



European Commission - Speech [Check Against Delivery]



EVP Vestager speech at the Danish Association for European Law - "Europe in Denmark, Denmark in Europe: 50 years of EU membership"

Copenhagen, 9 January 2023

Introduction

Good afternoon.

And if it is not too late to say so, a Happy New Year. A year that marks 50 years of Danish membership in the EU. Two thirds of all Danes don't remember a time when they were not EU citizens. Even me, as I was four years old at the time we joined.

The EU is today an integrated part of our democracy. A system of cooperation that lets us find joint solutions, based on respect for our democracy, human rights, free social market economies, cohesion and equal rights for all citizens in our member states.

In Danish politics, Europe is with us every day. In almost all topics discussed, there is a European angle.

The EU is a club with 27 members, who cooperate to find solutions for the 'common best'. And in a club, it is also necessary to be able to look beyond your own interests. Of course we compromise, but the cynics often seem to miss the obvious fact: It's not a zero-sum game.

It's interesting to go back to the discussions people had 50 years ago, on the eve of our accession. There was a lot of scepticism at the time. Some worried that as a small country, we would lose our sense of Danish-ness. Others worried that our political voice would be drowned out by the Germans and French - that Brussels would decide everything. Still others worried that the cost of paying into the EU budget would hamstring our economy.

What Europe does for Denmark

After 50 years, it's right to ask ourselves: Has any of that happened?

First let's take 'Danish-ness'. I think it is fair to conclude that we are today every bit as Danish as we were 50 years ago. In fact, we've even made it into an export - '*hygge*' has become an international by-word for cosiness since entering into the English language in 2016. Our liberal policies have led the way to social change - as the first country in the world to provide same-sex couples with the rights and benefits of marriage in 1989. This change opened the door to same-sex marriage in 33 countries.

And far from losing our political voice, Brussels has given it a megaphone. Within the Union, Denmark has consistently punched above its weight - a good example was the negotiations around the Pesticides Package in 2006, when Denmark together with Sweden and Luxemburg pushed against larger countries to successfully impose tougher standards for pesticides, protecting public health and the environment^[1].

Internationally, Danish Commissioners, MEPs, and staff in Brussels have led the charge on a number of ground-breaking issues - making an impact we never would have been able to achieve without EU membership. Just think of Commissioner Connie Hedegaard's work on Climate Policy that paved the way for the Paris agreement; or the historic work of Commissioner Poul Nielson in brokering the Cotonou Agreement in 1999, a major milestone in EU-Africa relations. Not to mention the work of Commissioner Henning Christophersen, one of the key architects of the euro.

Finally, our economy. Has it suffered under EU membership? In 2021, Danish trade with fellow EU countries has increased to record heights, even despite the pandemic. Denmark's trade balance remains positive, showing the benefits of EU membership for Danish exports. At the same time, access to cheaper EU imports has also helped to curb inflation in Denmark. In 1973 when Denmark joined, inflation was 12%, well ahead of Sweden at 7.5%. Seven years later, after Denmark had joined and Sweden had not, the Danish inflation fell even as Sweden's rose to 14%. This was thanks to downward price pressure from EU imports, especially from Germany.

And the fact that the Danish Krone is tied to the euro guarantees a high degree of exchange rate stability. That provides real value to our industries, year after year. Ultimately this about the well-being of people. Disposal income of Danish households continues to rise - faster than in most other EU countries.

Then there are the not-so-little things we simply take for granted. Like not having to put up with border crossings and passport controls – in most countries. Not having to pay customs duties on birthday presents or delivery orders from a neighbouring country. To say nothing of the opportunities Danes enjoy when they work, study and travel across Europe, all hassle free.

This is probably why support for the EU has been steadily increasing in Denmark. In the Seventies, we were reluctant Europeans.

By 2018, Danish opinions of the EU had improved at a new high level. More than two thirds of Danes believed the EU was a good thing^[2] - a record number at the time. Now, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, precedents are being broken again, with Denmark's decision to drop its opt-out on the EU common defense policy.

We need European unity, more than ever. That can come in the form of protecting our Single Market and our economic interests from the aggressive protectionism of China and others - just think about the EU's new Foreign Subsidies Regulation, designed to protect our Single Market from unfair subsidies from overseas. Or the EU Chips Act, which will safeguard supply chains for semiconductors.

European unity can also take the form of a stronger and more meaningful common defence policy, giving Europe the tools to stand up to the ruthless aggression of the Kremlin, among others.

Whatever way you look at it, there is no solution for Denmark that does not involve a strong role within the Union.

What Denmark does for Europe

None of this is very surprising. After all, I think most Danes know that the EU is good for Denmark.

Obviously, there is always a power balance in Brussels. With all the competing interests and coalitions, EU politics is like playing six dimensional Sudoku: big countries and small ones. Liberal, socialist and conservative. Northern Europe and Southern Europe. Western and Eastern. Fiscal hawks and doves. Free market and interventionist.

The point is, Denmark has a part to play in that calculus, but that is just the most obvious part of our contribution. If you look deeper into the machinery of the EU, Danish voices are always making themselves heard. You will find the staff from Danish ministries, participating in countless working groups and committees, what is called 'comitology' in Brussels-speak. It is a slow process of mutual learning, where civil servants exchange expertise behind the scenes, with the Commission acting as a sort of referee.

Politics is the art of compromise. This goes for parliaments and when governments have to find a majority for their proposals. This is also the case in the EU with 27 members. It is no use to only fight for the best for one country in each and every case. And I have seen time and again how Danes have looked not only to solve their own problem, but also find a solution that could solve the problems for other countries. Just as governments have to bend and find compromises in national matters. In a club you have common rules. They need to be respected, especially when they concern democracy, human rights and rule of law. These are not open to compromise. The conflicts and crisis that we have witnessed in the last years have shown us the importance of standing shoulder to shoulder on our values and principles.

Naturally, the court system also influences here. As a member, Denmark, like any member state, has to abide to the laws of the EU. And the EU laws takes precedence over the national law.

Conclusion

I know these times of crisis are putting us to a test. That is clear. But if you look at how we are responding, it is just as clear that we are passing this test. There are disagreements, but that is how the EU has always worked. And with so much turbulence, it is to be expected.

Much more important is the sense of solidarity and common purpose we are showing - whether that is in our united response to Putin's aggression, in our collective efforts to decarbonise our economies, or in the positive partnerships we are building with likeminded countries across the world.

Because even in dark times, we see the European Union working to find joint solutions for the common best.

Thank you.

[1] See Panke, D (2012) "[Being small in a big Union: Punching above their weights?](#)"

[2] [Support for EU 'at record level' in Denmark \(thelocal.dk\)](#)

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