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Norway in the United Nations Security Council 2021-2022: “talented strategist” or “running young fox”?

On June 17, 2020, Norway was elected as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for 2021-2022. Of the five priorities presented by Norway, special attention was paid to the need to respect international law and strengthen the structures of multilateral cooperation. These ambitious goals are accompanied by numerous global challenges, requiring the involvement of a substantial number of staff members at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the use of their accumulated experience. Therefore, it will be difficult for Norway to play the role of a strategist and an efficient facilitator between the UNSC conflicted permanent members, especially since there was no consensus among Norwegian political parties regarding the country's very candidacy.

Pink socks with golden hearts – an effective promotional campaign. Norway received 130 votes during the competition with Ireland (128 votes) and Canada (108 votes) for one of the two seats reserved for the Western European and Others Group. It became one of five states – along with India, Ireland, Kenya, and Mexico – elected on June 17-18 by the UN General Assembly to the UNSC. The two-year term of office of these states will start on January 1, 2021, and last until the end of December 2022. The competition between the candidates was even, but – what is worth emphasizing – was conducted in the spirit of fair play and included various activities. For example, Norway, organized a study visit (Oslo and Tromsø) for the UN ambassadors, the theme of which was the protection of seas and oceans and climate change, whereas Ireland and Canada organized concerts of U2 and Céline Dion.

Norway has been elected four times as a non-permanent member of the UNSC (the last time was 2001-2002) so far. Its campaign for the UNSC for 2021-2022 informally began in 2007 and was officially launched in New York in June 2018 by Crown Prince Haakon and Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Søreide. An experienced ambassador to the United Nations, Mona Juul, also played an important role in promoting Norway's candidacy, supervising diplomatic efforts and organizing meetings and receptions at her residence. Ambassador Mona Juul is well known in the UN structures – she was the Deputy Permanent Representative of Norway to the UN (2005-2010), and earlier, together with her husband Terje Rød-Larsen, she was involved in facilitating secret negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization which culminated with the signing of the Oslo agreement in 1993.

During the promotional campaign, the Prime Minister of Norway Erna Solberg, took part, i.e., in the African Union Summit (February 2019) and paid official visits to 15 states in the Caribbean region, while Ine Eriksen Søreide held nearly 120 bilateral meetings. Norway's diplomatic missions around the world were also involved in the campaign. As pink color was chosen as a symbol (which was supposed to emphasize the importance of women, albeit without a clear indication of a feminist foreign policy agenda, e.g., in Sweden), one of the most visible elements corresponding with it were pink socks with golden hearts worn by Norwegian diplomats. Officially, the total expenditure of Norway's MFA on the promotion of Norway's candidacy until 2019 amounted to almost NOK 29.5 million (approx. EUR 2.8 million). However, this amount did not include activities undertaken by retired Norwegian diplomats and the huge budgetary allocation to ODA (according to the OECD data, Norway has been allocating at least 0.7% of its GDP for this purpose every year since 1976, and in 2019 it was over 1% of GDP, i.e., USD 4.67 billion)¹.

¹ OECD, *Net ODA*, <https://data.oecd.org/oda/net-oda.htm> [24.07.2020].

Norway's priorities in the UN Security Council. Since the time of Norway's previous membership in the UNSC, non-permanent members' capabilities have not changed significantly and remain relatively small compared to the five permanent members with veto rights. Taking into account the assumptions of Norway's foreign and security policy adopted in April 2017, the United Nations plays a leading role in global efforts to promote international peace and security, the protection of human rights, and the Sustainable Development Goals. In early 2018, the Norwegian government indicated the reasons for applying for a non-permanent seat, including protection of Norway's global interests, involvement in peace-building efforts and dispute resolution, and supporting the UN as a key multilateral structure that governs the international order. Norway's experience in conducting peace talks and managing UN peacekeeping operations has also been indicated many times – despite the fact that the country is inhabited by only 5.3 million citizens, over 42,000 Norwegians have served in UN-led peace operations since 1949. It also provides the fifth largest financial contribution to the UN operational activities for development (2018), and Norwegians are the sixth largest group of UN officials working in this area. The chance to increase Norway's influence on global politics and gaining a higher prestige in the UN structures are also not without significance.

Norway's priorities are related to its current foreign policy. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has repeatedly emphasized that international cooperation based on international law is a necessary condition for stability and security in the world, which is currently a field of competition between three great powers (the US, China and Russia). Therefore, compliance with international law, which is the basis of Norway's activities in the UNSC, is of prime importance. Other priorities are also reflected in the current Norwegian foreign policy, including:

- peace diplomacy – Norway has significant experience in this area and has built a recognizable brand over the years, actively participating, i.e., in the peaceful settlement of disputes and conflicts in South Sudan, Colombia, the Philippines, or in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict;
- inclusion of women – a more active role of women in the UN peacekeeping missions increases the likelihood of reaching an agreement that takes into account the specific needs of women in conflict areas;
- protection of civilians – the greatest emphasis is put on preventing and combating conflict-related sexual violence; in line with Norwegian foreign policy these actions should be based on human rights and humanitarian law;
- climate change and security – Norway intends to draw the attention of other members of the UNSC to the potential links between climate change and threats to international security.

Global challenges – the main concern of political parties. Norwegian political parties had different attitudes toward the campaign. It was naturally supported by the ruling Conservative Party (H, Høyre). However, representatives of other parties' paid attention to the potential problems associated with Norway's election as a non-permanent member of the UNSC. Audun Lysbakken, leader of the Socialist Left Party (SV, Sosialistisk Venstreparti), wondered if Norway would be able to pursue an independent policy in the UNSC and thus oppose major powers, including the US. Critical statements were also made by representatives of the Progress Party (FrP, Fremskrittspartiet), which was a part of the government coalition until January 2020. Christian Tybring-Gjedde (deputy chairman of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense at Storting) stressed the need to implement the promises made by the government during the campaign. In his opinion, it would be difficult due to the disparities between the US, Russia, and China; it will also mean that costs will increase – both financial and those linked to a possible loss of credibility. This position was also shared by the FrP Vice-President Sylvi Listhaug (Minister of Petroleum and Energy until January 2020, former Minister of Justice, Public Security and Immigration), who emphasized that Norway is a small state that should look after its own interests. Meanwhile, participation in the work of the UNSC might be problematic and, e.g., may impede the implementation of Norway's interests at the High North within the context of cooperation with Russia and China (see more in [“IEŚ Commentaries”, No. 130](#)).

All the Norwegian civil servants shaping the state's strategy and policy in the UNSC are aware of other challenges. This will include, i.e.,: uncertainty regarding the results of the US presidential election (re-election of President Donald Trump would be highly problematic for Norway due to the current US policy towards international organizations); the rivalry between the US, China, and Russia; and, finally, the need to intensify international efforts to combat climate change in the face of the growing economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Norway's previous term of office was preceded by numerous expectations. Although Norwegians made a good impression on the Western diplomats, demonstrating their experience and proper knowledge, they did not manage to achieve the assumed political favors. The international media devoted little attention to Norway, and in the domestic public opinion prevailed a belief of unspecified priorities (causes of wars and conflicts, involvement in Africa, and strengthening the UN's ability to plan and conduct peacekeeping operations based on the Brahimi report). There are various reasons for this state of affairs that should be attributed to both external and internal factors. In the context of external factors, we may note the change of the global political agenda after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the need to maneuver between the interests of permanent members of the UNSC. Relating to the internal factors, we can direct our attention to the hardly measurable priorities, the unrealistic expectations accompanying the election of Norway, and the weak communication with the media, who were not very interested in Norway's success but instead focused on terrorism and the situation in the Middle East.

Conclusions. The history of the UN Security Council to-date shows that the influence of small states (up to 10 million inhabitants) on its activities is limited. It largely depends on two groups of qualitative factors. Firstly, on existing competences in knowledge, launching operations, and diplomatic leadership and coalition-building skills. Secondly, the state's image in the international arena is crucial, with particular emphasis on the expected neutrality or reputation of the promoter of certain norms and solutions in specific areas of international policy.

The current challenges indicate that focusing on fewer priorities and using the state's strengths can be a better alternative. Estonia did so for digital solutions (see ["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 202](#)); also, Sweden used this strategy for cooling the conflict in Syria. Due to the current structural changes in international politics, Norwegian diplomatic abilities, coalition-building skills, and the image of a consistent partner alone may not be sufficient to play the role of a strategist and small states' representative. There is a risk that Norway will be a "young fox" running between the powers, trying to mediate between them but yet unable to prevent their competition.