

Report of the Icelandic Chair of the Standing Committee of the EFTA States

First half of 2024

30th Anniversary of the EEA Agreement

The Icelandic chairmanship of the EFTA Standing Committee was marked by the 30th anniversary of the EEA Agreement. Several important meetings and events were organised in connection to the anniversary that allowed the 30 EEA States to celebrate their special partnership, underscore the shared values which this partnership is based upon and celebrate the prosperity that the EEA Agreement has brought about for its citizens and businesses.

Meeting of EEA leaders

The successful meeting of EEA leaders held on 22 March in Brussels underlined the unity of the EEA States in times of multi-dimensional global challenges. Prime Ministers of the EEA EFTA States and their EU counterparts celebrated the internal market which has created unprecedented prosperity and freedom for EEA citizens. During these times, it was reiterated that like-minded partners need to stand together. The shared fundamental values, democracy, rule of law and human rights, including gender equality are at the core of the cooperation elements which EEA States jointly need to defend and safeguard. This was the second meeting held between EEA leaders and marks the beginning of a tradition. The first meeting was held in March 2019 on the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the EEA Agreement.

Seminar on plastic pollution in the oceans and art exhibition by the Arctic Creatures

To commemorate the anniversary, the Icelandic chair organized a special seminar on plastic pollution in the oceans with participation by all the EEA EFTA states, the Belgian presidency and the Commission. The seminar was opened by H.E. Mr. Georges Gilkinet, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Mobility in Belgium, and closed by the Prime Minister of Iceland Katrín Jakobsdóttir. The nature and the scale of plastic pollution, its impact on our natural resources, ongoing global talks, the Arctic dimension and the present and future European policy response were at the heart of the discussion. In relation to the event, Prime Minister Jakobsdóttir opened a special art exhibition created by the Icelandic art ensemble *Arctic Creatures* in the EFTA House. Recycling plastic litter in unexpected ways, the Icelandic artists throw new light on the circular economy and remind us to what extent sustainability of our natural resources depends on how we treat them.

Meeting of EEA EFTA Prime Ministers with Enrico Letta

At the invitation of the Prime Minister of Norway, the Prime Ministers of the EEA EFTA States met with former Prime Minister of Italy Enrico Letta on 22 March in Brussels to discuss his upcoming report on the future of the internal market. The EEA EFTA contribution along with national contributions of the EEA EFTA States were presented at the meeting. Mr. Letta's report "More than a Single Market" published in April dedicates a section to the

relationship of the EEA EFTA State and refers to them as close and strategic partners of the EU.

Meeting of the EEA Council

The overall functioning of the EEA Agreement and the role of the green transition in Europe's competitiveness including challenges and opportunities were at the core of discussions at the meeting of the EEA Council on 28 May. The meeting was chaired by Ms Hadja Lahbib, Minister for Foreign Affairs, European Affairs and Foreign Trade and the Federal Cultural Institutions of Belgium, representing the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. European Commission's Executive Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič and representatives of the European External Action Service took part in the meeting. Representatives from the EEA EFTA side were Ms. Þórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland, chairing on behalf of the EEA EFTA States, Mr. Espen Barth Eide, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway and Ms. Dominique Hasler, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Liechtenstein. The parties to the EEA Agreement issued a joint celebratory statement on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the entry into force of the Agreement. The meeting was preceded by an informal political dialogue where the discussions focused on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, Georgia and the Middle East.

EEA 30 Year Anniversary Conference

The EEA Council meeting was followed by a fruitful EEA 30 Year Anniversary Conference organised by the EFTA Secretariat. Panelists included the EEA EFTA Foreign Ministers Ms. Þórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir, Ms. Dominique Hasler, Mr. Espen Barth Eide, the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Hadja Lahbib and EVP of the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič. The event was moderated by EU Affairs Correspondent Maria Tadeo. Future of the internal market and the wider European cooperation in a challenging geopolitical context were the key points of discussion. The debate was supported by keynote addresses by the former Prime Minister of Italy Enrico Letta and the Director of Carnegie Europe Rosa Balfour.

Incorporation of EEA relevant acts

During the chairmanship period a total of 283 acts were incorporated into the EEA Agreement by 144 Joint Committee decisions. This included the ASAP (Regulation 2023/1525 supporting ammunition production) and EDIRPA (Regulation 2023/2418 establishing an instrument for the reinforcement of the European defence industry through common procurement), Regulation 2019/1238 on a pan-European Personal Pension Products (PEPPs), Regulation (EU) 2023/851 amending Regulation (EU) 2019/631 as regards strengthening the CO2 emission performance standards for new passenger cars and new light commercial vehicles, and the simple, transparent and standardized (STS) securitisation package in the field of financial services. Focus continued on moving forward older files in the backlog particularly in the fields of energy, financial services and statistics resulting in some progress. In relation to health preparedness and response, the relevant draft EEA Joint Committee decisions were submitted to the EU side.

Work in capitals continued to reduce the number of Joint Committee decisions where entry into force is pending due to constitutional requirements.

Future of the Internal Market and files with horizontal dimensions

In the current geopolitical climate, EU legislative priorities relating to the Internal Market are increasingly focused on the economic security and how to ensure the competitiveness of the internal market. Major work will continue under the chairmanship of Norway in the EFTA Taskforce assisting the EFTA Standing Committee, to determine the implications of the files with horizontal dimensions for the EEA EFTA States. A report will be submitted to the Standing Committee on 4 July, which will include key recommendations on the way forward.

Decision-shaping

EEA EFTA Comments were provided to the EU side on 30 Years, 30 States: together for a Competitive and Resilient Europe. Moreover, EEA EFTA States presented their views on strengthening the Weights and Dimensions Directive to promote road safety and also their opinion on strengthening the proposed enforcement rules on GDPR.

In the framework of Subcommittee I-IV, Iceland presented a proposal to update the current guidelines on EEA EFTA Comments. The main aim was to introduce a new tool in the form of an informal non-paper or discussion paper e.g. on a particular aspect of a proposal to be used only in cases where there is an immediate need to inform the EU side of an EEA EFTA position. As this core point was not accepted by delegations the proposal was withdrawn by Iceland.

Given the importance of activating all EEA EFTA actors, the EFTA Secretariat, as a practice, will inform the EFTA Advisory Bodies when an EEA EFTA Comment is to be undertaken. The Secretariat already informs the Advisory Bodies when an EEA EFTA Comment has been submitted to the EU.

EEA outreach

A continued emphasis was placed on strengthening the knowledge of the EEA Agreement and the Financial Mechanisms to make full use of the available tools and the EFTA House to disseminate information on the EEA. A fruitful biannual Seminar on how the EEA Agreement works was organised by the Secretariat in March. In addition to the conference mentioned above on plastic pollution in the oceans and related art exhibition by the *Arctic Creatures*, a joint conference was also successfully organised in January by the EFTA Surveillance Authority, the EFTA Secretariat and the EEA EFTA States on the Development of Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) in the European Economic Area. The conference brought together amongst others Commissioner Kadri Simson, Terje Aasland, Minister of Energy of Norway and Edda Sif Pind Aradóttir, Chief Executive Officer of Carbfix.

Participation in programmes

In the framework of Iceland's chairmanship, focus continued to ensure that the EEA EFTA States' participation in relevant EU programmes 2021-2027 was based on the rights and obligations set out in the EEA Agreement. Given recent developments of excluding the EEA EFTA States from participation in certain topics under future Horizon Europe work programmes, the EFTA side placed a continuous emphasis on the common interest of all parties to provide for the full participation of the EEA EFTA States in EU programmes. The

contribution and participation of the EEA EFTA States in these programmes are among the outstanding achievements of the past 30 years of EEA cooperation.

Synergies between the three EFTA House organisations

Under the last chairmanship of Iceland in 2022, an emphasis was placed with successful outcomes on a number of synergy elements between the three EFTA House organisations. This included efficient cost management and a joint facilities and service team. Iceland's aim under the current chairmanship was to look into ways to increase the interaction and knowledge of staff between the three organisations. On 11 June a status report on the matter was presented to the Standing Committee and a barista coffee service was offered to staff at the "Synergies Café".