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Highlights in EFTA's History

[Previous](#) / [Next](#) / [Overview](#)

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1960s

The "outer 7" (Austria, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK) established EFTA as an economic counterbalance to the more politically driven "inner 6" of the EEC (France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux). Focus was on free trade in industrial products between the EFTA Member States, i.e., intra-EFTA free trade. Finland joined EFTA (1961).

1970s

Iceland joined EFTA (1970). The UK and Denmark left EFTA to join the EC (1973). Norway said "no" to EC membership in a referendum and remained in EFTA. The focus for the EFTA States was the conclusion of Free Trade Agreements with the EC. In 1977, tariffs on industrial goods were fully dismantled and a West European free trade system of 18 countries was established.

1980s

The EC presented its ambitious project of developing a fully integrated internal market governed by the four freedoms. The first EFTA-EC ministerial meeting (Luxembourg, 1984) adopted a declaration on extended co-operation and EFTA agreed to continue with EC-EFTA relations in parallel with developments on the EU side. Commission President Jacques Delors proposed a European Economic Area with more structured arrangements in trade and common institutions (1989). Portugal left EFTA to join the EC (1986).

1990s

Formal negotiations for an EEA Agreement started (June 1990). The EEA Agreement was signed in Oporto (2 May 1992) and entered into force (1 January 1994). Switzerland voted against EEA membership (1992), Liechtenstein became an EEA member while Sweden, Finland and Austria left EFTA to become EU members (1995).

2000s

EEA enlargement negotiations were undertaken and completed (January-July 2003). The European Union and the EEA were enlarged with ten new Member States (from 1 May 2004).