

Interview with Veli Sundbäck on the end of the negotiations on the EEA from EFTA Bulletin (July-December 1991)

Caption: In autumn 1991, in an article in the monthly publication EFTA Bulletin, Veli Sundbäck, Junior Minister in the Finnish Foreign Ministry, outlines the difficulties surrounding the final stage of negotiations held with the representatives of the European Communities during the night of 21 to 22 October 1991 in Luxembourg in order to reach a conclusion on the European Economic Space (EES), later to become the European Economic Area (EEA).

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He conducted the final stretch of the EEA negotiations

"It was indeed complicated to solve this puzzle which had so many pieces", comments Veli Sundbäck, Finnish chief negotiator who was also EFTA's chief negotiator during the final phase of the EEA negotiations. He also reveals that while the EFTA ministers were still considering the last text on the negotiating table in Luxembourg in the early hours of Tuesday 22 October "to my great surprise I heard that the EC side had already started to celebrate the result with champagne".

A tense atmosphere prevailed in the early hours of 22 October - just before the EEA Agreement was concluded. In foreground, Eivinn Berg, Norway's chief negotiator and Head of the Norwegian Permanent Mission to the EC in Brussels and Veli Sundbäck, Finnish chief negotiator and Undersecretary of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Finland; facing them, Thorvald Stoltenberg, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Norway; Eldrid Nordbo Minister for Trade and Shipping of Norway; Einar Bull, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Norway and Jonas Gahr Store, Special Adviser, Prime Minister's Office, Norway.

1. What issues were most complicated to solve for you as EFTA's chief negotiator during the final stretch of the EEA negotiations?

The EEA is a comprehensive agreement consisting of numerous elements, which taken together have to bring about a balance of rights and obligations as well as of benefits and concessions. It was indeed complicated to try to solve this puzzle of many pieces. There was another, slightly disturbing element in the negotiations, which became more and more apparent towards the end when final compromises were drawn. Our negotiating partner on the EC side was the Commission, but it had to take into account the wishes of the member states. Of course, it was not always easy to combine the different positions on the EFTA side either. As to the individual issues at the very end of the negotiations, fish and transit were perhaps most difficult from the chairman's point of view. Since they were mainly discussed in the bilateral context we did not always have a full control over the situation.

2. There were some bilateral elements in the EEA negotiations, for instance fisheries. In what way did this complicate your work as a chief negotiator?

On fish, the important element of access to EC markets was of course a common EFTA matter. But since the EC side had linked its concessions in this issue to its demands for fishing rights which were an entirely bilateral issue, it was not easy for the chairman to play an active role in trying to solve this question. The transit issue was purely bilateral and our efforts were mainly limited to extending pleas to both sides for an early solution.

3. During that long last negotiation round in Luxembourg, at what stage were you yourself sure that the agreement was certain?

On my arrival in Luxembourg I had quite positive and hopeful expectations. It was a good sign that this parallel meeting had been convened. Everybody knew that this would be the last chance. But there still were quite a number of open questions left. I could be sure about the successful conclusion of the negotiations only at the very end after the difficulties in fish and transit had been solved.

4. Was there any moment during your crucial period as EFTA's chief negotiator, when you almost or completely lost hope for an agreement?

Personally, I felt great disappointment that we were not able to solve the open issues at the end of July. But it was evident that time had run out then. Despite the disappointment I kept saying to myself: "This must succeed, nobody can afford a failure". On Sunday evening in Luxembourg I again became pessimistic having listened to all the requests from our EFTA friends and to the very tough position of the Commission.

5. What were your feelings when you left the EFTA meeting room and went upstairs to the Dutch chairman's reception to celebrate the conclusion of the EEA agreement with a glass of champagne?

At the very end of the negotiations the EFTA ministers were still having their meeting and considering the last text on the table when to my great surprise I heard that the EC side had already started to celebrate the results with champagne. One cannot give too many "artistic points" for that. Fortunately the contents of the last compromise solutions were satisfactory to us and we could join our EC partners in the celebrations. In spite of the hasty last moves, my feelings were relief and satisfaction when I slowly began to understand that the long and difficult negotiations had really come to a successful conclusion.