

# THE UK AND THE EUROPEAN ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

Practical considerations on closer cooperation



January 2026

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## BACKGROUND



**T**his briefing is part of a series that is exploring the merits of the UK re-engaging with, or ultimately re-joining the European Environment Agency (EEA) and its country network, Eionet. The first paper in 2024 outlined the benefits of re-engagement with these bodies.<sup>1</sup> These can be summarised as follows:

- ∞ Many environmental challenges and resources do not respect boundaries, and managing these should be done collectively.
- ∞ Many European nations offer the most similar geographies and demographics to the UK. With many tackling the same problems, we can learn from, if not cooperate on, policies to address these particularly on those areas where EU policies are now more ambitious.
- ∞ By collecting comparative data and outcomes of our respective approaches we can better understand the effectiveness of our current approaches in the UK.
- ∞ The economic value of data is growing in our increasingly digital world. Having access to and participation in the uptake and use of new monitoring techniques and high-value European data sets can have secondary benefits for the UK economy.
- ∞ EEA's involvement in Copernicus on land monitoring and in situ data collection provides opportunities for synergies. Similarly the EEA has a mandate to bring results from EU research programmes including Horizon, of which the UK is now a member again, to assist policy.<sup>2</sup> Therefore arguably rejoining the EEA and Eionet, would help maximise the value of the UK's existing research contributions by improving the relevance of the findings to policy making.

The purpose of this briefing is to build on this earlier paper and set out:

1. **Forms of cooperation** – a list of the various forms of cooperation that the UK could learn lessons from, with an analysis of their pros and cons.
2. **Costs of cooperation** – an analysis of the costs involved of cooperation.
3. **Time of negotiation** - an analysis of the time taken by recent countries to negotiate an agreement with the EEA.

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1 See: IEEP UK Policy Briefing, 'The case for closer cooperation with European partners on environmental data and information' (2024) <https://ieep.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/EEA-EIONET-Briefing.pdf> & M. Nicholson, (2023) 'Bridging the Gap: Understanding UK environmental data and reporting outside the EU', Policy Report, Institute for European Environmental Policy, UK [https://ieep.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Bridging-the-Gap\\_Understanding-UK-environmental-data-and-reporting-outside-the-EU.pdf](https://ieep.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Bridging-the-Gap_Understanding-UK-environmental-data-and-reporting-outside-the-EU.pdf)

2 Article 2 (o) of the EEA Regulation (No. 401/2009) states: to assist the Commission in the diffusion of information on the results of relevant environmental research and in a form which can best assist policy development.

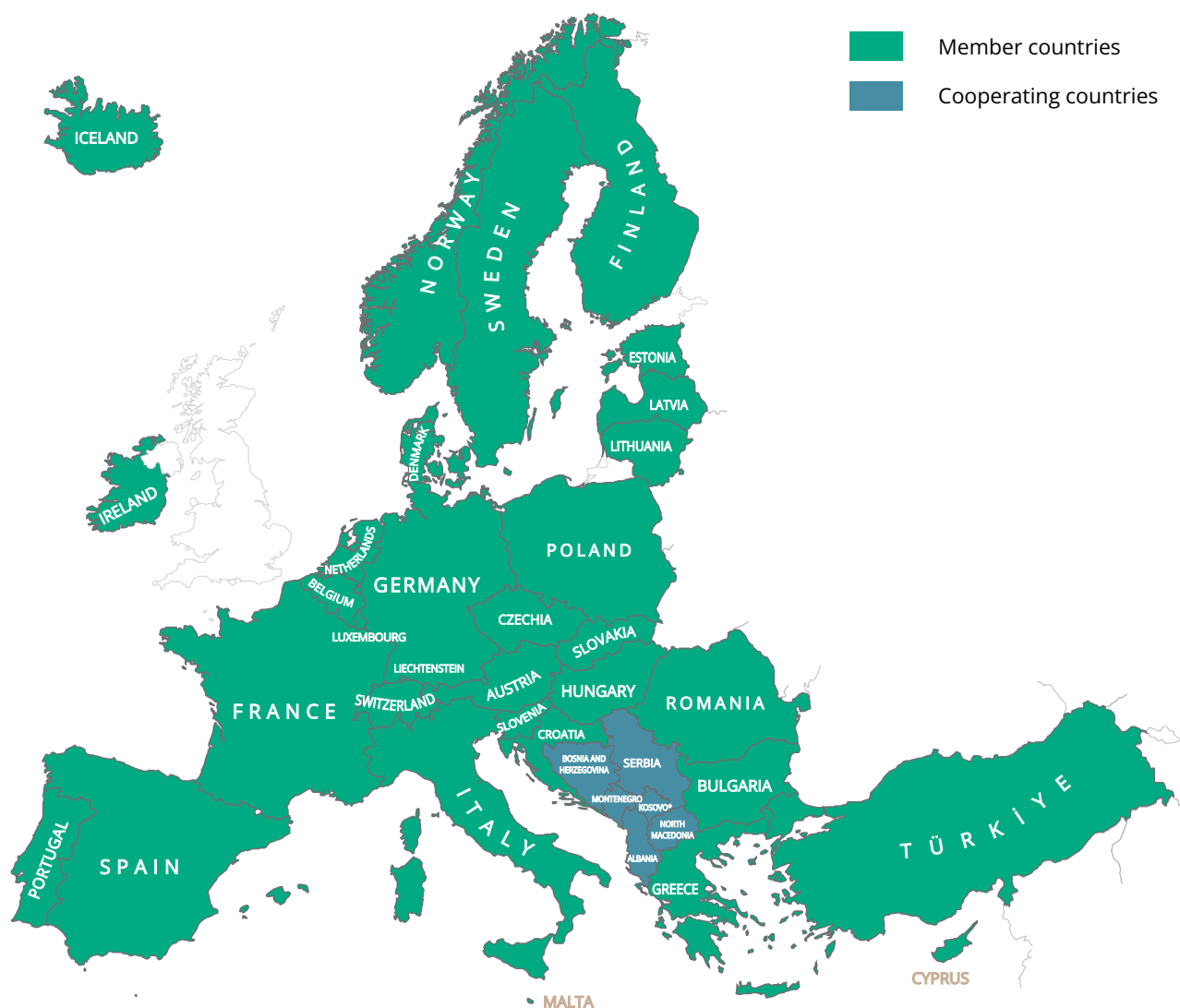




# INTRODUCTION

**T**he UK was a founder member of the European Environment Agency in 1993 but exited the organisation in 2021. The then Conservative Government decided to leave the EEA when the UK left the European Union despite the two issues not being directly linked – in other words, membership of the EEA is not predicated on EU membership, it is a *European* organisation. There are 32 member countries (5 of which are non-EU member countries) with a further 6 cooperating countries (all West Balkan/non EU). It was established by EU Regulation but is open to non-EU countries because environmental issues do not respect political borders.

## EEA members and cooperating countries, 22 June 2022



\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

After more than 25 years of intense cooperation, there is now little active and/or formal cooperation between technical environmental experts in the UK with their counterparts in the EEA or Eionet. This paper looks at the varying options for moving from the current 'standing still' position to a more active and participatory stance. It also recognises that in the UK's scientific and technical agencies and authorities there is a significant wealth of expertise and experience on data gathering and analysis that is highly praised and valued by other countries in Europe.

Indeed, there should be support from the EEA in the UK re-joining EEA/Eionet, particularly in tackling transboundary pollution and shared resources and habitats like those in the North Sea. Historically, the UK contributed high-quality expertise to Eionet, and its absence may have weakened the network's capacity. The EEA operates in English and covers areas where the UK has strong capabilities.

Please note that the acronym EEA is used throughout to denote the European Environment Agency, and any reference to the European Economic Area for example in the context of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) is spelt out. For example Switzerland is an EFTA country, but does not belong to the European Economic Area 'EFTA-EEA'.



# FORMS OF COOPERATION

**Table 1** Forms of Cooperation

			Description	Pros	Cons
Full membership	1a.	Membership EU Member State  'EU member model'	Applies to EU 27	Seat on EEA Management Board with full voting rights.  Membership fees paid on their behalf by European Commission as an EU subsidy	
	1b.	Membership Non-EU Member States  EFTA European Economic Area model'	Applies to Iceland, Liechtenstein & Norway.	Seat on EEA Management Board with restricted voting rights, but still able to participate in debates and thus influence steer of workplans and strategic direction of organisation.	No voting rights on EEA Management Board concerning use of EU subsidy.  Membership fees not received as part of EU subsidy but payable to EEA via EU EFTA model agreement.
	1c.	Membership Non-EU Member State  'Turkey/Swiss model'	Applies to Switzerland & Turkey	Seat on EEA Management Board with restricted voting rights, but still able to participate in debates and thus influence steer of workplans and strategic direction of organisation.  Not required to deliver information defined under the EU's <i>Acquis Communautaire</i>	No voting rights on EEA Management Board concerning use of EU subsidy.  Membership fees not received as part of EU subsidy.

**Table 1** Forms of Cooperation (cont.)

			Description	Pros	Cons
Cooperation Agreement	2a.	'Cooperating Countries'  'Balkans model'	Applies to West Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and "Kosovo" <sup>3</sup>	Access to scientific community of experts via Eionet. Can participate in peer to peer scientific/technical projects at their own cost.  Participation in Eionet and Eionet meetings means that influence can be brought to bear on implementation of workplans and identifying future priorities.	No seat on EEA Management Board and hence no voting rights.
	2b.	Bespoke UK deal  A new 'UK/ EEA model' ?	A bespoke agreement for the UK which falls short of full membership of the EEA?	Access to Eionet meetings and hence the technical experts across environmental issues in all the 32 EEA member countries. Access to up to date environmental expertise, data and information from across Europe. Ability to contribute UK data to future Environmental assessments so the UK does not appear anymore as a blank unknown space on the map. Ability to make accurate comparisons of UK progress on environment issues against other European Countries.	Unlikely, without full membership, to have a seat on EEA Management Board with voting rights. Some form of fee payable to cover part of the running costs of EEA/Eionet.

<sup>3</sup> The designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.



## What could renewed cooperation between the UK and EEA/Eionet look like?

The different possible forms of cooperation discussed below are based on the existing settings and structures that have been put in place over the past 30 years to allow the widest possible membership and cooperation with non-EU countries as foreseen by the EEA/Eionet establishing Regulation. All negotiations about such arrangements are led by the European Commission.

**Membership** – Aiming for a return to membership would signal the highest possible level of intent with regard to the UK re-entering the family of European countries and their scientific and technical cooperation on the environment.

Should the UK want to do this however, the only likely arrangement open to it (barring the EU or EFTA route which this paper rules out) would be through some form of bilateral agreement such as the one Turkey or Switzerland (see 1c. in [Table 1](#)) negotiated in 2003 and 2004 respectively. A membership fee would be payable to help cover the running costs of the organisation (see [Costs of Cooperation](#)). Switzerland and Turkey are both represented on the Management Board of the EEA but do not have voting rights, which is also the case for Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, suggesting that this would be the same for the UK. Negotiations for full membership would therefore need to be commenced with that in mind.<sup>4</sup>

**Cooperation Agreement** – A less demanding and less formal discussion could be had with the EEA about some form of cooperation agreement with the EEA and Eionet which falls short of full membership, at least for a period of time.

Currently, several West Balkan countries already have such an agreement. Assuming that the UK would not wish or be encouraged to enter into the same agreement as the West Balkan countries, a bespoke agreement for the UK, modelled perhaps along similar lines, could be envisaged.

Such an agreement could reasonably be imagined to include:

- ∞ Access to the Eionet network and attendance of Eionet meetings across all issues;
- ∞ Access to the environmental data held by the EEA
- ∞ Ability to contribute UK environmental data to the EEA for inclusion in their databases
- ∞ Inclusion of the UK in future EEA environmental assessments.
- ∞ The hiring or secondment of UK National Experts.

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<sup>4</sup> Most decisions are made by consensus after wide debates, to which all members can contribute. Few decisions are made by voting and mainly regard formal decisions over the use of the EU subsidy. The impact on not having voting rights have to be weighed against the access that membership gives to the data, information and expertise in the network and influence on the work from the involvement of the UK and its experts.



## COSTS OF COOPERATION

**I**t is important to be clear what is meant by the 'costs of cooperation'. There are different 'costs' to be considered.

Depending on what form of cooperation is agreed upon, the main or most significant determiner would likely be a 'membership fee' to contribute to the running costs of the EEA. Presently, membership fees of EU Member States are paid on their behalf by the European Commission to the EEA as part of an annual 'subsidy', with membership fees of other non-EU members paid separately.

Membership fees for the most recent non-EU member countries of the EEA pay the most, equating to roughly €2 million per year. The size of the fee appears rather arbitrary on first glance but this has partly to do with history. As founding members of the EEA in 1992, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway negotiated a favourable fee level. Turkey on the other hand, joined in 2003 and has had several years of tapered fees.<sup>5</sup>

The calculation for new members fee is based partly on a combination of the country's GDP and population size, but may be complicated by other negotiations.

As the UK is a larger country in per capita terms, some estimates suggest the UK's potential EEA contribution could be between £5–9 million, given the Agency's total budget of €100 million, and the unlikelihood that it would be less than the Turkish contribution of €3m. Understanding what the relative UK contribution is for Copernicus (compared to other nations) would be useful preparation for discussions about EEA/Eionet.

As EU member states contribute to the running costs of the EEA and Eionet through the overall grants which they pay into the European Union budget, we do not consider their contributions below.

- ∞ Iceland pays ~ €100,000 per year.
- ∞ Liechtenstein pays ~ €2 million per year.
- ∞ Norway pays ~ €375,000 per year.
- ∞ Switzerland pays ~ €2 million per year.
- ∞ Turkey pays ~ €3million per year.

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<sup>5</sup> For several years, the European Commission subsidised Turkey's membership fees but this financial support gradually wound down to €0.

## Other costs

Other costs to consider would include the cost of re-establishing and maintaining sufficient human and technical capacity in one's own administrative agencies (e.g. Environment Agency & Natural England) to collect, analyse and transmit compatible data and information to the EEA and Eionet and to take part in collective activities. As any such agreement with the EEA/Eionet would be at a State level – a UK level – this would mean that capacity in all four parts of the UK would be needed if it were not in place currently, to ensure that overall UK data and information on the state of the environment was as robust as possible.

Participating countries in EEA and Eionet activities routinely send seconded national experts for periods of time to EEA headquarters in Copenhagen. This is considered a major benefit for some countries, such as Turkey, as a way to both raise the status of its national contribution and to better draw on the learning from other nations. While salaries and some other minor expenses are paid by the home country, the EEA often pays for additional living costs in Denmark which can be comparatively high.

## NEGOTIATION TIME



**M**ost examples of European nations negotiating to join the EEA have been caught up in wider negotiations around EU membership, with a few exceptions. Iceland, Liechtenstein & Norway were part of the discussions on the initial set up of the EEA, and as such are not a useful comparison. Switzerland is perhaps the most useful parallel as the discussions were not caught up in wider discussions about joining the EU, as would be the case with discussions about the UK. They did still take 4–5 years and were still part of negotiations on other matters (see [Case Study](#)).

There are similar elements to the process taken by Switzerland and Turkey that would likely be faced by the UK, namely a pre-negotiation phase followed by formal proceedings with the EU (rather than directly with the EEA). Some degree of cooperation is likely during the negotiation phase on membership, whether as a formal cooperating country, e.g. Switzerland during its interim status of being an EEA cooperating country, or in some limited or bespoke forms of cooperation, e.g. Turkey's 'enhanced cooperation agenda'.

Some time will need to be allowed for domestic engagement, as shown by the Turkish and Swiss examples. This would likely include Parliamentary engagement, which is advisable for getting buy-in, although it is not clear that this would be legally necessary. Also, buy-in from the UK (and devolved) agencies is essential to ensure the costs, practicalities and benefits of renewed engagement are factored in.



## NEXT STEPS

**T**o make the case for rejoining, the question of value for money may need further work on the quantitative return on investment to sit alongside the other benefits made already. There will need to be further work on the practicalities of collecting data to meet the requirements of the EEA from across the four UK nations. However having been a member until recently, these should not be significantly different for more long standing data streams. Moreover, considering the Swiss and Turkish negotiations took many years, these are details that can be explored within that period rather than a cause for delaying the UK Government formally signalling its interest in exploring a closer relationship with the EEA and Eionet.



## Switzerland's Path to EEA Membership

**Switzerland's journey toward cooperation and eventual membership of the European Environment Agency (EEA) offers a valuable case study for countries like the UK considering re-engagement with European environmental structures. Switzerland began its involvement with the EEA before formal negotiations began, participating in experts working groups and contributing a national expert to the initial development of the EEA. This early engagement helped establish trust and familiarity in Switzerland with EEA mechanisms.**

Initially, Switzerland and Monaco (who applied at the same time) were designated as 'cooperating countries', a status that lasted five years. Switzerland eventually transitioned to full membership, while Monaco did not (because of its own specific issues).

Under Article 19 of the EEA's founding regulation, any third country that shares the EU's environmental objectives can participate in EEA/Eionet. Switzerland, though part of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), is not part of the European Economic Area. Unlike Norway and other EFTA countries, Switzerland had to find its own route to cooperation, as at first it could not formally engage with the EEA.

In 2001, Switzerland held bilateral negotiations with the EU, focusing on environment and labelling. These talks received high-level political approval and led to Switzerland's inclusion in a pan-European environmental report, though not in the EU's *State of the Environment* report. The EEA itself was not directly involved in these negotiations, which were conducted by the European Commission in Brussels.



## ***Financial Contributions and Budget Considerations***

Switzerland's financial contribution to the EEA was calculated based on population and GDP, similar to EU member states. For the UK, understanding its current contribution to Copernicus and other EU programmes such as Horizon could provide useful comparative insights.

After negotiations, the agreement required signature and ratification by all member states – a process that took two years.

## ***Operational Integration and Obligations***

During its cooperating phase (2001–2006), Switzerland became familiar with Eionet and EEA mechanisms, easing its transition to full membership. Full members are expected to nominate national experts for each topic and contribute to cross-topic collaboration, which has become even more integrated since the UK's departure from the EU.

This collaborative model allows countries to draw on each other's expertise, offering opportunities for national organisations to engage, particularly through programmes like Copernicus. Member obligations include: annual financial contributions; and nominating Management Board representatives, National Focal Points, and 25–30 experts. These numbers may change with future EEA strategies.

Priority data flows are approved by the EEA Management Board and become binding obligations. However, like some countries, Switzerland does not share all environmental data, particularly in areas like climate and energy, as these are part of the EU's *Acquis Communautaire*, which does not apply to Switzerland. In some cases, this is due to less relevant expertise or in the case of data on waste and nature restoration, Swiss data are not compatible with EU standards.

In terms of legal implications, data shared through the EEA is not used in legal proceedings. Greenhouse gas (GHG) reporting is governed by a global UN convention, which both the UK and Switzerland adhere to. However, there is no similar framework for water data. Swiss water data is high quality but incompatible with the EU's Water Framework Directive. Switzerland spends around 0.5 million Swiss francs to convert its data to EU standards.

## ***Political and Strategic Engagement***

Swiss membership in the EEA grants its environment minister access to biannual informal meetings with EU ministers. These meetings offer a unique opportunity to engage with the European Commission in an informal setting, allowing directors to discuss emerging legislation and challenges. Such access would be unavailable without EEA membership and could be a valuable model for UK engagement.

## ***Environmental Negotiations Within Broader Political Contexts***

Environmental issues were not central to market access negotiations but were included in a broader package of topics negotiated by Switzerland. These included transport, banking, statistics, education, and research. While not politically dominant, environmental matters were

still significant enough to be part of the negotiation framework.

The pre-negotiation phase was unique, but the formal process followed standard procedures. In other regions, such as the Western Balkans, the EU has shifted its stance on whether EEA membership is part of the accession process. The UK's situation resembles Switzerland's, as EEA membership was not part of an EU accession process.

In Switzerland, parliamentary involvement was crucial. Environmental issues were included in a referendum tied to the Schengen agreement. Swiss authorities are required to report back to Parliament on progress in their European relationships, including with the EEA.

### ***Governance and Voting Rights***

Despite lacking voting rights on the EEA Management Board, Switzerland has not experienced discrimination. Decisions are made by consensus in closed sessions, and all countries can influence outcomes informally, such as during the election of the EEA Executive Director.

### ***Benefits of EEA Membership***

Switzerland has seen tangible benefits from EEA membership. Harmonised reporting standards have improved the quality of Swiss environmental data. Cross-border issues, such as with Italy regarding air pollution and water quality in shared lakes, are easier to address with compatible data. The EEA also provides access to a rich knowledge base, which supports policy development.

### ***Flexibility and Eionet Participation***

Switzerland and other countries such as Turkey benefit from flexibility in reporting obligations. They are not required to respond to all calls for information, a feature negotiated with the EEA. However, some data sharing remains essential, especially for harmonising standards in areas like carbon emissions.

Participation in Eionet does not require full EEA membership. Cooperating countries can join Eionet, which is often where the most practical value lies. Switzerland has benefited from satellite data via Copernicus, especially during recent environmental crises in mountainous regions. Public awareness of these benefits is growing, even if citizens are unaware of the data's origins.

### ***Implications for the UK***

Since the UK is not seeking membership of the EU, the Swiss example is useful. It shows how being outside the EU does not per se prevent involvement in EEA/Eionet activities before concluding negotiations. It depends more on what contributions from the UK could be perceived as being useful for EEA/Eionet.

Moreover, the way that Swiss membership grants its environment minister access to biannual informal meetings with EU ministers is a valuable model for UK engagement, since such access would be unavailable without EEA engagement.



## Turkey's Membership in the EEA: Process, Challenges, and Strategic Insights

**Turkey joined the European Environment Agency (EEA) in 2003, following a lengthy and complex negotiation process that ran in parallel with broader discussions around EU membership. While environmental issues were politically less sensitive than other topics, such as market access or banking, the process still required approval from Turkey's national parliament. This political endorsement was relatively straightforward, as environmental cooperation was seen as beneficial and non-controversial.**

The negotiation process unfolded in two distinct contexts: political/administrative and technical. Politically, the Ministry of Environment paid the necessary fees, and the agreement was implemented without major hurdles. Technically, however, the process was more challenging. Turkish agencies had to be convinced of the value of EEA membership, and the EEA itself was initially resistant, given Turkey's non-EU status and the complexity of its institutional structures. It took time for both sides to align on the importance of environmental cooperation and Turkey's role within the Agency.

### *Cooperation During Negotiations and Eionet Participation*

Unlike the West Balkan countries, which were involved in Eionet at a very early stage before becoming Eionet members (still not being EEA members), Turkey did not systematically participate in Eionet until its EEA membership was signed off. However, Turkish representatives did attend high-level meetings and a Turkish scientist was appointed to the EEA Scientific Committee well before membership was agreed, indicating a willingness to engage. The operational challenge lay in integrating Turkey's diverse and complex institutional structures into the EEA's streamlined processes.

To address this, a bespoke 'enhanced cooperation agenda' was developed. This document

outlined the interests of Turkish agencies and the support the EEA could offer, helping both sides identify common priorities and establish a shared language for collaboration.

### ***Financial Contributions and Operational Costs***

Turkey's annual membership fee is approximately €3 million, calculated based on population and GDP. This figure represents around 10% of the EEAs budget, although the proportion has decreased as the overall EEA budget has grown. In addition to financial contributions, Turkey incurs in-kind costs, such as sending experts to meetings. Due to its institutional diversity, Turkey often sends two participants per meeting, whereas most countries send one. Initially, the EEA covered these costs to facilitate Turkey's integration.

Data reporting is another significant cost. Although Turkey is not an EU member, it is expected to follow EU regulations in areas like circular economy and bathing water. Monitoring, reporting and preparing data require substantial effort. Countries that do not report miss out on the benefits of sharing this information and making comparable assessments. Turkey has the flexibility to choose which areas to report on, based on political priorities and technical capacity. There are no sanctions for non-reporting, but the absence of specific monitoring programmes can limit engagement and non-reporting is made visible.

### ***Alternative Models and Political Context***

Turkey did not explore lower-tier cooperation models akin to those used by Balkan countries. The political stakes of EU membership meant that full EEA membership was the only option considered. Other forms of cooperation, such as those between Turkey and the Joint Research Centre (JRC), were inspired by Turkey's EEA membership and facilitated through its permanent delegation to the EU. These collaborations allowed Turkish experts to participate in Commission services and scientific initiatives.

### ***Challenges and Institutional Dynamics***

One of the key challenges has been internal scepticism in Turkey, with some questioning, after a few years in the EEA, the relevance of EEA membership and consideration of withdrawal (prompted also by the gradual increased costs of membership to Turkey and the evolution of Turkish politics). This highlighted the importance of selecting national leads who understand the EEAs remit and can advocate for its value. In Turkey's case, the presence of seconded national experts working at the EEA helped build institutional support. These were specifically requested by the Turkish authorities to strengthen links when confronted with internal opposition to membership. Turkish experts are now highly active and valued within the EEA, with more seconded national expert applications coming from Turkey than from any other country.

Concerns about value for money are more common among non-EU members like Turkey, Switzerland, and Norway than among EU countries. The benefits of EEA membership vary by country, depending on how effectively they engage with the Agency and successfully leverage its resources.

## Voting Rights and Governance

Turkey does not have voting rights on the EEA Management Board, though it can attend all meetings. Voting is limited to specific decisions, such as selecting the chair and EEA Executive Director. Historically, voting also applied to European Topic Centres, but this approach is evolving. A revision of the rules of procedure may grant equal voting rights to all EEA member countries, although this has not yet been confirmed. Overall, the lack of voting rights has not posed significant practical issues.

## Benefits to Turkey and the EU

Turkey has gained several benefits from EEA membership. Politically, it produces a national environmental report aligned with the EEA's *State and Outlook* report, enhancing public awareness and providing useful references for environmental debates. Turkish experts involved in EEA activities contribute to regional and international projects, including in the Western Balkans, and bring this expertise back to Turkey. Their high profile within the EEA strengthens Turkey's influence and visibility.

Bilateral discussions between Turkey and other EEA members allow for targeted collaboration on specific issues. Turkey also contributes to country case studies in EEA reports, further integrating its expertise into European environmental assessments.

From the EU's perspective, Turkey's membership enhances the quality and scope of environmental reporting. Turkey uses EEA frameworks and indicators to assess progress, and its participation in the network improves mutual understanding of environmental challenges and solutions.

## Flexibility in Data Sharing and Reporting

Like Switzerland, Turkey enjoys flexibility in reporting obligations. This was not formally agreed at the outset but has evolved over time. For example, Turkey reports on nationally protected areas but has discretion over how and where this data is shared. In some cases, data is only used internally by the EEA for assessments, while in others, it is shared publicly or privately with international bodies like UNEP.

Some member countries have requested that specific data not be published, and the EEA accommodates these preferences. The Agency also reports on behalf of countries to international bodies including Eurostat, saving members time and resources.

## Implications for the UK

Turkey's experience highlights the importance of institutional design and clarity in roles when engaging with the EEA. For the UK, establishing clear structures for reporting and interaction – especially with agencies like the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) – will be crucial. While the Commission may have non-negotiable requirements, the EEA tends to be more flexible and solution-oriented, making bespoke arrangements possible.

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