

Nordic Soft Power and Eastern European Absence: Analysing the Strategic Role of Scandinavia and Romania's Exclusion from the 2025 Gaza Peace Summit

Dott. Ric. Cătălin-Gabriel Done

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Introduction

The 2025 Gaza Peace Summit, held in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, represented a renewed international attempt to stabilise the Middle East after a prolonged period of violence and humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Convened under the joint auspices of the United States and Egypt, the summit brought together global and regional leaders to consolidate a fragile ceasefire, coordinate humanitarian assistance, and develop a framework for post-conflict reconstruction. Although direct representatives from Israel and Hamas were notably absent, the gathering sought to advance multilateral cooperation and humanitarian coordination under what became known as the *Trump Declaration for Enduring Peace and Prosperity*².

Central to the summit's organisation and political momentum was the personal involvement of President Donald J. Trump and his presidential team³. Building upon the foundations of the Abraham Accords, which normalised relations between Israel and several Arab states earlier in his second administration⁴, President Trump's approach combined pragmatic diplomacy with a focus on economic interdependence and regional stabilisation. His participation in the Sharm El-Sheikh summit symbolised an effort to reinvigorate American leadership in the Middle East and to reunite Israeli and Arab stakeholders around a shared vision of security and reconstruction. The summit thus reflected both a continuation of Trump's earlier peace initiatives

¹ Author: **Dott. Ric. Cătălin-Gabriel Done**, Vice President of ESGA Romania, Expert in Nordic Security and Cooperation, e-mail: catalin-gabriel.done@esga.ro

² The White House, 'The Trump Declaration for Enduring Peace and Prosperity', 13 October 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/10/the-trump-declaration-for-enduring-peace-and-prosperity/>.

³ The White House, 'President Donald J. Trump's Comprehensive Plan to End the Gaza Conflict', 29 September 2025, <https://x.com/WhiteHouse/status/1972736025597219278>.

⁴ Meir Ben-Shabbat and David Aaronson, *The Abraham Accords, Two Years On: Impressive Progress, Multiple Challenges, and Promising Potential* (Institute for National Security Studies, 2022), JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep42590>.

and an attempt to forge a broader consensus in an increasingly fragmented geopolitical environment.

Among the European participants, Norway's presence was particularly significant, reaffirming its long-standing reputation as a credible mediator in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, a legacy rooted in its facilitation of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre's participation underscored Norway's sustained engagement in humanitarian assistance and post-war reconstruction in Gaza, as well as its capacity to operate across multiple diplomatic arenas. While Norway's traditional role as a neutral mediator remains widely recognised, some recent analyses – including commentary by Elliott Abrams – have highlighted debates over how Norway balances its humanitarian commitments with political engagement. These discussions suggest that, rather than abandoning impartiality, Norway is navigating the complex task of promoting human rights and international law while maintaining constructive dialogue with all parties involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict⁵. In stark contrast, **Romania's absence from the summit highlighted a visible decline in its diplomatic visibility and strategic agency**. Once regarded as a pragmatic interlocutor between East and West, Romania's non-participation illustrates a broader erosion of influence within contemporary conflict mediation frameworks.

This paper therefore examines two interrelated dimensions of the summit's diplomatic implications. Firstly, it analyses why Scandinavian countries – particularly Norway – continue to play strategic and respected roles in Middle Eastern peace processes, grounded in traditions of neutrality, humanitarian diplomacy, and institutional continuity. Secondly, it offers a critical reflection on Romania's exclusion, situating it within the broader context of Eastern Europe's diminished influence in global conflict resolution and the apparent reluctance of major powers, notably the United States, to acknowledge Romanian foreign policy as a credible contributor to high-level diplomacy.

The guiding question of this analysis is thus:

What does Norway's inclusion and Romania's exclusion from the 2025 Gaza Peace Summit reveal about the evolving hierarchy of small- and medium-state diplomacy in Europe?

⁵ Elliott Abrams, 'Norway: From Mediator to Persecutor of Israel', Council on Foreign Relations, 12 August 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/norway-mediator-persecutor-israel>.

Through this framework, our paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of how leadership vision, strategic coherence, and soft-power capacity determine the international relevance of smaller European states in twenty-first-century diplomacy.

The Strategic Logic Behind Scandinavian Involvement

Scandinavian countries have consistently demonstrated a strategic approach to international conflict mediation that combines diplomatic neutrality, humanitarian engagement, and multilateral cooperation^{6,7}. Their involvement in the Middle East, exemplified by participation in the 2025 Gaza Peace Summit, reflects a deliberate policy of leveraging soft power and credibility rather than coercive influence. By drawing on historical experience, established institutional frameworks, and carefully calibrated diplomatic strategies, Scandinavian states have been able to assert influence and maintain a constructive presence in complex international negotiations⁸.

To understand Norway's and the broader Scandinavian role in contemporary peace efforts, it is necessary to consider the historical roots of their engagement in the Middle East. The region's complex conflicts have long required not only high-level diplomacy but also the sustained involvement of credible, neutral actors capable of bridging entrenched divides⁹. Scandinavian countries, particularly Norway, have established a tradition of such engagement, combining principled diplomacy with practical mediation efforts that extend back several decades.

Norway's reputation as a credible mediator in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is firmly rooted in its facilitation of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Acting as a neutral intermediary, Norway hosted a series of negotiations that ultimately led to the first direct agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. The Oslo process not only established a precedent for small-state diplomacy in the Middle East but also demonstrated Norway's ability to combine discretion,

⁶ 'Mandates and Nordic Experiences in International Mediation', in *The Peacemaking Mandate: Nordic Experiences in International Mediation*, ed. Isak Svensson and Peter Wallensteen (Cambridge University Press, 2025), Cambridge Core, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009413923.002>.

⁷ Tarja Väyrynen, "The Higher Cause of Peace": What Could and Should the Nordic Countries Contribute to the Development of Conflict Mediation in the EU Context?', in *The Nordic Countries and the European Security and Defence Policy*, ed. Alyson J.K. Bailes et al. (Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁸ Nir Levitan, *Scandinavian Diplomacy and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Official and Unofficial Soft Power* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2024).

⁹ Ellie Geranmayeh, *Regional Geopolitical Rivalries in the Middle East: Implications for Europe* (Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 2018), JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19678>.

patience, and strategic engagement to achieve tangible political outcomes¹⁰. While maintaining its traditional neutrality, Norway has also formally recognised the State of Palestine¹¹, reflecting its commitment to supporting Palestinian self-determination within a framework of balanced diplomacy. This early involvement positioned Norway as a trusted actor capable of bridging significant political divides, a legacy that continues to shape its diplomatic posture today. Moreover, the combination of historical experience and regional diplomatic culture has enabled Scandinavian countries to maintain continuity and influence in peace initiatives, even as global geopolitics evolve¹²; therefore, Norway's enduring presence in Gaza-related negotiations, alongside the broader Scandinavian emphasis on humanitarian engagement, demonstrates how small and medium-sized states can leverage long-term credibility and principled diplomacy to exert meaningful impact in complex conflict environments.

A central pillar of Scandinavian involvement in international peace processes is the strategic use of soft power, grounded in moral authority and credibility rather than coercive military or economic influence¹³. Norway and its regional neighbours have cultivated reputations as principled, neutral actors, which allows them to participate effectively in sensitive negotiations where larger powers might be viewed as partisan or overly strategic. This perceived impartiality is crucial in building trust among conflicting parties and in establishing the conditions necessary for dialogue and compromise.

Complementing this diplomatic neutrality is a robust commitment to humanitarian aid and development assistance. Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, and Denmark consistently integrate humanitarian considerations into their foreign policy, supporting reconstruction, education, and health initiatives in conflict-affected areas. By linking material support with diplomatic engagement, Scandinavian states enhance their credibility and reinforce the perception that their involvement is driven by principled concern rather than strategic self-interest.

¹⁰ Si Liu, 'Redefining Global Influence: The Roles of Small States – Norway and Qatar in the Aftermath of the Russian-Ukraine War', *Comparative Strategy* 44, no. 2 (2025): 258–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2025.2456426>.

¹¹ Norwegian Government, 'Why We Recognized the State of Palestine', 2024, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/why-we-recognized-the-state-of-palestine/id3041269/>.

¹² Norwegian Government, 'Joint Statement on the Situation in Palestine', 2025, <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/joint-statement-on-the-situation-in-palestine/id3117373/>.

¹³ Ștefania Teodora Popa, 'Norway's Public and Cultural Diplomacy', *Journal of Global Politics and Current Diplomacy*, no. 1 (2015): 35–49.

Norway at the Forefront: Leadership in Scandinavian Peace Diplomacy

Norway's prominent role in Middle Eastern diplomacy is rooted in its unique mediator credentials, developed over decades of engagement¹⁴. Unlike its Scandinavian neighbours, Norway has cultivated deep and sustained relationships with both Israeli and Palestinian leadership, enabling it to serve as a trusted intermediary in times of tension. These connections, which stem in part from the Oslo process and subsequent peacebuilding efforts, provide Norwegian diplomats with credibility that few other states in the region – or Europe – can claim.

Such relationships allow Norway to facilitate communication channels that are often unavailable to other international actors. By maintaining dialogue with political leaders, civil society actors, and regional stakeholders, Norway ensures that its mediation efforts are informed, responsive, and grounded in local realities. This depth of connection positions Norway as a natural convenor and mediator in high-stakes negotiations.

Norway's recognition of the State of Palestine, coupled with its continued engagement in Israel-Palestinian diplomacy, underscores its balanced approach. By simultaneously supporting Palestinian self-determination and maintaining working relations with Israel, Norway strengthens its credibility as a neutral actor capable of bridging deeply entrenched political divides. However, this nuanced position is complicated by Norway's economic engagements. According to a recent report by Middle East Eye¹⁵, the Norwegian sovereign wealth fund, despite the country's publicly stated commitment to peace and human rights, holds investments in companies producing arms that have been used in conflicts such as the one in Gaza. This apparent tension between Norway's diplomatic principles and the financial activities of its state-managed assets raises questions about the consistency of its foreign policy. Furthermore, it is important to consider how this economic dimension interacts with Norway's diplomatic role. While the country has taken concrete steps to support Palestinian self-determination, its indirect financial links to military production could be perceived as undermining its neutral mediator image. This highlights the challenges faced by small

¹⁴ Norwegian Government, 'Tale På Universitetet i Oslo Om Norge i Midtøsten', 2022, https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/middleeast_engagement2/id2911708/.

¹⁵ Andrew Feinstein and Jack Cinamon, 'How Norway, Home of the Nobel Peace Prize, Profits from War in Gaza', *Middle East Eye*, 2025, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/how-norway-home-nobel-peace-prize-profits-war-gaza>.

states in balancing ethical foreign policy with economic interests, particularly in highly contested conflict zones.

However, Norway's operational engagement distinguishes it from other Scandinavian countries. Beyond high-level negotiation, Norway has consistently invested in on-the-ground humanitarian and reconstruction activities in Gaza and the West Bank. Through programmes that provide housing, medical support, and educational initiatives, Norway demonstrates that its involvement is not solely rhetorical but grounded in tangible action.

This operational engagement reinforces Norwegian diplomatic efforts by linking negotiation with concrete humanitarian outcomes. Such a dual approach enhances Norway's legitimacy in the eyes of both local communities and international partners, showing that the country's presence in peace processes is both principled and practical.

In addition, Norway's coordination of aid in partnership with international organisations and donor networks ensures that assistance is strategic, targeted, and sustainable. This integration of humanitarian work and diplomatic mediation exemplifies the Scandinavian model of combining soft power with tangible development contributions.

While Norwegian government plays a central role in Middle East peace diplomacy, other Scandinavian countries contribute in complementary ways. Sweden, for example, is recognised for its strong emphasis on human rights advocacy and long-standing support for Palestinian institutions¹⁶. However, Sweden's involvement tends to be less focused on direct mediation between conflicting parties, prioritising advocacy and institutional support instead.

Denmark and Finland, by contrast, maintain EU-focused foreign policies, emphasising multilateral cooperation and regional engagement rather than direct leadership in peace processes. While these countries participate in international discussions and provide humanitarian assistance, they do not carry the same level of historical or operational engagement in the Israeli–Palestinian context as Norway.

¹⁶ Regeringen, 'Strategy for Sweden's Development Cooperation with Palestine 2020–2024', 2020, 2020–2024, <https://www.government.se/contentassets/ea4c7fcef5494153bfeaffad964b7fc1/strategy-for-swedens-development-cooperation-with-palestine-20202024.pdf>.

It should be noted and acknowledged that Norway's sustained involvement also carries significant symbolic value. Its reputation as a "neutral moral broker" serves as a model for how small states can exert meaningful influence in global diplomacy. This symbolic role is reinforced by Norway's consistent policy approach, principled engagement, and integration of humanitarian and diplomatic strategies. The combination of credibility, operational commitment, and moral authority ensures that Norway is not only a mediator in practical terms but also a standard-bearer for principled small-state diplomacy. Its example demonstrates that states with modest economic or military power can achieve disproportionate impact through consistency, neutrality, and ethical engagement. It is precisely these qualities that led to Norway's invitation to participate in the 2025 Gaza Peace Summit in Egypt, where its role as a trusted intermediary and experienced facilitator was recognised as essential to fostering dialogue, coordinating humanitarian support, and contributing to the broader international effort to stabilise the region.

The Romanian Absence: A Critical Reflection

Romania's engagement in Middle Eastern diplomacy during the Cold War was shaped by its unique geopolitical positioning within the Eastern Bloc and its efforts to assert an independent foreign policy^{17,18}. Unlike many of its Warsaw Pact partners, Romania under Nicolae Ceaușescu pursued a degree of autonomy from Moscow, cultivating relations with both Arab states and Israel. This allowed Bucharest to act as a pragmatic interlocutor between East and West, building a reputation as a reliable, if relatively modest, diplomatic actor in a region defined by enduring volatility and the competing interests of global powers.

In the post-communist period, Romania sought to maintain and expand this diplomatic legacy, positioning itself as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. Its early 1990s foreign policy emphasised active participation in multilateral forums, humanitarian initiatives, and dialogue facilitation, reflecting a continuation of the pragmatic realism that had characterised its Cold War diplomacy. As Dr. Ioana Constantin-Bercean observes in a public post, the Middle East has never been a stable region, its strategic location making it a corridor for invading armies and

¹⁷ Irina Gabriela Ion, 'Romania's Involvement in the Middle East: Historical Tradition and Some Recent Challenges', *Monitor Strategic*, nos. 1–2 (2016): 30–39.

¹⁸ Dumitru Preda and Victor Boștinăru, eds., *Romania-Israel. Diplomatic Relations*, (Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013).

a focus for the ambitions of great powers. Romania's diplomacy operated within this context of chronic instability, striving to balance European interests with regional sensitivities.

However, Romania's influence in the Middle East was always contingent upon broader global dynamics. Dr. Constantin-Bercean notes that after the decline of European influence following the 1953 Iranian coup and the 1956 Suez Crisis, the United States emerged as the dominant power, shaping regional security, energy, and geopolitical frameworks¹⁹. Smaller European states, including Romania, had to navigate these structures carefully, relying on diplomatic credibility, multilateral engagement, and pragmatic negotiation to maintain relevance.

The early post-communist era presented both opportunities and challenges for Bucharest. Romania's accession to European structures and NATO offered potential leverage in international diplomacy, yet also imposed new constraints, as Romanian authorities increasingly coordinated its policy with broader Western agendas. While Romania continued to participate in peacebuilding discussions, its voice was gradually overshadowed by other actors, such as the Scandinavian countries, whose consistent track record, humanitarian engagement, and soft power afforded them privileged roles in mediation processes.

Building on this evolving experience, Romania reached a peak of proactive engagement in the Middle East between 2010 and 2020 under the leadership of President Traian Băsescu. Bucharest actively facilitated dialogue between European and Middle Eastern actors, hosting high-level discussions and welcoming official visits, including that of Bashar al-Assad in November 2010. During this decade, Romania maintained communication channels with multiple regimes, coordinated bilateral initiatives, and positioned itself as a modest but credible actor capable of promoting stability and dialogue in a complex region.

Nevertheless, this active engagement gradually gave way to increasing subordination to European Union agendas. While Romania once acted as an autonomous bridge between Europe and the Middle East, post-2020 developments indicate a shift towards prioritising alignment with major European powers over independent diplomacy. This strategic deferment has eroded

¹⁹<https://www.facebook.com/ioananelia.bercean/posts/pfbid02CvBeMkXVeXAFRDJfjBDsb3aCfz9cWkf8LSDT2tN13ZMSZ1sHwbkZKVvUqnZ9FBKAl>

Romania's credibility with key international partners, including the United States, and reduced its capacity to influence regional outcomes.

Romania's absence from the 2025 Gaza Peace Summit in Egypt serves as a stark indicator of its declining international recognition. Once considered a credible interlocutor in Middle Eastern affairs, Romania no longer appears in the agendas of key mediators or host countries. This absence reflects not only the country's marginalisation in practical terms but also the erosion of its symbolic presence in a region where historical experience and proactive engagement were previously valued.

A central factor in this marginalisation is the lack of a consistent, visible foreign policy agenda beyond EU and NATO frameworks. While alignment with Western institutions provides security and legitimacy, Romania has increasingly subordinated its independent diplomatic initiatives to collective European positions. This over-reliance on supranational agendas has diluted Romania's agency, leaving it unable to assert itself as an autonomous actor capable of shaping regional dynamics or initiating dialogue independently.

The consequences of this shift are evident in Romania's geopolitical positioning, particularly with respect to the United States. Washington no longer regards Romania as a meaningful interlocutor in Middle Eastern affairs, opting instead to engage with countries that have demonstrated sustained commitment, operational presence, and soft-power credibility, such as Cyprus, Greece or Hungary. The loss of U.S. engagement signals a broader diminution of Romania's influence, constraining its capacity to contribute to multilateral initiatives or shape outcomes in ways that were previously possible.

Equally significant is Romania's limited capacity to project influence beyond its immediate regional neighbourhood. Unlike small or medium-sized European states such as Norway or Sweden, which leverage historical credibility, humanitarian involvement, and consistent engagement to maintain international relevance, Romania has failed to cultivate similar networks or sustained platforms in the Middle East. The absence of operational engagement (whether in humanitarian aid, reconstruction, or dialogue facilitation) further diminishes its standing as a credible partner.

This marginalisation carries profound implications for Romania's strategic credibility. Historically, Romania was able to position itself as an independent foreign policy actor, bridging Europe and the Middle East through pragmatic diplomacy. Today, however, the country has largely transitioned into the role of a regional follower, dependent on broader EU policy frameworks and overshadowed by more active mediators. This shift signals both a loss of influence and a weakening of the institutional memory that once supported independent, principled engagement.

Unfortunately, our institutional weaknesses exacerbate this marginalisation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs appears increasingly reliant on theoretical analyses disconnected from regional realities, while political leadership offers inconsistent guidance. The absence of a coherent, long-term strategy leaves Romania without a clear roadmap for constructive engagement. This combination of institutional disorientation and leadership inconsistency undermines the country's ability to reclaim its role in the region.

Conclusion: Lessons and Future Directions

The contrast between Scandinavian strategic coherence and Romania's current diplomatic stagnation is both striking and instructive. Norway's sustained engagement in the Middle East demonstrates that small states can wield influence far beyond their material power: through consistency, neutrality, and principled commitment, they build credibility that allows them to act as trusted mediators in highly complex conflicts. By contrast, Romania's absence from the 2025 Gaza Peace Summit signals the consequences of strategic drift, institutional weakness, and over-reliance on EU and NATO frameworks, leaving it largely invisible in arenas where it once played a meaningful role.

The lessons for Romania are clear. Reinvesting in humanitarian diplomacy and reconstruction efforts can restore both operational and normative influence, while cultivating specialised expertise in mediation and regional affairs is essential to rebuild credibility. Beyond institutional capacity, the country must adopt a proactive stance in multilateral peace processes, seeking partnerships and dialogue channels that go beyond the automatic alignment with major powers. Only through deliberate, consistent, and well-resourced engagement can Romania hope

to regain its voice and shape outcomes in a region where trust and continuity matter more than size or wealth.

Ultimately, the 2025 Gaza Peace Summit underscores a broader principle: credibility in diplomacy is earned through sustained commitment, operational involvement, and principled engagement. Romania’s challenge is not only to catch up with its peers but to reclaim the role it once held as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East, demonstrating that even modest states can exercise strategic influence when guided by vision, consistency, and ethical leadership.

Comparative Strategic Assessment: Scandinavia vs. Romania

Dimension	Norway/Scandinavia	Romania
Diplomatic Identity	Mediator, humanitarian actor	Security-dependent, follower of allies
Engagement Model	Active multilateral diplomacy	Reactive participation through EU/NATO
Reputation	Credible, neutral, trusted	Politically loyal but not influential
Soft Power Assets	Development aid, peacebuilding expertise	Limited aid capacity, underdeveloped diplomacy
Strategic Autonomy	High	Low

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