

# Contemporary Geopolitical Positionings of Iceland Towards 'Europe' and the Nordic States

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# CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL POSITIONINGS OF ICELAND TOWARDS 'EUROPE' AND THE NORDIC STATES

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## ABSTRACT

In the context of the spatialities of Europeanisation, we demonstrate the manoeuvrability of states through the selection and deployment of geopolitical positioning strategies. Specifically, we highlight how geographic quantities (territory, location, resources, natural conditions) are bundled together to substantiate a mutable national interest as well as underpin the advocacy by states of particular geopolitical positionings. We argue that the diplomatic use of geographic quantities in state-led efforts to structure and shape international interactions has demonstrable geopolitical consequences. Using the case study of Iceland, one of the first casualties of the international financial crisis, we examine this state's geopolitical repositioning towards 'EUrope' through use of geographical uniqueness and concomitant reaffirmation of Nordic closeness. We expose the diplomatic challenges to the use of geographical categories such as uniqueness in geopolitical (re)positioning towards the emerging 'EUropean' order.

**Key words:** Geopolitics, uniqueness, representation, Iceland, European Union, Nordic

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## INTRODUCTION

Without doubt the European Union (EU) means different things in different places, for 'the politics of integration evokes different responses, tactics and strategies in different geographical contexts' (Moisio *et al.* 2013, p. 738). The spatialities of Europeanisation (Jones 2006; Clark & Jones 2008; Jones & Clark 2010) continue to warrant academic attention particularly as 'EUrope' as idea, practices and project faces existential threats from both within and without. We have always maintained that 'the 'tipping point' for a more liberating Europeanisation is to be found through empirical analyses of the workings and operation of contemporary elite Europeanisation spaces, discourses and practices' (Jones & Clark 2010, p. xvi). This has

found support in recent calls for analyses of the 'ways in which "Europe" is contested and played out in political discourses and practices' (Moisio *et al.* 2013, p. 739). Context-specific geopolitical imaginations are central to the meaning of 'EUrope' for those who live outside it: for how the European Union (EU) is constructed within political discourses, how these constructions change and come under all manner of contestation over time – as well as require strenuous political-diplomatic efforts to maintain their dominant meanings – are vital dimensions of the actualisation of 'EUrope' beyond its borders.

While the study of the imaginations, visions, narratives and representations that (re)make worlds is of course the essence of geopolitics (Dijkink 1996), we argue that less well understood within geopolitics scholarship are the

mechanisms by which states and regions outside the current EU 28 develop their positioning strategies and place brandings to secure maximum advantages from this emerging 'EUropean' order. To this end, and as a contribution to the political geography of Europeanisation, here we examine how 'EUrope' is both scripted and contested by 'outside' political and diplomatic elites as part of state (re)positioning strategies. Our emphasis is specifically upon the geopolitical representations through which belonging to 'EUrope' can be articulated and performed, and state (re)positioning can be fixed. This process of (re)positioning is inescapably contested and fraught with numerous political challenges, with diplomats expending considerable energies trying to make geopolitical representations visible, workable and profitable in their struggle to co-ordinate geopolitics both at home and at-a-distance. Building upon work on European enlargement (Moisio 2002, 2008; Busch & Krzyzanowski 2007; Browning & Christou 2010; Bialasiewicz 2011), here our empirical focus is on Iceland, one of the first casualties of the international financial crisis and subsequent candidate country for EU membership (Thorhallsson 2009; Loftsdottir 2010; Clark & Jones 2012; Nielsson & Torfason 2012; Wade & Sigurgeirsdottir 2012; Jones & Clark 2013; Bergmann 2014).

We contend that from an economic perspective, much has been written on how national economic policies are recast to attract foreign direct investment under neoliberal globalisation. Relaxing taxation regimes and using grants and subsidies to boost the attractiveness of territories to corporations are now widely recognised as vital tools of national economic strategy, allegedly enabling repositioning of states relative to their global competitors (Nyseth & Granas 2007). States' role within this economic repositioning is pivotal, with a whole strand of literature emerging on 'state branding' that seeks to understand national responses to dominant neoliberal imperatives, through the production and redefinition of national 'images' and 'identities' to enhance economic growth possibilities (Aronczyk 2007). It seems international capital, banks, and global financial markets now exert a hege-

monic influence on national economic policy; however, Payne and Sutton (2007, 2) note that 'states still enjoy ... room for manoeuvre in the global political economy'.

This verdict, from an economic perspective, chimes with Taylor and Flint's (2007) observation of the continued geopolitical 'manoeuvrability of states'. Yet compared with economic analyses, this geopolitical manoeuvrability – the ways in which states seek to enhance their global geostrategic presence – remains relatively under-examined. We argue here that there are now three pressing reasons for closer attention to be paid to the contemporary geopolitical (re)positioning of states, by which we mean how political-administrative elites attempt to shape national political-strategic choices and strategic trajectories in order to influence global events and globalising politics. Before addressing these, a caveat is necessary. We recognise 'however' that elite-led geopolitical (re)positioning of states is fraught with difficulties and, 'at best' is characterised as a fragile accomplishment. Most clearly, state elites do not have the means or capability to control the quicksilver of state sovereignty with its leaky, permeable boundaries and increasingly contested political spaces, in which other actors and civil society shape the determination and (multiple) expression of national interest and identity.

First is the shift in economic power over the last decade among the global community of states, most notably towards Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRICS), catalysing change in the global geopolitical and geostrategic order; second is the concomitant implications this is now having for forms of statecraft and diplomatic practice in the 21st century; and third is the growing realisation among political elites of 'the increasing role which geographically related ... resources ... have on international relations and diplomacy' (Criekemans 2011, p. 714). Most especially, geographic quantities that continue to be regarded as inert by scholars of international relations (IR) are self-evidently mutable and often highly geopolitically charged – for instance, constructions of territory, notions of diplomatic 'propinquity' and 'distance', and the geographic influences

underpinning that most opaque geopolitical category, 'the national interest'. Geopolitical (re)positioning, as Dijkink (1996, p. 11) reminds us, concerns the 'relation between one's own and other places, involving feelings of (in) security or (dis)advantage (and/or) involving ideas about a collective mission or foreign policy strategy'. The ongoing reconfiguration of neoliberalism following the financial crises of 2008–10 has had without question a profoundly traumatic impact upon these relations, feelings and ideas yet, the geopolitical and geostrategic implications (and reactions) for specific states of this have received scant attention. This (re)positioning thus encapsulates what Dijkink (1996, p. 16) describes as new 'geopolitical visions' in which political elites attempt to (re)configure and (re)articulate national identities in order to broaden the range of geopolitical and geostrategic choices and possibilities for states. Moreover, the neo-liberal crisis has meant that repositioning is not only the pre-occupation of elite cadres but also intrinsic to the efforts of various (dis)affected domestic groups to fashion and articulate new positions towards private and public interests, elected governments and trans-border forms of governance and control.

### CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL (RE)POSITIONING STRATEGIES OF STATES

Here we undertake a preliminary overview of contemporary geopolitical repositioning strategies by states. Analysis of geopolitical repositioning thus contributes to political geographical debates conceptualising states as ensembles of projects, actions, and material presences and absences of identity, and to states' contribution to the (in)coherence of the global geopolitical imagination (Agnew *et al.* 2008). Important in this regard is how territory – one of the wellsprings of national sovereignty and identity – is recast through historical experience and social practice to become a crucial signifier in foreign policy metanarratives and discourses (Rembold & Carrier 2011).

In our view, such a focus also speaks to recent developments in critical IR on the practices structuring global geopolitics, where the lexicon of state practice and the role of diplomacy in national image projection give the semblance of order and meaning to the global community of states (Adler & Pouliot 2011). Unquestionably, geopolitical repositioning is a contested process. This follows as a direct consequence of states' fundamentally 'peopled', contingent, and multi-scaled character, both domestically (for example, contrasting elite and civil society perspectives on states' 'place in the world') and internationally (arising from competing diplomatic visions and representations, and discourses enacted at numerous diplomatic sites and negotiating fora). Hence we argue that geopolitical repositioning derives from the untidy bundle of government-civic society relations, rival identity constructions and global-local diplomatic encounters, meaning that state 'agents struggle to endow [states' position] with political validity and legitimacy ... but this is a hard work of reification and power struggle' for political elites (Adler & Pouliot 2011, p. 25). Unbundling state repositioning, then, is complex, comprising in our opinion at least four substantive elements.

First is the 'political production of territory'. Any state strategy is reliant on how the territory of states is, and has been, used and manipulated for political effect historically. By this we mean the ways in which national frontiers, local territories, boundaries and borders have been used as sites of flows of people, goods, ideas and capital over time. For political theorists and political geographers, territory has fundamental importance to these political mobilisations. Political geography is now reconsidering the fundamental significance of territory as a dynamic quantity 'best understood through ... an examination of the relation of the state to the emergence of a category of "space"' (Elden 2010, p. 810). Understanding how territory shapes the possible repertoire of repositioning strategies of states thus means grappling with its different manifestations and their fluctuating significance as a geopolitical resource, to reveal 'a continuum of

practices and discourses of territorialities' (Paasi 2003, p. 119). This shaping and reshaping of territory over time is crucial to geopolitical repositioning. It encompasses, for example, states' production of new political spaces by establishing border regimes, and states' management of their internal territorial order, including symbolic, infrastructural and institutional techniques to structure and subdue (Elden 2005, 2010).

Second, repositioning depends on 'states' self-identity and technologies of state ordering'. This is closely allied to political constructions of territory, for 'geopolitics is influenced by the state context from which it is approached' (Moisio & Paasi 2013, p. 256). While ostensibly bearing little relation to it, the mastering of states' self and communal identities (Agnew & Corbridge 1995; Agnew 2003) through technologies of cartography, diplomacy, population statistics, political parties, sectoral management and infrastructural planning is thus highly influential in shaping projection globally of state identities. So historically, national cultural, linguistic and historic identities have proven to be potent referents for developing interstate relations of one sort or another: 'effective foreign policy rests upon a shared sense of national identity, of a nation-state's "place in the world", its friends and enemies, its interests and aspirations. These underlying assumptions are embedded in national history and myth, changing slowly over time as political leaders reinterpret them and external and internal developments reshape them' (Hill 1996, p. 8). In particular, national identities provide discursive codes for 'us' and 'them': 'us' are states with similar allegiances, interests, and affiliations; 'them', states that are contrary or conflicting in their outlook and interests, in effect the 'other', prompting (variously) dependence, acquiescence, or opposition. In this sense, state self-identities are indeed an anchor of geopolitical imaginations (Agnew *et al.* 2008). Most clearly, these identities underpin the range of possibilities for fashioning new positioning strategies, as 'National identity is still one of the most potent forces in the international system – embodied in the nation state, it has served as a rallying call in the develop-

ment of national projects' (Garson 2004, p. 198) with respect to other states.

In turn, these two constituents inform 'practices of statecraft/diplomatic place-making at a distance' – that is, individual and collective diplomatic practices which in most cases materialise spatially. Geopolitical positioning is fundamentally a set of statecraft practices that serve to validate and legitimise particular narratives of national identity in order to advance or secure practical geopolitical objectives; practices in this case are 'socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world' (Adler & Pouliot 2011, pp. 4–5). Reaffirming existing positioning strategies and crafting new strategies is thus reliant on personal insight, specific texts and diplomatic scripts, as well as individual diplomatic performances and actions. Crucially place-making at a distance is a fundamental diplomatic requirement of state positioning that coheres from these individual acts, performed by 'real people, who – working via network channels, across national borders, organizational divides, and in the halls of government – affect political, economic, and social events' (Adler & Pouliot 2011, p. 18).

Lastly, 'geopolitical imaginaries (codes and visions) for geopolitical repositioning' imbricate these three constituents – that is, guide and/or 'map on' to uses of territory/territoriality for geopolitical effect (for example, claims to 'geographical uniqueness'), embedded notions of state self-identity (e.g. states acting as a cultural 'bridge', or a bastion of particular 'values'), and particular forms of diplomatic action – by being mobilised as part of a purposive geopolitical strategy (Dijkink 1996; Grygiel 2006; Clark & Jones 2012; Jones & Clark 2013). Rationales for (re)positioning by states might include to deepen or to distance affiliations with other states; to address perceived issues of 'difference' or hierarchy; to promote 'influence' or 'status' with other countries; and/or to ensure membership of particular state collectivities, such as regional trade blocs or global governance structures.



We examine this process of geopolitical repositioning within the global geopolitical imagination through empirical consideration of Iceland (using Icelandic diplomatic interviews conducted in English and supported by English language-based literatures some of which written by Icelanders); apposite, as it is a country in flux following zealous adherence to global neoliberalism; yet, simultaneously, its political classes and people are seeking to fashion a distinctive political and territorial presence in the contemporary geopolitical imagination (Wade & Sigurgeirsdottir 2012; Bergmann 2014). Iceland offers a novel empirical perspective too, for 'the dominant presentations and practices constituting the modern geopolitical imagination have been overwhelmingly those of the political elites of the Great Powers, those states [with] the capacity to write the political economic agenda of others, defining appropriate standards of conduct and providing the framing for interstate relations with which others must conform' (Agnew 1998 p. 10). With some notable exceptions, the political geographic processes behind the positioning of more marginal states, such as Iceland, have been largely overlooked by political geographers.

Our focus here is on the use of the 'uniqueness' imaginary as a geopolitical strategy to create a new geopolitical positioning for Iceland towards 'EUrope' in the wake of the *kreppa* (literally 'collapse'), which saw a heavy fall in national GDP and left the island state on the verge of bankruptcy in 2008–9. In addition to efforts to reposition post-crash Iceland towards the EU, there was also a simultaneous realisation that reinforcing Iceland's Nordic credentials could provide an important restorative of the state's tarnished geopolitical standing. The exploitation of these credentials to 'legitimize certain actions and justify specific political orientations' (Moisio *et al.* 2011, p. 244) is a long standing part of the Nordic dynamic. This latest interplay between Icelandic geopolitical imaginaries of uniqueness in 'EUrope' and positioning in the Nordic family is also examined drawing on over 50 interviews with Icelandic, Nordic, and other EU diplomatic sources conducted during 2010–13. These interviews were conducted by the authors in

Reykjavik, Brussels, London, Dublin, and Vienna. Repeated interviews were held with mobile respondents across European diplomatic spaces. This enabled us to put Icelandic foreign policy and its daily transaction, firmly in view. These were therefore not respondents falling into an occasional survey for researchers to try to draw out what they really think or know, but individual diplomats who were prepared to talk candidly based on, in some cases, over 15 years of connection with the authors. Responses were also triangulated through comments and materials from other diplomatic sources including senior Danish, Norwegian, US and British representatives.

We consider diplomats as intrinsic to the production of geopolitics – they make and project geopolitical representations, and in doing so make claims, try to convince others of their veracity, and expend considerable efforts in sustaining these representations. Indeed, they are, as one author describes, 'the plumbers' of geopolitics (Gould-Davies 2013, p. 1460). Diplomats devise, trial, make claims and counter-claims about geopolitical representations and play a critical role in maintaining the chimera of state permanence and solidity in an era of profound change in politics globally (cf. Painter & Jeffrey 2009). Diplomatic practice underwrites this illusion of state presence, by ordering and legitimising state identities nationally and internationally. Diplomacy is therefore central to the geopolitical (re)positioning of states.

### ICELANDIC UNIQUENESS AND GEOPOLITICAL POSITIONING TOWARDS 'EUROPE'

Geographical uniqueness has been widely used as a discursive formulation by state elites in their international relations (Jones & Clark 2013). Clearly, politicians and diplomats of many states have deployed geographical exceptionalism of one sort or another to support specific geopolitical visions and identities. For these state elites, such narratives are not merely forms of national branding but, rather, set out ways in which states can relate to, and secure political advantages

from, world and regional orders. Crucially, they provide a means for conducting and shaping political behaviours and interactions. As Yanik (2009, p. 532) explains, these narratives 'do not merely imply imaginations or representations regarding the geographical location of a country ... They also give us clues to the international role and the identity a state aspires to, or plans to become'. Critically, while narratives of 'uniqueness' might on the surface 'denote only geography ... in reality, [they] combine geographical imaginations, role and identity. These [narratives] ... are indeed discursive strategies employed [by elites] ... to frame and to justify various foreign policy goals' (Yannik 2009, p. 533). Exploring the dynamics of the political use of geographical uniqueness and the attendant domestic and transnational consequences therefore offers a potentially fruitful line of geopolitical enquiry. Contextualising the political dynamics associated with the use of discursive formulations is especially important to this enquiry.

Since Icelandic independence in 1944, successive governments have adopted various means to project and position the state internationally, as well as being forced to respond to Icelandic geopolitical casting by others. Consequently, Iceland joined NATO in 1949, signed a defence agreement with the US in 1951, became part of the European Free Trade Association in 1970, and intensified its relations with the EU through membership of the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1994, and participation in the Schengen Area from 1996. These geopolitical positionings buttressed particular national identities and offered the Icelandic state a sense of location in the world.

The financial crisis of 2008 was cataclysmic for the Icelandic state, prompting a major loss of public trust in government and consequent rapid erosion of state legitimacy especially in international context. This financial collapse produced what might be described as a post-hegemonic trauma involving fundamental changes in popular views of the state, its operation and geopolitical positioning, that is, a situation bearing all the hallmarks of what Taylor would describe as a 'geopolitical transition' (Taylor 1990; see also Sidaway

& Power 2005). European Union membership was perceived by the new Social Democratic Alliance (SDA) leadership as the only vehicle that could bring much needed stability to Icelandic politics and serve as a refuge for the ruptured national economy following the overzealous commitment by previous governments to neoliberal ideologies (Bergmann 2014). The country's fiercely independent character has emerged from, and has been shaped by, its relation with Europe, for while Iceland's parliament (*Alþingi*) lays claim to being one of the world's oldest democratic assemblies, national sovereignty has been won from Europe only recently. Thus, the country's 700-year colonial heritage as part of Norwegian and Danish kingdoms informs national scepticism and wariness of European political affiliations, albeit through a European prism of cultural closeness (Benediktsson 2003). Nonetheless, Icelandic wariness was compelled to cede ground to political pragmatism as 'EUrope' appeared able to offer a ready-made financial and economic shelter for the troubled state (Wade 2008, 2009).

This change in national context and discursive construction of 'EUrope' as a geopolitical shelter brought about a reformulation of Icelandic geopolitical visions and a rearticulation of geographical representations necessary to justify such a significant change in its foreign policy. Iceland's participation in European co-operation would be underpinned by a deeply inscribed national spirit of independence, itself conditioned by the country's colonial history and a highly distinctive physiographic situation as a small island state with extreme weather and surrounded by hostile, though highly productive, fishing seas. This was presented in the following way: 'Iceland would be the smallest and most sparsely populated member of the EU. Iceland would be the most westerly member state, remotely situated and faced with harsh natural conditions. It would be the only one located in its entirety within the Arctic region. These unique features will shape the negotiations in the months to come' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010, p. 1). The Icelandic diplomatic corps, especially its small Brussels-based mission, under

the guidance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, had the task of communicating this new state positioning. Following the formal application to the EU for membership in 2009, the Icelandic government published in July 2010 a document mapping out Iceland's geopolitical future with 'EUrope' and the discursive boundary conditions that it hoped would steer the accession process, based on a complex interweaving of historical experience, national identity, and cultural practices sutured together in a representation of geographical uniqueness (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2010). For Icelandic diplomats it provided an essential script for the balance of future discussions, in which the State could be portrayed not as a microcosm of the international financial crisis but, rather, as having made a rational calculated decision on membership as part of a much longer process of EU-Icelandic integration efforts, as a well-placed diplomat explained: 'The beginning of this [27 July 2010] document 'Where did we come from? What is Iceland?' Is it only the country that tried to become a banking superpower and fell on its face'? No, we are more than that. That was just something that happened in Iceland in some five-year boom time' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) respondent, 2010). This view was amplified by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ossur Skarphéðinsson, who described it as the 'logical next step' in the development of Iceland's long-standing relationship with Europe (quoted in Benediktsson 2010, p. 6), an important discursive signal ahead of any formal negotiations with a powerful EU group. Geographical uniqueness was thus the essential discursive element in Icelandic diplomatic efforts, facilitating tacit and spoken communication in diplomatic interactions over potential EU membership.

The diplomatic use of geographical uniqueness for Icelandic positioning led to three strategies being deployed by Icelandic diplomats, what Adler-Nissen (2008) describes as compensatory, missionary and self-censorship. Compensatory diplomatic strategies involve limiting the negative effects of uniqueness arguments to European integration dynamics, seeing Icelandic membership of the EU as a positive inducement for EU member states,

not least through the playing of the Arctic card and Iceland's centrality to an EU envisioning of the high latitudes, and re-emphasising Iceland's historical engagement and connections with Europe and also its shared Nordic identity (Moisio *et al.* 2011; Jones & Clark 2013). Missionary diplomatic strategies are much more uncompromising in nature, with uniqueness presented diplomatically as a national geographical emblem, a lynchpin of Icelandic identity to be protected from 'EUrope'. As an Icelandic diplomat explained, 'We are blunt and at times very blunt. It names the things as they are; it says what we think' (MFA respondent 2010). Diplomatic self-censorship strategies are cognisant of the serious loss of national standing and credibility as a result of fiscal collapse and are sensitive to member states concerns, leading to intensified diplomatic efforts to minimise further loss of national status and accompanying international marginalisation. This dominant interpretive background of uniqueness thus not only conditioned Icelandic diplomatic interactions, reasoning, and planning for negotiations with the EU but also defined the 'horizon of possibility, and provided the background knowledge of expectations, dispositions, skills, techniques, and rituals that are the basis for the constitution of practices and their boundaries' (Adler & Pouliot 2011, p. 17).

With the European Commission warmly approving the Icelandic application in February 2010 and the European Council unanimously endorsing this view in June 2010, pressure mounted on the SDA and its champion of EU membership, Foreign Minister Ossur Skarphéðinsson, to find ways to secure domestic support for membership of the EU in the face of considerable public and political opposition (Wade & Sigurgeirsdottir 2010). Crucially, (re)positioning of the Icelandic state would depend upon how diplomats could secure advantages from deploying geographical uniqueness in European negotiations, and how receptive the EU negotiating side would be to it, thereby offering reassurance to domestic audiences over the safeguarding of vital national interests in the agricultural and fisheries sectors. As an Icelandic diplomatic source explained, 'Europe



celebrates differences. Europe acknowledges differences and takes them into account. This is the general principle ... We are certainly different ... We are saying we are different and we would like this to be taken into account' (MFA respondent, 2010). However, contrasting views both within and between elite and civil society groups over this (re)positioning strategy were reflected in the astute comments of an Icelandic parliamentary source 'a large proportion of the nation would say membership of the European Economic area (EEA) is enough. But others argue it is not. And crucially people do not agree on why! But I think it is fair to say that the currency question after the collapse has been a major issue. There is a multitude of other issues, of course, and people take different positions on their relative importance. Some people say EU membership is needed because of this, others say because of that. Some look at it from the cultural side – you know, "We should be part of the European family"; others say "we cannot run our small economy without being part of a whole, with a stable currency". And then the opponents say, "we have a relatively good life, being members of the EEA. We can get all the benefits of the free market, and joining the Union would just add extra burdens in terms of extra regulation. We should instead be looking to trade more freely in all directions, not just with Europe". These, and other reasons, including the issues of the very valuable fishing grounds and the wealth of natural resources we have, come into the equation' (Parliamentary respondent 2010).

There were wide-ranging implications for the EU of accepting the metanarrative of Icelandic uniqueness. The Icelandic position on the uniqueness of its fisheries sector came in for particular criticism by the European Commission on three levels (Jones & Clark 2013). First, that the Icelanders were deliberately misrepresenting EU policy on fishing access and quotas; second, an erroneous belief that the fisheries sector in Iceland is more sensitive than elsewhere in the EU; and third, the overt suspicion by Icelanders that the Commission could not be trusted to represent Icelandic fisheries' interests within and beyond 'Europe'— three points that go

to the heart of the sovereignty debate in EU governance and the ability of the Commission to work alongside member states in the project of integration. Fisheries, regarded as the 'lifeblood of the Icelandic economy' (MFA 2010, p. 1), presented the most intractable problem as two comments from a Commission source make apparent 'Iceland thinks that they are so unique in fisheries but in fact in several member states this is just as sensitive an issue. Spain is one, Portugal another. And these member states allow these decisions to be taken in Brussels ... And ... every other country trusts the Commission to represent their interests in a neutral and unbiased way' (European Commission respondent 2011).

Consequently by the summer of 2012, negotiations between Iceland and the EU over fisheries had still to be opened. Conflicting outlooks and interests between Iceland and 'Europe' over geographical uniqueness began to emerge publicly, prompting diplomats to slow down membership talks. By January 2013 the diplomatic clock on EU negotiations was stopped entirely as national elections planned for the spring loomed. Diplomats in Brussels had calculated electoral gains for those parties opposing EU membership as a geopolitical (re)positioning strategy, a point expressed lucidly by a Norwegian diplomatic source: 'Now the problem is you have elections in 2013 and probably – with the way polls stand today – have a new government in April. And will this new government want to continue with these negotiations? Well, that will depend on a number of things. Even a new government which is negative towards membership might decide to conclude them, you know, the people will have the opportunity to say yes or no. But if they are very far from conclusion, you can guess what a new government opposed to accession might say. You know, "the voters knew we were against going in, we see we are very far from a positive outcome, we'll not continue them". I don't want to be negative, but you know that is a scenario that's likely ... But this is the scenario that many of us foresee. But this idea of stopping the negotiation clock may well pop up again. It might even be the case they hold a

referendum on continuing the negotiation alongside the election. It's possible. And if you have situation towards the end of the year where it turns out – where it becomes visible to everyone, on fisheries for instance – that negotiations are impossibly difficult, and will never lead to the result that Iceland wants, It's going to be tremendously difficult for the Government – and for the forces inside the Government that are anyway against – to agree to continue, because of the drag effect this would have on the outcome of the spring election'.

### **(RE) NEW POSITIONINGS OF ICELAND: THE NORDIC FAMILY**

European integration is valued, debated and reasoned differently in the various Nordic countries, and the whole concept of 'EUrope' is arguably being actualised differently in their politics. In many ways, this denotes 'as much regional disintegration as integration and unity' (Moisio *et al.* 2011, p. 244) and reflects the various political histories and experiences of the individual Nordic states. The interplay between Iceland's European and Nordic geopolitical positionings has always been an intriguing one, catalysing a range of geopolitical developments. For example, there was free movement of people (i.e. an open border regime in the Nordic countries) long before this was the case in Europe. In turn, this was an important rationale for Iceland and Norway, the two non-EU Nordic states, to join the EU's Schengen area; without doing so, Schengen would have to have established an outer border between Norway and Sweden, a situation described by a senior Icelandic diplomat as 'unthinkable' for the Nordic countries (MFA respondent, 2013). Moreover, relations between Nordic states within the EU and Iceland have subtly changed. So following Sweden's and Finland's accession to the EU in 1995, 'there was a kind of impact on Nordic co-operation in the sense that many thought Sweden and Finland would give priority to their new status as EU member states ... [leading to] a cooling of relations with us and Norway' (MFA source, 2013). However,

while noting that this 'sort of changed the dynamics and the relations of the Nordic family to a certain extent' in the years immediately following the 1995 accession, this respondent maintained 'co-operation and the dynamics of the Nordic group reverted to what it always had been', while among the Nordic-3 (Sweden, Finland, Denmark) within the EU an influential Nordic presence is now beginning to emerge in security and defence policy. For example, Sweden and Finland have signed agreements on defence and security co-operation; and within the EU and NATO both were among the most committed partners in recent military operations in Libya and Afghanistan.

With the failure in 2008 of Iceland's neo-liberal experiment to recast the country as international financial powerhouse came realisation that reinforcing Iceland's Nordic credentials could provide an important restorative of the state's tarnished geopolitical standing. This could be achieved by the Icelandic case for EU membership being supported and furthered by the EU's own Nordic members, and close diplomatic relations among Nordic states enabling Icelandic diplomats to draw upon previous Nordic accession negotiations with 'EUrope' be they successful (Denmark, and later Sweden, Finland) or unsuccessful (Norway). Iceland, of course, has profoundly close historical and cultural ties with the Nordic states, based on a legacy of colonial occupation (the island was part of Danish and Norwegian kingdoms from the twelfth century onwards, with independence only achieved in the mid-twentieth century), migration, trading and commercial links, and aesthetic associations through one of Europe's oldest forms of literary expression, the sagas. Thus it was natural that, running parallel to attempts to position and to align Icelandic interests more closely with the EU in the wake of the *kreppa*, a geopolitical strategy was launched to further enhance co-operation with the 'Nordic family'. This was understandable given their cultural closeness and amounting, at one level, to a simple reaffirmation of the country's geopolitical identity and cultural heritage.

Importantly however, this repositioning also sought to build upon the immediate

response of the Nordic countries to offer Iceland much needed financial support in the aftermath of the financial crisis; indeed, they were among the first states to offer material assistance to the stricken Icelandic economy in September 2008. Yet even within the Nordic family, Iceland's diplomatic presence remains viewed through the prism of historical circumstance. Thus, asked to reflect on Iceland's position among the Nordic states, a senior figure in Norway's diplomatic service in Reykjavik commented: 'This is obviously not the biggest Embassy we have – It's a small outfit we have here, and that suits the place of the country we're in. So of course if you ask me, Stockholm or Copenhagen, well, they probably are the really important postings among the Nordic states, you know, highly political. I would say this is, err, an interesting posting, considered to be interesting, but as you can imagine not one of the most high profile, obviously'.

Partly this view – which is strongly imbued with inflections of diplomatic 'difference' and hierarchy – reflects intertwined colonial histories, and rivalries, between Reykjavik and Oslo. Equally, however, it reflects a strong concern in Iceland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that financial mismanagement in the wake of the *kreppa* had caused substantial damage to the Icelandic geopolitical presence globally, but especially within the Nordic region. To address this situation, since 2008 MFA's efforts have focused efforts on restoring the country's diplomatic standing through formal mechanisms of Nordic foreign policy co-operation.

Informal co-operation between Nordic states goes back to the 1950s, with the signing of the Helsinki Treaty in 1962 formalising these arrangements and enabling a deepening and broadening of Nordic collaboration and mutual aid since that time. Under the Helsinki Treaty, a parliamentary assembly, the Nordic Council, was established, bringing together representatives from the democratically elected chambers of parliament from all Nordic countries to discuss common co-operation and to identify mutually beneficial issues for collaboration; this was followed in 1971 by the creation of the intergovernmental forum of the Nordic Council of Ministers,

an executive body whose powers have substantially increased through binding legal agreements and treaties made by its signatories. Iceland's role since 2008 has been to make more expansive, creative and proactive use of both fora, with the aim of finding common areas of interest between all Nordic states through Iceland acting as broker and facilitator. Thus renewed emphasis has been placed by the MFA on building resource management initiatives (over fisheries with Norway), and strengthening foreign and security policy (such as with fellow NATO states Sweden). The latter initiative capitalises on change in global geopolitical dynamics with the collapse of the USSR enabling Sweden and Finland to play more active roles in a distinctive Nordic foreign and security policy. This contrasts with the Cold war period, when the three Nordic states were 'somewhat compromised, with Sweden in a state of neutrality, Finland with special relations with the USSR, and Iceland in effect occupied by US armed forces' (MFA source, 2013). All this reduced enormously the potential for foreign policy and security policy among the Nordic states.

Post 2008, the interplay between Nordic and European positionings has created new geopolitical dynamics between Iceland and Nordic states 'in' and 'out' of the EU. It has, for example, created closer affinities between Iceland and Norway, as the two states that – as recent events in Iceland have confirmed – are resolutely opposed to EU membership, despite significant domestic minority opinion in favour of accession. But it has also strengthened domestic relations with Denmark, which deepened during Iceland's vexed EU accession process. The net result for the Icelandic state of the flux and flow between these two geopolitical positioning strategies has been to consolidate what are seen as established strengths of Icelandic statecraft, namely promoting the country's perceived expertise in natural resource management with Europe; acting as a 'venue space' in the high latitudes for Nordic co-operation on energy and logistical support for fossil fuel prospecting; while attempting to build a geopolitical case for the country to be seen as a legitimate 'Arctic state', and a

staging post for Arctic exploration. This latter positioning of Iceland has, however, proved contentious, not least with the other Nordic states.

Iceland's perceived expertise in natural resource management is predicated on a sustainable fisheries policy, based on a transferable quotas system which has been widely credited with influencing recent change in the EU's own antiquated Common Fisheries Policy. This has provided a valuable basis for deepening bilateral relations with Norway, focused on what is now described as 'responsible resource management' (applying to fish and other living marine resources). There has been disagreement on some concrete issues, such as over mackerel quota – but such disagreements have been minor compared with the disputes on this topic between Iceland and the EU leading to action being taken by the European Commission in 2013.

More important in Iceland's efforts to reaffirm its geopolitical position among the Nordic family is its contentious handling of the country's role in Arctic policy. A growing awareness and renewed interest in the Arctic and the 'High North' link all the Nordic states, most clearly because of their geographic proximity. Nordic co-operation over this issue relates to manifest transport, tourism and resource exploitation challenges, but there is also recognition that these challenges bring a renewed security dimension to reshape the Nordic relationship, and to strengthen the rationale for Nordic, rather than European co-operation. Critical to this from Iceland's perspective is legitimising its claim as an Arctic state. This claim has been tempered by the Ilulissat declaration made in 2008 by a grouping of five states within the Arctic Council (of which Iceland is a member) called the Arctic-5 (A-5). The Declaration sets out an agreement between Ministers from the US, Russia, Canada, Norway and Denmark (attending on behalf of Greenland) that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) should be the basis for any dispute or any claim or any management action in the Arctic Ocean. This has major implications for Iceland's geopolitical positioning strategy as an Arctic state, as a senior Nordic diplomat com-

mented: 'One important difference between us is that Iceland is not what we refer to as a coastal state of the Arctic Ocean. That is a question of pure geography, although the Icelanders don't like us speaking about their place in relation to the Arctic, or indeed about what we call the A-5 coastal states. This has become apparent on a few occasions at Ministerial level. Now, of course, if you look at a map, Iceland does not have a coast on the Arctic Ocean; It's not placed there. You have Greenland here, Svalbard there, and Iceland right down here; there's no continental Icelandic shelf or coastline going up from Iceland to the Arctic Ocean. Now we agree with the Icelanders that we don't want to move any of the key decision-making out of the Arctic Council. The Icelanders are very keen, they insist very strongly that the Arctic Council should be the main, the only body dealing with Arctic issues, and we agree with them that the Arctic Council is the main body. But we have met with others in the A-5. And we think the Arctic Ocean is a separate entity, a meaningful and logical basis for meeting, discussing and agreeing among those states that about the Ocean'.

Icelandic efforts to find a new geopolitical role relative to the Arctic continue, but recent efforts to locate the secretariat of the Arctic Council in Reykjavik have not been successful and tend to show again the covert hierarchical distinctions made in geopolitical positioning between the members of the Nordic family as explained by a Norwegian diplomatic source: 'Maintaining a strong Arctic Council has meant the creation of a Permanent Secretariat. The Icelanders suggested that this Secretariat should be based here in Reykjavik, but the position was made that it should be in Tromsø, and I think everyone's comfortable with that now'.

Iceland's reaffirmation of its Nordic positioning post 2008 thus demonstrates that deepening and extending existing strategies takes time and considerable investment by states. Specifically, it requires fashioning of a clear geostrategic vision, co-ordination of multiple sites of diplomatic engagement and points of diplomatic contact, and a preparedness to defend at all times the geopolitical codes that underpin these visions. While

Iceland is widely credited with possessing a focused, highly professional diplomatic cadre, the state apparatus faces a strong challenge to establish its Arctic credentials among the Nordic states and the A-5 grouping within the Arctic Council. Pragmatically therefore, in future the country may have to settle for crafting a position for itself as a gateway to the Arctic, building on its existing logistical and emergency response capabilities in the high latitudes, rather than as a state actively contesting claims over the vast natural resources of this debatable territory.

### REPOSITIONING OF ICELAND TOWARDS 'EUROPE' SINCE 2013

Since April 2013, the new Icelandic government has both presented and represented a new particular identity discourse towards 'EUrope' through a diplomatic process that allows others to understand and interpret its national interests. As we have seen, Icelandic national identity is neither 'natural' nor 'given', but rather the reflection of cultural and discursive choices made by that state. In September 2013, Foreign Minister Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson in a key speech to parliamentarians dismissed the former government's geopolitical positioning of the state towards 'EUrope' as having been 'taken without necessary solidarity and conviction in place' and a 'journey commenced in uncertain times in Iceland-[when] our position was not strong' (MFA 2013). Moreover, Icelandic national identity is now being articulated through the idea of partnership with, rather than membership of 'EUrope' with the ultimate goal of 'lending more weight and visibility' to Iceland's European engagements (MFA 2013). In diplomatic parlance this is 'a metaphor about greater, stronger participation short of membership' (Diplomatic respondent 2013). Securing the validity and legitimacy of this latest geopolitical (re)positioning is entrusted to frontline Icelandic diplomats. While the membership application has now been officially placed 'on ice', and only to be thawed should a national referendum be requested on the issue, Icelandic diplomats are eager to avoid this being represented as

a rupture of Icelandic-EU allegiances. Icelandic national interest is now portrayed necessarily as neither conflicting nor contrary to 'EUrope' as a diplomatic source explained 'He [Minister Sveinsson] is saying things very similar to his predecessor and to his predecessor. For example, he is saying Europe is very important to us, Europe is our largest export market, we are a solid European country with solid European roots and we want to participate but we just don't want to join the EU but we want to strengthen the EEA agreement' (Diplomatic respondent 2013). Here, while Icelandic national interest is in the process of being recast, this is taking place in a context of proclaimed longstanding European friendship, shared values and common understandings.

However, geopolitical (re)positionings are, as we have emphasised, highly contested. Most pertinently, the status and influence of 'EUrope' has been undermined by what could be argued is Iceland's refusal of it. In October 2013, the EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Füle expressed his view that 'we were not that far from being able to present the citizens of Iceland with a deal which would take into account Iceland's specificities and at the same time taking into account the European Union's principles'. There are several reasons for this manoeuvre by the EU – not least an attempt to project the new Icelandic Government as being hasty in its decision to halt talks with the EU and thereby not serving national interest well; to encourage pro-EU groups in Iceland to press for a referendum bid for the restart of talks; to portray the EU as being receptive to various geopolitical circumstances and at the same time refuting allegations that the breakdown in negotiations was due to an intransigent EU ill-equipped to handle the specific circumstances of small states like Iceland.

This EU challenge to Iceland was immediately and forcefully refuted by the Icelandic Foreign Minister describing it as a 'rather free account. The fact of the matter is that all the major issues in these negotiations were still unresolved when they were put on hold. Although many chapters had been opened and a third closed, it cannot be maintained that a conclusion was around the



corner when the chapters on fisheries and agriculture had not been opened, not to mention the fact that the EU had not even completed deliberations on ... fisheries' (MFA 2013). The use therefore of geographical uniqueness to administer, conduct, control and fix territorial negotiations with 'EUrope' has clearly had major reverberations. Significantly, as the above exchange demonstrates, it marks above all a distinct stage in the history of 'European' external relations; a candid assessment by a small island state of the value of adopting the structures and policies of an alleged 'New EUrope'. It signals also a profound questioning of the 'EUropean' project and its capability to offer a safe economic haven for small nations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Closer understanding of the workings and operation of contemporary elite Europeanisation spaces, discourses and practices remain central to the analysis of the diverse expressions and meanings attributed to 'EUrope'. We have argued that the mechanisms by which states outside the EU 28 develop their positioning strategies and place brandings to secure maximum advantages from negotiating with this emerging 'EUropean' order are of particular interest given that 'the politics of integration evokes different responses, tactics and strategies in different geographical contexts' (Moisio *et al.* 2013, p. 738). We contend that 'EUrope' is both scripted and contested by 'outside' political and diplomatic elites as part of complex state (re)positioning strategies. Our emphasis is specifically upon the re-inventions and re-inscriptions of particular geopolitical representations through which belonging to 'EUrope' can be articulated, performed and championed, and state (re)positioning can be fixed. This process of (re)positioning is inescapably contested and, as we have shown, fraught with numerous political challenges as diplomats attempt to bundle together geographic quantities (territory, location, resources, natural conditions) to substantiate a mutable national interest as well as underpin their advocacy of particular geopol-

itical positionings. The use of geographic quantities in state-led efforts to structure and shape international interactions have demonstrable geopolitical consequences. Their use is designed to contribute to 'a state's supposed taken for granted status ... a doubtful particularism ... turned into universal truths to justify this or that action' (Agnew 2009, pp. 431–432) but unquestionably provoke alternative, often challenging reactions to their usage.

In this paper, we have responded to recent calls 'to explore ... and explicate how "Europe" is understood and performed in political practices in different parts of Europe' (Moisio *et al.* 2013, p. 745). Drawing upon a case study of Iceland, we have shown the diplomatic usage of geographical uniqueness as a state branding practice and strategy, a pivotal element to state (re)positioning towards 'EUrope' following financial collapse in 2008. In particular, we have exposed the different struggles over the use of the geopolitical category of uniqueness, as various competing and divergent political interests contest, legitimise or reject it in their political entanglements with 'EUrope'.

Additionally, we have also explored the localised imaginations and diplomatic articulation of 'EUrope' through Iceland's geopolitical positioning towards other Nordic states over this same period, and its strategic reaffirmation of membership of the Nordic family. In doing so, we have underlined the complexities and messiness of connecting the politics of the appropriation and the organisation of space with elite deployment of geopolitical discourses and representations for that purpose. Moreover, our exploration of Icelandic (re)positionings towards 'EUrope' and the Nordic group clearly exposes 'the success, strength, and continuity of certain geographical representations and the volatility of others' (Mamadouh 2010, p. 321).

Iceland now finds itself in choppy geopolitical waters. The new government has begun an active diplomatic campaign for the international (re)positioning of the state towards 'EUrope', the Nordic family, and Arctic membership and most recently has undertaken efforts to forge new links with rapidly growing economies in Asia. Here, the recent

signing of the bilateral free trade agreement with China in April 2013 not only encourages trade and investment between both parties, but also affirms Icelandic aspirations to be taken as a serious player in the high latitudes by facilitating scientific co-operation in marine and polar scientific matters with China, and pledging support for Chinese observer status in the Arctic Council (MFA 2013). What is occurring therefore is nothing less than a new political production of Icelandic territory and the emerging global projection of a refashioned state identity.

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