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**„The Only State Completely in the Arctic“  
The Evolution of Iceland's Arctic Identity**

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**FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE**

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## Preface

One year ago I had very little knowledge of Arctic matters in the context of International Relations which is why I signed up for a course called *Introduction to Arctic studies*. In the first class, I raised the question of whether there is something such as an „Arctic identity“, furthermore I started wondering whether Iceland or Icelanders identified with the Arctic. I had never myself given it a thought whether I, as an Icelandic person, identified as an Arctic which is why I started asking different friends and family members, and usually, people had never considered it. I soon decided that I wanted to write my MA thesis on something in the context of the Arctic and reached out to my supervisor, Page Wilson. She directed me towards this path and in the light of my interest of the concept of identity, her proposal of exploring the evolution of Iceland’s Arctic identity was appealing. It soon became clear to me that I wanted to focus on how Iceland’s Arctic identity has been portrayed by Icelandic politicians since the Arctic was put as priority on Iceland’s foreign affairs agenda, in 2011.

I would like to thank my husband for endless support and sacrifices to make my writing possible and my parents and in-laws for babysitting when I needed to write. Furthermore I would like to thank my work for giving me the flexibility I needed to complete my thesis. Finally I would like to thank my supervisor, Page Wilson for the support and guidance that led me onto this path as well as for challenging me and pushing me beyond my comfort zone, which contributed significantly to my competencies in the field of research.

## Abstract

The evolution of Iceland's Arctic Identity since 2011 has been motivated by various events including the debated cooperation between the Arctic five since 2008, the importance Iceland has given historically to being recognised as equal to other sovereign states and the recent importance that has been given to the Arctic globally. Apart from Olafur Ragnar Grimsson the former president, Iceland did not give the same level of importance to the Arctic prior to the grouping of the Arctic five as it did after that event, and shortly after, or in 2011, put the Arctic as a top priority of its foreign affairs agenda. What followed was the construction of Iceland's Arctic Identity, where politicians have actively advocated for Iceland's Arctic-ness. The politicians make an effort of asserting Iceland as a Coastal state and claim Iceland is the only state completely in the Arctic.

This thesis is a case study that will explore the evolution of Iceland's Arctic Identity, analysing specifically how it has been portrayed by politicians. It will do so by applying the method of discourse analysis. The main theme that emerged from the analysis of Iceland's Arctic identity discourse as portrayed by politicians were: The use of Iceland's geographical position and Iceland being the only sovereign state fully within the Arctic according to their interpretations, environmental characteristics in Iceland that have commonly been associated with the Arctic, as well as the narrative of Icelandic people being Arctic and how the Arctic has affected Iceland's society and livelihood.

## Útdráttur

Þróun á því, sem kalla mætti norðurslóðaímynd eða sjálfsmýnd Íslands sem norðurslóðaríki, hefur síðasta rúman áratug eða svo markast af nokkrum meginþáttum. Þar verður helst litið til samstarfs þjóðanna sem mynda hópinn „Artic five“ (Standríkin fimm) síðan 2008 og umræður á þeim vettvangi, jafnframt til þeirrar áherslu sem Ísland hefur með vísan til sögulegra röksemda lagt á mikilvægi þess að verða metið í því samstarfi til jafns við önnur fullvalda ríki, auk þess aukna mikilvægis sem norðurslóðir hafa fengið hin síðari ár á heimsvísu.

Fyrir utan þann skýra áhuga sem Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson fyrrverandi forseti Íslands sýndi málinu, var ekki sjáanlega mikil áhersla almennt lögð á málefni Norðurslóða, fyrr en eftir myndun „Artic five“ hópsins. Fljótlega eftir það eða upp úr 2011 voru þessi mál sett í forgang í utanríkisstefnu Íslands og mikilvægi þeirra undirstrikað. Í kjölfarið fylgdi markviss uppbygging á norðurslóðaímynd Íslands, þar sem stjórnmalafólk hefur með virkum hætti talað fyrir og lagt áherslu á Ísland sem norðurslóðaþjóð. Lögð hefur verið áhersla á Ísland sem strandríki og það eina innan hópsins sem sé að öllu leyti innan marka norðurslóða.

Ritgerðin er tilviksrannsókn á framangreindri þróun og því hvernig þessi norðurslóðaímynd hefur verið kynnt í málflutningi stjórnmalamanna sem og greining á orðræðunni. Dregin er sú ályktun að stjórnmalamenn hafi einkum lagt áherslu á landræðilega stöðu og fullveldi þjóðarinnar, sem og þeirrar stöðu hennar innan norðurslóða að vera eina fullvalda ríkið sem er að fullu innan hins skilgreinda svæðis. Ísland hafi þau náttúrulegu einkenni sem almennt séu tengd norðurskautinu auk þess sem þjóðarvitund sé um að Íslendingar tengist þessum slóðum í víðum skilningi og að þessi staðsetning landsins hafi haft áhrif og mótað samfélagið og lífsviðurværi þeirra sem hér búa.







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## 1 Introduction

Recently the Arctic has gained more importance internationally due to climate change, its economic opportunities and the opening of the Arctic waterways due to melting ice.<sup>1</sup> Arctic and non-Arctic states are in different positions to influence decision making in the Arctic based on geographical location, territory and global status.

The Arctic Council is one of the most important mechanisms in this aspect as well as the so-called five coastal states, which are all part of the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council which was founded in 1996 consists of eight states that have territories within the Arctic circle including Russia, the United States, Canada, Kingdom of Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Iceland. The Arctic Council is a “quasi-international organization” and a body in place, meant for creating a platform or forum for the aforementioned Arctic states to discuss and make decisions on common arctic matters. Secondly, there are the five coastal states. This cooperation is not a body such as the Council, but rather an initiative that groups these states together, that are also part of the Arctic Council to discuss matters and issues in the Arctic. This is a rather exclusive body which implies that some Arctic states have more power in terms of governance in the Arctic, excluding Iceland, Sweden and Finland from some of the Arctic discourse.<sup>2</sup> Iceland has expressed its discontent since the Arctic coastal states came together for the first time. Iceland has in fact many interests to protect which would be better protected with the status as an Arctic coastal state.<sup>3</sup>

Iceland is a small state, which has given value to independence, being recognised and a sovereign state equal to other sovereign states, while at the same time being recognised for being “unique”.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after the establishment of the cooperation between the Arctic five as a separate cooperation from the Arctic Council, Iceland put

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Buixadé Farré et al., "Commercial Arctic shipping through the Northeast Passage: routes, resources, governance, technology, and infrastructure," *Polar Geography* 34, no. 4 (2014): 298-299. DOI: 10.1080/1088937X.2014.965769

<sup>2</sup> "The Arctic Five Versus the Arctic Council," Arctic Yearbook, 2016, accessed October 23, 2021. <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2016/2016-briefing-notes/205-the-arctic-five-versus-the-arctic-council>

<sup>3</sup> "The Arctic Five Versus the Arctic Council", 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Eirikur Bergmann, *Nordic nationalism and right-wing populist politics: Imperial relationships and national sentiments*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017, 96-102

the Arctic at the top of its agenda of foreign affairs.<sup>5</sup> Following ambiguous efforts to advocate for Iceland's Arctic-ness became apparent and the journey of construction for Iceland's Arctic identity began.

Iceland has been proactive in terms of strengthening its position in Arctic affairs and has used its opportunities to influence the region as well as taken initiatives that have contributed to their involvement in the Arctic including Iceland's chairmanship in the Arctic Council, cooperation with Greenland and through the Arctic Circle Assembly.

Before Iceland gave a significant focus to the Arctic, it did not give any significant importance to identifying as Arctic. Once the Arctic had been made a priority, Icelandic politicians put efforts in international forums to paint a picture of Iceland being Arctic.

The emphasis on portraying Iceland as Arctic is worth exploring. This thesis is a case study that will explore the evolution of Iceland's Arctic identity discourse. It will through discourse analysis review speeches made by foreign ministers, prime ministers and presidents from when the Arctic was put at the forefront in Iceland's foreign affairs agenda in important international platforms as well as towards Icelandic audiences. The research question is:

*How has Iceland's Arctic Identity been portrayed by Icelandic politicians?*

The topic at hand reflects the constructivist approach in International Relations, which gives significant importance to identity in international relations and the thesis will therefore contribute to constructivist scholarship.

We will start with the chapter on conceptualisation of identity, theoretical perspectives where we will cover constructivism as a theory in International relations, and methodology which includes review on the research design and methods. In the third chapter we will review the literature in two parts starting with Iceland's national

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<sup>5</sup> Skarphéðinsson, Ö. "Icelandic Perspectives on the Arctic," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Frontiers - Arctic Tipping points Conference, Tromsø, 23-28 January 2011, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/utanrikisraduneyti-media/media/nordurlandaskrifstofa/icelandic-perspectives-on-the-arctic-tromso-24-jan-2011.pdf>.

identity and the path that led onto Iceland's Arctic identity and then moving on to academic work that has already been done on Iceland's Arctic identity. Chapter four will be the analysis of how Icelandic politicians have portrayed Iceland's Arctic identity. Chapter five will sum-up the evolution of Iceland's Arctic identity discourse, applying theoretical perspectives. Finally, chapter six will summarize the main results of the thesis and answer the research question at hand.

## 2 Theoretical Perspectives and Methodology

This chapter is in three parts and covers conceptualization of identity, review of the theoretical concept constructivism, with particular focus on identity as one of the main proposition of the theory and methodology.

### 2.1 Conceptualization of Identity

According to the dictionary, identity refers to how something or someone can be recognized.<sup>6</sup> Identity can refer to a group just as it can refer to an individual. A group's identity can consist of common values, ideas, history etc., which creates this common identity. The individuals of that group feel a sense of sameness and belonging, whereas those that do not have that common identity might be considered as the “other”. When this group they belong to is threatened, the individuals sharing a certain identity might be threatened by something external or the “other”. When it comes to state identity there are a few things to consider.

Geographers have pointed out the relationship between space and identity and how the combination of the two enables groups to position themselves in the world.<sup>78</sup> Not only is identity often formed within state boundaries and by its environment, but the perception of space, and in this context territorial space, is influenced by identity. The state system we live in can be considered as a result of the relationship between identity and territory.

Identity is also temporary, as in, not only confined to space but also to time. In terms of collective identity, for example, national or state identity is developed through common present and history. Without having been present during historical events and the fact that „the present“ has sometimes a completely new population from the time

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<sup>6</sup> "Identity," Collins English Dictionary, 2012, accessed 4 September, 2022, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/identity>.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Keith and Steven Pile, eds. *Place and the Politics of Identity*. Routledge, 2004, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Ingrid Medby, "Peopling the state: Arctic state identity in Norway, Iceland, and Canada," PhD diss., Durham University, 2017, 40-41



the event took place, the individuals within that nation have similar notions about that particular event that contributes significantly to their common identity. Furthermore, the future also contributes to this identity, as what happens in the present translates into and affects the future, based on shared ideologies and how the group foresees and plans for the future.<sup>9</sup>

Putting identity into the context of state identity, it is understood that various, formal organs of the state participate in the process of identity creation. This will furthermore be elaborated on in the following chapter.

## 2.2 Constructivism

The focus of this project, namely - the evolution of a particular national identity as shaped by politicians – strongly reflects the constructivist approach to IR theory.

The propositions of constructivism may be divided into four categories:

- Our reality is socially constructed and therefore social facts are important
- Ideational and material structures as well as norms and rules are of importance.
- That the role of identity plays an important role in shaping political action
- A belief that structures and agents mutually influence one another<sup>10</sup>

Three of these propositions will be shortly elaborated on below, but the proposition that the role of identity plays an important role in shaping political action deserves a separate chapter in the light of the topic of this thesis.

Constructivism revolves around the idea that the current global system that we live in today is a social construct.<sup>11</sup> That means that our reality is a product of common and shared ideas, perception, behaviour, values and understanding or “social facts”.<sup>12</sup> Constructivists claim the main contributors are social interactions that have shaped the world and that the current system is a product of these interactions. Constructivism can be used to explain change in the international system, recognise the social dimension of

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<sup>9</sup> Medby, "Peopling the state," 39-47.

<sup>10</sup> T. Flockhart, "Constructivism and foreign policy," in *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, edited by Tim Dunne, Amelia Hadfield and Steve Smith, 84.

<sup>11</sup> K.M Fierke, "Constructivism," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 162.

<sup>12</sup> Flockhart, "Constructivism and foreign policy," 85.

international relations and how regimes and norms can shape it, and that the world can be shaped, and influenced by choices and actions.<sup>13</sup> While realism assumes it to be a fact that our world is anarchic and that the self-help system is a result of that, constructivism argues that the system is rather a result of actions and practices that have produced this current system. A simple example of this is how the colour pink is considered as a feminine colour while the colour blue is thought of as a masculine colour. This idea has been produced by human interactions that have formed a subjective reality and understanding, and is a social fact. Simply put, the idea that pink is for girls and blue is for boys is our reality because people have given that particular meaning to these colours and not because of an objective fact based on biology for example. For instance, in the late 19th century and early 20th century, the colour pink was associated with boys while blue was associated with girls which stresses how this idea of associating colour with specific gender is produced by a shared understanding of how people understand the world but not as a hard-wired fact of human nature.<sup>14</sup>

This translates into international relations in the way we perceive our global reality today. Constructivism claims that it has been produced by social facts and not as a consequence of human nature. Constructivism doesn't necessarily deny certain elements that are part of what can be considered "human nature", nonetheless, they argue that social facts that have been produced by human interactions are more important. This understanding of the world creates space for reconstruction, meaning that how we are used to, for instance, managing international conflicts or prioritizing matters important to our country over the common good, can technically be changed by rethinking how or what we want our reality to be.

Realism and liberalism build their understanding of the world on material structures and forces, referring to certain features of the world that will always exist independently of actors, which constitutes the world system we live in, a material structure. Hence, the theories assume that the international system will never change and attempt to provide us with the eternal laws of international relations. Realism

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<sup>13</sup> Fierke, "Constructivism," 163.

<sup>14</sup> Khadija Bilal, "Here's Why it All Changed: Pink Used to be a Boy's Color & Blue For Girls," *The Vintage News*, 1 March, 2019, accessed 6 August, 2022, <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2019/05/01/pink-blue/>.

claims that states will always behave in the same way, that is, competing against each other, while liberalism claims that states will always find ways to cooperate.

Constructivism challenges this assumption and states that international relations are not material. While constructivism acknowledges that material factors play a role in forming the international system, they stress that these material factors exist as a product of shared ideas and how we interpret the world and actions of other actors.

The structure that we live in is organized by rules and norms. These rules and norms are a common understanding of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour of an individual according to the social group or community that the individual belongs to. However, these norms and rules can be changed.<sup>15</sup>

The third core component that constructivists give importance to is the recognition that agents influence structure through practice and structure influences agents. That being said, the current system we live by is a product of the practices of agents that have resulted in social facts being developed, habitualized and externalized which has led to the current structure we live with today, and has contributed to the creation of a system of self-help as many would see it.

Constructivists would therefore argue that the creation of our current global system is not caused by “human nature”, as classical realists, for instance, argue. However, once a certain system or structure has been constituted, it reinforces behaviour, practices and identity. When identity and one’s understanding of self is challenged, it can create space for reinvention that can subsequently influence the structure .<sup>16</sup>

### 2.2.1 Identity According to Constructivism

Another core proposition of constructivism is the idea of identity, referring to how someone understands the “self”, relationship with others and its place in the world. In order for there to be a “self”, there is always the contrast of the “other”. While realism and liberalism claim that states' identity is pre-existing, that is that all states think and act based on self-interest, constructivism claims identity to be constituted and influenced by cultural, social, political and historical context, and although is perhaps quite stable it is

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<sup>15</sup> Flockhart, "Constructivism and foreign policy," 85-86.

<sup>16</sup> Flockhart, "Constructivism and foreign policy," 88-90.

still always in the process of reconstitution. They, therefore, place great importance on identity as it constitutes interests, preferences and values.<sup>17</sup>

Another important aspect of identity for constructivists is the attachment of norms to identity. Identity implies that agents have certain norms which influence behaviour. Therefore, in contrast to the realist and liberalist assumptions that believe that behaviour can be calculated by the logic of calculations of cost versus benefits as the basis for their actions, constructivists claim that the norms, based on the constructed identity will affect the behaviour, as some behaviour is considered appropriate or inappropriate.<sup>18</sup>

### 2.2.2 Identity in International relations

Identity has been an emerging concept in international relations scholarship since the 1990's, especially for scholars that have sought an alternative understanding of the world and global system to realism. Identities shape our understanding of the self in contrast to the other, which contributes to how states place themselves in the current global system we live in. The world consists of the people living within it and they construct the states. Therefore, how the people making up the states perceive themselves and their position and role in the global society self-evidently influences how states behave and act.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, as Cronin suggests, identities can be of use as a frame of reference that indicates how states or political leaders will build, initiate, maintain and structure their relations with other states.<sup>20</sup>

Identity in IR highlights how the world is socially constructed as elaborated above and how that shapes the interests of states which can indicate the condition of peace and causes of war.<sup>21</sup> When applying identity in IR scholarship, it has been used to re-read and understand the state system in different and various ways. Bloom used national identity as the term for a state's collective identity, a common identity or something that explains how the mass of a nation's public identifies with the state. This notion of collective identity provides a theoretical justification for how a state can be understood as an entity

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<sup>17</sup> Flockhart, "Constructivism and foreign policy," 84.

<sup>18</sup> Flockhart, "Constructivism and foreign policy," 86-87.

<sup>19</sup> Felix Berenskoetter, "Identity in international relations," in Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies, 2017, accessed 6 August, 2022.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.218>.

<sup>20</sup> Cronin, Bruce. "Transnational Identity and the Evolution of Cooperation." In *Community under Anarchy*. 15-33. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Berenskoetter, "Identity in International Relations."

made up of individuals. The national identity enables political leaders to represent for the “same”, a mass that has a common identity and thereby common interests, needs etc.<sup>22</sup>

Wendt offered an alternative reading to the state and international system and how it is constituted by shedding light on how identities structure relations instead of being understood as competing and autonomous power units. By approaching international relations in this way, he portrays how the international system is not necessarily anarchic but more complex than that, a dynamic international society.<sup>232425</sup> Other scholars have offered a mixed version of the two aforementioned approaches, putting emphasis on how borders are socially constructed which has led to the problematic political notion of who is on the inside and who is on the outside of these borders.<sup>26</sup> The individuals that are inside certain borders are individuals who tend to form the aforementioned collective identity, in other words, a national identity or nationalism and have often interests in protecting that identity, which can contribute to conflict when that identity is threatened. The notion that identity is socially constructed thereby challenges the assumptions of the international system as it is today and recognizing this, that identity has been influenced and conditioned by history, creates a certain space for change. When contemplating relations between states, national identity plays an important role as a base for political leaders to speak and represent a state collectively.

### 2.3 Methodology, methods and data collection

This chapter covers the methodology applied in this project.

#### 2.3.1 Research Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the evolution of Iceland’s Arctic identity via the public statements of Icelandic politicians. While there are already some published works on Iceland’s Arctic identity, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, this

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<sup>22</sup> William Bloom, "Identification Theory - Its Structure, Dynamics and Application," in *Personal Identity, National Identity and International Relations*, 47-52.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics," *International organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391-425.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Collective identity formation and the international state," *American political science review* 88, no. 2 (1994): 384-396.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Wendt, "On constitution and causation in international relations," *Review of international studies* 24, no. 5 (1998): 101-118.

<sup>26</sup> Berenskoetter, "Identity in International Relations."

project distinguishes itself by focussing on the role and contributions of select Icelandic politicians in the process of Iceland's Arctic identity formation.

### 2.3.2 Research method

This research thesis will be based on qualitative research methods as its nature requires in-depth analysis. The simple way to understand the difference between quantitative and qualitative methods is that the former is more concerned with numbers and objective facts that produce outcomes that can be generalized for more, while the latter strives to explore and understand experiences, meaning, behaviour and what's going on in "people's heads".<sup>27</sup> In order to understand this, interpretation is necessary, which applies to the topic at hand.

### 2.3.3 Research design

This thesis is a case study, but a case study is used when one researches a specific case to understand it thoroughly and in detail. A case can be a state, community, small group, organization etc.<sup>28</sup> This thesis looks at the specific case of the evolution of Iceland's Arctic identity discourse. Case studies are used when one wants to understand in-depth a contemporary phenomenon, that is the case, something that is happening in the real world.<sup>29</sup>

### 2.3.4 Data Analysis

For this thesis, primary and secondary data will be used. Primary data includes statements, press releases, speeches, reports and policy papers. The secondary data includes academic articles.

The first step in data collection was collecting and reviewing academic work already done on Iceland's Arctic Identity. In this project, the specific focus is on the role of various Icelandic ministers of foreign affairs from 2011-2021 as well as various Icelandic prime ministers and presidents that have represented Iceland internationally in the Arctic discourse. These representatives have been selected due to their influential roles and participation in international relations, representation, diplomacy and policy-making, and how they articulate the Icelandic state's identity. Therefore the second step in data

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<sup>27</sup> Silverman, David, ed. *Qualitative research*. sage, 2020, 3-5

<sup>28</sup> John Gerring, "What is a case study and what is it good for?," *American political science review* 98, no. 2(2004): 342.

<sup>29</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Case study research: Design and methods*, Vol. 5. sage, 2009, 88.

collection was to collect all documents, especially speeches and public statements made by these aforementioned political leaders.

We will analyze the data through discourse analysis. There is no united approach to discourse analysis by scholars, as the significance of the term discourse has been debated in the context of this research approach. Nevertheless, there is some consensus on the term's meaning as in its most basic definition it is text and talks. There are two definitions that scholars have commonly subscribed to and are dominant in discourse analysis. The first one is micro-level discourses which refer to how individuals and groups use language in social circumstances. It focuses on things such as rhetorical and syntactic aspects of the discourse. The second one is a macro-level discourse which analyzes the main themes and identifies patterns that can be drawn out of a text. There is, however, another level that is the meso-level which focuses on stitching together the macro and micro.<sup>30</sup> In this case, we will be using meso-level discourse analysis, as we are both looking into the rhetorical and syntactic aspects of the discourse, that is an analysis of the text from the foreign ministers on Iceland's Arctic Identity and what may lie behind these words, as well as identifying main themes that can be found between the different ministers. We will do this by reviewing talks, statements, speeches and articles and drag out the themes that emerge in connection to Iceland's Arctic Identity. This will be done inductively meaning that the themes will emerge once we start reviewing the data and not be predetermined. Once themes start to emerge the main analysis will take place by looking into the rhetorical and syntactic aspects of the discourse.

#### 2.3.5 Problems and limitations

While discourse analysis can be a valuable method for an in-depth understanding of something, it has its disadvantages.

For instance, it may be very time-consuming and takes a lot of effort.<sup>31</sup> The amount of data under analysis in this thesis is indeed quite robust compared to the limited amount of time. This can be a challenge in this sort of project, that is writing a MA thesis in one semester. This was addressed by creating a time plan which was evaluated regularly. Furthermore, the author realized the possibility of not being able to finish the

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<sup>30</sup> Marianne LeGreco, "Discourse analysis," *Qualitative methodology: A practical guide* 55 (2014): 68-71.

<sup>31</sup> "Discourse Analysis and Its Advantage and Disadvantage," *Journogian*, accessed 8 August, 2022, <http://www.journogian.com/2017/03/discourse-analysis-and-its-advantage.html>.

thesis in one semester before starting the process. Having recognised this before and managing expectations was useful as in fact the process continued over to the summer semester. Therefore, it did not come as a surprise and did not discourage the author. Another limitation of discourse analysis is that it focuses solely on language and it has been pointed out that language does not always give the full picture of the case. In this thesis, on the other hand, the focus is on the evolutions of how politicians have portrayed Iceland's Arctic identity, which is based on the language that they use in their public talks, writings and speeches. Therefore, the author believes that discourse analysis fits well to meet the objectives of this thesis.

Finally, the author was limited by data that was accessible, that is, not all speeches and talks in the field under analysis were available to the public and/or some internet links to speeches were not working anymore. The author used what was accessible to her.

#### 2.3.6 Ethical Issues

The author does not believe that there are any significant ethical issues. The author does not have any connections to experts on Arctic matters, aside from teachers nor anything to gain from conducting this research, apart from acquiring experience and completing an MA degree. Perhaps the most important aspect to consider is bias shaped by the author's worldview. Considering this when approaching the subject will ensure that the analysis will not solely bring out biased perspectives. However, the author does not consider this an ethical issue, as all individuals and thereby researchers have different identities that are shaped by different values, hence, it is important to consider objectivity in all research conducted and not just this one.



### 3 Literature review on Iceland's Arctic Identity

In this chapter, the already existing literature on Iceland's Arctic Identity will be reviewed in two parts. The first part will cover Iceland's national identity and the path towards the focus on Iceland's Arctic identity as there can be found elements to Iceland's national identity that seem to translate into the focus given to the Arctic but also showcases contradictions when comparing the national identity to Iceland's Arctic identity discourse. The second part will cover the research that has been done on Iceland's Arctic identity.

#### 3.1 Iceland's national Identity in historical context

Iceland's national identity has been shaped through history, especially by its independence struggle. The journey towards independence created a narrative of Iceland's national identity to make a case for independence. This narrative was characterized by the importance to the nation to be seen as unique yet an equal partner in international politics.<sup>32</sup> This translates into Iceland's Arctic identity, both from the perspective of how elements of Iceland's national identity, that is its desire to be recognized as an independent state, equal to other sovereign states, sheds light on why Iceland has given value to being recognised as an Arctic state. Secondly, there are also elements of Iceland's national identity that match what is considered Arctic characteristics, such as the environment. In this chapter, we will review Iceland's national identity and the effect it may have had on putting the Arctic at forefront of its foreign affairs agenda.

##### 3.1.1 Iceland's independence struggle and nationalism

Iceland became independent in 1944 after a long-lasting independence struggle which significantly influenced its national identity. Iceland's population then was 60.000<sup>33</sup> compared to 345.000<sup>34</sup> today and is therefore considered a microstate by some.<sup>35</sup>

Iceland's identity was highly influenced by the independence struggle, the importance of claiming sovereignty and the desire to be recognized as equals to western

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<sup>32</sup> Eiríkur Bergmann, "Nordic nationalism," bls. 93

<sup>33</sup> Eiríkur Bergmann, "Nordic nationalism," 93.

<sup>34</sup> Worldometer. "Iceland population." Worldometer. 2022. Accessed 8 August, 2022. <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/iceland-population/>.

<sup>35</sup> Eiríkur Bergmann, "Nordic nationalism, " 93.

states.<sup>363738</sup> This translates into its national identity. Iceland was inspired by the myth of independent Vikings that was interpreted in the way that worked for the independence struggle, and driven by the argument of Iceland being a separate nation, with a different language and to fit the argument of independence. Under Danish rule there was a sense of weakness and humiliation, however, the “Icelandic spirit” continued throughout the challenging times which inspired Iceland to reclaim the notion of the “nation's own worth”. This Icelandic spirit was commonly described with words such as purity and unique language and there was a desire to demonstrate this perceived uniqueness to the outside world and to be recognized as equals.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, there was a picture painted of Icelanders as the finest group of Norwegians, a selection of the strongest that were shaped by the harsh living conditions that filtered out the weak and these elements forged the Icelandic nation. Hitherto Iceland has had a desire to be distinguished from other states as different and unique while being recognized as equals in western society. Furthermore, in the early 20th century Icelanders were disturbed by being put into the same category as other colonial nations such as Greenland and countries in Africa, which contributed to this need of wanting to be recognized as a western, white country and the preoccupation of international perception. Iceland’s journey towards independence contributed significantly to Iceland’s national identity and has translated into modern days.

Iceland’s colonial history and relationship with its neighbours is very present in today’s political discourse. Iceland’s economic boom was also characterized by the need to portray a certain national identity, by demonstrating Icelandic strength as a product of its Viking heritage and experience of adapting to the harsh environment. Icelandic nationalism has been explained by the vulnerabilities and insecurities of its smallness and the fear of losing its sovereignty and existence. Even when Iceland claimed independence, which should have marked the end of the independence struggle, a new era took over, that is the ever-lasting-independence struggle, the notion that the independence struggle

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<sup>36</sup> Eiríkur Bergmann, "Nordic nationalism," 96-102.

<sup>37</sup> Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, "Þingvellir: An Icelandic ‘Lieu de Mémoire,’” *History and Memory* 12, no 1 (2000): 4-17.

<sup>38</sup> Medby, "Peopling the state," 140-141

<sup>39</sup> Eiríkur Bergmann, "A threat to democracy and independence? Perception of the EU in Icelandic discourse," *Distant voices*: 147-148.

will never end and that Icelanders need to continue to assert their independence.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Iceland continuously experiences the need to assert itself in the international arena, with a hint of inferiority complex that translates into decisions, actions, and identity. When Iceland was excluded from the grouping of the Arctic five, it was particularly unhappy compared to the other states excluded. This reflects Iceland's "ever-lasting independence struggle", their status as a small state and their desire to be recognized as equals to the other Arctic states. Furthermore, as part of Iceland's national identity, the ability to adapt to a harsh environment translates well into one of the key components of Iceland's case for its Arctic-ness, characterized by difficult environmental conditions and how that has affected its identity. It is noteworthy however to consider how Iceland gave importance to being recognized as western and different from, for instance, the population of Greenland in contrast to how it articulates its Arctic identity today which brings out contradictions between Iceland's national identity and its Arctic identity which will be further elaborated on in chapter five.

### 3.1.2 Towards advocating for an Arctic Identity

The Arctic Council was established in 1996. It was a low-key event which didn't catch a lot of attention outside of the room where it took place. The international arena did not give the same value to it as now. Before 1996 there was already some cooperation in the Arctic, but it has been described to have been difficult to get all the Arctic countries together. The events leading to the establishment of the Arctic Council were Mikhail Gorbachev's speech in 1987<sup>41</sup>, also marking the time between the cold war and the new era in the Arctic where he proposed the Arctic environmental protection plan<sup>42</sup>, which then led to the proposal of Arctic Environmental Protection Cooperation in 1989. In 1990 Sweden, Finland and Canada issued a proposal on future cooperation in the Arctic. While the idea of establishing an Arctic Council was brought up by Canada in 1987 it wasn't until 1991 that they sent an official letter to the Arctic states about founding an Arctic Council. The same year the first ministerial meeting between the eight Arctic states took place,

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<sup>40</sup> Bergmann, "Nordic nationalism, " 96-102.

<sup>41</sup> Markku Heikkilä, "It All Started in Rovaniemi," *Shared Voices Magazine*, 2016, accessed 8 August, 2022, <https://www.uarctic.org/shared-voices/shared-voices-magazine-2016-special-issue/it-all-started-in-rovaniemi/>.

<sup>42</sup> "The Rovaniemi Process: The Beginning of the Arctic Era," Arctic Finland, accessed 4 September, 2022. <https://www.arcticfinland.fi/news/The-Rovaniemi-Process-The-Beginning-of-the-Arctic-Era/39969/15e81f13-69fe-4972-9668-a4d0b578318d>.

the environmental ministers came together and approved the environmental protection strategy. Shortly after it disappeared from the spotlight.<sup>43</sup> After a few, arguably, passive years, the Arctic Council was established in September 1996.<sup>44</sup>

The same year of the establishment of the Arctic Council, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson became the president of Iceland.<sup>45</sup> He at the time was asking himself the question of what would be important for Iceland in upcoming years and came to the conclusion that Arctic matters would be significant in future world politics, which led to the idea of the Arctic Circle Assembly.<sup>46</sup> For him, environmental issues were what led his focus, as a common issue relevant to all.<sup>47</sup> While Grimsson gave focus to the Arctic as soon as 1996, it wasn't high on the agenda of Iceland's foreign affairs. Going back to the establishment of the Arctic Council and what led to it, Iceland was not the state that took the initiative, such as can be considered to have been done by Canada, Finland and Sweden.<sup>48</sup>

Shortly before Iceland gave priority to the Arctic region, two important historical events took place. First of all, the American army left Iceland in 2006, contributing to an identity crisis, especially in the context of security. Furthermore, what was high on Iceland's political agenda was the economic boom. In a short time, Iceland became one of the richest countries with the fastest growing economy in the world.<sup>49</sup> This gave Iceland a place in the world. In 2008, however, the economy collapsed, which resulted in ruined relationships and harmed Iceland's image. At the same time, Iceland was ranked highest in the global gender gap report, which created an opportunity to re-identify and reconstruct its image as "champions of gender equality".<sup>50</sup> Referring back to the previous chapter, on Iceland's everlasting independence struggle, Iceland gave importance to two things: being recognized as different and unique and being recognized as an equal partner in the international arena. These aspects were important

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<sup>43</sup> Arctic Finland. "The Rovaniemi Process: The Beginning of the Arctic Era."

<sup>44</sup> Markku Heikkilä, "It All Started in Rovaniemi."

<sup>45</sup> "Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson," Alþingi, accessed 8 August, 2022, <https://www.althingi.is/altext/cv/is/?nfaerslunr=440>.

<sup>46</sup> Birgir Þór Harðarsson, "Íslendingar búa í lúxusgarði heimsins," Kjarinn, 14 October, 2017, accessed 8 August, 2022. <https://kjarinn.is/folk/2017-10-11-islendingar-bua-i-luxusgardi-heimsins/>.

<sup>47</sup> Birgir Þór Harðarsson, "Íslendingar búa í lúxusgarði heimsins."

<sup>48</sup> Arctic Finland. "The Rovaniemi Process: The Beginning of the Arctic Era."

<sup>49</sup> Eiríkur Bergmann, "Nordic nationalism," 106.

<sup>50</sup> Þorgerður J. Einarsdóttir, "All that glitters is not gold: Shrinking and bending gender equality in rankings and nation branding," *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 28, no. 2 (2020): 140-141.

to Iceland due to its vulnerability and the fear of losing its independence and sovereignty, which is historically very important to the nation-state.<sup>51</sup>

Another important event took place in 2008, the Ilulissat meeting which resulted in the Ilulissat declaration, which was a formal meeting of the Arctic Coastal states, which left the members of the Arctic Council that were excluded from this grouping discontent. The excluded members were Iceland, Finland and Sweden.<sup>52</sup> Iceland was particularly unhappy and expressed concerns about exclusion and overlap between the Arctic five and the Arctic Council.<sup>53</sup> Shortly after this, Arctic matters were put on the list of the main priorities of Iceland's foreign affairs, which was decided unanimously by the Icelandic parliament.<sup>54</sup> In the parliamentary resolution on Iceland's Arctic Policy in 2011, it is stated that "it is of great importance that consensus is reached across the political spectrum on an Arctic policy which aims at positioning Iceland among those countries that have the greatest influence on future development in the region"<sup>55</sup> In this statement it is clear that Iceland aims to position itself as a highly influential state in the region. Before this time little can be found on a *conscious* effort of advocating for Iceland's Arctic-ness. Even, when Iceland held the chairmanship of the Arctic Council in 2002-2004<sup>57</sup>, Halldór Ásgrímsson who served as the minister of foreign affairs from 1995 until 2004 does not give particular, *conscious*, focus on emphasizing Iceland's Arctic Identity.<sup>58</sup> The same goes with the foreign minister in 2004-2006, Davíð Oddsson, who mentions little about the Arctic, but the common efforts of addressing environmental issues and nothing specifically on Iceland's Arctic identity.<sup>59</sup> Valgerður

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<sup>51</sup> Medby, "Peopling the state," 140-141.

<sup>52</sup> Jon Rahbek-Clemmensen and Gry Thomasen, "How has Arctic coastal state cooperation affected the Arctic Council?," *Marine Policy* 122 (2020): 104239.

<sup>53</sup> Dodds et al., "Territorial nationalism and Arctic geopolitics: Iceland as an Arctic coastal state," 25.

<sup>54</sup> Skarphéðinsson, "Icelandic Perspectives on the Arctic."

<sup>55</sup> Government of Iceland, *A Parliamentary Resolution on Iceland's Arctic Policy* (Reykjavík Government of Iceland, 2011), <https://www.government.is/media/utanrikisraduneyti-media/media/nordurlandaskrifstofa/A-Parliamentary-Resolution-on-ICE-Arctic-Policy-approved-by-Althingi.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> Government of Iceland, *A Parliamentary Resolution on Iceland's Arctic Policy*.

<sup>57</sup> "Iceland," Arctic Council, accessed 4 September, 2022. <https://www.arctic-council.org/about/states/iceland/>.

<sup>58</sup> Ásgrímsson, Halldór Ásgrímsson, "Round Table Discussion on Future Perspectives," Arctic Council, speech delivered at a roundtable discussion with the Arctic states, Finland, 2002, [https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/1584/MM03\\_Key\\_note\\_speech\\_Halldor\\_Asgrimsson.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y](https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/1584/MM03_Key_note_speech_Halldor_Asgrimsson.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y).

<sup>59</sup> Davíð Oddsson, "Ræða Davíðs Oddssonar, utanríkisráðherra, um utanríkismál," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered to the president, Reykjavík, 11 November, 2004, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda->

Sverrisdóttir, foreign minister from 2006-2007, does, however, deliver one speech where she makes a statement that contributes to Iceland's image as an Arctic state:

Iceland's location in the Arctic region has shaped the Icelandic nation since its settlement, more than eleven centuries ago. Living conditions were often difficult and food was scarce. Gradually, the Icelandic people learnt the necessity of using the natural resources of their country in sustainable manner in order to survive.<sup>60</sup>

However, this is the only example that was found prior to Skarphedinsson's term as a foreign minister where the Icelandic foreign minister makes efforts in terms of painting a picture of Iceland as an Arctic state. Evidence of Ingibjörg Solrun Gísladóttir, the minister of foreign affairs from 2007-2009<sup>61</sup>, affirming Iceland's Arctic identity could not be found. Even, when looking at Grímsson's speeches, who has been active in the Arctic discourse, has not given particular focus to portraying Iceland's Arctic identity in particular. He, however, was the driving force behind the establishment of the Arctic Circle which was founded in 2013<sup>62</sup> and has created an important platform for Iceland to position itself as an important player in the Arctic.<sup>63</sup> In 2009 Iceland expressed their unhappiness about being excluded from the cooperation of the Arctic five<sup>64</sup> and in 2010 Skarphedinsson included in his annual report the call for an Arctic policy.<sup>65</sup> In 2011 as mentioned earlier, the parliament approved to put the Arctic on Iceland's foreign affairs agenda. With that said, the period from 2009-2011 can, can be considered as the time when Iceland started *consciously* constructing and advocating for Iceland's Arctic identity.

Iceland has various interests to protect in the Arctic which has undoubtedly contributed significantly to its wanting to affirm itself as an Arctic state. Nonetheless,

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fyrrum-radherra/2004/11/11/Raeda-Davids-Oddssonar-utanrikisradherra-um-utanrikismal/ bæta við í bibliog.

<sup>60</sup> Valgerður Sverrisdóttir, "Launching of the International Polar Year," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Opening of the International Polar Year, 1 March, 2007, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/efst-a-baugi/frettir/stok-frett/2007/03/01/Opnun-althjodaheimskautssarsins/>.

<sup>61</sup> "Ms. Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir of Iceland - Deputy Special Representative for Iraq," United Nations, accessed 4 September, 2022. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/personnel-appointments/2021-01-15/ms-ingibjorg-C3%B6rg-s-C3%B3lr-C3%BAn-g-C3%ADslad-C3%B3ttir-of-iceland-C2%A0-deputy-special-representative-for-iraq-C2%A0>.

<sup>62</sup> "Chairman of Arctic Circle," Arctic Circle, accessed 8 August, 2022. <https://www.arcticcircle.org/chairman-of-arctic-circle>.

<sup>63</sup> Birgir Þór Harðarsson, "Íslendingar búa lí lúxusgarði heimsins."

<sup>64</sup> Dodds et al., "Territorial nationalism and Arctic geopolitics: Iceland as an Arctic coastal state," 24-25.

<sup>65</sup> Icelandic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Report of Icelandic Minister for Foreign Affairs* (Reykjavík: Icelandic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010), <http://www.mfa.is/media/Skyrslur/Executive-summary.pdf>.

elements of Iceland's national identity can be seen in how Iceland's Arctic identity has been portrayed. This can be seen in how nature is described and how it has affected the people of Iceland. Furthermore, the everlasting independence struggle and the fear of losing sovereignty has contributed to Iceland continuously wanting to be taken seriously in the international arena, and wanting to be seen as equal. While all the excluded states from the cooperation between the Arctic five, Iceland, Finland and Sweden were unhappy, Iceland was arguably the loudest state in expressing its unhappiness which perhaps reflects these insecurities.<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless it could also stem from the fact that Iceland, different from Sweden and Finland, has territorial waters in the Arctic.<sup>67</sup>

### 3.2 Literature review on Iceland's Arctic Identity

Since 2011, there has been some academic work done on Iceland's Arctic identity which will be reviewed in this second part of chapter three.

#### 3.2.1 The Recognition of Iceland as an Arctic Coastal State

In 2011 a parliamentary resolution on Iceland's first Arctic policy was agreed upon unanimously.<sup>68</sup> One of the main priorities was to establish Iceland as an Arctic Coastal state. Shortly after Dodds and Ingimundarson published their article *Territorial nationalism and Arctic geopolitics: Iceland as an Arctic Coastal State*. In their article, they write about how being recognized as a coastal state was considered significant by the parliament and the ministry of foreign affairs, while it had yet to be seen whether Icelandic citizens would give the same importance to it in the future. Through speeches, behaviour and performances, Iceland attempted actively to build, develop and proclaim itself as a Coastal state, acting in a certain role mostly directed toward international audiences. They point out how Iceland continuously performs borders by reinforcing Iceland's geographical position and selecting a narrative that fits that image, as a case for why they should be included as part of the Arctic six instead of excluded from the Arctic five, in order to protect their national interests. They concluded that Iceland's motives are mostly driven by materialistic drivers, but not part of nationalistic passions.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Dodds et al., "Territorial nationalism and Arctic geopolitics: Iceland as an Arctic coastal state," 24-25.

<sup>67</sup> Dodds et al., "Territorial nationalism and Arctic geopolitics: Iceland as an Arctic coastal state," 35.

<sup>68</sup> Skarphéðinsson, "Icelandic Perspectives on the Arctic."

<sup>69</sup> Dodds et al., "Territorial nationalism and Arctic geopolitics: Iceland as an Arctic coastal state," 21-37.

### 3.2.2 Peopling the Arctic

In 2017 Medby published her PhD thesis where she explored among other things “how state personnel in Norway, Iceland and Canada articulate discourses of their state’s “Arctic Identity””.<sup>70</sup> In order to achieve an understanding of how Iceland articulates discourse of their Arctic Identity, she conducted interviews with 12 officials and representatives of the Icelandic state.<sup>71</sup>

She concludes that although it is apparent that Icelandic personnel use their geographical position as a case for Iceland being Arctic and a state “wholly in the Arctic” and have by this logic “self-claimed” themselves as a coastal state, the way in which they articulate Iceland’s Arctic Identity is also connected to time and history. With that said, although the importance given to being recognized as Arctic is recent or since 2011 as elaborated on in chapter 3.1.2, the representatives claim Iceland has always been Arctic and that “being Arctic connects to the meaning of being Icelandic and vice versa”.<sup>72</sup> Medby also points out how Iceland’s independence history has contributed to the importance given to sovereignty where historically Iceland has always wanted to be seen as equal to the others, yet at the same time unique, which translates into the Arctic discourse and can partly explain how Iceland reacted to the grouping of the five coastal states comparing to Sweden and Finland, as well as how Iceland focuses on Arctic membership rather than Arctic leadership. Furthermore, the Arctic is a hot topic globally, and being recognized as such contributes to this need of feeling “unique” and becomes embedded in the imagination of the “self” within the community. Furthermore, Medby concluded that as Iceland doesn’t have an indigenous population, as well as the geographical divide between the south and the Arctic north is not clear comparing it to some other Arctic states. These two points have contributed to the feeling of Iceland not being as Arctic as the other Arctic states. The state’s Arctic Identity is produced by articulations based on context and storytelling which is driven by the state’s personnel. The different stories in ways compose the state’s Arctic Identity which subsequently positions the states and gives it the opportunity to act.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Medby, "Peopling the state," 52.

<sup>71</sup> Medby, "Peopling the state," 63.

<sup>72</sup> Medby, "Peopling the state," 134.

<sup>73</sup> Medby, "Peopling the state," 140-141.



### 3.2.3 Iceland's Perception of itself in the Arctic

Sumarliðason wrote his MA thesis in 2021 on examining how Iceland, that is the state, perceives itself in the Arctic. Through narrative analysis, the thesis looks into Iceland's Arctic policies and interviews representatives of Iceland. The thesis sees Iceland's identity is performed through narratives. The findings of the thesis included how increased interest in the Arctic affected Iceland's approach to the Arctic. In fact, putting an emphasis on Iceland being Arctic is quite recent as elaborated on above, for just over 10 years, and Sumarliðason drags out how in a short period of time this focus has increased significantly, translating into Iceland's narratively performed Arctic identity which has become an important element in Iceland's state identity. He points out how this change of focus may have occurred when Iceland's Arctic-ness was undermined by the cooperation of the Arctic five and how today, while emphasis was put on Iceland's spatial identity, that is its geographical position in the Arctic, now the narrative includes how Iceland has always been Arctic since settlement and describes how the Arctic has influenced Iceland's culture, experiences and way of living.<sup>74</sup>

### 3.3 Conclusion

Although Iceland has been part of the Arctic Council since it was founded, the level of focus given to the region has differed and it wasn't until shortly after the Arctic five started their cooperation excluding Iceland, Finland and Sweden, that Iceland started consciously advocating for its Arctic Identity, which reflects the value that the state gives to being recognized as equals to other states.

Some academic work that has been done on Iceland's Arctic identity confirms this and drags out the active efforts of Iceland, performing Iceland's Arctic identity and selective narratives that contribute to the image of that identity. Dodds and Ingimundarsson bring insights into the importance given to the recognition of an Arctic Coastal state and is very much in line with the topic at hand, but written in 2012. This thesis will look at the evolution of Iceland's Arctic Identity from 2011 to 2021, which certainly addresses Iceland's importance of being recognised as a Coastal state and how that focus may have evolved and shifted. Medby's PhD thesis focuses on how state

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<sup>74</sup> Emil Ísleifur Sumarliðason, "Imagining an Arctic State: An analysis of the performance of the Icelandic state's Arctic identity," 38.

personnel in Norway, Iceland and Canada articulate discourses of their state's "Arctic Identity", and is published in 2017. While Medby covers how state personnel articulate discourse of their state's Arctic identity and does so through interviews, this thesis focuses specifically on how Icelandic politicians including foreign ministers, presidents and prime ministers articulate Iceland's Arctic identity in their speeches.

Sumarliðasson's MA thesis is the most recent project on the topic but he is looking specifically at how the state perceives itself in the Arctic and how it is performed through narratives. He does this by looking at policies and conducting interviews. This thesis different from the aforementioned academic work covers how Iceland's Arctic identity has been portrayed by Icelandic politicians, mostly through speeches delivered and looks at the evolution of the state's Arctic identity discourse and serves therefore as an add-on and update of previous work done in the field.

## 4 Analysing the evolution of Iceland's Arctic Identity

In this chapter, the main findings of the data will be presented and analyzed. The chapter is divided into the following periods based on the terms of foreign ministers:

- 2011-2013 which marks the time when the Arctic was put on the agenda as a top priority in Iceland's foreign affairs until the end of Ossur Skarphedinsson's term as a foreign minister
- 2013-2016 - Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson's term as a foreign minister
- 2016-2017 - Lilja Alfredsdottir's terms as a foreign minister
- 2017-2021 - Gudlaugur Thor Thordarson's term as a foreign minister

Under each time period, data from speeches of other significant leaders during that period will also be analyzed. These leaders are presidents and prime ministers and were selected due to their influential roles and presence at International and Arctic events.

Each sub-chapter will analyze how the political leaders have described, portrayed and constructed Iceland's Arctic identity through discourse, each term ending with concluding remarks for all periods.

### 4.1 2011-2013

This chapter will analyze the data in the period 2011-2013.

#### 4.1.1 Ossur Skarphedinsson

In 2011, Ossur Skarphedinsson, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, made a speech at Norway's Arctic Frontiers conference which had interesting elements in terms of constructing Iceland's Arctic Identity. But this also marks the time when the parliament of Iceland unanimously decided to give priority to the Arctic, and interestingly half a year after another meeting of the Arctic five.<sup>75</sup> One of the main themes of Iceland's Arctic identity discourse is affirming Iceland's geographical position and its significance in the Arctic context and in the aforementioned conference Skarphedinsson stated:

As a sovereign state, that is the only one lying in its entirety within what the government of our hosts [i.e. Norway] defines as the High North, and with the land and vast areas, as well as huge interests, within the Arctic, it is stating the obvious

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<sup>75</sup> Heather Exner-Pirot, "The return of the Arctic Five," Eye on the Arctic, accessed 4 September, 2022. <https://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2015/07/23/blog-the-return-of-the-arctic-five/>.

that we consider ourselves an Arctic Coastal state. Obviously we want to be recognised as such. In this context, the concept is not deployed in a narrow, legal sense confined to territorial claims. I use it as a political and geographical argument to drive home the point, not without reason, that we want to be included, not excluded, from deliberations on the Arctic region.<sup>76</sup>

In this statement, Skarphedinsson clearly attempts to affirm Iceland as the only sovereign state lying entirely within the High North. However, the High North is not the same as the Arctic. The High North is a Norwegian phenomenon that is not necessarily recognized or known by other states. Skagestad, in his report *The 'High North': An Elastic Concept in Norwegian Arctic Policy*, published in 2010, mentioned how the Arctic is a distinct geographical area while the high north is a more abstract term. The High North was, however, defined for function purposes when Norway was developing its High North strategy, where geographical parameters were considered to cover “the sea and land, including islands and archipelagos, stretching northwards from the southern boundary of Nordland county in Norway and eastwards from the Greenland Sea to the Barents Sea and the Pechora Sea”.<sup>77</sup> As the term High North is uniquely, at least formally, a Norwegian concept and not understood by all, it can be easily but mistakenly be interpreted as the Arctic.

Acknowledging this draws out how the minister conveniently chooses a term that matches his narrative. By stating that Iceland lies entirely within the Arctic based on this is not completely accurate. Furthermore, Skaphedinsson states how it is “obvious” that Iceland should be recognized as a coastal state. Dodds and Ingimundarson point out how if it is so “obvious”, then why is it so important to state it?<sup>78</sup> Certainly, he makes the statements based on the fact that Iceland has not been recognized as a coastal state but wants to be recognized as such, included but not excluded, and in fact the minister states that he is stating this geographical and political argument to drive home the point. Geographers have pointed out the relationship between space and identity and how the two enable a group to position itself in the world. Hence Skarphedinsson reminding his audience of Iceland’s geographical location is an attempt he makes as a case for Iceland

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<sup>76</sup> Skarphéðinsson, "Icelandic Perspectives on the Arctic."

<sup>77</sup> Skagestad, Odd Gunnar Skagestad, *The 'High North': An Elastic Concept in Norwegian Arctic Policy* (Lysaker: Fridtjof Nansen Institute, 2010), 1-6, <https://ogskagestad.net/HighNorthFNIaug10.pdf>.

<sup>78</sup> Dodds et al., "Territorial nationalism and Arctic geopolitics: Iceland as an Arctic coastal state," 21-22.

being Arctic. That territory creates a basis for Iceland to identify as Arctic and as a Coastal state, even "more Arctic".

In the same speech Skarphedinsson said: "...like the heavenly creature, the polar bear, I am at home in the crisp, cold darkness of the Arctic winter, so I can tell the good people of Tromso that I do not particularly want to leave"<sup>79</sup>.

In this statement, Skarphedinsson, through storytelling, attempts to paint a picture for his audience. He starts by comparing himself to the polar bear which is very symbolic of the Arctic. This is an interesting choice as Iceland is not inhabited by polar bears. Nonetheless, over 600 polar bears have turned up in Iceland with sea ice arriving on Icelandic shores. However, polar bears are not native to Iceland.<sup>80</sup> Although he doesn't state that polar bears roam around Iceland, this statement could be interpreted easily in that way as he follows the descriptions of the polar bear by stating that he "is at home", his home being in Iceland and therefore it seems like an exaggeration of Iceland's Arctic nature. He then goes on to say that the crisp Arctic air and the cold darkness in Tromso makes him feel at home, reminding his audience of Iceland's Arctic characteristics perhaps, to be matching Tromso's Arctic characteristics, that is inarguably in the Arctic.

In the same speech he states the following:

We have since settlement based our livelihood on the offerings of the Arctic nature, both land and sea. The Arctic has had a very profound influence on the development and history of our country. Indeed, the settlement itself was made possible by a very brief spell of warm climate in the Arctic, when a completely untouched country was settled from Norway by what cynical historians sometimes refer to in jest as the first tax-evaders of history.<sup>81</sup>

In this statement, he refers to Icelandic nature as Arctic nature. He goes on to mention how the Arctic region and its environment has had an influence on the development of the history of Iceland and how the settlement was only possible because of the spell of warm climate in the Arctic, reaffirming the relationship between Iceland and wider Arctic concerns. Interestingly he includes the word "untouched", when he talks about

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<sup>79</sup> Skarphéðinsson, "Icelandic Perspectives on the Arctic."

<sup>80</sup> "Polar Bear," Icelandic Institute of Natural History, accessed 8 August, 2022. <https://www.ni.is/en/fauna/mammals/hvitabjorn>.

<sup>81</sup> Skarphéðinsson, "Icelandic Perspectives on the Arctic."

the settlement, a term commonly associated with wilderness, which has also been a common narrative of the wider Arctic throughout history.<sup>82</sup>

Skarphedinsson then goes on with the following segment:

In the Sagas, and our annals of history, one of the most prominent factors always looming in the writer's description is what our forebears with traditional literary flair inherited from the Celtic strain in our blood called the "mortal enemy". This was the pack ice, with its grave consequences for the livelihood and survival of our people, extreme cold, frost damage to vegetation and the ensuing lack of crops, lack of vital access to the fish in the sea, - and of course hungry polar bears. It is therefore not surprising that the high and the low points of our history are closely entwined with climatic and natural fluctuations. My grandparents' generation witnessed the emigration of almost 25% of the Icelanders, who literally left their country because of the extreme climate that accompanied long spells of heavy pack ice. The development of modern society in Iceland is also very much dependent on the nature of the Arctic North, and its fluctuations. The backbone of our economy has been, and still is, the exploitation of our fisheries resources. These, in turn, very much depend on the balance, and health of the Arctic nature. Iceland is surrounded to the East and to the West by strong polar currents flowing from the Arctic Ocean into the North Atlantic. The upswell on the boundaries of these currents, and the warmer Gulf Stream from the south is the basis of our strong fishing stocks.....  
.....Firstly, Iceland aims to assert her position as a coastal state in the Arctic and is committed to ensuring that all international discussions and decisions about the future of our region reflect the interests and aspirations of Arctic residents.<sup>83</sup>

Here, Skarphedinsson really makes an effort in drawing out characteristics that are considered Arctic and makes a case linking Iceland's history and modern, economic conditions to 'Arctic nature'. It is evident that Skarphedinsson is making a case for Iceland being considered as an Arctic state by taking the time to shed light on Iceland's Arctic characteristics through storytelling. The need of asserting Iceland as a Coastal state at this point in time is likely driven by Iceland's insecurities that may have appeared after the meeting of the Arctic five states in 2010.<sup>84</sup> He does this consciously and doesn't shy away from that fact, as he states at the end of his speech, that one of the priorities of Iceland's Arctic policy is to 'assert her position as a coastal state in the Arctic'<sup>85</sup> which portrays how he is making efforts in promoting Iceland as an Arctic state.

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<sup>82</sup> Anna Dóra Sæþórsdóttir et al., "Making wilderness: Tourism and the history of the wilderness idea in Iceland," *Polar Geography* 34, no. 4 (2011): 249.

<sup>83</sup> Skarphéðinsson, "Icelandic Perspectives on the Arctic."

<sup>84</sup> Heather Exner-Pirot. "The return of the Arctic Five."

<sup>85</sup> Skarphéðinsson, "Icelandic Perspectives on the Arctic."

A group's identity can consist of common values, ideas, history etc., which creates this common identity. The individuals of that group feel a sense of sameness and belonging, whereas those that do not have that common identity might be considered as the 'other'. In Iceland's Arctic identity discourse, 'we' is commonly used, implying the contrast of the 'other', as well as Icelanders, are described as inhabitants of the Arctic.<sup>86</sup>

In Skarphedinsson's statements one can see how he assumes Icelandic people are also Arctic people.

Firstly, Iceland aims to assert her position as a coastal state in the Arctic and is committed to ensuring that all international discussions and decisions about the future of our region reflect the interests and aspirations of Arctic residents. Secondly, Iceland will actively encourage inclusive high level political cooperation within the Arctic Council with a strong focus on the human dimension. Thirdly, in international fora Iceland will actively seek to ensure, that the interests and concerns of Arctic residents are put to the front in the global effort against climate change, transboundary pollutants and in developing agreements that will contribute to the sustainable development of the Arctic region.<sup>92</sup>

In the statement above, one can see Skarphedinsson's efforts to establish Iceland as an active participant in the decision-making processes, to ensure that the future reflects the interests and aspirations of the Arctic residents, including Icelandic residents. Here, the wider focus on 'Arctic residents' is not limited to Icelanders, but also includes the interests, concerns and aspirations of other Arctic residents. The use of the phrase 'Arctic

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<sup>86</sup> Skarphéðinsson, "Icelandic Perspectives on the Arctic."

<sup>87</sup> Skarphéðinsson, Ö, "Key Note speech," Stjórnarráð Íslands, Speech delivered at the Arctic as a Global Challenge – Issues and Solutions, Reykjavik, 18 March 2013, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/utanrikisraduneyti-media/media/Raedur/The-Arctic-as-a-Global-Challenge---Speech-by-Ossur-Skarphedinsson.pdf>.

<sup>88</sup> Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson, "Iceland's Policy and Priorities in a Changing Arctic," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Frontiers, Tromsø, 20 January, 2014, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/utanrikisraduneyti-media/media/Raedur/Raeda-GBS-ArcticFrontiers.pdf>.

<sup>89</sup> Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson, "Climate Change Through an Arctic Lens."

<sup>90</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, "Arctic Interests of the West Nordic Countries," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at a break-out Session Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavik, 12 October, 2019, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2019/10/12/Erindi-radherra-a-hlidarvidburdi-Vestnorraena-radsins-a-Hringbordi-nordursloda/>.

<sup>91</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, "Ávarp á Hringborði norðurslóða í Edinborg," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Forum, in Edinburgh, Edinburgh, 14 October, 2017, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2017/11/20/Avarp-a-Hringbordi-nordursloda-i-Edinborg/>.

<sup>92</sup> Skarphéðinsson, "Icelandic Perspectives on the Arctic."

residents' suggests such their interests, concerns and aspirations are common among them. However, the residents of the Arctic as a whole have very diverse interests and needs, and while the Icelandic state is perhaps the best placed to address the needs of Icelandic residents, the needs and interests of the latter don't necessarily reflect the needs of the rest of the residents of the Arctic.

Skarphedinsson affirms Icelandic people as Arctic people by using language such as 'we':

This should be the guiding principle for the Council to keep its relevance and leadership as the main forum for Arctic Cooperation. We must work together. We must refrain from the temptation to undermine it by sub-groups of Arctic states or unilateral actions. We should allow ourselves the luxury to have frank discussions that focus on minimizing our differences and maximizing our shared interests.<sup>93</sup>

By using the pronouns such as 'we' when speaking of Arctic cooperation, Skarphedinsson is reasserting Iceland's Arctic status and its aspiration to lead and have an influential role in the Arctic.

Finally, Skarphedinsson gives importance to the indigenous peoples of the Arctic.

It is of importance to underscore as well that our Arctic policy includes a firm commitment to support the rights of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Their existence today, and their future tomorrow, is based on the health of the Arctic environment. They have an ethical right to be a party to decisions of the region.<sup>94</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Other political leaders on the Arctic

Before 2011, which remarks the time when Iceland's government consciously put the Arctic on its list of priorities in foreign affairs, the then president, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, had been speaking of the Arctic for many years. His Arctic focus is and has been, however, quite different from other politicians, who put arguably a very distinct focus on creating, shaping and performing a certain Icelandic Arctic Identity which is evident in their speech. Grimsson, as arguably the pioneer of Iceland's focus on the Arctic, is rather concerned about global challenges such as climate change and the importance of research, and in his speech, it is implied that he does consider Iceland Arctic without giving focus to it. Skarphedinsson, for instance, is very firm on bringing together examples of Iceland's

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<sup>93</sup> Skarphéðinsson, "Key note speech."

<sup>94</sup> Skarphéðinsson, "Key note speech."



Arctic-ness, different from Grimsson which may be also explained by the different roles they have. It can be interpreted in the ways that Grimsson sees Iceland as Arctic and does not need to confirm it with the others as it is a 'given' fact. He rather makes bold moves that remind the international arena of Iceland Arctic-ness such as establishing the Arctic Circle assembly, which is the largest international, annual Arctic event there is.<sup>95</sup><sup>96</sup><sup>97</sup> By doing that, he puts Iceland in the centre of the debate in many ways, geographically but also by creating a very powerful platform for Iceland to advocate for the interests and Arctic-ness.

In 2013 when Grimsson opened the first inaugural Arctic Circle Assembly, he speaks of a common global future, climate change, the importance of research and the nature of the assembly, which is a platform for everyone; Arctic, Arctic states, non-Arctic states, presidents, indigenous peoples and civilians where everyone can come together to discuss matters relating to the Arctic and their interests. In this speech, there is little focus on affirming Iceland as an Arctic state and he rather talks about it as an Arctic state.<sup>99</sup>

Other Icelandic political leaders during this period, that is 2011-2013 do not, in particular, give focus to the Arctic. In June 2013 on the other hand, that is shortly after Skarhedinsson's term finished as a minister of foreign affairs, Egill Helgason, a well-known journalist that leads the political television show *Silfur Egils*, published a news article where he criticizes the focus that Iceland was putting on the Arctic. He names the Article 'A Foggy Talk about the Arctic' (í. Þokukennt tal um Norðurslóðir) and states that Iceland does not own land in the Arctic. His main point in the article is that the efforts put in and emphasis put on the Arctic are greater than the potential gains.<sup>100</sup> While he is not a political representative, this in ways undermines Iceland's Arctic Identity by saying that

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<sup>95</sup> Vilborg Einarasdóttir, "Olafur Ragnar Grimsson: A New Model Of Arctic Cooperation For The 21st Century," *Journal of the North Atlantic and Arctic*, November, 2018, accessed 8 August, 2022. <https://www.jonaa.org/content/2018/10/19/a-new-model>.

<sup>96</sup> Grímsson, Ólafur, "Global Arctic," Arctic Circle Assembly, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavik, October, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVb6t1nIddM>.

<sup>97</sup> Grímsson, Ólafur, "The Arctic as the New Geopolitical Playing Field," Arctic Circle Assembly, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Forum, Korea, December, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgny5sW6Jh8>.

<sup>98</sup> Grímsson, Ólafur. "Welcome." Arctic Circle Assembly. Speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavik, 22 October, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4PgKfsPdto>.

<sup>99</sup> Grímsson, "Inaugural 2013 Arctic Circle Assembly."

<sup>100</sup> Egill Helgason, "Þokukennt tal um norðurslóðir," DV, 7 June, 2013, accessed 8 August, 2022. <https://www.dv.is/eyjan/2013/6/7/thokukennt-tal-um-nordurslodir/>.

Iceland doesn't own land in the Arctic, which is an important argument in making a case for Iceland's Arctic-ness as space is an important contributor to identity and the combination of the two enables a group to position themselves in the world, or in this case, in the Arctic and the Arctic discourse. Furthermore, an important component of a common identity is shared interests and needs. Helgason's opinion is that the interests of Iceland in the Arctic are not as much as Skarphedinsson and the parliament let it out to be. This statement, therefore, undermines the efforts made by Skarphedinsson to paint a picture of Iceland as an Arctic state.

#### 4.1.3 Conclusion

From the above, various conclusions about Iceland's Arctic identity in the 2011-2013 period can be drawn. Firstly, Skarphedinsson draws out how Iceland's geographical position makes the case for why Iceland is Arctic and more importantly to him, a Coastal state which should be included, not excluded. Secondly, he drags out the Icelandic nature's characteristics that have been associated with the Arctic. Thirdly, when he speaks about the needs and interests of the Arctic people, he commonly uses pronouns such as we and us, implying that he sees the Icelandic population as Arctic.

It is interesting, however, that in this period the construction of identity seems to have been driven by the ministry of foreign affairs, while the president, does not make efforts in terms of reaffirming the international audience that Iceland is an Arctic state, but rather on common issues that the Arctic faces, which perhaps to him self-evidently includes Iceland, which it true. This can be explained by the different roles of the two leaders. Furthermore, the prime minister during this term does not make any speech on any significant platform on Arctic matters.

## 4.2 2013-2016

This chapter will analyze the date in the period 2013-2016.

### 4.2.1 Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson

During his time as foreign minister, Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson did not put emphasis on the geographical position of Iceland in the context of its Arctic identity. Only once, in an article in the Huffington Post did he mention how "Iceland is the only country in the northern hemisphere that is fully within the Arctic region. Reykjavík is the northernmost capital in

the world”<sup>101</sup>. This is also shortly after yet another meeting of the Arctic five in 2015, which had not happened since 2010 when Hilary Clinton’s remarks on the exclusive and inappropriate nature of the Arctic five cooperation.<sup>102</sup> He did not particularly emphasize this in public meetings that concerned the Arctic. This could be explained by the fact that he did not see the same need for reminding people that were familiar with Arctic matters that Iceland was the only Arctic state, fully within the Arctic, and boldly assumed or wanted it to appear as it was a given that Iceland is the only sovereign state fully in the Arctic. On the other hand, when he made the above-mentioned statement on Iceland being the only country fully within the Arctic region, he was speaking to another type of audience, that is the readers of the Huffington Post, a diverse group of people from the U.S.<sup>103</sup>

Sveinsson’s ways of asserting Iceland as an Arctic state from a nature perspective during his term as a foreign minister is quite similar to Skarphedinsson’s, through storytelling but without being as direct with his objectives.

So why this chilly name for a volcanic island with frequent eruptions? In *Landnáma*, the book of settlement in Iceland, it says that one of the first Vikings to travel to the island, Floki, who followed his ravens, climbed a mountain and saw beneath him a fjord full of drift ice. Hence, the name Iceland. The drift ice and our harsh climate is a reminder to Icelanders that we are an Arctic nation. Iceland is, however, considerably warmer than its name and geographic location indicate. The Gulf Stream secures the habitability of Iceland as it brings us warmth from the south. The warm water and the cold Polar water masses meet off our coast and create prime conditions that provide Iceland with one of the world’s richest fishing grounds. Since settlement, we have based our livelihood on what nature has to offer, both on land and from the sea. Icelanders have learned to live and adapt to the changes in the environment caused by the difficult forces of nature... ..In the end the question about the future of the Arctic is a fundamental one for Iceland. As an Arctic nation it touches more or less all the aspects of the way of life in Iceland.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson, "Climate Change Through an Arctic Lens," Huffpost, 1 December, 2016, accessed 8 August, 2022. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/climate-change-through-an-arctic-lens\\_b\\_8655232?utm\\_hp\\_ref=green&ir=Green](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/climate-change-through-an-arctic-lens_b_8655232?utm_hp_ref=green&ir=Green).

<sup>102</sup> "The return of the Arctic Five," Eye on the Arctic, accessed 4 September, 2022. <https://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2015/07/23/blog-the-return-of-the-arctic-five/>.

<sup>103</sup> "Audience Analysis Behind the AOLHuffington Post Deal," Nielsen, accessed 4 September, 2022. <https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2011/aol-huffington-post/>.

<sup>104</sup> Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson, "Iceland’s Role in the Arctic – The Future of Arctic Cooperation," Stjórnaráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavík, 14 October, 2013, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/utanrikisraduneyti-media/media/nordurslodir/Arctic-Circle-speech-October-14-2013.pdf>.

Although Sveinsson acknowledges more than Skarphedinsson does, the warmer climate in Iceland than is generally associated with the Arctic, he mentioned in his speech Iceland's Arctic characteristics. He speaks of drift ice and harsh climate as a reminder that Iceland is an Arctic nation. He mentions how the climate has affected Icelandic livelihood and how Icelanders have learned to live and adapt to the changes in the environment caused by the difficult forces of nature. The evident difference in the articulation of the narrative between the two ministers is that Skarphedinsson exaggerates more in his narrative of Iceland as an Arctic state, giving less space to the warmer climate in Iceland, and more to the characteristics of Iceland's nature that are considered Arctic, as well as he is obviously, dramatically and unapologetically asserting Iceland as an Arctic Coastal state. Sveinsson on the other hand takes a more realistic approach in his description in the way that he does not hold back on acknowledging Iceland's 'non-Arctic' characteristics and presents in some ways a more accurate image of Iceland. His objective also appears to be more centred on the importance of acknowledging Iceland as an Arctic state in order to be able to influence the Arctic discourse that touches upon environmental changes that will affect Iceland's way of life, than asserting Iceland as a *coastal state*.

In another speech he states the following:

First, Icelanders know and understand the difficult conditions in the north. The extreme environment is natural to us. Icelandic sailors know how to navigate the most difficult seas. Our engineers know how to design and build structures that can withstand the most fearsome winter storms.<sup>105</sup>

In this statement, he clearly draws out characteristics of Icelandic nature that are common to wider 'Arctic nature' and contribute to Iceland's Arctic identity.

Sveinsson also uses 'we' and 'us' when speaking of the Arctic people which implies that the Icelandic people are Arctic.

As Arctic nations, we need to keep that in mind and make sure that our debate is open and transparent for others in the international and global community<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson, "The Growing Importance of the Arctic Region," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Economist Arctic Summit, London, 4 March, 2014.

<https://www.stjornaradid.is/media/utanrikisraduneyti-media/media/gunnar-bragi/Economist-Arctic-Summit-2014---raeda.pdf>.

<sup>106</sup> Sveinsson, "Iceland's Policy and Priorities in a Changing Arctic."

For us in the Arctic, the stakes are high, since our environment and our very livelihood is at stake.<sup>107</sup>

With increased focus on the Arctic, its future development and changes in various fields, there will be greater emphasis on the cooperation and coordination between the Arctic states and on the international arena. I mentioned in my speech at the UN General Assembly last September that these developments put special responsibility on us, the caretakers of the Arctic. That means the nations and people in the Arctic need to make sure that responsible resource management and sustainability are always kept in mind when discussing developments in the Arctic.<sup>108</sup>

In the last statement, he speaks particularly about the responsibility of 'us', the caretakers of the Arctic, and follows it by saying that the caretakers include the nations and the people in the Arctic as these caretakers.

#### 4.2.2 Other Political Leaders in the Arctic Discourse

Sigmundur David Gunnlaugsson, Iceland's prime minister from 2013-2016<sup>109</sup> made two speeches at the Arctic Circle during his term. He made the opening speech of the Arctic Circle in 2014 where he puts focus on environmental challenges in the Arctic. Although discrete, there can be found some elements of Iceland's Arctic identity. However, this is apparent through how he speaks, that is using terms such as 'we' in the Arctic, and not making an effort in terms of claiming that Iceland is Arctic. Perhaps it was well accepted by this time that Iceland was an Arctic state and because of that Gunnlaugsson did not see the necessity of affirming it. In fact, Hilary Clinton in 2010 criticized the cooperation of the Arctic five as inappropriate and exclusive in a meeting she attended that was organised by Canada for the Arctic five and left early which undermined the cooperation of the Arctic five.<sup>110111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson, "Climate Change Through an Arctic Lens."

<sup>108</sup> Sveinsson, "Iceland's Policy and Priorities in a Changing Arctic."

<sup>109</sup> "Forsætisráðherra heldur lokaerindi í Hringborði Norðurslóða," Stjórnaráð Íslands, 18 October, 2015, accessed 8 August, 2022. <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/forsaetisraduneytid/fyrri-forsaetisradherra/stok-raeda-fyrrum-forsaetisradherra/2015/10/18/Forsaetisradherra-heldur-lokaerindi-i-Hringborði-Nordursloda/>

<sup>110</sup> Heather Exner-Pirot. "The return of the Arctic Five."

<sup>111</sup> "Clinton rebuke overshadows Arctic meeting," Foreign Policy, 30 March, 2010, accessed 4 September, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/03/30/clinton-rebuke-overshadows-arctic-meeting/>.

Indeed, the Arctic states have a history and good record in resolving their differences in a cordial and peaceful manner in the High North. We may not agree on all issues everywhere, as certainly is the case these days.<sup>112</sup>

It is quite remarkable, when you think about it, how the Arctic has become a region of stability and cooperation after decades of tensions during the Cold War. We must continue to build on this and avoid the slippery slope of military build-ups and confrontation in the region.<sup>113</sup>

In these statements above Gunnlaugsson mentions how the Arctic states have a history of resolving differences in a peaceful manner in the High North as well as in the following statement how it is remarkable how the region has become one of stability and cooperation after the Cold War. He follows the two statements by using 'we' need to continue this sort of cooperation. The use of 'we' as a pronoun in this context implies Iceland is an Arctic state, included, as part of the Arctic regions.

Gunnlaugsson makes another interesting statement which is a bit in the spirit of Skarphedinsson and reaffirms the Arctic Council as the main forum for discussion and decision-making pertaining to the Arctic.

Let me first mention the Arctic Council, which remains the most important forum for discussion and decision making on issues pertaining to the Arctic.<sup>114</sup>

The audience of the Arctic Circle is likely to be familiar with the Arctic Council and its functions within the Arctic. It is therefore interesting to see how he inserts this extra sentence of reminding his audience of the fact that the Council remains the most important forum for discussion and decision-making on issues pertaining to the Arctic. In ways, it can be perceived as a reminder that the Council is more important than the cooperation between the Arctic five, from which Iceland is excluded. Nonetheless, in 2014, Fran Ulmer the chair of the US Arctic Research Commission, in her speech at the Arctic Circle also affirmed the importance of the role of the Arctic Council in the region<sup>115</sup>. Hence, Gunnlaugsson wasn't the only one doing this and doesn't necessarily reflect insecurities such as being excluded from the cooperation between the Arctic five.

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<sup>112</sup> Gunnlaugsson, "Opening Speech."

<sup>113</sup> Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson, "Opening Speech," MBL, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle, Reykjavik, 31 October, 2014, <https://www.mbl.is/media/09/8309.pdf>.

<sup>114</sup> Gunnlaugsson, "Opening Speech."

<sup>115</sup> Fran Ulmer, "The Importance of Science and Research to the US Arctic Council Chairmanship," Arctic Circle Assembly, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavik, 2 November, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKpjYew29AA&ab\\_channel=ArcticCircle](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKpjYew29AA&ab_channel=ArcticCircle).

However, at the Arctic Circle in 2015 Gunnlaugsson brings up Iceland's role at the Arctic Council where he states:

As an Arctic Coastal State and a founding member of the Arctic Council, Iceland has great interests at stake in the Arctic, shaped strongly by its geographical position and the importance of access to natural resources and their sustainability. The eight Arctic States share a common responsibility and a mutual interest in the protection and sustainability of the Arctic [...] This brings me to one of our policy's main points – namely regional co-operation with other stakeholders. The Arctic Council remains the most important forum for discussions and decision-making on issues pertaining to the Arctic.<sup>116</sup>

His speech, in 2015, is characterized more by the need to reaffirm Iceland as an Arctic state. Not only does he mention that Iceland is an Arctic Coastal state, but he also reminds his audience of Iceland being a founding member of the Arctic Council. Later in his speech, he also reminds his audience, yet again, that the Arctic Council remains the most important forum for discussions and decision-making on issues pertaining to the Arctic. The difference between Skarphedinsson's approach and Gunnlaugsson's approach is that while Skarphedinsson was actively advocating for Iceland as a Coastal state and says so himself, Gunnlaugsson states it as a fact. Whether it is a fact or not can be debated. However, according to the Arctic five in that same year, Iceland was in fact not, as they held yet another meeting as the Arctic five Coastal states signing an agreement on a heralded moratorium on fishing in the high seas portion of the central Arctic Ocean, yet again, excluding the other three Arctic states.<sup>117</sup> Hence, the shift between Gunnlaugsson's approach from 2014 and 2015 is very likely influenced by this event.

The prime minister also states in his speech in 2014 "We also have valuable expertise to share, including within our Coast Guard, which is well acquainted with climatic conditions in the North and has"<sup>118</sup> which drags out how Iceland has valuable expertise due to their experience with climate conditions in the North, that is the Arctic. This is the only time he mentions weather conditions that the nation is accustomed to. But the harshness of the Arctic weather conditions as commonly described needs experience, and although not directly stated by the minister, it is implied and can be perceived as the nation has experience with Arctic climate.

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<sup>116</sup> Gunnlaugsson, "Forsætisráðherra heldur lokaerindi í Hringborði Norðurslóða."

<sup>117</sup> Heather Exner-Pirot. "The return of the Arctic Five."

<sup>118</sup> Gunnlaugsson, "Opening Speech."

In 2015 he also gives space to shed light on how the Arctic has shaped the livelihood of the Icelandic nation by stating:

For centuries, Iceland's economic and social well-being and livelihood has been shaped by the natural riches and climatic conditions of the North.<sup>119</sup>

In this statement he drags out the climatic conditions and the natural resources that have shaped the nation, and although he says conditions of the North, earlier in his speech he states: "In the course of time the Arctic, the High North as it is sometimes referred to"<sup>120</sup> and therefore in the context of speaking at the Arctic Circle, it can be safely assumed that he is speaking of how the Arctic has influenced the nation's livelihood. History and environment contribute to a nation's identity and sense of self, and this statement showcases how the Arctic climate has contributed to Iceland's identity or Arctic identity.

Gunnlaugsson also includes some statements on the importance of protecting the rights of indigenous peoples:

The composition of the Arctic Council is quite remarkable and encompassing, and includes not only Arctic member states but also, and this is important, communities of indigenous peoples as permanent participants.<sup>121</sup>

And although the stakes are high for states and businesses alike, we must always remember that there are people, including indigenous peoples, living in these areas, whose livelihood and rights need to be fully protected.<sup>122</sup>

We need to work with indigenous peoples in the Arctic in their efforts to preserve their rights and their way of life. Indigenous peoples have inhabited the Arctic for thousands of years - their proportion is estimated to be about 10 percent of total population living in arctic areas. It is important to ensure that all the inhabitants of the High North can prosper and live in harmony with nature, and utilize their resources in a sustainable way.<sup>123</sup>

One of the core principles of Iceland's Arctic Policy is related to further promoting knowledge about the Arctic. Education about the Arctic must be promoted, as well as research on the region in the broadest possible sense, such as in the fields of climate change, glacier research, marine biology, international politics and law,

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<sup>119</sup> Gunnlaugsson, "Forsætisráðherra heldur lokaerindi í Hringborði Norðurslóða."

<sup>120</sup> Gunnlaugsson, "Forsætisráðherra heldur lokaerindi í Hringborði Norðurslóða."

<sup>121</sup> Gunnlaugsson, "Opening Speech."

<sup>122</sup> Gunnlaugsson, "Opening Speech."

<sup>123</sup> Gunnlaugsson, "Forsætisráðherra heldur lokaerindi í Hringborði Norðurslóða."



security, history and culture, economic and social development, gender equality, and Arctic shipping.<sup>124</sup>

Iceland has contributed extensively to science in the Arctic and will continue to do so. We have for instance led two projects that focussed on the people of the Arctic and their living conditions – the comprehensive surveys of human development in the region, contained in the Arctic Human Development Reports – and the report on gender equality in the Arctic.<sup>125</sup>

Although these statements do not necessarily concern Iceland's Arctic identity, it is interesting to consider the focus Iceland has put on indigenous peoples and the human rights dimension of Arctic affairs. Iceland has been in a way searching for its ways and contributions to the Arctic, and as it can be seen in the state's national identity, its interests often concern the protection of the rights of people, which in ways translates into this focus on the indigenous populations.

#### 4.2.3 Conclusion

Between 2013 and 2016 the discourse of Iceland's Arctic Identity Sveinsson is quite consistent in his narrative of Iceland's Arctic Identity and commonly drags out nature characteristics to describe Iceland's nature and are associated with the Arctic. The primary point to be drawn from this period is the difference in focus in giving space to affirm Iceland's Arctic identity in the speeches of Gunnlaugsson between 2014 and 2015. Context is important to explain this shift, but in his earlier speech, significant meetings between the Arctic five hadn't taken place since 2010 when Clinton's remarks on the inappropriate and exclusive nature of the cooperation between the Arctic five. In July 2015, the Arctic five met, yet again excluding Iceland, Finland and Sweden, and it is apparent in Gunnlaugsson's speech that same year at the Arctic Circle that he gives more space to reaffirming Iceland's Arctic-ness, Iceland as a Coastal state and a founding member of the Arctic Council. On similar notes Sveinsson also makes these remarks in the Huffington Post on Iceland being the only country in the northern hemisphere that is fully within the Arctic region. This reflects the state's insecurities at the Arctic decision-making table and the need to affirm its Arctic identity. The image of Iceland's Arctic identity seemed perhaps more stable, but takes a step back with the aforementioned event between the Arctic five.

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<sup>124</sup> Gunnlaugsson, "Forsætisráðherra heldur lokaerindi í Hringborði Norðurslóða."

<sup>125</sup> Gunnlaugsson, "Forsætisráðherra heldur lokaerindi í Hringborði Norðurslóða."

## 4.3 2016-2017

This chapter will analyze the date in the period 2016-2017.

### 4.3.1 Lilja Dogg Alfredsdottir

Lilja Dogg Alfredsdottir did not speak about the Arctic to the same extent as some ministers, as her term was shorter than usual. However, she includes two interesting statements in two of her speeches. One is in Icelandic at the University of Akureyri in September 2016 where she presents Iceland's interests in the Arctic, and thereby directed towards Icelandic people, where she states that "Iceland has an important place in the Arctic as all of the country and most of the territorial waters are within the Arctic boundaries."<sup>126</sup> What is interesting about this statement and the context is the fact that it is in Icelandic and seemingly the first speech that was made towards an Icelandic audience where there are elements of Iceland's Arctic identity affirmed. What the politicians have in common is that they all show elements of asserting Iceland as an Arctic state, by presenting a narrative that contributes to that image. Nevertheless, Alfredsdottir's need to state this fact to an Icelandic audience doesn't make it so obvious that Iceland is an Arctic state, and therefore that all Icelandic people are Arctic people and identify accordingly. This statement implies in some ways that Icelandic people do not know of the Arctic elements of their identity that their representatives in foreign affairs attempt to portray. On the other hand, she could be solely reaffirming what they already know, especially given the context, that the audience is likely already familiar with Arctic matters as it takes place in Akureyri, which has also been described as Iceland's centre of Arctic matters in Iceland.<sup>127</sup>

Alfredsdottir's second statement is in English where she states the following:

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<sup>126</sup> Lilja Alfreðsdóttir, "Hagsmunamat á norðurslóðum," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered in the University of Akureyri, Akureyri, 8 September, 2016, [https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/04-Raduneytin/Utanrikisraduneytid/PDF-skjol/Hagsmunir-I%cc%81slands-a%cc%81-nordurslo%cc%81dum--raeda%20\(1\).docx](https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/04-Raduneytin/Utanrikisraduneytid/PDF-skjol/Hagsmunir-I%cc%81slands-a%cc%81-nordurslo%cc%81dum--raeda%20(1).docx).

<sup>127</sup> "About the Stefansson Arctic Institute," Stefansson Arctic Institute, accessed 4 September, 2022. <http://www.svs.is/en/about-us>.

As an Arctic Coastal State and a founding member of the Arctic Council, Iceland has great interests at stake in the Arctic, shaped strongly by its geographical position and the importance of access to natural resources and their sustainability.<sup>128</sup>

Before this statement, Iceland is rather making the argument for why it should be considered a Coastal state, as its status as a Coastal state has been undermined by the cooperation between the Arctic five. Here Alfredsdottir confidently states “as an Arctic Coastal State...” which implies that it is in fact a Coastal state, whether that fact is recognized internationally or not.

Alfredsdottir mentioned in the abovementioned speech to the Icelandic audience, that because all of the country is within the Arctic, all the inhabitants of Iceland are within the Arctic and mentions that despite Iceland being a small state of over 300.000 people, the population is a large part of the population of the Arctic and therefore Iceland has the right to identify as an Arctic state and focus on topics that are important to the Arctic. In a way, it is as she is justifying Iceland's focus on the Arctic in its foreign affairs, which puts into question how relevant it is to the people of Iceland. Nonetheless, it is, again, important to consider the profile of the audience other than their national identity, as they are also people that are likely familiar with Arctic matters as they attend this event. But yet, it in ways then gives Alfredsdottir less of a motive to reaffirm this fact, of Icelandic people being a large part of the Arctic population, yet she does.<sup>129</sup>

#### 4.3.2 Gudni Th. Johannesson

Gudni Th. Johannesson, the president of Iceland from 2016 until now, made a speech at the Arctic Circle Assembly in 2017. He takes another approach to the politicians spoken about in this thesis until now, where he doesn't, in particular, emphasize Iceland as an Arctic state.

There was a time when the far north was for us Icelanders a mystic scene, known as the frozen sea, the home of giants, trolls and strange creatures. The Icelandic Sagas – our early contribution to world literature – also contain tales of distant travels, of

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<sup>128</sup> Lilja Alfreðsdóttir, "The Arctic Council in a Global Context - the Road Ahead," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle 20 years Anniversary, Reykjavík, 9 September, 2016, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/utanrikisraduneyti-media/media/lilja-alfredsdottir/The-Arctic-Council--20-years-Anniversary-9-sept-2016.pdf>.

<sup>129</sup> Alfreðsdóttir, "Hagsmunamat á Norðurslóðum."

trade and battle in regions to the east of the Nordic world, as well as encounters with natives in lands we now call Greenland, Canada and the United States.<sup>130</sup>

His background is in history<sup>131</sup> and gives insights into how Iceland and its Nordic neighbours viewed the inhabitants in the high north. This contrasts significantly with the notion presented by Skarphedisson, Sveinsson and Gunnlaugsson about Icelanders always having been Arctic and identifying as such. Certainly, the Arctic isn't a synonym with the far north, but in this context, Iceland touching the Arctic Circle which has been undebatably considered as the Arctic, as well as he is speaking at the Arctic Circle Assembly, by 'far North' of Iceland he speaking of the Arctic. He mentions in fact how the far north was for Icelanders a mystic scene, frozen and home of strange creatures as part of the Icelandic sagas and encounters with 'natives' in lands including Greenland, Canada and The United States. He brings out the point how " the high north and its inhabitants were alien – outsiders in the eyes of their Nordic neighbours"<sup>132</sup> By stating this, the High North includes the inhabitants that were considered as 'alien' and outsiders in contrast to the neighbours in the North including Iceland. He goes on by stating that there is a lesson to be learned from this as "today, the indigenous people of the Arctic can and should no longer be seen as outsiders –".<sup>133</sup> Johannesson's speech, therefore, does not put emphasis on affirming Iceland as an Arctic state with a history where it's self-evident that Icelandic people are Arctic but rather the relations to the Arctic or what was considered the Arctic, or high North in the past, and Iceland's relationship with it due to its close proximity. He rather puts focus on the lessons learned when it comes to treating indigenous people of the Arctic as equals which are issues different from what Iceland as an Arctic state has experienced.

He included one interesting statement in his opening remarks at the Annual meeting of the Arctic Economic Council where he said:

"We all want to increase progress in the Arctic. But progress can be a tricky word. An elusive aim. A leader in an indigenous group in another hemisphere he said the remark once "Our problems really began when other people started taking interest

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<sup>130</sup> Guðni Th Jóhannesson, "Opening Speech," Forseti Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavik, 10 October, 2017.

[https://www.forseti.is/media/2746/2017\\_10\\_13\\_arctic\\_circle\\_setning.pdf](https://www.forseti.is/media/2746/2017_10_13_arctic_circle_setning.pdf).

<sup>131</sup> "Guðni Th. Jóhannesson," Forseti Íslands, accessed 4 September, 2022. <https://www.forseti.is/um-forseta/guðni-th-johannesson/>.

<sup>132</sup> Jóhannesson, "Opening Speech."

<sup>133</sup> Jóhannesson, "Opening Speech."

in us". We want to promote the Arctic, improve people's lives, make sensible use of resources. But moderation is key. "<sup>134</sup>

There he puts forward the contrast between 'us' and the 'other', but who is the 'other' and who is the 'us' in this context remains unclear. Is the 'us' solely the indigenous group making the remark and the Arctic states and partners the ones who are taking interest in them? Or is 'us' meant as the peoples of the Arctic, indigenous and non-indigenous and the 'other' the people and the states that are not Arctic? Depending on that this statement can have two different meanings.

Johannesson's key focus when speaking of the Arctic is on sustainability and the environment<sup>135136</sup> and elements of reasserting Iceland's Arctic identity are not so visible. This can be explained by the different role he is in compared to ministers of the country.

#### 4.3.3 Conclusion

Lilja Alfreðsdóttir's short term as a foreign minister does not provide us with a lot of data. However, it is interesting to consider how she attempts to clarify to Icelandic audiences that Iceland is an Arctic state, almost as if she needs to justify Iceland's focus on why the Arctic is prioritized. Furthermore, it is interesting to consider how she makes the statement of Iceland being a Coastal state, which is not recognized by all. She surely considers Iceland as an Arctic state and its population as Arctic. The president does not really speak of Iceland as an Arctic state but brings out historical facts of how the Icelandic nation saw the Arctic as something far North, the Icelandic population not being included as part of the Arctic and the Arctic population as outsiders. There the contrast of self to the 'other' contradicts what the ministers of foreign affairs have been attempting to portray, that Iceland is and has always been an Arctic state. This draws out how identity is changeable and influenced by agents representing a state. Nonetheless, the different focus of Johannesson can also be explained, as in the case of his predecessor, by the different roles they play compared to the ministers.

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<sup>134</sup> "Guðni Th. Jóhannesson," Forseti Íslands, accessed 4 September, 2022. <https://www.forseti.is/um-forseta/guðni-th-jóhannesson/>.

<sup>135</sup> Jóhannesson, "Greetings from the president of Iceland."

<sup>136</sup> Jóhannesson, "Opening Speech."

## 4.4 2017-2021

This chapter will analyze the date in the period 2017-2021.

### 4.4.1 Gudlaugur Thor Thordarson

Gudlaugur Thor Thordarson, minister of foreign affairs from 2017-2021 put a lot of emphasis on the Arctic during his term and made an effort to highlight Iceland's geographical position. In Icelandic, as Alfredsdottir does, he states:

It is clear that few states have as many interests to protect when it comes to economic development of the area as Iceland, since the country is completely within and large part of territorial waters within the Arctic boundaries. This is unique among the states in the Arctic Council.<sup>137</sup>

He makes the case that Iceland has interests to protect and attempts to drive the point home by stating that the country is completely within the boundaries of the Arctic but uses the word 'since' which implies that it is obvious. Again like Skarphedinsson did at the time when the state started to develop Iceland's narrative of its Arctic identity, Thordarson states something that he considered an obvious fact, but if it is so obvious, why is there the need to remind his audience?

Thordarson furthermore makes an effort to remind the outside world that Iceland is in fact the only state fully within the region's boundaries through different platforms. At the Arctic Circle assembly in 2018 he stated the following:

We, Icelanders, like to believe that we enjoy a special position in the Arctic - being a Member State of the Arctic Council and situated entirely within the boundaries of the region<sup>138</sup>

At the Arctic Circle assembly in 2019, there is a certain shift in how Thordarson articulates Iceland as an Arctic state. Addressing a breakout session of the West Nordic Union, he stated:

It is obvious from the level of participation in the Arctic Circle this year that our region, the Arctic, is not only high up on the globe but also high on the international

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<sup>137</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, "Samráðsfundur vegna formennsku Íslands í Norðurskautsráðinu," Samráðsfundur vegna formennsku Íslands í Norðurskautsráðinu," Stjórnaráð Íslands, speech delivered at Hugarflugsfundur um formennsku Íslands í Norðurskautsráði, Reykjavík, 12 January, 2017, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2017/01/12/Samradsfundur-vegna-formennsku-Islands-i-Nordurskautsradinu/>.

<sup>138</sup> Þórðarson, "Arctic Interests of the West Nordic Countries."

agenda....Our countries are Arctic, our nations are Arctic and our everyday realities are Arctic.<sup>139</sup>

This statement appears in some ways more confident in terms of making the case for Iceland being Arctic as he doesn't feel the need to 'state the obvious' of Iceland being in the Arctic completely and therefore an Arctic state. This is also apparent in speeches directed toward the international arena after 2019, as he doesn't include this at all as a fact in different platforms from that time on. He does however continue to include this in speeches and articles that are directed toward Icelandic-speaking audiences where he states three times in three different articles in the newspaper, Morgunbladid the following:

Sustainability, prosperity and security in the Arctic are important for the whole world because of its extensive global impact and it is more important for Iceland, which is the only state completely within the Arctic<sup>140</sup>

Iceland is completely within the area that is often defined as the Arctic. We are therefore in a key position to mark our unique place as an Arctic state...<sup>141</sup>

Iceland is an Arctic state and is completely within the boundaries that are defined as the Arctic. This is why it is vital for Iceland to continue and assert itself applicable in this area in positive mode towards the future. <sup>142</sup>

It appears that the foreign minister made a conscious decision in 2019 to refrain from advocating for Iceland's Arctic-ness based on its geographical position towards the international audience, but continues to do so towards the Icelandic audience. He certainly continues talking about Iceland as an Arctic state, but more confidently, not needing to remind his international audience of its geographical position as a case for its Arctic-ness. In 2019 Iceland had chairmanship at the Arctic Council, which perhaps could be the reason for not needing to assert itself as Arctic, *as much*, as the year before and that the chairmanship was a powerful enough tool to affirm Iceland as an Arctic state.

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<sup>139</sup> Þórðarson, "Arctic Interests of the West Nordic Countries."

<sup>140</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, "Þekkingarsamfélag norðurslóða á Akureyri," Stjórnarráð Íslands, 6 June 2020, accessed 8 August, 2022.

<https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2020/06/06/Thekkingarsamfelag-nordursloda-a-Akureyri/>

<sup>141</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, "Áttavitinn vísar alltaf í norður," Stjórnarráð Íslands, 20 May 2021, accessed 8 August, 2022. <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2021/05/20/Attavitinn-visar-alltaf-i-nordur/>

<sup>142</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, "Allra augu beinast að norðurslóðum," Stjórnarráð Íslands, 23 October 2021, accessed 8 August, 2022.

<https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2021/10/23/Allra-augu-beinast-ad-nordurslodum/>

Furthermore, in the new Arctic Policy of Iceland, the point of asserting Iceland as a Coastal state is not included anymore.<sup>143</sup>

Thordarson doesn't take as much space in his speeches to create the image of Iceland's Arctic nature but certainly integrates it. Thordarson for instance states at one point that "the Arctic has moved from being an isolated wilderness to becoming central to our future".<sup>144</sup> Referring back to the previous chapter on how Thordarson has stated that Iceland is the only state fully within the Arctic, it can very well be interpreted that when he refers to the 'isolated wilderness', he is referring to Iceland as well. This is applicable in many of his statements where he doesn't directly refer to Iceland's weather but to the northern areas and the Arctic and describes Arctic nature.

The northern areas have been frontiers societies where conditions were harsh and unpredictable, and people moved towards the south in search of better livelihoods.<sup>145</sup>

In a relatively short period of time, the Arctic has transformed from a region primarily characterized by isolation, cold and darkness, into a region buzzing with innovation and opportunities.<sup>146</sup>

In other statements, he connects Iceland to the living conditions in the Arctic and in fact repeats the same statement in two different platforms:

Most inhabitants in the Arctic region live in close proximity to nature and must deal with challenging environmental conditions. This is our reality here in Iceland. We rely extensively on the nature of our country for our livelihood, be it fishing, tourism, energy production or agriculture. With sustainable development as our guiding principle we have managed to build a prosperous society. Through the rich and diverse cultures that the circumpolar Arctic region harbors, we, together, can build

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<sup>143</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Iceland's Policy on Matters Concerning the Arctic Region* (Reykjavík: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021), [https://www.government.is/library/01-Ministries/Ministry-for-Foreign-Affairs/PDF-skjol/Arctic%20Policy\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.government.is/library/01-Ministries/Ministry-for-Foreign-Affairs/PDF-skjol/Arctic%20Policy_WEB.pdf).

<sup>144</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, "The Arctic: A New Territory of Business," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavík, 14 October, 2017. <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2017/10/14/Raeda-a-Hringbordi-nordursloda-The-Arctic-A-New-Territory-of-Business/>.

<sup>145</sup> Þórðarson, "Ávarp á Hringborði norðurslóða í Edinborg."

<sup>146</sup> Þórðarson, "Together for a sustainable Arctic: Towards Iceland's 2019 – 2021 Arctic Council Chairmanship." <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2018/10/21/Lokaavarp-utanrikisradherra-a-Hringbordi-nordursloda-i-Horpu/>



thriving, sustainable societies for all, based on knowledge sharing, innovation and hard work.<sup>147/148</sup>

In the abovementioned statement, Thordarson drags out characteristics that are associated with Arctic nature such as challenging environmental conditions and how the country has to be dependent on nature for its livelihood. He also connects Arctic characteristics to his childhood with the following statement:

I recall an advice from my mother when I was a young boy heading for school in blistering snowstorms in Borgarnes, my birthplace. She told me to zip up and muddle through because in the end the sun would always come out.<sup>149</sup>

Thordarson integrates much into his speeches about Icelandic people as Arctic people. In one of his statements to an Icelandic audience he states:

There has been a broad consensus politically and in the whole community when it comes to Arctic matters and it is important to maintain it.<sup>150</sup>

Interestingly this states that the whole Icelandic community is in the same place when it comes to Arctic matters and Iceland's importance and relevance in the Arctic, but in a way goes against what can be interpreted from other statements towards the Icelandic community which has been elaborated on above, where politicians have constantly reminded or explained to Icelandic audience how and why Iceland is Arctic and why Arctic matters are or should be of importance to them. On this note, there are other examples

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<sup>147</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, "Together for a sustainable Arctic: Towards Iceland's 2019 – 2021 Arctic Council Chairmanship," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavik, 21 October, 2018, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2018/10/21/Lokaavarp-utanrikisradherra-a-Hringbordi-nordursloda-i-Horpu/>.

<sup>148</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, "Iceland's priorities in the Arctic Council," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at a seminar at the University of Akureyri, Akureyri, 14 January, 2019, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2019/01/14/Avarp-a-nordurslodamalthingi-i-Haskolanum-a-Akureyri/>.

<sup>149</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, "Iceland's Chairmanship of the Arctic Council," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavik, 11 October, 2019, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2019/10/11/Avarp-utanrikisradherra-a-Hringbordi-nordursloda/>.

<sup>150</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson. "Samráðsfundur vegna foremnisku Íslands í Norðurskautsráðinu."

where he reminds Icelandic audiences of the fact that they are Arctic such as when he states “We, Icelanders are all Arctic people”<sup>151152</sup> .

Thordarson also on many different occasions reminds his international audience of the fact that Icelandic people are Arctic people and that the Arctic environment has contributed to that identity.

Most inhabitants in the Arctic region live in close proximity to nature and must deal with challenging environmental conditions. This is our reality here in Iceland. We rely extensively on the nature of our country for our livelihood, be it fishing, tourism, energy production or agriculture. <sup>153</sup>

For the people who call the Arctic their home, adaptation and resilience are key factors in dealing with these consequences.<sup>154</sup>

Thordarson also uses words such as ‘we’ and ‘our’ when speaking of the Arctic

In the Arctic, as a result of climate change, we have a tendency to talk about prospective economic development, for example large-scale mining plans, new oil and gas exploration and alternative shipping routes as outside factors that will have a big economic impact on our region.<sup>155</sup>

We, the inhabitants of the Arctic, are already witnessing the consequences of climate change. In Iceland, the rising ocean temperatures have already led to changes in the migration patterns of fish stocks around the country. Rising temperatures, along with the acidification of the ocean and increasing pollution, are genuine threats that need to be taken seriously.<sup>156</sup>

We all recognize that the challenges we face today will not be dealt with or solved by the people of the North alone, not solely by our Governments, not solely by our experts, not solely by businesses, International organizations nor NGO’s. It is only through collective action that we will be able to succeed. ....It is in the interest of all inhabitants of the North that we use every means possible to increase our knowledge of each other, the region and of what is at stake. And I remain confident that if we

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<sup>151</sup> "Málefni norðurslóða rædd við fulltrúa Utanríkisráðuneytisins," SSNE, 3 September, 2021, accessed 8 August, 2022, <https://www.ssne.is/is/um-ssne/frettir/malefni-nordursloda-raedd-vid-fulltrua-utanrikisraduneytisins>.

<sup>152</sup> "Endurnýjadur samstarfssamningur við Norðurslóðanetið," Stjórnarráð, 1 september, 2021, accessed 8 August, 2022, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/efst-a-baugi/frettir/stok-frett/2021/09/01/Endurnyjadur-samstarfssamningur-vid-Nordurslodanetid/>.

<sup>153</sup> Þórðarson, "Together for a sustainable Arctic: Towards Iceland’s 2019 – 2021 Arctic Council Chairmanship."

<sup>154</sup> Þórðarson, "The Arctic: A New Territory of Business."

<sup>155</sup> Þórðarson, "Ávarp á Hringborði norðurslóða í Edinborg."

<sup>156</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, "Introduction on Climate Change in Arctic Iceland," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavik, 20 October, 2018, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2018/10/20/Raeda-radherra-a-vidburdi-um-loftslagsbreytingar-a-nordurslodum-a-Hringbordi-nordursloda/>.

approach the challenges and opportunities at hand with a sense of humility, respect for the realities we face, for one another and the enormous responsibility we carry on behalf of future generations, we will be able to make real and meaningful progress for the benefit, prosperity and wellbeing of our peoples....Therefore, for us in the Arctic, perseverance and resilience need to be at the forefront as sustainability continues to be an important trait for our existence as we learn to adapt to a changing climate.<sup>157</sup>

We will need a strong adaptation in the Arctic to the unavoidable changes in our natural environment, but that is exactly what we, the people of the Arctic, have shown to be capable of throughout the years. Many of us living in the Arctic region have had to learn, through generations, to live and adapt to extremely harsh weather conditions often along with isolation in hard-to-reach areas. Despite the hardship there are thriving communities in the Arctic. Iceland is an example of one of those communities. Sustainable use of natural resources transformed Iceland, in less than a century, from being one of the poorest countries in Europe into one of its most affluent.<sup>158</sup>

The interests of the inhabitants of the Arctic need to be respected, with a special focus on the indigenous peoples. It is our responsibility to allow the people of the region to enjoy security and prosperity in different forms. That includes access to local health care, education, employment and communications.<sup>159</sup>

Thordarson and the other foreign ministers have in common the use of the language of 'we', 'us', 'we the inhabitants' etc. which creates a contrast between 'us' that is, the people of the Arctic versus 'them', reinforcing a certain Arctic identity which implies that this group of people under the umbrella 'us' have common experiences, needs, interests, history and so forth. They drag out different sorts of examples that contribute to an Arctic identity such as how weather conditions have forced people to adapt, learn and live with certain conditions. Thordarson furthermore specifically takes an example of Iceland being one of these communities and how it has adapted to an Arctic environment.

Thordarson clearly sees Icelandic people as Arctic people and has almost gone so far as stating that Icelandic people are perhaps close to being indigenous in his interview with Sumarlidason for his MA thesis. While he recognizes that Icelandic people do not fit under the definition of indigenous people he points out that there are a lot of similarities

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<sup>157</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson. "Concluding remarks." Stjórnarráð Íslands. Speech delivered at the Clean and Global North Conference, Helsinki, 29 November, 2019.

<https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2019/11/29/Avarp-a-nordurslodaradstefnunni-A-Clean-and-Global-North-i-Helsinki/>.

<sup>158</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, "The Arctic Council: 25 years of Peace and Cooperation," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Frontiers, 2021, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/utanrikisraduneytid/utanrikisradherra/fyrri-radherrar/stok-raeda-fyrrum-radherra/2021/02/03/Opunaravarp-a-Arctic-Frontiers-nordurslodaradstefnunni/>.

<sup>159</sup> Þórðarson, "Sustainable Business in the Arctic."

in the history of indigenous people and Icelandic people and said “Aren’t we Indigenous to some degree?”<sup>160</sup>. Today, however, the Icelandic nation deals with very different problems than indigenous peoples, hence it could be argued that this statement in some ways undermines the needs and issues of indigenous peoples. Iceland for instance has a vote, as a sovereign state in the Arctic, at the decision-making table of the Arctic Council, whereas indigenous people do not have the same power and voice. Lastly, to be clear, Icelandic people are not indigenous and do not fit under the definition of what falls under being indigenous.<sup>161</sup>

#### 4.4.2 Katrín Jakobsdóttir

The prime minister during this term was Katrín Jakobsdóttir who spoke at the Arctic Circle in 2018<sup>162</sup>, 2019 and 2021. In her speeches in 2018 and 2021, she includes elements of Iceland’s Arctic-ness, while in 2019 she does not include anything of that sort.<sup>163</sup>

The prime minister makes some space to affirm the Icelandic people as Arctic.

We who live in the arctic are not exempt from this reality. The effects of climate change are here for all to see and we need to take action as does the rest of the world..It is not only a home to a spectacular and unique wildlife, as well as four million people

The Arctic may seem a bit chilly for some of us here. But for the four million people, including indigenous communities, spread across eight countries – this is home.<sup>164</sup>

But the Arctic is where we can see this change most clearly – it is here that the warning signals are loudest.

The Arctic is no place for increased armaments and military action. We need to bridge our differences and solve our problems by conversation and cooperation.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Emil Ísleifur Sumarliðason, "Imagining an Arctic State: An analysis of the performance of the Icelandic state's Arctic identity."

<sup>161</sup> "Definition of indigenous peoples," Arctic Center, University of Lapland, accessed 4 September, 2022. <https://www.arcticcentre.org/EN/arcticregion/Arctic-Indigenous-Peoples/Definitions>.

<sup>162</sup> Katrín Jakobsdóttir, "Ávarp Forsætisráðherra við Opnun Hringborðs Norðurslóða," Stjórnarráðið Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavík, 19 October, 2018, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/lisalib/getfile.aspx?itemid=cd23c8f4-d3a7-11e8-942d-005056bc530c>.

<sup>163</sup> Katrín Jakobsdóttir, "Ræða Katrínar Jakobsdóttur forsætisráðherra," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavík, 10 October, 2019, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/01--Frettatengt---myndir-og-skrar/FOR/Fylgiskjol-i-frett/Arctic%20Circle2019%20lokadr%c3%b6g-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>164</sup> Jakobsdóttir, "Ávarp Forsætisráðherra við Opnun Hringborðs Norðurslóða."

<sup>165</sup> Katrín Jakobsdóttir, "Opening speech," Stjórnarráð Íslands, speech delivered at the Arctic Circle Assembly, Reykjavík, 14 October, 2021. <https://www.stjornarradid.is/raduneyti/forsaetisraduneytid/forsaetisradherra/stok-raeda-forsaetisradherra/2021/10/14/Avarp-Katrinar-Jakobsdottur-forsaetisradherra-vid-opnun-things-Hringbords-nordursloda-14.-oktober-2021/>.

She uses terms such as ‘we who live in the Arctic’ and ‘we [the Arctic states] need to take action and so does the rest of the world’. She words these statements in a way that distinguishes between the ‘we’ the Arctic state and the rest of the world. Therefore it is certain that she sees Iceland as Arctic. She mentions how the Arctic is “home” to the people of the Arctic, including Iceland self-evidently, and in ways makes it personal by using this wording. Furthermore, she mentions how the effects of climate change can be seen and follows it by saying ‘it is here that the warning signals are loudest’. As the Arctic Circle takes place in Iceland, she certainly views Iceland as being in the Arctic. Finally, she mentions how ‘we’, the Arctic states, need to bridge our differences.

The prime minister also touches upon Arctic environmental characteristics, as can be seen in these two statements:

Both the people and the incredible wildlife of the region have equally adapted to an environment that would prove difficult for most to survive in.<sup>166</sup>

It is a calm and sunny day here in Reykjavík, but we who live in the high north face storm clouds on the horizon.<sup>167</sup>

She mentions how the people of the Arctic have adapted to an environment that would be difficult for most to survive in. According to the first statements here above, she clearly sees the people of the Arctic as Icelandic people as well, drawing out Arctic characteristics that distinguish the Arctic population that has adapted to living conditions that others could perhaps not, creating a commonality that the Arctic population has. In her speech at the Arctic circle in 2021, she reminds her audience at the start how despite it being sunny that particular day, in October, Iceland is in the high north and faces storm clouds on the horizon.

#### 4.4.3 Conclusions

In the beginning of his term as minister of foreign affairs, Thordarson reminds his audience of Iceland being the only state fully within the Arctic. However, in 2019 there is a certain shift where he does not make this point to the international audience, but solely towards the Icelandic audience. It almost seems like a conscious decision. From then on he speaks of the Arctic often by using ‘we, the people of the Arctic’ implying the contrast

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<sup>166</sup> Jakobsdóttir, "Ávarp Forsætisráðherra við Opnun Hringborðs Norðurslóða."

<sup>167</sup> Jakobsdóttir. "Opening Speech."

of the others, the rest of the world. Katrín Jakobsdóttir as prime minister does not mention anything about Iceland's geographical position to drive home a point of Iceland's Arctic-ness but she, much like the foreign minister, brings out the contrast between us and the other. Both the foreign minister and the prime minister draw out Arctic environmental characteristics and connect them to Iceland and how the Arctic states, including Iceland have based their livelihoods on what the Arctic has to offer and adapted to the harsh reality of its environment. They use descriptions such as chilly, challenging environmental conditions that would be difficult for most to survive in, storm clouds, wilderness, harsh, cold, darkness, close proximity to nature and blistering snowstorms. Through these descriptions, they draw out characteristics that are considered Arctic and connect them to Icelandic reality.

#### 4.5 Conclusions

The main themes of how Iceland's Arctic identity are firstly the argument of Iceland's geographical position and in line with that, asserting Iceland has a Coastal state. Secondly, the politicians use descriptions of Iceland's environment and nature that are associated with the Arctic to shed light on the state's Arctic-ness. Thirdly they speak of the Icelandic people as Arctic and how the Arctic environment has shaped the Icelandic society, culture and livelihood. Fourthly they speak in terms such as 'we', the Arctic residents, states and people implying the contrast of the other. Finally they give importance to the indigenous population of the Arctic which goes in line with the state's national identity. Although the themes are apparent throughout the year, there is different focus given to each one depending on the context at the time. This will be further elaborated on in the following chapter.

## 5 Discussing the evolution of Iceland's Arctic Identity

The preceding chapter analysed in detail a selection of public statements made in varying formats, and to different audiences, by leading Icelandic politicians from 2011 onwards concerning Iceland's Arctic identity. In this chapter, the main themes of Iceland's Arctic identity, as derived from this analysis, will be identified and discussed.

### 5.1 Iceland as a coastal Arctic State

Identity refers to the idea of how someone understands oneself in contrast to the other and helps one understand their place and position in the world. In the context of states, the relationship between space, which includes territory and geographical borders, and identity and the combination of the two enables the state to position itself in the world.

Since the grouping of the Arctic five states in 2008 which excluded Iceland, Finland and Sweden from cooperation on some Arctic matters, Iceland has experienced insecurities which have been apparent in public statements. Shortly after this event or in 2011 the Arctic was put on the agenda of foreign affairs as a top priority where one of the aims was to assert Iceland's position as a Coastal state. Skarphedinsson was unapologetically vocal about this, explicitly stating that he was attempting to drive home a point.

Sveinsson and Gunnlaugsson did not give as much focus to asserting Iceland as a Coastal state at first. Perhaps because at that point in time the grouping of the Arctic five wasn't as much of a threat to Iceland's status in the Arctic as the Arctic five had not had any significant meetings since 2010, which also marks the time when Hilary Clinton made her memorable remarks, criticizing the exclusion of the other Arctic states from important decision making in the Arctic. However, in 2015 the Arctic five met once again and it is apparent that there is a certain shift in terms of the focus given to Iceland's geographical position, where Gunnlaugsson states that Iceland is a Coastal state and founding member of the Arctic Council, and Sveinsson wrote about Iceland being the only country in the northern hemisphere that is fully within the Arctic region. Alfredsdottir also makes this point in one of her speeches, Iceland being a Coastal state and in another speech that Iceland and its territorial waters are mostly within the boundaries of the Arctic. Thordarson doesn't mention Iceland being a Coastal state. However, in the first part of his term he makes efforts in affirming Iceland's

geographical location. In 2019 he stops doing this and appears more confident in how he talks about Iceland as an Arctic state. In 2021, Iceland's new Arctic Policy is published and does not include the aim of asserting Iceland as a Coastal state.

Hence Iceland's territory in the Arctic and that, according to many of the narratives elaborated on in chapter four, Iceland is the only country completely in the Arctic serves as an important argument in asserting Iceland as an Arctic state and as an Arctic Coastal state.

It is, however, important to consider that there are different interpretations of the Arctic's boundaries. A common interpretation is that the southern border of the Arctic only extends to 66° latitude, also considered as the Arctic circle.<sup>168</sup> This has been challenged by the argument that many areas south of these 'borders' have Arctic characteristics. Another interpretation, called 'the treeline', represents an area that is characterized by glaciers and wooded tundra. A third interpretation is that the Arctic is the area in the North that has the average temperature lower than 10° each month, also in the summer. For the treeline and the line defined by average temperature each month below 10°, climate change becomes problematic, moving the imaginary borders of the Arctic as heat increases resulting in the environment changing. Based on this the Arctic can be divided into the high Arctic, low Arctic and the subarctic.<sup>169</sup>

The main point to be drawn from this is that Arctic borders are debated. This adds complexity for some Arctic states, especially in the more southern Arctic, who have had to advocate for their place in the Arctic up to a certain degree. Some states have for instance been excluded from important discussions. This is most evident is the division between the Arctic five and the Arctic eight. The Arctic five have had important meetings excluding the other Arctic states. The Arctic is not an organized body as such but refers to the grouping of the five Arctic littoral states including Canada, Norway, Denmark(through Greenland), the U.S. and Russia.<sup>170</sup> These states justify their cooperation based on geographical position.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Albrechtsen, Eirik Albrechtsen and Martin Indreiten, "Arctic safety," *Safety Science*, 1-2.

<sup>169</sup> Albrechtsen, Eirik Albrechtsen and Martin Indreiten, "Arctic safety," *Safety Science*, 2.

<sup>170</sup> "The Arctic Five Versus the Arctic Council", 2021.

<sup>171</sup> "Ocean Stewardship: Moving from Words to Action in the Central Arctic Ocean," WWF Arctic Programme, accessed 4 September, 2022. <https://www.arcticwwf.org/the-circle/stories/ocean-stewardship-moving-from-words-to-action-in-the-central-arctic-ocean/>.



This becomes problematic in Arctic matters as it undermines the Arctic Council and cooperation as well as the other Arctic states feeling excluded and that their position in the Arctic and at the decision-making table is threatened.<sup>172</sup> This can lead to states feeling the need to reassert themselves as Arctic states.

According to some of the narratives of Icelandic politicians, Iceland is the only Arctic state completely in the Arctic.<sup>173</sup><sup>174</sup><sup>175</sup> Referring back to the different interpretations of the Arctic this does not hold logic, if focusing on the imaginary line of the Arctic Circle as the only Icelandic landmass considered in the Arctic Circle is Grímsey, a small island in the North, inhabited by approximately 85 people.<sup>176</sup> Grímsey is not fully within the Arctic, and barely touches the Arctic circle 'borders'. This implies that they focus on the narrative that the southern borders of the Arctic are at 60° latitude, which has also been considered as the low Arctic or subarctic. If looking at the treeline as a reference, Iceland borders between the Tundra zone, which is used as the reference for the treeline and the taiga zone of coniferous forest.<sup>177</sup> If looking at the Arctic borders from the temperature perspective, that is that territory in the North that doesn't exceed 10° on average any month of the year, Iceland almost fits in this category in all months but July and August.<sup>178</sup> Furthermore, with climate change Iceland's average temperature continues to rise, making this point of reference changeable.<sup>179</sup>

Hence, looking at Iceland's geographical position from different points of view, Iceland is really at the limits of being completely in the Arctic from many different interpretations of the Arctic lines. However, the interpretation that the Arctic's southernmost borders are at 60°, supports Iceland's narrative of being the only sovereign state completely in the Arctic. Given the different interpretations of the

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<sup>172</sup>"The Arctic Five Versus the Arctic Council", 2021.

<sup>173</sup> Skarphéðinsson, "Icelandic Perspectives on the Arctic."

<sup>174</sup> Þórðarson. "Samráðsfundur vegna foremennsku Íslands í Norðurskautsráðinu."

<sup>175</sup> Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, "Þekkingarsamfélag norðurslóða á Akureyri," Stjórnarráð Íslands, 6 June 2020, accessed 8 August, 2022.

<sup>176</sup> "Grimsey Island." Arctic Trip, accessed 8 August, 2022. <https://www.arctictrip.is/grimsey-island/#:~:text=Grimsey%20is%20the%20northernmost%20inhabited,5%20sq%20km%20in%20size.>

<sup>177</sup> "Drainage of Iceland," Britannica, accessed 8 August, 2022.

[https://www.britannica.com/place/Iceland/Drainage.](https://www.britannica.com/place/Iceland/Drainage)

<sup>178</sup> "Reykjavik Weather August Averages, Iceland," Holiday Weather, accessed 8 August, 2022.

[https://www.holiday-weather.com/reykjavik/averages/august/.](https://www.holiday-weather.com/reykjavik/averages/august/)

<sup>179</sup> "What Worries Iceland? A World Without Ice. It Is Preparing," New York Times, 9 August, 2019, accessed 8 August, 2022. [https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/business/iceland-ice-melt-global-warming-climate-change.html.](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/business/iceland-ice-melt-global-warming-climate-change.html)

geography, it is worth acknowledging how Iceland has chosen the geographical borders of the Arctic that fits their narrative.

## 5.2 Iceland as an Arctic State

The Ministers of Foreign Affairs as well as the Prime Ministers covered in this project all make efforts in terms of affirming Iceland as an Arctic state. Two common themes emerge in affirming Iceland as an Arctic state. First, pointing out Iceland's geographical position as elaborated on above, and secondly pointing out the Arctic characteristics of Iceland's nature. Arctic nature has been associated with wilderness, which often is imagined as remote, wild, dangerous, cold, harsh, mysterious, unknown, untouched by humans and inhabited by wild creatures.<sup>180181</sup>

Geographers have included in their contributions to identity in connection with space, that it is not solely about the geographical position where a state lies that affects its identity but also the environmental conditions that come with that space and how it contributes to identity.

Three out of four of the former foreign ministers, excluding Alfredsdóttir, all draw out characteristics connected to Arctic nature. They all do so through storytelling, but most of the time choose a selective narrative of the Arctic characteristics such as harsh, cold, isolated, inhabitable, wilderness, darkness, snowstorms, challenging, fearsome and ice. Skarphedinsson even goes so far as to speak of polar bears, who are not native to Iceland, despite drifting onto the Icelandic territory occasionally. Sveinsson however points out the warmer climate in Iceland that is generally not associated with the Arctic. The politicians construct an image of Iceland's Arctic-ness through their narrative and in some ways, or at least Skarphedinsson and Thordarson, neglect that Iceland does not live with the same extreme weather conditions as some other Arctic territories. Different from Skarphedinsson, who explicitly tells his story in order to make a point, Sveinsson's representation of Iceland's nature is more accurate in his speech and presents a more holistic image of Iceland's weather conditions, while Thordarson

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<sup>180</sup> Anna Dóra Sæþórsdóttir et al., "Making wilderness: Tourism and the history of the wilderness idea in Iceland," *Polar Geography* 34, no. 4 (2011): 249.

<sup>181</sup> Shelagh D. Grant, "Arctic wilderness—And other mythologies," in *Journal of Canadian Studies* 33, no. 2 (1998): 27. Harvard.

integrates subtly into his speeches the Arctic characteristics of Iceland's Arctic-ness. The presidents during this period do not integrate environmental characteristics into their speeches. Both prime ministers covered in the project include statements on Iceland's Arctic environmental characteristics.

Hence in terms of evolution, it seems as though the descriptions of Arctic characteristics of the Icelandic environment are consistently apparent in Iceland's Arctic Identity discourse, it becomes more subtle compared to the beginning and not as exaggerated.

### 5.3. Icelandic people as Arctic people

While the chapter above describes the ways of the 'justifications' of why Iceland is an Arctic state, a state's identity is based on the nation's collective identity or a common identity that explains how the mass of a nation's public identifies with the state. What composes the state are the people that the politicians represent. In the Arctic, there are 4 million people.<sup>182</sup> As an Arctic state, the whole population of Iceland is part of the census making almost 10% of the Arctic population Icelandic,<sup>183</sup> but the question of whether they identify as Arctic remains unanswered.

A common past or history is an important component of a nation's identity. A common description of Icelandic people being Arctic is by describing how the Arctic environment, nature and resources have shaped the society and its livelihood since the beginning. This is apparent in all of the descriptions apart from Alfredsdottir who nonetheless points out that the people of Iceland are all Arctic residents. The people's dimension of the discourse on Iceland's Arctic identity had been quite coherent since 2011, but the level of focus given to reinforcing the idea of Icelandic people being Arctic has differed. The first three foreign ministers covered in this thesis have certainly given space to affirming Icelandic people as Arctic people, they do not do it to the same degree as Thordasson does. Thordarson has even taken it a step further, by implying that Icelandic people are almost indigenous. This is however not accurate.

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<sup>182</sup> "Arctic Peoples," Arctic Council, accessed 8 August, 2022. <https://arctic-council.org/explore/topics/arctic-peoples/>.

<sup>183</sup> "Projected population trends in the Arctic," European Environmental Agency, 14 June, 2017, accessed 8 August, 2022. [https://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/daviz/projected-population-trends-in-the-arctic#tab-chart\\_1](https://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/daviz/projected-population-trends-in-the-arctic#tab-chart_1).

Furthermore, the politicians commonly use terms such as 'we' and 'us', implying a contrast to the 'other'. Identity revolves around the notion of how one distinguishes oneself from the other. By speaking of Icelandic and Arctic residents as 'we' it provides a base for the state to place itself in the world, as Arctic residents versus non-Arctic residents.

The presidents during these terms do not give particular focus to the Icelandic people being recognized as Arctic people, Johannesson on the contrary points out that Iceland saw the people of the Arctic in the past as outsiders.

It is interesting to consider that although the efforts to affirm Iceland as an Arctic state change and evolve, they are consistently apparent towards the international audience. The focus on reminding the Icelandic nation of its Arctic-ness varies however and there seems to have been more focus in latter years on conveying that image to Icelanders, where they are reminded that they are Arctic, why they are Arctic and their interest in the Arctic. This undermines Iceland's Arctic identity in the way that it implies that identifying as Arctic is perhaps not deeply rooted in the people's national identity. However, Iceland *is* an Arctic state and Icelandic nature has many commonalities with what has been associated with Arctic nature, and environmental conditions have shaped the society and the image of the 'self' whether that is called Arctic by the Icelandic people or not. Does one need to describe themselves as 'Arctic' to be Arctic? Nonetheless, the difference in the politicians' approaches toward the international audience versus the Icelandic audience makes one consider that the notion of Iceland's Arctic identity is driven by political interests rather than nationalistic tendencies.

The ministers all connect their Arctic identity to history and how their ancestors had to learn how to adapt to the difficult environmental conditions of the Arctic and how that has shaped and contributed to the nation as it is today. Furthermore, although going beyond the scope of this project it is also interesting to reflect on how that matches the notion of Icelandic people identifying as Arctic.

#### 5.4 Iceland as an Ally of Arctic Indigenous People

Human rights and gender equality are important elements of Iceland's national identity and in the Arctic discourse, this is apparent through the importance given to the rights

of indigenous peoples which is quite consistent throughout the period covered in this thesis.

In the past, Iceland gave great importance to being recognised as equal to other western states and even took offence at being put into the same category as other colonial nations such as Greenland. The focus given to the rights of indigenous peoples, therefore, showcases a certain shift and perhaps Iceland now, relates to states like Greenland compared to before, as a small state that wants to be able to influence the decision-making and has some elements in its history that are similar to the history of Greenland.<sup>184</sup>

The space and importance given to acting as an ally of Arctic indigenous peoples and in general the importance given to human rights contribute to the constructivist notion that the global system is a social construct which is a product of history and human interactions which can subsequently be reconstructed. The importance of human rights is part of the national identity which influences the actors representing the state and their practices. This, therefore, is an important part of the image that the politicians portray.

This aspect of Iceland's approach to the Arctic discourse is valuable, and could be driven by Iceland's national identity but could also stem from Iceland's attempt to use its strengths to contribute to the Arctic. Looking back to the times when Iceland took the chance to reconstruct its image as 'champions of gender equality', it was shortly after the economic collapse which forced the state to rethink its strengths and where it could contribute internationally. Hence, is Iceland's approach as an ally of indigenous peoples driven by the need to contribute to the Arctic discourse, by relating to the indigenous societies as a small society that gives importance to being heard and seen as equals to other sovereign states, or is it driven by pure humanitarian intentions? Of course, this is impossible to answer, but interesting to consider nevertheless.

## 5.5 Conclusions

To sum up the evolution of Iceland's Arctic Identity Discourse, the findings show that the focus on Iceland's geographical position, that is Iceland being the only state fully within

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<sup>184</sup> Utanríkisráðuneytið, *Samstarf Íslands og Grænlands á Nýjum Norðurlóðum*. (Reykjavík: Utanríkisráðuneytið, 2020), 113-115.

the Arctic and therefore should be recognized as a coastal state, has decreased towards the international audience, but is still apparent towards Icelandic audience. The reminder of Iceland's Arctic environmental characteristics has decreased, but is always an important part of the conversation, but not as exaggerated as at the very beginning. The discourse on Icelandic people being Arctic has always been apparent, where most of the political leaders bring out the contrast between 'us' versus the 'other'. It has, however, increased and gone even further, almost claiming that Icelandic people are indigenous. Finally, while there was not as much unity among political leaders in terms of how they described Iceland's Arctic Identity, this seems to be more apparent in recent years where Iceland's Arctic identity discourse is more coherent compared to before.

From a constructivist point of view, reality is a product of common and shared ideas, perceptions, behaviour, values and understanding of social facts. Iceland did not really give *significant* importance to the Arctic (apart from Grimsson), nor to identifying as Arctic before 2008. However, by giving importance and value to that particular identity and in ways performing it through human interactions, Iceland is in the process of constructing an Arctic identity. Therefore the reality of Iceland identifying as Arctic is constructed, attempting to develop a social fact of Iceland being Arctic, driven by the desire to be recognised as Arctic, and thereby contributes to the Arctic discourse.

Iceland's focus on affirming its Arctic identity in this period is influenced by the political context. The Arctic has gained a significant interest from international actors in the past decade, and those actors are eager to protect their interests. This desire to identify as Arctic can also be traced back to history and culture. Iceland's independence struggle was driven by the desire to be recognized as equal to other sovereign states. There is certainly a hint of inferiority complex which translates into the culture. In fact, shortly after Iceland was excluded from the cooperation between the Arctic five, the prioritization of Arctic matters became important. This goes in line with the constructivist's views on identity which is influenced by cultural, social, political and historical context and how identity is influenced by interests and preferences as well as the question of who am I in contrast to the other, who am I or we in this global society and what is our position. It is interesting, however, that the construction of identity seems to have been driven by the ministry of foreign affairs, while the presidents, do

not make efforts in terms of reaffirming to the international audience that Iceland is an Arctic state, but rather on common issues that the Arctic faces.

Furthermore, looking into the statements of Egill Helgason, and his criticism towards the focus on the Arctic, as well as the focus of some of the ministers in affirming Iceland's Arctic Identity to Icelandic audiences, one must wonder whether the people of the state identify with the Arctic in the same manner as Skarphedinsson describes. With that said, does Iceland have an Arctic identity or is it solely an articulation of an Arctic identity that is being portrayed by the representatives of the state? Identity refers to how one sees the self in contrast to the other, and a national identity refers to how a group commonly sees themselves in contrast to the other based on history, values etcetera, which raises the question of whether the Icelandic population sees itself as Arctic, as before this time speaking of Icelandic people as Arctic had not been the norm. In Medby's research, however, some personnel she interviewed point out that despite Iceland not giving importance to the Arctic before and therefore not advocating for being recognized as Arctic, doesn't mean that they haven't always been Arctic. In fact, identity is bound to space, and Iceland is somewhat in the Arctic, depending on the interpretation of the boundaries, it does have characteristics of Arctic nature which has shaped the nation-state, and has a historical meaning, whether that has been called Arctic or not. However, the difference between state identity and national identity, is that state identity is understood by how the state represented by actors articulate the discourse of their state identity, while the national identity is how the people that make up the state perceive themselves and their position and role in society. The national identity plays an important role that serves as the basis for political leaders to speak and represent a state collectively. In the context of Iceland's Arctic Identity, this is interesting as one can question how the representation of the Arctic Identity actually reflects the Icelandic nation and how they collectively perceive themselves. There is in a way a difference between technically being Arctic because of a common international understanding of what that entails and identifying as Arctic.

Another of the core components of constructivism is that agents influence structure. The agents, foreign ministers, prime ministers and presidents in this context influence the structure by putting the Arctic at the forefront, creating an important

platform, the Arctic Circle to advocate and remind us all, that Iceland is an Arctic state, and by creating a narrative. This all contributes to Iceland's position in the Arctic. Iceland as a small state could very easily have been lost in the Arctic discourse if the efforts to be included would not have been made. The structure in the same way influences these agents, and the fact that they actually need to make these enormous efforts as a small state to be taken seriously at the decision-making table. In terms of ideational versus material structures, constructivism sheds light on how ideas are just as important as material factors. This can be seen in how the Icelandic politicians give space and focus to climate change and humanitarian approaches to the indigenous peoples of the Arctic and the importance to put that in forefront of the discussion.



## 6 Conclusion

This case study has analyzed how Icelandic political leaders have portrayed Iceland's Arctic Identity through discourse analysis and explored the evolution of it.

To answer the research question, how has Iceland's Arctic Identity been portrayed by Icelandic politicians, there are few main themes that can be identified. The first one is the argument of Iceland's geographical position and according to some of the politicians, that Iceland is the only one fully within the Arctic. However this assumption is based on interpretation which serves as a selective narrative that fits a certain agenda of Icelandic positions advocating for Iceland's Arctic-ness and for asserting Iceland as a Coastal state. The second theme is the focus on Iceland's Arctic environmental characteristics which the politicians have integrated in their speeches to make a case for Iceland's Arctic-ness. These two fall under the category of spatial identity and how identity is influenced by space including geographical position and environmental conditions of that space and how that has included the state's identity. The third theme is how they speak of the people of Iceland as Arctic. They both do so by portraying how the Arctic environment has shaped Icelandic society relating to history, which in the identity discourse falls under temporal identity. Secondly they distinguish us versus the other, which emphasizes that they see that the people of the Arctic have certain commonalities that distinguish them from the rest of the world. Furthermore one of the politicians even goes so far as implying Icelandic people being indigenous. The last theme that is noteworthy, is how Iceland acts as an ally of indigenous peoples. This can be explained by an important element of how Iceland as a state perceives itself as a humanitarian actor. It can also be explained by empathy due to the state's insecurities but yet pride of being a small state that seeks voice and being recognized as equals to other sovereign states. It can also be explained by how Iceland as a small states seeks to contribute to the Arctic discourse by using what they consider as their strength, that is champions of gender equality and contributors to human rights. It can be all three reasons even or just one, but remains a question that can perhaps not be answered. It is however an element of Iceland's national identity that translates into it's Arctic identity.

Onto the evolution of Iceland's Arctic identity from 2011-2021, it went from clearly and unapologetically advocating for Iceland being recognized as a coastal state

based on their Arctic-ness with exaggerated descriptions of Iceland's Arctic nature and its geographical position. The efforts of describing Iceland's Arctic nature are still apparent but not as exaggerated, while the case of Iceland being the only state fully within the Arctic continued until 2019, when the then foreign minister stopped mentioning it to international audiences but did so towards Icelandic audiences. What has stayed consistent throughout the period is putting the contrast of us versus the other. However, this technically solely applies to the foreign ministers of this period as for the presidents they did not include much that can be understood as attempting to portray an Arctic identity, on the contrary the current president in ways undermines Iceland's Arctic identity by shedding light on Iceland having seen the people of the Arctic as outsiders in the past. The two prime ministers during this period on the other hand that spoke in important Arctic platforms were quite much in line with the foreign ministers. Furthermore it is apparent how the focus given to advocating for Iceland's Arctic-ness evolves according to the period and the political context each time.

Are Icelandic people Arctic people? Yes, technically they are, as Iceland is an Arctic state. Nonetheless it is problematic to put Arctic people and Arctic identity into one box, as the population of the Arctic is very diverse in terms of history, experiences, representation, needs and interests. That does not mean that the needs and interests of Iceland in the Arctic are not important, as it composes almost 10% of the Arctic population. Furthermore Iceland and other Arctic peoples have in some areas similar problems, needs and interests. However the fact that Iceland is a privileged state within the Arctic with a 'seat at the table', puts Iceland into a different category, than indigenous people for instance. Furthermore, the fact that, in the few cases where the ministers talk to an Icelandic speaking audience and in ways need to remind people that they are Arctic, goes against the image that is being portrayed towards the international audience. Although Iceland as a state didn't give much focus to the Arctic and being recognised as Arctic people before it was put as priority on the foreign affairs agenda, which makes an interesting case for how the idea and image of being Arctic has been and is being constructed. It is two different things technically being Arctic and identifying as Arctic. Hence further research would be interesting to explore how the Arctic identity being portrayed by politicians reflects Iceland's national identity, that is how the mass of the nation's public identifies and whether that includes the Arctic.

To conclude, the evolution of Iceland's Arctic Identity since 2011 has been motivated by various events including the debated cooperation between the Arctic five since 2008, the importance Iceland has given historically to be recognised as equals to other sovereign states and the recent importance that has been given to the Arctic globally. Apart from Olafur Ragnar Grimsson the former president, Iceland, the state, did not give the same level of importance to the Arctic prior to the grouping of the Arctic five as it did after that event, and shortly after or in 2011 put the Arctic as a top priority of its foreign affairs agenda. What followed was the construction of Iceland's Arctic Identity, and the politicians have actively advocated for Iceland's Arctic-ness through various narratives that fit that image, of an Arctic Iceland.



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