

# Norwegian Reaction to Russian Attack on Ukraine - Siri Neset



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*Like several other European countries, Norway has seen shifts in its foreign and security policy as a direct consequence of the war in Ukraine. The more significant ones are downgrading its diplomatic relations with Russia to a minimum and changing its laws regarding the sales and export of weapons to a country in conflict.*

Although Ukraine is relatively far from Norway, what Russia does in its

neighborhood is of great concern. Norway has a 195.7-kilometer land border with Russia and the two countries also border each other's exclusive economic zones in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean.

The fast-evolving situation in Ukraine and Russia's aggressive attack has led Norway to react with several policy implementations. Many of these align with the EU, US, NATO, UN, and other international policies since Norway sees it as vital for the international community to act in unity to support Ukraine and counter Russian aggression. As a result, the Norwegian government first condemned the Russian attack on Ukraine at the highest level and with the strongest wording. While the Prime Minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, [condemned](#) "Russia's military attack on Ukraine in the strongest possible terms" on the day of the first attack and classified it as a "serious violation of international law (that) will have dramatic consequences for the people of Ukraine", Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt [added that](#) "the attack is unjustified, unprovoked and irresponsible. A clear breach of international law". The Norwegian elite, expert community, and people, in general, have also reacted strongly towards the Russian war on Ukraine and support the government's position.

## **Diplomatic relations**

The Russian Ambassador was summoned to a meeting with the Foreign Minister on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February. He was presented with the Norwegian position on the situation, including that Russia holds full responsibility for the invasion and that Norway demands Russia to end the atrocities and withdraw its military forces. In a press conference after the meeting, the Foreign Minister said that Putin had lied about Russia's intentions in Ukraine and the invasion was meaningless.

The Norwegian MFA issued a travel warning on February 27, advising against all travel to Russia. A week later, on March 5, it announced that Norway was reducing its contact with the Russian authorities to a minimum due to the latter's invasion of Ukraine. Essential contact with the Russian authorities would, however, continue in areas relating to maintaining critical public functions and sustainable resource management in the north. Consequently, the Arctic Council and Barents Euro-Arctic Council are not functional at the moment. This is a rather dramatic decision as far as Norway is concerned since the Norwegian policy historically has been to maintain diplomatic relations with Russia in times of crisis – even during the Cold War – to enable a de-escalation of the situation.

In the current case, the Norwegian government has also aligned itself with the sanction policies of the EU and US and has so far acted in accordance with international institutions and alliances, such as the UN and NATO. Moreover, the Ministry of Finance [informed](#) the Fund Manager of the central bank of Norway -Norges Bank- on February 28 to immediately freeze all investments made by the Government Pension Fund Global (GPFG) – perhaps the world's largest sovereign wealth fund. At the beginning of the year, the GPFG had Russian shares at a value of roughly NOK27bn, roughly 2,75bn Euro. The Ministry has further requested Norges Bank to prepare a plan for the complete divestment of the Fund from the Russian market.

## **Military aid/support**

Norway also decided to send non-lethal military equipment such as helmets and bulletproof vests to Ukraine and additional troops to NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup in Lithuania.

As for sending defensive weapons to Ukraine, the debate ran high, like in several other countries, mainly because Norway has since 1959 had a strict

policy on the export of firearms. The guidelines for dealing with applications concerning the export of defense-related products are based on a decision from 1959 that makes it clear that an assessment of the foreign and domestic policy situation in the area in question is required before any exports are permitted and that Norway will not permit the sale of arms or munitions to areas where there is a war or the threat of war, or to countries where there is a civil war. An addendum to this came in 1997, stating that a careful assessment of the foreign and domestic policy situation in the area in question and a broad-based evaluation of license applications for the export of defense-related products are required. Finally, in 2019 a direct reference to international humanitarian law was included. As such, sending weapons to any conflicting parties under any circumstances is not easy for Norway.

Even though the public debate was not as fierce as one may have expected, concerns were raised as to the fact that Norway would not have reasonable control of the weapons and where they could end up, perhaps potentially in the hands of Russians or militias further down the road. Furthermore, what the future consequences might be of such a sudden change in the policy for Norwegian weapon control that has been a fundamental norm in regulations for 60 years. Many officials are also concerned that this change is taking place without a thorough debate and risk analysis before the decision. There was also a debate within the expert community about whether sending weapons to Ukraine might lead to an increased risk of aggression from Russia towards Norway.

Finally, there was a concern that Norwegian weapon export to Ukraine might affect the perception of Norway as a prominent humanitarian actor and that it could endanger its humanitarian work around the world and possibly impact negotiations negatively on humanitarian access to war zones, including Ukraine. Norway has already provided NOK 250 million -about 25,4 million Euros- in humanitarian support in response to Russia's attack on Ukraine, primarily to

the UN Refugee Agency, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund. This has now been increased to a total of NOK 2 billion – 203,5 million Euros.

Nevertheless, the Norwegian government decided on February 28 that it would donate 2.000 M72 anti-tank weapons to Ukraine “to defend itself against the military attack from Russia” PM Støre [added](#) that, although “Norway has a restrictive policy concerning the export of defense-related products”, it is aligning its actions with its close allies and the other Nordic countries as “Ukraine is now in a desperate and extraordinary situation”.

### **Closing of Norwegian airspace and Norwegian ports**

Norway closed its airspace for Russian flights on February 28 and extended this ban to Svalbard and Jan Mayen – Norway’s territories in the Arctic Ocean on March 1. The restricted area includes the airspace over the Norwegian territorial waters and applies to all aircraft operated by Russian air carriers, including marketing carriers in code-sharing or blocked-space arrangements, or for any Russian registered aircraft, or any non-Russian-registered aircraft that is owned or chartered or otherwise controlled by any Russian natural or legal person, entity or body.

The banning of Russian ships from European ports is currently being discussed in Europe, and some countries have already adopted a few restrictions. In Norway, this has so far not been discussed much publicly. Still, the Minister of Fisheries and Ocean Policy stated that Norwegian ports would not be closed to Russian ships. But the debate is now rising in the Norwegian media, and the

opposition is criticizing the government. The background for the Minister's reluctance is said to be the critical environmental cooperation between Russia and Norway in the Barents Sea to safeguard the ecosystem, including the fish population. However, as some news agencies have [reported](#), it also has to do with the vital fishing industry in the north and the intertwined interests of Russia and Norway therein.

## **Other Areas of Contact**

Equinor, Norway's largest energy company, has, in addition to acting in compliance with Norwegian, EU, and US sanctions, decided to stop new investments into Russia and to start the process of exiting Equinor's Russian Joint Ventures. Equinor has been in Russia for over 30 years and entered a cooperation agreement with Rosneft in 2012. Similarly, Hydro announced that it will not enter into new contracts with Russian producers until further notice. It evaluates existing commitments' options, including a potential freeze of commercial relationships with Russian counterparts.

Other Norwegian major international companies like Telenor and Statskraft have not commented on the situation or their dealings with Russia. Yara, however, is highlighting the issue of food security and asking the international community to do more in this regard and, at the same time, lower the dependence on Russian supplies. Some private businesses in Norway have also initiated different boycotts of Russian goods and services.

Norwegian ski federation has banned Russian and Belarus athletes from participating in competitions in Norway, and the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports have been working towards their international headquarters to suspend all Russian and Belarus athletes from entering the international competition as well as Russian are suspended



from holding positions within different international sports organizations.

Within different interest organizations in the culture sector, there is an ongoing discussion regarding a boycott of Russia. That is, whether a sanction should be implemented for Russian theatre, opera, and art from performing in Norway and Russian artists from displaying their art.

Finally, about 1000 Ukrainian refugees have entered Norway as of March 11, and the government is preparing for many more to come. On March 4<sup>th</sup>, the government decided to offer temporary collective protection to Ukrainians, which provides an exemption from individual assessment and allows protection to an entire group of people. It practically means that displaced Ukrainians will not have to undergo a time-consuming process of individually reviewing their cases. The last time this was done in Norway was during the Kosovo conflict in the late 1990s.

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All in all, the reaction to the Russian war on Ukraine has been forceful, swift, and largely united the government, elite and expert communities, private business and culture institutions, as well as the general public. Moving forward, the debate regarding Norwegian ports might very well be next in line. However, it most likely will be one of the more difficult discussions given the potentially high impact on the fish industry and potential risks regarding the highly vulnerable ecosystem in the Barents Sea, where Russian and Norwegian interests are intertwined.



## **Siri Neset**

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