as they need to build alliances and participate in international cooperation. EFTA Ministers paid a tribute to the importance of EFTA membership when the Association celebrated its 60th anniversary last year. Video statements from the ministers on the occasion of EFTA's 60th anniversary can be found on the EFTA website and the EFTA youtube channel.

Against this background, we at EFTA have three main fields of activity:

First, the regulation of economic relations among the EFTA Members;

Secondly, the development and management EFTA's worldwide network of free trade agreements;

Then, last but certainly not least, the management of the EEA Agreement, our topic of the day.

With the EEA, the three EEA EFTA countries have managed to secure a fantastic device to ensure a stable and favourable contribution to European integration, for the benefit both of our people and companies, and of our EU partners. EEA EFTA countries' commitment to European integration and to European values is to some extent stronger than in some of the EU members. The credibility of the EEA is high, which helps us in our interactions with our counterparts from the EU institutions.

The EEA Agreement has over the years proven to be an extremely resilient construction. Since the conclusion of the Agreement, the EU went through four enlargement rounds, four treaty reforms, including some substantial changes of the EU's own institutional setup, and had to overcome a number of crisis. Meanwhile, the EEA cooperation continued, even consolidated, and still functions to the satisfaction of all parties involved.

The EEA extends the EU Internal Market to three of our member states, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. In addition to ensuring the four freedoms, the Agreement provides for extensive cooperation between government agencies, as well as parliamentary cooperation and cooperation between economic and social partners. Through their participation in EU committees and expert groups, the three EFTA states contribute to the elaboration of

future EEA-relevant EU legislation and programmes. This will all be explained in more detail during today's seminar.

The EEA is also a demonstration of solidarity among the countries of Europe to overcome social and economic challenges. The so-called EEA and Norway Grants have made a lasting contribution to reducing social and economic disparities in Europe and supporting a free and vibrant civil society, which is beneficial for the whole EEA.

For over a quarter of a century, Europe and the world have undergone profound evolutions. In my view, the key underlying reason for the EEA to prove successful in addressing these changes is the positive spirit of cooperation between the EEA EFTA States and their EU friends and partners. This positive spirit continues to prevail, and I am therefore confident that we will be successful in tackling upcoming challenges, such as the green and digital revolution, or the more recent health policy challenges.

But the well-functioning of our common Internal Market demands continuous efforts from all parties to the EEA Agreement, including the institutions you represent. We are therefore thankful for your interest in the EEA today.

During today's seminar, you will get first-hand information on the EEA from some of key personnel at the EFTA Secretariat and from the most relevant organisations that also play a fundamental role in the well-functioning of the EEA Agreement. You will also enjoy a special presentation by the Norwegian Ambassador to the EU, who is currently chairing the EFTA Standing Committee, and by our counterpart on the EU side, the European External Action Service.

I wish you a great seminar and encourage you to take part actively in the discussions throughout the day.