

# Imagining an Arctic State

An analysis of the performance of the Icelandic state's Arctic  
identity

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# Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how the Icelandic state perceives the Arctic and its place in that region of the world. The thesis sees Iceland's state identity as narratively performed and engages with a three-dimensional view of state identity based on space, time, and the state's relationship with Others to construct a holistic view of state identity. Through a narrative analysis of Iceland's Arctic Policies and elite interviews of Icelandic state representatives, this thesis explores how Iceland conceives its place in the Arctic. Illustrating what an Arctic identity entails in an Icelandic context, from an Icelandic perspective. Adopting a top-down perspective of state identity, the findings of this thesis indicate what the impacts of the recent growth in interest of the Arctic may be on Iceland, and how being an Arctic state may not only involve spatial factors. Whereas the region has largely been viewed solely on spatial terms, the other two dimensions brought into account in this thesis demonstrate the multifaceted nature of an Arctic identity.

**Key words:** Arctic, Iceland, state identity, narrative, performance

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# 1 Introduction

In recent years the Arctic has gained a seemingly ever-increasing interest from around the globe. The region is warming at a rate that is three times faster than the global average. Leading to a large-scale loss of the very thing that has been a defining aspect of the Arctic, the sea-ice is melting (AMAP, n.d.; Lenton et al., 2019, p. 593). This has a domino effect on other dimensions of the Arctic. Already there is an instance of a whole community being forced to relocate due to climate change (Welch, 2019).

These changes to the region also have an impact on the macro-level. With the melting of the sea-ice, actors such as China are taking a more active role in the Arctic, *inter alia* via the Belt and Road Initiative's Polar Silk Road and their declaration of holding the title of near-Arctic state in 2018 (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2018; Tillman, Jian, & Nielsson, 2018). Notions of a 'New Cold War' have also been circulating due to increased military activity in the region. While it is debatable whether that amounts to a New Cold War, it is clear that the Arctic is a significant space for global politics. In contrast, the Arctic as a whole has been characterized by peacefulness and stability (Exner-Pirot, 2020).

The Arctic is often seen to be at the very frontier of civilization, a remote, dark and inhospitable place (Ísleifsson, 2020). Nevertheless, the circumpolar Arctic is home to over 4 million people, of which approximately 10% are Indigenous Peoples (Durfee & Johnstone, 2019, pp. 1–9). Therefore, there are great contrast in the narratives regarding the region. Nonetheless, it remains a place often perceived to be clouded in mystery, a distant North. With that in mind, the concept of the Arctic is likewise not exactly clear-cut. All of this increasing interest views the Arctic through diverse lenses. This thesis seeks to explore the Arctic through narratives, the way this region is perceived through the stories surrounding it.

On the geographical front, the most common geographic definition of the Arctic lies at latitude 66° 33' N, the Arctic Circle. However, there are various other definitions of this northernmost region of the world. Among them are definitions based on the Arctic Council working groups of the Arctic Monitoring & Assessment Programme (AMAP) & the Conservation of Arctic Fauna & Flora (CAFF) definitions of the Arctic region (AMAP, n.d.; CAFF, n.d.). These contrasting definitions only reach the more geographic conceptions of the Arctic. Many Arctic states have their own socially constructed ideas of what the Arctic entails. This thesis seeks to examine the Arctic state of Iceland's construction of the Arctic to see how the state perceives the region.

Being one of eight members of the Arctic Council and having territory within the Arctic Circle, Iceland is an Arctic state. That much was confirmed and institutionalized with the establishment of the Arctic Council through the Ottawa Declaration in 1996. Through this intergovernmental forum, eight states were made members: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States (Ottawa Declaration, 1996). However, Iceland's connection to the Arctic varies greatly depending on the definition that is followed. Iceland is the only state to not have any Indigenous Peoples within its borders (AHDR-II, 2015).

If it is a territory within the Arctic Circle that defines an Arctic state, then Iceland just barely makes it. A tiny island of mere 5,3 km<sup>2</sup> is the only landmass of Iceland that can be said to be within the Arctic Circle, the island of Grimsey. Other, more broad definitions see the country as being entirely within the Arctic region.

That being said, Iceland like other Arctic states depict the Arctic in this broader conception of the region. Canada tends to use simply “the North” to refer to a broader definition of the Arctic, Norway uses the term “*nordområdene*”, often translated as “the High North”, and Iceland uses “*Norðurslóðir*” (Medby, 2018, pp. 119–120). The latter two can be translated as “the northern areas”. Indeed, this term of “*Norðurslóðir*” is used as the translation for the Arctic in Icelandic. Perhaps the best example of which can be seen through the way Iceland’s Arctic Policies are in the original Icelandic: *Stefna Íslands í málefnum norðurslóða* (Alþingi, 2011, 2021). However, another term is also translated as the Arctic, that being “*Norðurskautið*”. This latter term has a more specific meaning as the area within the Arctic Circle. That being said, the Arctic has become a crucial part of Icelandic foreign policy. This development is however a relatively novel one.



Image 1: A Map of the Arctic (AHDR-II, 2015).

Whereas there is a significant amount of research into the Arctic region regarding a variety of subjects, less time has been spent on the subject of Arctic identities. As interest in this frontier region of the globe, the question remains, how do states perform their Arctic identities? More specifically, how is an Arctic identity manifested in the case of the Icelandic state? The following section introduces the research problem of this thesis as a discussion of what the Arctic means for the Icelandic state before the research question is brought forth.

## 1.1 The Research Problem

*“We are an Arctic state, an Arctic nation.”<sup>1</sup> (Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, 2020)*

The quote above comes in response to a query by the author of this thesis, provided during an online open meeting dedicated to unprepared inquires, serves to illustrate the current position that the Icelandic state takes regarding the Arctic. An explicit stance that underlines the importance of the Arctic for Iceland as a whole. Not just for the state, but the nation as well. Furthermore, the Arctic is seen as an issue impacting the whole globe. As can be seen from the quote below, obtained during the same meeting.

*“[Arctic affairs] are the opposite of Las Vegas. As you know, everything that happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, but everything that happens in the Arctic has an impact on the whole world.”<sup>2</sup> (Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, 2020)*

While Iceland is unquestionably an Arctic state, the implications of that *Arcticness* is of interest to me. The profile of the Arctic as a region in global affairs has been raised to new heights in recent years as described in the previous section. But what does that mean for the identity of Iceland as one of the eight Arctic states?

Much like was the case on the global stage, Iceland’s attention towards the Arctic has grown immensely in a short period of time. The Icelandic Parliament, Alþingi, did not publish the country’s first Arctic Policy until 2011. Around the same time as other Arctic states had been working on their own. Before that, the Icelandic Foreign Ministry had published reports in 2005 and 2009 on Iceland in the Arctic but the 2011 Arctic Policy was the real first step towards moving the Arctic into the very core of Iceland’s foreign policy. As was the goal of then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Össur Skarphéðinsson (Ingimundarson, 2015, p. 89). The Policy came just a couple of years after the controversial 2008 Ilulissat Meeting where the so-called Arctic Five (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States) met to reaffirm their support for the UN Law of the Sea Convention, without the involvement of the other three Arctic states. This was seen to undermine the role of the Arctic Council and thereby minimize the role of Finland, Iceland, and Sweden in the region (Ingimundarson, 2011, pp. 184–185, 2015). In an attempt to increase the role of Iceland in the Arctic Council, the state fought for hosting its Secretariat in Iceland. To no avail, as Norway won that battle (Ingimundarson, 2015, p. 90). The second and current Arctic Policy was published in 2021 as an update to reflect developments to Arctic affairs, within and outside Iceland. Both Policies will be examined in a later chapter.

Academic work dedicated to the field of Arctic state identities remains limited. The only literature dedicated to this specific field is Medby’s 2018 article *Articulating state identity: ‘Peopling’ the Arctic state* which was based on

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<sup>1</sup> „Við erum norðurslóðaríki, norðurslóðarþjóð.”, translated by author from Icelandic.

<sup>2</sup> „[Norðurslóðamálin] eru andstæðan við Las Vegas. Þið vitið það að allt það sem gerist í Las Vegas, það veit enginn af því en allt það sem gerist á norðurslóðum hefur áhrif alls staðar í heiminum.”, translated by author from Icelandic.



her 2015 doctoral thesis. Her work focused on how “discourses of state identity are articulated by its personnel” (2018, p. 117) and was the inspiration for this thesis. Literature on the Arctic states as a whole, is more comprehensive. Scholars such as Rachael Lorna Johnstone, Oran B. Young, Klaus Dodds, and others have focused on Arctic governance and its geopolitics. Annika Bergman-Rosamond & Ben Rosamond’s (2015) work on the political community and governance within the Arctic region should also be noted. Furthermore, Ingimundarson has explored the impact of the Arctic on Icelandic foreign policy and the other way around. Accounting for the rapidly changing circumstances in the Arctic region when it comes to just about all fields of research, the way Iceland reacts to those changes deserves greater attention.

## 1.2 The Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a deeper understanding of the Icelandic state’s view of the Arctic and Iceland’s place within that region of the globe. The thesis aims to study Iceland’s Arctic identity through the use of state identity theory. This is done by utilizing an approach towards state identity that is spatiotemporally grounded as well as taking account of Others, to conceptualize Iceland’s Arctic identity. The aim of the thesis will be reached by studying narratives surrounding Iceland’s Arctic identity. To guide the thesis, it will seek to answer the following Research Questions:

1. *How does the Icelandic state perform its Arctic identity?*
  - a. *How is Iceland perceived to be spatially located in the Arctic?*
  - b. *How is Iceland’s connection to the Arctic temporally perceived?*
  - c. *How is Iceland’s Arctic identity perceived to be seen by Others in the region and how are Others perceived by Iceland?*

The first question serves as the primary Research Question of this thesis and assumes the existence of an Icelandic Arctic identity. Hence it is a question of how it materializes through the state’s performance of said identity. In this case, identity is understood as something that can be examined through narratives that are continually upheld, a reiterative process that produces identities. This is how this thesis conceptualizes the performance of Iceland’s state identity. The state is perceived to be as-if a person to enable this analysis of a state’s identity. Iceland’s Arctic identity will however not be seen as being set in stone but constantly becoming, identity is therefore seen to be fluid and subject to change. To study this particular identity, the narratives of high-level Icelandic state representatives are seen to be constitutive of its Arctic identity. Hence, this thesis is concerned with a state-level analysis rather than everyday representations of the state. These standpoints will be further detailed in the subsequent chapters.

The three sub-questions serve as the foundation for the three-dimensional approach to state identity adopted in this thesis, being: Spatial, temporal, and relational. The first one aims to examine how Iceland's Arctic identity is spatially located in the Arctic. The second sub-question examines temporal perceptions of Iceland in the Arctic. Finally, the third one seeks to examine the relationality of Iceland's Arctic identity. That is, its perception of how Others see Iceland in the Arctic, and how Others are perceived by Iceland.

The novelty of this research is predominantly due to how limited research into Arctic identities is overall at this point, as is noted in the previous section. This is especially true for research into an Icelandic Arctic identity as is the focus of this thesis. By examining identity on spatiotemporal grounds, as well as in relation to others, this thesis seeks to bring in a new conception of how the Icelandic state performs its Arctic identity. Furthermore, by conducting elite interviews with current and former high-level state representatives, new material is collected. This material is then analyzed using a narrative approach, based on the aforementioned conception of identity. Finally, the inclusion of the new and updated Icelandic Arctic Policy (2021) brings material into the research that has hitherto not been analyzed.

### 1.3 Thesis Structure

The structure of the thesis is as follows: The second chapter brings in the theory which will be used to analyze the research problem and explore how both the state and its identity are conceptualized. Following this exploration of the theoretical assumption taken in this thesis, the aforementioned three-dimensional approach of state identity is detailed. How spatiality, temporality, and relationality are seen to construct state identity in this thesis.

The third chapter is dedicated to the methods utilized, detailing how a narrative approach is adopted. It will explore narrative analysis as a theory, how the approach will be used in examining Iceland's Arctic identity that is the focus of this thesis, and finally, the material analyzed will be analyzed.

The fourth chapter analyzes the material on the basis of the approach to state identity detailed in the theoretical framework, using narrative analysis. It will then take that analysis and discuss its results in connection to the theoretical framework. Explore what possible answers to the research questions could be found, and discuss potential theoretical consequences based on the results of the analysis.

Finally, the conclusion will sum up the thesis, examine future avenues for research, and discuss what could have been done to improve the thesis's quality.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

Before diving into the theoretical framework for this thesis some theoretical assumptions will be made. These assumptions will serve as a position that is adopted and clarified briefly below. The goal of this section is not to conduct a thorough analysis of these theoretical assumptions, nor will this chapter be used as a tool that will be used to study Iceland's Arctic identity in later chapters. Its aim is rather to build a foundation from which state identity theory departs in the subsequent section dedicated to said theory. Following that exploration of state identity theory, the three-dimensional conception of state identity that is used as this thesis's theoretical framework is expanded upon. The goal is to provide a holistic framework for studying state identity, adopted to the particular case that this thesis is dedicated to, Iceland's Arctic identity. Finally, a section on what elements will be emphasized in the analysis is provided.

### 2.1 Theoretical Assumptions

In our everyday lives, the state is treated as an individual. States talk, act, react; states feel real. What is to say they are not? Well, we cannot touch a state, we cannot see a state, not really. Gilpin notes that the “state does not really exist [...] [o]nly individuals exist.” (Gilpin, 1986, p. 318). This claim is based on the conception of agency and its connection to being, that only individuals really act and hence exist. The only way states act in his conception is through individuals acting on their behalf (Gilpin, 1986, p. 318). Nonetheless, we act like states exist, and they do within our socially constructed reality. This reality of ours can be examined via the discourse around it – discourse is what constitutes our social reality. That being said, how do we know that there is such a thing as the state?

Foucault's concept of the formation of objects comes into play to examine that question. Drawing on Foucault, Schiff notes in his reflections on state personhood that we can recognize “when a group of statements refer to a similar object” (2008, p. 368). This can be applied to any kind of object, material and immaterial. While the statements differ to some degree there is a clear reference to a shared understanding of objects such as the state. Foucault argues that three *rules of formation* dictate that the same object is indeed being referred to (Foucault, 1972, pp. 40–42; Schiff, 2008, p. 369). Firstly, objects, such as the state do emerge from somewhere. They do not just appear out of thin air all of the sudden. Foucault argues that what he calls *surfaces of emergence* should be mapped. Where the individual difference between objects emerges (Foucault, 1972, p. 41). These surfaces of emergence differ across time and the discourses they appear in. In the case of the

modern state, the emergence of its discursive formation can be said to be from the Treaties of Westphalia (Schiff, 2008, p. 369). Foucault's second rule of formation notes that the *authorities of delimitation* must also be described. That is, those that are authorized to delimit, designate, name, and establish an object (Foucault, 1972, p. 42). In the case of Foucault that particular object was madness whereas for Schiff those authorities that delimit the state became individuals involved in foreign policy practices, international organizations, scholars of various disciplines, and even possible the people of a state, its *demos* (Foucault, 1972, pp. 41–42; Schiff, 2008, p. 370). Thirdly and lastly, Foucault noted that the systems under which different types of objects are distinguished must be analyzed. The *grids of specification* as Foucault called these systems allow for a division of states depending on, *inter alia*, their ideologies, economic status among others (Foucault, 1972, p. 42; Schiff, 2008, p. 370).

Without going in-depth into a debate about the existence of discursively formed objects and Foucault as a whole, these rules of formation illustrate a certain position that is taken in this thesis, namely, that there is such a thing as the state. The academic debate concerning what that object is, however, is a whole other story. Nonetheless, this thesis takes inspiration from Judith Butler's *performativity* in how it conceptualizes the state. Whereby the state is seen to exist on the basis of performance, done through a reiterative process via narratives, discourses, and language. How this performance is done is what constitutes the state's identity (Butler, 2014; Campbell, 1998; Medby, 2018).

As noted above, states are often treated as individuals or persons in our everyday lives. This assumption about states is common among scholars of International Relations (IR) and social scientists, lawyers, and others. States are given properties commonly associated with human beings; they feel, they have interests, beliefs, and most importantly to this thesis, identities (Wendt, 2004, p. 289). Among the most prominent IR scholars advocating state personhood is Alexander Wendt who argues that state personhood is a very real thing, and that "states are people too" (1999, p. 215). His main argument for the said position is that he views *intentionality* as a critical requirement for personhood, "persons are above all intentional" (Wendt, 2004, p. 295). What Wendt means by that is however not entirely clear. He simply assumes "that intentionality means human or 'intelligent' intentionality, whatever that precisely is" (2004, p. 295). Wendt sees this applying to states through collective intentionality, where the state is seen as a group (Wendt, 2004, pp. 296–298). But can the state be viewed as a mere collective, a group of individuals?

Wight argues that it cannot. He points out that the state is much more than a group or a collective (2004, p. 279). The state is an incredibly complex system, far greater than the sum of its parts. This is not to deny the role of individuals within the state as Wight argues that is done in Wendt's conception of state personhood. As Wight puts it: "To assign personhood to the state is to neglect, not only the role of human agency, but also to occlude the power inscribed in the state as a structure" (Wight, 2004, p. 280). Through this passage, it becomes clear that Wight does not only see Wendt as neglecting human agency in his conception of state personhood, but also the importance and power of the state as a structure. Wight's underlining of individual agency and emphasis on state structure is where this thesis's

theoretical assumptions derive from, where state activity is seen as being the outcome of “individuals acting within particular social contexts” (Wight, 2004, p. 280). Not treating the state as a person but as-if a person to make an analysis of Iceland’s Arctic state identity possible.

McSweeney (1999) reaches a similar conclusion to Wight regarding the state as-if a person, but for a different reason. To McSweeney, the state’s “action is subject to the same logical and sociological analysis as that of individuals or other collectivities. It makes sense to speak of states as if they were agents when the agency of individuals in a representative capacity carries the allocative and authoritative resources of the state with it” (1999, p. 150). But much like Wight, he emphasizes the role of state representatives’ agency within the system of the state. What follows is an exploration of the way state identity is conceptualized in this thesis. The theoretical assumptions detailed above are key in that exploration.

## 2.2 Conceptualizing State Identity

The concept of identity as a broad subject has been extensively examined in academic circles. These academic works have dealt with how identity is constructed, maintained, and sustained. Since this thesis has limited implications for the identity literature as a whole, it will not be diving into said field. Instead, it will be restricted to the literature concerning state identity. Research into state identity is a more recent development that relies on states being seen as persons in their own right, or at the least treated as-if persons. This chapter seeks to explore what state identity entails and how it is understood in the context of an Icelandic Arctic identity.

As noted in the previous chapter, states are often treated as persons both by IR scholars as well as in popular discourse. Firstly, this position entails that states have ‘bodies’, that is their territory, their peoples, and their sovereignty (Mitzen, 2006). States, much like people, seek to protect their bodies to stay alive. The protection of their physical self is at the very core of realist branches of IR studies. States will essentially do everything they can to keep their physical self secure. Under this system, states are said to be selfish and self-interested according to Waltz (1979, 1987, as cited in Wendt, 1994, p. 387). However, under this conception states are not merely physical beings, they are also social beings whose identities originate both endogenously (from the domestic society) as well as exogenously (from the international society) (Wendt, 1994, 1999). Therefore, Wendt (1999) sees state identities as being socially constructed, rather than given. What that entails is that state identities are built on interactions with other states.

A key part of state identity can be said to be its uniqueness, the thing that distinguishes it from other states (Mitzen, 2006, p. 382). However, for that distinction to be feasible there needs to be a ‘sense of Self’ as Steele argues (2008). According to Steele this sense of the Self is provided by narrative, “[w]ithout narrative, without a state agent collecting the history of a nation-state into a story that informs current actions, the Self of a state does not exist” (Steele, 2008, p. 20).

Hence, narrative is a vital part of establishing the whole idea of the state. There needs to be an origin and a story of how the current status was reached for a Self to exist, which can then be distinguished from other states (Steele, 2008). But state identities are not categorically stable.

State identities are not fixed but ever-changing. Nor does a singular state identity exist, multiple state identities exist for each and every state at each point in time (Larsen, 2014). Taking Denmark as an example, feminism has been projected as part of the state's identity according to Richey (2001). However, it is also an EU member-state and as Larsen (2014) argues, Denmark has adopted an EU identity. The state can therefore be said to hold multiple state identities simultaneously. These articulations of a state identities may also vary quite drastically as Larsen (2014) concluded. He found that there were many different projections of the state's identity in the case of the Denmark's EU identity. Whereby different contexts meant different projections of a certain identity (2014, p. 383). Hence, state identities should be studied with a great deal of fluidity in mind.

One such approach that allows for fluidity in studying identity is Margaret R. Somers's narrative identity. The approach essentially involves bringing together a narrative approach and the concept of identity. This avoids "the hazards of rigidifying aspects of identity into a misleading categorical entity is to incorporate into the core conception of identity the categorically destabilizing dimensions of time, space and relationality" (Somers, 1994, p. 606). While this approach has not been utilized to study state identity this thesis will take inspiration from this three-dimensional conception of identity. How that will be used for analytical purposes will be detailed further in the *Methodology* chapter. Furthermore, the conception of state identity that is described here relies on the articulation of state identity by its representatives to study an Icelandic Arctic state identity. A similar analysis on Arctic state identities was conducted by Medby (2018) but in her case, it was a question of how state representatives see themselves to be Arctic and what it means to represent an Arctic state. In this thesis state representatives' articulations are seen as constitutive of an Icelandic Arctic identity.

To sum up, this thesis proposes to analyze the Arctic state identity of Iceland based upon Somers's narrative identity approach, to avoid seeing identities as something stable, fixed, and already reached. As noted above, she proposes to incorporate "the categorically destabilizing dimensions of *time*, *space* and *relationality*" into the conception (Somers, 1994, p. 606). By doing so the constantly ongoing construction of identities can be examined. Hence, the following sections explore the way in which state identity could be analyzed with the dimensions of *space*, *time*, and *relationality* in mind. While these three dimensions that are seen as constitutive of the state identity are truly interlinked, the following chapters seek to analyze them as individually as possible, commencing with the spatial dimension.

## 2.2.1 Spatiality

A region *being Arctic* entails being located within a certain space, a region of the globe. This is why the dimension of spatiality is the first one to be examined. Fundamentally, *being Arctic* entails being located in the far North, on ‘top of the world’, as it is sometimes presented. While definitions of where exactly that line lies, it can be said that the Arctic is just about as far North as one can wander. While the Arctic has recently gained a more central status in global discourse as compared to the 1990s where the Arctic was perceived to be “a peripheral region” as Young presented it still lingers (2019, p. 1). Indeed, in an earlier piece, Young (2005, p. 9) upheld this notion of the Arctic as a peripheral region. This section seeks to explore what meaning this dimension of spatiality has for an Arctic identity.

This perception of the Arctic taking center stage is a recent development, as noted above. Nonetheless, this distant region in the far North continues to be depicted as an empty space, a no-man’s land (Lindberg, 2019, p. 105). That is true to a certain extent, as a great deal of the region is covered in ice and much of the region remains outside the borders of any state (Bergman-Rosamond & Rosamond, 2015, p. 135). But as later chapters will explore further, that perception of the Arctic region being an empty space no longer seems to apply. Not to the same extent at least. With this rising interest in the Arctic, the region has been said to have become ‘bordered’ as Annika Bergman Rosamond & Ben Rosamond argued (2015). While the process of bordering has primarily been viewed as a state-centered function, academic literature such as Rumford’s *Cosmopolitan Spaces* (2008) has stressed that individuals, groups, institutions, and others also perform ‘border work’ (Paasi, 2021, p. 18). Nonetheless, a prevalent perception of Arctic bordering is seen on a state-centered basis (Bergman-Rosamond & Rosamond, 2015, pp. 148–149).

The consequences that these bordering processes have for identity are the spatial limitations that they imply. Bordering as a socially constructed practice allows one group to distinguish themselves from another – the difference between an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ (Scuzzarello & Kinnvall, 2013, pp. 92–93). The kind of border in question varies greatly as borders “wherever the movement of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled” (Balibar, 2004, p. 1). Illustrating the diversity and fluidity of borders. As a first step, one could begin by looking at a traditional map of the world. Typically, this would be a political map, depicting the borders between countries. Some borders are more obvious than others, such as the island state of Iceland in the far North Atlantic Ocean. Its borders simply being the limits of the island, as well as a few minor islands outside the main island. But once again, that is a simplification. While those borders indicate the limits of the Icelandic state, it is a member of the European Economic Area, the European Free Trade Association, and the Schengen Agreement, among others, all of which significantly open up the borders of the country via economic means, increase the ease of movements within their borders, and in a variety of other ways. The way these borders are constructed radically differs. Borders within the European Union (EU) are frequently portrayed as nearly non-existent while the inside-outside Europe divide is emphasized (Scuzzarello & Kinnvall, 2013, p. 91). Borders have become an extremely fluid concept in this ever-increasingly interconnected world. Globalization has however not meant a disappearance of borders. Rather, the

importance of borders and territories is shifting (Andreas, 2003). While scholars such as Perkins & Rumford have argued that borders remain “a possession of the state” (2013, p. 268) the growing importance of another type of spatial phenomenon, regions, should not be underestimated.

Much like in the case of state borders, states have traditionally been seen to be the key actors in region-building. But as in the case of state borders, globalization has brought forth new regionalization (Paasi, 2011, p. 10). What this “New Regionalism” entails is a step away from the state-focused regionalism and an emphasis on multidimensionalism, whereby there exist different levels of ‘regionness’ (Söderbaum, 2013, p. 12). Hence, it is not just policymakers or state actors overall that ‘perform’ regions as this is a complicated process conducted by a multitude of actors (Paasi, 2010, pp. 2299-2300). Söderbaum’s understanding of new regionalism is based upon a perspective of regions whereby no regions are taken as a given but rather socially constructed. This “implies that [regions] are politically contested, and there are nearly always a multitude of strategies and ideas about a particular region which merge, mingle, and clash” (Söderbaum, 2013, p. 12). Rather than being set in stone, regions are thus understood as becoming, as a constant reproduction (Paasi, 2011, p. 13; Söderbaum, 2013, p. 11).

In this reproduction of regions, institutions perform a key role. Paasi goes as far as to argue that identity “is part of the institutionalisation of regions, the process through which regions come into being” (2001, p. 140). Paasi argued that this process consisted of four stages and that all regions possess: a territorial shape (indirectly examined above), a symbolic shape (to be explored under the ‘relationality’ chapter), a number of institutions, and an established identity (Paasi, 2001, p. 140, 2011, pp. 12–13). It is the role of the institutions to maintain the shapes constructed by the territorial and symbolic stages and to provide a distinction between their region and others (Paasi, 2001, p. 140).

That being said, this thesis focuses on a region’s identity, which under Paasi’s understanding: “refers to such features of nature, culture and inhabitants that distinguish a region from others” (Paasi, 2011, p. 14). However, Paasi distinguishes between this regional identity and the identification of the people living within the region, often called its ‘regional consciousness’ (Paasi, 2011, p. 14). This latter phenomenon refers to whether and to what degree the inhabitants of a region identify with the region. This need not mean that all people living with a given region identify with it. Rather this may be more evident in the performance of daily life and not something that is intentionally reflected upon (Paasi, 2001, pp. 139–140, 2011, pp. 13–15). Not much work has been done on researching the Arctic as a region overall. Albert & Vasilache (2018) examined the case of the Arctic region on a basis of governmentality but research into an Arctic identity remains limited.

This thesis focuses on the performance of state actors, policymakers, and others of that nature. Furthermore, this thesis will not be focusing on an Arctic regional identity as a whole. Indeed, Bergman-Rosamond & Rosamond noted in 2015 that it was “too early to talk about a shared overarching Arctic identity” (p. 136). Whether that is still the case today could very well be the subject of yet another thesis. This one however, seeks to explore just one understanding of an Arctic



identity, the Icelandic one. Nonetheless, as Söderbaum argues, the understandings of regions are politically contested, whether that is the case here remains to be seen.

### 2.2.2 Temporality

Identity is not merely spatially constituted but also temporally. The way the past and history are constructed is radically different throughout time depending on what events are emphasized while others may be forgotten. Examining the narrative construction of the way history is presented by an actor's identity is therefore essential (Hom & Steele, 2020). The construction of a singular, often linear, history has become common practice in the search for a stable state identity (Kinnvall, 2017, p. 103; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, pp. 246–247). Hence, while in the context of this thesis the perception of the Icelandic state being Arctic is seemingly a given, that may not always have been the case.

Historical narratives are a way to create common ground for a group. They enable a sense of shared origins as well as understandings and interpretations based on those origins (Patterson & Monroe, 1998, pp. 321-324). Not only is the way history is constructed indicative of how a group acts, sees its and others' place in the world, but is also used to explain the actor's future (Patterson & Monroe, 1998, p. 316). As Steele notes: "In recalling past events, [...] social agents not only provide particular interpretations of history, but are enlivening history by using it to create the basis for action" (2008, p. 56). History thence becomes a basis for agency, even a guide for future actions as argued by Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe (2015). The narrativization of national history becomes a way to legitimize a certain ideology by pinpointing the group's origins and history to a shared place, time, and ancestor as a way to justify an ideological direction (Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe, 2015, p. 144). Narrativizing national history is facilitated through such tools as memories, symbols, and myths. Thus, influencing the perception of a national identity (Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe, 2015, p. 144; Smith, 2000).

Firstly, a recent example of a symbol used in the Arctic context could be seen to be the 2007 planting of the Russian flag by the legendary explorer Artur Chilingarov and 'Hero of the Soviet Union'. Strengthening the Russian Federation's claim of being an Arctic state as their flag is quite literally planted at the North Pole. This creation of a new symbol is a reproduction of the narrative history of Russia as an Arctic state, a "reification of the past in the present" as Ingimundarson (2011, p. 178) phrased it.

Secondly, taking a look into how myths can function in the Arctic context is the myth of the 'Icelandic Utopia' as described in detail in Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson's work on the Images of the North (2020). This depiction has then been further utilized by Icelandic officials in the portrayal of the Icelandic state as a sort of commercial center of the Arctic, inspired by myths of the "Arctic Mediterranean". This term was first conceptualized by the Icelandic early 20<sup>th</sup>-century explorer, Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, whereby the Arctic region became one of the great commercial arteries of the world, with Iceland at its navel (Ingimundarson, 2011, p. 177).

Thirdly and finally, memories involve the way in which certain events are collectively remembered by the group. Their narration is for example used in the legitimization of a certain collective conception of the group or for its mobilization (Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe, 2015, p. 144). Medby's (2018) exploration of Arctic identities involved a recount of Norwegian officials' collective memories of being Arctic as the primal beginnings of the Norwegian seafarers and fishermen, living off the sea. Essentially, it is in their blood to be Arctic (Medby, 2018, p. 121). Collective memories such as that maintain the deep connection to that identity.

These tools function as a way to enable a linear perception of national history. A sense that that construction is the one true history that is shared among the state, nation, or even both. That is however a simplified reconstruction of history. The narrative organization and construction of national history is subjective. The construction of history should not be taken as a given, it is an idea, a collection of experiences organized in the context of the present (Steele, 2008, pp. 56-57). This perception of a singular, even linear, narration of history functions as a way to maintain stability, to avoid insecurity (Kinnvall, 2017, p. 97; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, pp. 246–247). When that perception of singularity is threatened, it may lead to a feeling of instability or anxiety (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). Instinctively actors seek to avoid that feeling. Instead aiming for confidence in the “continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (Giddens, 1991b, p. 92), also known as ontological security. It should be emphasized that this continuity and constancy noted above is a question of perception or feeling. Scholars such as Browning (2018, p. 246) argue that there is no such a thing as absolute ontological security, that anxiety constantly looms over.

This concept of ontological security was originally developed with individuals in mind by Laing (1990) & Giddens (1991a) through psychoanalysis and sociology respectively. Building on that concept, scholars such as Kinnvall, Mitzen, Steele, and others have developed it for an analysis of states as the ontological security-seeking actor. In their work the assumption is that states not only seek physical security, that is the security of their territories and internal structure, but also ontological security based on Laing & Giddens's theorization (as seen above) (Mitzen, 2006). The ontological security-seeking state emphasizes the same need in the perception of a “whole, continuous person in time” as theorized to be the case for individuals (Mitzen, 2006, p. 342). Once again underlining the importance of temporality in the construction of a state identity. Hom & Steele's work (2020) on how the state's Self deals with time expands on this theorization. In their work on the ontological security of international agents, Hom and Steele focus on narratives surrounding these agents and the importance of time in their ontological security and the constitution of their identity. Much like is the case for the identities of individuals, states feel the need to sense a beginning and the possibility of an end for the articulation of the coherence and integrity of their identity through time (Carr, 1986, p. 164; Hom & Steele, 2020, pp. 326–327). In the case of international agents, that origin would be considered to be found in the Treaties of Westphalia while the prospects of their end, in their current form, were raised by threats to that system by Al Qaeda and the IS as Hom & Steele note (2020, pp. 326–327). However, the international realm is perceived to be a much more complex than the

individual one, with a great deal more X-factors according to Hom & Steele. This in part, is what makes the international realm a particularly anxious one (Hom & Steele, 2020, pp. 323, 330-331). In this “late-modern world there is less actors can take for granted, which makes ontological insecurity and existential anxiety more common and decision-making more difficult.” (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017, p. 52). It is therefore tempting to draw on history in the decision-making process. Indeed, a coherent and stable perception of the past is a vital part of limiting anxiety.

Anxiety need not be a negative thing. While one option certainly is maintaining the status quo through the performance of a linear narrative as has been briefly discussed above. It has been linked to a rise in a simplified conception of our social world with a division of Us and Them to construct an explanation, which can lead to nationalistic trends where the Other is depicted as a threat to Us as explored by Kinnvall. However, anxieties need not lead to a maintenance of the status quo. They can be a trigger for change by dislodging old certainties and potentially opening up political space. [Anxiety], therefore, is a precondition for realizing alternative possibilities” (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 247). This conception of ontological security is based upon a rather recent trend that criticizes the so-called ‘status quo bias’. Examples of that criticism can be found in works such as Kinnvall & Mitzen’s (2020), Rosedale’s (2015), and Berenskötter’s (2020). Under this ‘status quo bias’ the fundamental goal of ontological security is to maintain the status quo, the *security of being*. As opposed to a view of ontological *security of becoming*, which opens up the possibility of change, as noted above.

Finally, since Iceland is the focus of this thesis, its smallness must be noted. While there is limited literature on this topic of the ontological security of a small state, Steele (2008) & Hom (2020), and Arfi (2020) have explored the ontological security of Belgium at the beginning of the first World War. Hom & Steele (2020) note that: “Small states also might find their national Selves implicated directly by international identity as Belgium did in 1914.” In that case, it was seen to be Belgium’s duty as a neutral state, within the European society of states, to defend itself against German aggression. Despite it essentially amounting to an ‘act of national suicide’ (Hom & Steele, 2020, p. 328). Illustrating “that small powers possess the ability to influence the social structures of their community, or that, in short, the actions of such small states also have important societal consequences” (Steele, 2008, p. 96).

The limited number of studies conducted on small state ontological security also apply to the Icelandic case. Hence it is difficult to say whether a similar impact is found in the case of an Arctic identity of Iceland. While it is most certainly less dramatic and less precarious than that of Belgium in 1914. Iceland’s Arctic neighbors are however no less powerful than Belgium’s.

### 2.2.3 Relationality

While identity can be said to be spatiotemporally grounded, as detailed in the two parts above, it cannot exist without a comparison with Others. It is the difference between the Self and the Other that defines what the Self is and is not. So far, the

limits of identity have been explored via the temporal and spatial dimensions. This final section of the thesis's theoretical framework will explore the relational limits of identity. In the context of this thesis, being an Arctic state is dependent on there being non-Arctic states. Furthermore, since this thesis concerns itself on the particular Arctic identity of the Icelandic state, the differences within Arctic states need also be addressed. "Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty" (Connolly, 2002, p. 64) On those grounds, this chapter seeks to explore an aspect that sets the Icelandic state's Arctic identity apart from other Arctic and non-Arctic identities, namely the nation and its people.

While this thesis concerns itself predominantly with the identity of the state it is difficult, if at all possible, to completely separate talk of states from talk of nations. No matter how unrealistic that ideal of the nation may be, the two remain interconnected. That is especially true in the case of the elusive concept of the nation-state, the idea that nations should have their own nation-state (Billig, 2012, p. 22).

*In its pristine meaning, a nation is a group of people whose members believe they are ancestrally related. It is the largest group to share such a myth of common descent; it is, in a sentient sense, the fully extended family. (Connor, 1992, p. 48)*

The degree of connection that the people experience is dependent on the group in question. Their relationship is furthermore made more complex with the rising influence of globalization but by no means declaring it obsolete. As Campbell (1998, p. 353) notes, referencing Benedict Anderson's argument (Anderson, 2006), the nation should only be understood as a textually represented cultural artifact, an "imagined political community" as Anderson noted it. Anthony D. Smith on the other hand argues that: "The nation is not just an imagined political community, but a willed and felt communion of those who assert a moral faith and feel an ancestral affinity" (Smith, 2000, p. 803). Smith hence believes the nation to be more than Anderson's imagined political community. With that said this thesis leans more toward Anderson's understanding. To facilitate the examination of the links of the imagined political community of the Icelandic nation together in the Arctic context, of what makes it "unique", and to put a greater focus on the state.

The nation is to be imagined as unique in spatiotemporal terms. As much is detailed by Billig in his seminal work *Banal Nationalism* (2012, p. 67), referencing Benedict Anderson. Relying on previous chapters, these dimensions will not be discussed further. Instead, other aspects making the nation unique will be explored. Continuing to draw upon Billig (2012) one critical aspect of that national uniqueness is languages. Perhaps especially so in the case of Iceland, the small state in the middle of the North Atlantic and former colony of Denmark up until 1944. As Billig notes, the uniqueness of a language is often emphasized in the creation of a separate nation (2012, p. 26). Billig discusses the decolonization of Norway from Denmark in that context, noting the importance of creating a distinct language from Danish in the fight for independence (2012, p. 26). This importance of constructing a distinct language in Iceland mirrors the Norwegian case as Loftsdóttir (2011) &

Hálfðánarson (2000) argue. Iceland's history and a unique and even 'pure' language are used to fight for Icelandic independence. The statement below is dated 1918 and is from the Icelandic delegation of a Danish-Icelandic inter-parliamentary committee, tasked with finding a new arrangement between the two (Hálfðánarson, 2000, p. 91):

*The Icelandic nation is the only Germanic nation to preserve the old language, which was used in all the Nordic countries 900–1000 years ago. ... With the language, people have preserved a distinctive nationality, distinctive customs, and distinctive culture. And, with the language, the consciousness of the country's special status in relation with our kindred nations has always lived with the [Icelandic] nation. We deem that these circumstances, a particular language and distinctive culture, give us a historical and natural right to total independence.*<sup>3</sup>

The sentiments illustrated above underlined the fundamental importance of the unique Icelandic language to the "right to total independence". But not only a distinct language is noted, culture too is linked to this uniqueness which is said to distinguish the Icelandic nation from others. Billig explores this aspect of culture in the construction of nations, relying on Balibar (1991) among others. Noting how culture can be used to mobilize accounts of what the nation's uniqueness is built upon. Guibernau (2000) concurs with this role of culture for nations and utilizes it as one of his five dimensions of defining the nation. These two aspects of language and culture can be said to be intimately interlinked in the case of Iceland. This is due to the rich literary tradition through works such as the Sagas of the Icelanders where a free Icelandic state was often imagined (Hastrup, 1984). The Sagas are also where the perception (and in many cases the reality) of a common ancestry are depicted. As referred to above, in Connor's (1992) understanding of a nation it is, in its "pristine meaning", a group of people who believe they are ancestrally related. In few states is that as much the case as in Iceland.

Overall, the perception of Iceland from within can be said to be characterized as that of exceptionalism as discussed by Loftsdóttir (2018). The uniqueness of Iceland is seen to be based upon the previously covered aspects of language, culture, and shared ancestry. However, whether these notions of the Icelandic nation can be said to be linked to the Arctic will be discussed in later chapters. Dodds & Ingimundarson argue that "Iceland has been committed to a northern identity, it has traditionally paid limited attention to the Arctic" as late as in 2012 (pp. 33–34). However, just 3 years later Ingimundarson stated that the Arctic had "assumed a privileged place in Iceland's external affairs" (Ingimundarson, 2015, p. 95). This thesis aims to examine what the case is today for the Icelandic state regarding the Arctic.

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<sup>3</sup> Translated by Hálfðánarson.

## 2.2.4 Summary of Theory

The theoretical framework provided above aims to conceptualize the way state identity is seen. That is not to say every element touched upon will be discussed in great detail in the context of the performance of Iceland's Arctic identity. The central elements of the theoretical framework, the ones that will play the biggest part in this thesis's discussion of the case, are briefly outlined in this section.

From the spatiality section it is the question of how the bordering work is conducted and by whom that contributes the most to the question of how the Icelandic state is perceived to be spatially located within the Arctic. The conception of regions being in a constant state of reproduction will also be utilized in that context. Embracing regions not as being, but as becoming.

When it comes to the temporality section, this thesis is predominantly interested in examining how Iceland is temporally narrated to be in the Arctic. In that regard it is the way that history is constructed to appear to be stable and linear that contributes to the question of Iceland's temporal perception of the Arctic. This search for a stable perception of time is seen to be linked to anxiety and instability avoidance. These elements and the implications they may have will be discussed. Connected to that is the way history is narrated and the tools used in that context that this dimension will be examined under.

The final dimension of relationality concerns itself with what makes Iceland's Arctic identity unique in comparison to other Arctic state identities. The perception of that difference at least. As spatiotemporal factors have been noted this will predominantly be based on examining differences based on the nation, its culture, and the overall perceived uniqueness of the Icelanders.

## 3 Methods & Material

Debates concerning identity, its formation, and constitution are about as old as the field of social sciences. Accordingly, a variety of methods to study this concept of identities have emerged through the years. This thesis seeks to examine identities via narratives in a way that argues against the often-perceived rigid structure through which identities have been viewed in society. Narrative as a method enables an examination of the numerous narratives competing for domination throughout time and space for the core of an identity (Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe, 2015, p. 142). In an attempt to portray that fight for domination, identity has been viewed as socially constituted over time, space, and in relation to Others (Somers, 1994, p. 629). As much has been noted in earlier chapters and is reflected in the structure of the theoretical framework. However, this concept of narrative is highly disputed, with no clear definition or framework to base an analysis upon (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2016, p. 1-2; Tamboukou, 2008). What follows is an exploration of how this method will be used for the analysis of the Arctic identity of Iceland.

### 3.1 Narrative Analysis as a Theory

What is likely to be the first thing to come up when hearing the phrase ‘narrative’ is some form of fiction, a novel perhaps. An imagined story that has a beginning and an end, both of which can be pinpointed with relative ease. While real-life may not be as straightforward, narrative analysis shares many features with the form that storytelling takes in fiction. It involves examining data as-if it were a story. As Patterson & Monroe (1998, p. 316) detail: there are protagonists involved and everyone noted has a role to play in the storyline that is being told. Furthermore, the story is told from a certain perspective, and the way in which they are detailed is seen to be a matter of ‘fact’ (at least from the storyteller’s perspective). Narrative analysis takes notes of these ways that the story is presented, as well as how events are sequenced which can indicate how the narrator remembers the events. Finally, Patterson & Monroe (1998, p. 316) remark that a narrative can never be voiceless, it is fundamentally based on how the narrator perceives their social reality. This aspect of narrative analysis is what allows for an in-depth analysis of identity. While discursive analysis could in all likelihood be utilized to analyze this subject, it is the focus on larger stories that ultimately lead to a narrative analysis: narratives consist of discourses and discursive practices (Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe, 2015, p. 142; Nesbitt-Larking & Kinnvall, 2012, pp. 52–54).

Hence, while it is true that narratives are in essence stories, the stories are explored in the way they are grounded in human experience (Wibben, 2018, pp. 61-

62). Narratives allow for an analysis of the numerous coexisting stories constructed and reproduced in society. These stories are what allows us to make sense of the social realities of the narrator (Patterson & Monroe, 1998, pp. 315–316). It is the interplay between a variety of social realities that is of interest to this thesis, how identity is presented, constructed, and reproduced. This is why narratives are studied relationally, never in isolation (Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe, 2015, p. 142; Patterson & Monroe, 1998, pp. 315–316). In the case of this thesis, narratives are viewed in relation to time, space, and Others.

Just about anything can be viewed as a narrative because they can be found everywhere. Nonetheless, narratives are perhaps most popularly seen in politics and media (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2016, pp. 2–3; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012, pp. 76–77). Indeed, these two platforms are not uncommonly analyzed using narrative analysis (cf. Scuzzarello & Kinnvall, 2013; Szotek, 2017). This thesis aims to make use of narrative analysis along similar lines. With the state as the protagonist and its identity as the focus, constituted by narratives drawn from its policies and perceptions from high-level officials. Analyzing identities using a narrative approach highly emphasizes the fluidity of identity and its ever-ongoing construction and reconstruction (Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe, 2015, p. 143; Somers, 1994, p. 606–607). Narrative analysis, therefore, dictates that identities are not set in stone; they are “constructed and reconstructed in the context of internal and external relations of *time* and *space* and *power* that are constantly in flux” (Somers, 1994, p. 621). Whereas when identity is seen as fixed or categorical, the constant development of identity is ignored (Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe, 2015, p. 142; Somers, 1994, p. 621). This fluidity allows for an examination of the changing power dynamics that follow identities in flux.

A narrative approach to identity has been used to study the hierarchy of narratives. As Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe note: “Narratives are most powerful when they provide paradigmatic truths, i.e., when they become perceived as natural, essential, and given” (2015, p. 143). Such narratives tend to become institutionalized, providing a higher level of legitimacy and increasing the likelihood that they remain unquestioned. Narrative is thus intrinsically linked to questions of power and politics (Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe, 2015, p. 143; Patterson & Monroe, 1998, pp. 315–316). To make sense of the power and politics operating behind certain narratives they need to be analyzed. How one narrative of an event dominates while others are dismissed. Leading to a particular kind of action is legitimized in response to said narrative. Wibben (2018) used the example of “The War on Terror” to illustrate as much in her study on narratives of female engagement teams in Afghanistan.

Narrative analysis as a method for research opens up the possibility for a great degree of insight into personal experiences of events and how the self is expressed. Researchers performing such analysis should however take care in not generalizing this experience as evidence of the whole truth, of what actually occurred when the data collected is limited to perceptions and experiences of the narrator (Patterson & Monroe, 1998, p. 327). The analyst should also be mindful of their own assumptions and the way they may impact the results of the analysis (Patterson & Monroe, 1998,



p. 330). The following chapter examines the way this particular analysis will be conducted.

## 3.2 Doing Narrative Analysis

The subject of narrative analysis varies greatly as was touched upon in the previous chapter. From literary works, narratives in media, to interviews, narrative research “refers to any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 2011, p. 4). In this thesis, the material that will be analyzed is that of elite interviews, but also the current 2021 Icelandic Arctic policy as well as the former 2011 policy. Together, this material is seen to be constitutive of the way Iceland’s Arctic identity is constructed. The way the material was chosen, approached, and analyzed will be detailed in the next chapter. For now, the focus is on the way narrative analysis as a method will be employed in this thesis.

The way that narrative analysis will be used as a method in this thesis is based on an approach developed by Annick Wibben (2018). Her analysis of narratives is based on identifying “particular recurring elements and structural similarities among narratives” (Wibben, 2018, p. 62) but also discrepancies between the narratives (Wibben, 2018, pp. 62-63). Identifying similarities and emphasizing inconsistencies allows for an analysis of the varying perceptions of how the Arctic identity of Iceland is constructed. What it is, what it may be, what it is not, how that may have changed throughout time, and how it differs from the perception of other Arctic identities. This approach to an analysis of the Arctic identity of Iceland provides a map of how it is performed, legitimized, and portrayed by the Icelandic state. Through its policy as well as by the officials and politicians, that were interviewed and are seen as constituting the state’s identity. This is not to say there is such a thing as one true identity but to illustrate how an Arctic identity is presented.

Wibben (2018) draws upon Bal (2009) in her development of a narrative approach. This approach divides the analysis into three layers: the text, story, and fabula (Wibben, 2018, p. 62). The three, while analyzed individually, cannot exist separately. They are dependent upon each other and together constitute one whole narrative (Bal, 2009, p. 6). This division of layers is what offers the aforementioned identification of recurring elements and discrepancies among narratives. The three layers serve as different lenses through which the material is analyzed (Wibben, 2018, p. 62). As developed by Bal, the first (1) layer of the text can be said to be the medium through which the narrative is conveyed. This can be done through language, sounds, imagery, or some mix of those mediums. The second (2) layer, the story on the other hand concerns the way the content of that text is presented. For example, the way it is ordered or to bring about a certain feeling. The story layer is also where biases may appear. The final and third (3) layer is that of the fabula, which concerns the content of the narrative. The fabula is a set of connected events which are caused or experienced by the actors of the narrative (Bal, 2009, p. 5; Wibben, 2018, pp. 62-63). Whereas two narratives might include the same fabula

(content), its story (presentation) might be radically different. Hence, while some actors may portray an Icelandic Arctic identity in the same way, the way that identity is presented may differ. Underlining the importance of obtaining a significant number of interviews to examine the diverse presentations of Arctic identities.

Interviews need not be a site of narrative production, rather it is up to the interviewer to ‘activate narrative production’ as Czarniawska notes, referencing Holstein and Gubrium (2004, p. 51). Interviewees may simply become a retelling of narratives that are circulating. However, if interviewees are provided with ample space, they are more likely to respond with narratives (Czarniawska, 2011).

The interviews conducted in this case are elite interviews, but limited literature exists on that particular kind of interviews when a narrative approach is adopted. Barbara Czarniawska (2004) has written on narratives in an interview situation in general but does not dive into the particularities of elite interviews. Generally, elites are used to being asked questions and give their opinions, this has its pros and cons. On one hand, power asymmetry that is usually involved is canceled out due to their position. On the other, this means that retaining control of the interview proves more difficult (Kvale, 2011). Whether that encourages narrative production is difficult to say.

The analysis of the diverse stories presented also allows for an examination of what Bal calls “focalization” or: “the relation between who perceives and what is perceived” as Wibben describes it (2018, p. 64). That entails exploring how the different points of view impact the story which “can help indicate the subtle infusion of the narrative with particular ideals, be they specific to an academic discipline, a worldview, or a particular author” (Wibben, 2018, p. 64). In this particular case, an emphasis is placed upon the Icelandic state’s perception of its own Arctic identity. Hence the state can be seen to act as the protagonist within the narrative analyzed where state representatives and its Arctic Policies are seen to tell that story. This is a case of character-bound focalization where the focalizer and the character within the story are one and the same. In that case, the “character will have an advantage over the other characters. The reader watches with the character’s eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character” (Bal, 2009, p. 149). As the case of this thesis fits that description, that is very much the case. Bias towards the protagonist is therefore something that should be carefully avoided.

Using the method described above enables an analysis of the same overarching content (Iceland’s Arctic identity), conveyed by two different mediums (Iceland’s 2011 and 2021 Arctic Policies, & interviews of state representatives), using diverse presentations by a variety of actors. With that being said, this thesis will focus on the intricacies within the fabula, that is the ways the content is constructed. This thesis will also examine the ordering processes and themes seen via the story, possibly uncovering biases in its presentation.

### 3.3 The Analyzed Material

On the basis of analyzing an Arctic identity of Iceland using a narrative analysis, inspired by Wibben's (2018) approach, this thesis analyzes two types of material.

Firstly, and as briefly noted before, Iceland's 2011 & 2021 Arctic policies were analyzed. These documents are Parliamentary Resolution from Alþingi (the Icelandic Parliament) and as such written in Icelandic. While the now former Resolution has been translated into English, the updated one has not at the time of this thesis. Hence, to analyze them uniformly and to take the context of the Icelandic language into account, both were analyzed in the original Icelandic. The Policies are set up as guiding principles, 12 in the 2011 Policy and 19 in the 2021 Policy. Both were adopted unanimously, indicating the cross-party unity there is behind the issue. The Policies cover issues such as:

*"Iceland's position in the region, the importance of the Arctic Council and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, climate change, sustainable use of natural resources and security and commercial interests. Emphasis is furthermore placed on neighbour-state collaboration with the Faroe Islands and Greenland as well as the rights of indigenous peoples" (Government of Iceland, n.d.).*

Due to how short the two Policies are, they provided limited material for analysis. Nonetheless, they are the official narrative of the Icelandic state on the Arctic. Hence, they are seen to be a general framework that the state performs its Arctic identity within.

Secondly, four elite interviews were conducted with high-level representatives of the Icelandic state. They enable an analysis of the intricacies of Iceland's Arctic identity performance that the Arctic Policies build a framework for. The interviews were conducted with individuals that currently hold those roles as well as retired ones. All four individuals were Icelandic, and as an Icelander myself, these interviews were conducted in our native language, Icelandic. This also kept the language of the analyzed data uniform, both interviews and policies. Allowing for a more consistent analysis of the linguistic intricacies that can be found in Icelandic and may be lost in translation when interviews are conducted in one's second or third language. Purposive sampling was used to select the individuals that were interviewed where the criteria for selection was being a current or former state representative highly involved in Iceland's Arctic affairs at the highest level. This limited the number of individuals immensely and meant that only a handful of individuals met the criteria. The result was four individuals, their names are listed here below, with their informed consent. Unfortunately, they ended up all being of the same gender. Women within this field were approached but turned out to be unavailable for interviews. Furthermore, this field, at this level, can be said to be quite male-dominated which was another factor that resulted in these all-male interviews. Interviews were conducted with the following individuals in the order listed:

1. Össur Skarphéðinsson, Iceland's Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2009-2013
2. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, President of Iceland 1996-2016; Chairman of the Arctic Circle
3. Einar Gunnarsson, Ambassador, Chair of the Arctic Council's Senior Arctic Officials during Iceland's Chairmanship, 2019-2021
4. Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, Iceland's Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2017-

The interviews were conducted during a span of a month and a half with the first one being done at the end of May and the last one conducted in early July. They were semi-structured with an interview guide being created. With the goal of being able to compare and contrast the material. The interview guide includes seven main questions that are roughly divided into the three-dimensional approach that is adopted in the theoretical framework. The questions were formulated in English as the language of this thesis, then translated into Icelandic as the language of the interviews, both versions are provided in the appendix for transparency. In all but one case, the questions were not submitted to the interviewees beforehand. However, in one case the interviewee specifically asked them to be sent as a prerequisite of doing the interview. Three of the interviews were done face-to-face, while one was done virtually, via Zoom, with the camera turned off. The length of the interviews ranged from half an hour to an hour. All of them were recorded and transcribed with the interviewees' consent. Finally, before direct quotes were used in this thesis, the interviewees asked for them to be submitted for review, in three out of four cases.

### 3.4 Strengths and Limitations

Several of this thesis' limitations are noted within the previous section. Among those is the language the interviews were conducted in, that is the interviewees and my own native language, Icelandic. The language of the interviews does also mean that some complexities of the narratives risk being lost in translation. The novelty of this research furthers this risk, as some of the concepts had not been fully explored in Icelandic, especially when it comes to identity theory which is a big part of this research. This is, however, also a strength as it contributes to the novelty of the topic.

Another novelty and strength of the thesis is the material gathered from the individuals interviewed. Where my nationality and native language gave me the privilege of having an easier access to this level of elites than may be considered normal. Iceland's smallness influencing the accessibility of even the most elite individuals. Such as in this case, where the interviewees' knowledge and legitimacy are arguably one of this study's greatest strengths. Then again, interviewing elites can be easier said than done. Controlling the direction of the interviews was a particularly challenging process in some instances, as tends to be the case when it comes to elite interviews. On the other hand, this limited the ethical issues encountered when it comes to interviews, the usual power dynamics of researcher having power over the interviewee was canceled out, almost inverted, as the

position of the interviewees meant that they had a great deal of power over the interview. This applies both during the interview itself as well as before and after it was conducted. Seeing as how few options are when it comes to interviewing individuals in this high of a position and involved with Arctic affairs, I was forced to make whatever concessions were asked of me when it came to how the interviews were conducted and how I could use the material gathered. Fortunately, these concessions were minimal and consisted of submitting the questions in before the interview in one case as well as a review of the quotes which I was interested in using for the thesis in three cases. None of the quotes were rejected.

Ethical issues in analyzing official government documents, such as the 2011 & 2021 Arctic Policies can also be said to be limited. However, given how limited in scope these Policies are, it can be argued how valuable it is to include them in the analysis. Nonetheless, including them adds yet another element of novelty.

Finally, as an Icelander writing on Iceland, my own positioning should be reflected upon. That said, I do not see myself as being Arctic. I do not see Icelanders as a whole as being Arctic. Nor do I suspect that Icelanders generally see themselves as Arctic. Whether Icelanders as a people or nation see themselves as Arctic is however not the focus of this thesis but, this lens that I view the topic through does influence my analysis. The position of the interviewees, however, may have a counteracting influence.

## 4 Iceland's Arctic Identity

This chapter is dedicated to exploring Iceland's Arctic identity through the material gathered for this thesis. It commences with an analysis of that material, the four interviews, and two Policies, examining the narratives present to gain insight into how an Icelandic Arctic identity is performed. More time will be spent on the interviews than the Arctic Policies. This is simply because of the amount of material gathered in the interviews and the limited amount in the Policies. Nonetheless, as noted in the previous chapter, the Policies are seen to be a framework of Iceland's Arctic identity performance. A base from which Iceland's Arctic identity is seen to derive from. The intricacies of that performance are then gathered through the material gained from the interviews.

A discussion of that analysis then follows and will seek to answer the thesis's research questions. This will be done by exploring Iceland's Arctic identity based on the analysis, through the theoretical framework provided earlier in this thesis.

### 4.1 Analysis

The aim of this analysis is not an attempt to find just one true narrative that can be said to constitute Iceland's Arctic identity. Rather, it aims to examine the narratives presented in the material analyzed by identifying similarities and emphasizing inconsistencies as noted in the methodology chapter. This is done to allow for a fluid approach to identity. Furthermore, the focus of the analysis is not placed upon the medium through which the narrative is conveyed. Rather, the focus is placed on the narrative's presentation (story), and its content (fabula), following Wibben's (2018) approach to narrative analysis.

As is the case in the chapter dedicated to this thesis's theoretical framework, the analysis is divided into three interlinked yet separate sections: Spatiality, temporality, and relationality. However, before going into this three-dimensional division, some time will be spent on the linguistic division that has appeared in recent years over two terms that are now both translated as the Arctic but that has not always been the case.

#### 4.1.1 Reimagining the Arctic in Iceland(ic)

When it comes to the Arctic, two terms are used to indicate the word in Icelandic, *Norðurskautið*, and *Norðurslóðir*. This was briefly mentioned in the introduction of this thesis. The former term has however existed for a much longer time than the

latter term in this context. The former is perceived to be a tangible place, the second more abstract but has grown in prominence in recent years. As noted by Skarphéðinsson when asked about the *Norðurslóðir-Norðurskautið* issue: “It is in recent years that people have started to use [*Norðurslóðir*] with a direct correlation [to the Arctic]. That was not the case before” (Skarphéðinsson, 2021). According to Ólafur Ragnar, it was he who took the initiative to start using *Norðurslóðir* on a regular basis around 20-years ago. This is because: “For Icelanders *Norðurskautið* is a much narrower term which is linked to the poles rather than a region of the globe”. Hence, Ólafur and Össur started using *Norðurslóðir*, as a more comprehensive term for the Arctic. Coincidentally, since that term is used for a more expansive space, it means that Iceland can be said to be in its entirety within that specific space. As Einar sees it: “We are the only state that wholly falls within the limits of the Arctic.” Whereas *Norðurskautið* is seen as a more distant place, with a closer link to the Arctic Council within the narratives present in the interviews. Within the 2011 Arctic Policy it is emphasized in its third principle that “*Norðurslóðir* are comprised of *Norðurskautið*, as well as the part of the North-Atlantic region that is closely linked to it.” In the updated 2021 Policy, *Norðurskautið* is only mentioned twice, both times in the context of the Arctic Council. Meanwhile, *Norðurslóðir* is mentioned 25 times.

According to Ólafur Ragnar, this is not done to increase the weight of Iceland in the region within Icelandic Arctic narratives, rather “it has simply been solidified within Icelandic linguistic traditions to translate ‘Arctic’ as *Norðurslóðir*. Hence, as has become the norm when speaking of the Arctic within Icelandic government narratives, *Norðurslóðir* is the default term for the Arctic. This perhaps seemingly non-consequential division between the two terms is immensely important in the Icelandic context. As detailed above, it brings the distant Arctic (*Norðurskautið*) closer to Iceland in the form of the much more expansive Arctic (*Norðurslóðir*), even encompassing the country. How the Arctic is spatially narrated by the Icelandic state is the subject of the next section.

#### 4.1.2 Locating Iceland within the Arctic

The first of three dimensions examined in this chapter is that of spatiality. It will examine how the Arctic region is presented within the narratives analyzed and what elements this dimension concerning Iceland’s Arctic identity contains. This section also looks at how Iceland is spatially perceived within the Arctic region. As indicated by the very introduction of this thesis, space is a very fundamental dimension in the context of a regional identity such as the Arctic. This quote obtained from the interview with Össur further stresses this:

*Location is immensely important, without it no state can lay claim to being an Arctic state. (Skarphéðinsson, 2021)*

This perception is echoed by all interviewees, that location is the foundation of being Arctic. The perception of where the boundaries lie is less clear. Notions of Greenland being an Arctic country came up in all interviews, a common enough

perception and generally agreed upon. The Faroe Islands also came up to be perceived to be Arctic but that link was not seen to be as strong. Hence the limits of the Arctic region are quite contested as seen from within Iceland. Those limits, or borders, are perceived to be fairly contextual, based on the approach taken. Furthermore, the limits of the Arctic region are perceived to be a novel issue. One that has only manifested in recent years and will be explored in the subsequent section. Internally, whether Iceland is an Arctic state or not is seen not up to debate. It is a matter of fact according to the interviewees and the Arctic Policies as well. The degree of Arctic-ness and just how much of Iceland is perceived to be within the Arctic region is more interesting as this position of seeing Iceland as being the only state that is completely within the Arctic is unusual. It is first and foremost the two current representatives interviewed that champion this position.

*The whole country, and a majority of its exclusive economic zone, lies within the borders of the Arctic as it is most often defined and societal, economic, and environmental issues are Arctic issues (Gunnarsson, 2021)*

That being said, the borders of the Arctic, wherever they may lie, are seen to be externally performed by several actors. State actors are among those performers, but their part seems to be a more passive one through the location of the states within the Arctic region. Össur's quote at the beginning of this section illustrates that passive performance, much like Einar's quote in the previous section. State actors are rather seen to perform the Arctic through their membership in the Arctic Council. Which is seen to be the main delimitation as to which states are Arctic, and which are not. As Ólafur says: "The Arctic Council is a formal definition in the international diplomatic community on what states are Arctic states and the Icelandic government follows that definition." Össur concurs that being a member state of the Arctic Council is a prerequisite to being an Arctic state but is not sure whether that impacts Icelanders' perception of being Arctic. The two Arctic Council Working Groups that are hosted by Iceland, CAFF and PAME, are also seen to strengthen Iceland's Arctic identity, internally as well as externally. In fact, Össur argues that CAFF and PAME have without a doubt strengthened Iceland's Arctic identity.

The Arctic Council, while being seen as the main defining factor, is however not the only institutional factor in defining the Arctic. The UN is mentioned in the Arctic Policies in the context of UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) in both Policies. As well as in the context of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in the 2021 Policy. Furthermore, NATO is also noted in the latter Policy in the context of keeping the region a low-tension area. These institutions are not noted in the interviews, but they do take note of the importance of Icelandic research and educational institutions. This is especially true in the case of the Policies. The 2021 Policy directly stating that "Iceland's position and identity as an Arctic state should be strengthened by building up domestic knowledge and expertise in Arctic affairs, and by strengthening centers of education, science and dialogue."

A number of other factors also came up in defining the Arctic as a region. Even changing the perception of how the Arctic is seen externally as well as within the



state. A narrative that takes note of the climate crisis for example portrayed it as bringing the region closer to the rest of the world. While what little is left of the Arctic ice melts away from us it has never felt closer. Climate change was stated as one of the most fundamental threats to Iceland's interests in the region in the 2011 Policy. Furthermore, the fifth principle in the 2021 Policy is dedicated to minimizing climate change's negative impact in the Arctic. While the narrative is along the lines of climate change most certainly has a negative impact on the region, it is also seen to bring some opportunities. Through the prospect of new shipping lanes opening up for example. However, as Össur expressed:

*It is likely that climate change strengthens the image of the Arctic, its connection to Icelanders, and their identity in the future. (Skarphéðinsson, 2021)*

Not only does Össur argue that climate change is likely to influence the image of the Arctic as a whole but also how the Icelandic people see themselves. Einar's conception of the intimate connection of the Arctic peoples as a whole with nature, Icelanders included, would support that argument. He speaks of the Arctic peoples living under very similar conditions, owing a lot to climate and nature. This is one core characteristic of being Arctic according to him.

To sum up, defining the Arctic is a near-impossible task given how expansive it is. Its perceived limits within the narrative examined in this case include Iceland as a whole and touch upon all issues encountered in Iceland, in most cases. Hence, while Iceland's perception of where the limits of the Arctic lie, there is an agreement when it comes to the question of whether Iceland is located within the Arctic region. This status is heavily supported by Iceland's member status in the Arctic Council.

### 4.1.3 Iceland's Arctic Origins

The second dimension examined in this chapter is that of temporality. It examines how the Arctic region is temporally presented and what elements this dimension of the narrative concerning Iceland's Arctic identity contains. This chapter also concerns itself with how Iceland is temporally perceived to be within the Arctic.

Whereas Iceland's location has not changed, perceptions of that location certainly have throughout its history. The same applies to the Arctic. People did not generally think of the Arctic until around 140 years ago according to Ólafur. "It was not until around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that scientists and explorers started to go into this area" he said. Ólafur also noted that the West did not know anything about the Arctic when it started looking North a century and a half ago: „Icelanders had the saying that [they] were on the edge of the habitable world. [Their] image was that there was nothing North of Iceland that mattered. This changed when the Cold War ended. During the Cold War these areas were ruled by military interests." Guðlaugur also mentions this state of affairs in the Cold War, as well as adding World War I and II into the equation. However, it was generally accepted by all interviewees that Iceland had been in the Arctic for a long time, even always been there. Whether that had been a part of their identity is another thing.

*Iceland was an Arctic state 50 years ago even though people did not talk about it as such. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when Icelanders started looking at themselves as an Arctic state. (Grímsson, 2021)*

According to Ólafur, it is a recent development that the Icelandic state and its peoples see themselves as Arctic. When that changed is of course hard to say but he notes that the situation now and 15 years ago when it comes to this perception is poles apart. Einar speaks on similar terms, saying that:

*If you would go 10, 15 years back in time then Icelanders' identity was not at all that we were some Arctic state. Most Icelanders would probably rather find ways to identify with other European states. (Gunnarsson, 2021)*

Hence, he agrees with Ólafur's perception that this is a recent development. During my interview with Össur, he mentioned that if Icelanders were asked whether they saw themselves as an Arctic state he would not be so sure that they would agree with that. Guðlaugur even noted that during the first two years of his term as Foreign Minister (2017-2019 that is) there were minimal reactions to Arctic affairs in the international realm. It was mainly the Asian states that expressed interest, mainly China, but also Russia. It has only been during his most recent two years in office that international interest has grown immensely in Arctic affairs in his experience. Nonetheless, he sees Iceland as always having been in the Arctic, but that Icelanders "may not have been extremely happy about it. [They] weren't promoting it." In his perception, being in the Arctic did not use to be a positive thing.

*I think that people weren't generally looking at the North as an area of opportunities for Iceland. That people generally didn't look at it like that, rather said 'even though we are in the North' and try to reduce just how far North we were. (Þórðarson, 2021)*

He continued: "This has changed, people have started to see it as an advantage to be in the North rather than a flaw." In Ólafur's view, this perception regarding the Arctic did not change until six to eight years ago within the Icelandic Foreign Ministry, it was not until then that the Ministry made "Arctic affairs one of the pillars of Icelandic foreign policy." Furthermore, according to Ólafur, a widespread recognition among the Icelandic nation that Iceland is an Arctic state was not reached until the emergence of the Arctic Circle organization (founded in 2013 by then-President Grímsson) and the recently passed chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2019-2021). The Arctic Circle organization, according to Össur: "imprints it into Icelanders' consciousness over three, four days that they are Arctic." Referring to the organization's annual Assembly which takes place in Reykjavík.

Össur argues that this connection of the Icelandic nation to the Arctic is not a new one. Rather, its recognition is growing. According to him, the Arctic could be argued to be the reason why Iceland had been able to become a literary powerhouse via e.g., the Icelandic Sagas. Referencing one of Iceland's most prominent linguistic experts, Helgi Guðmundsson, the argument was that trade with Greenland had been able to provide the country with the capital to record these legendary pieces of literature. As Össur noted, writing these comprehensive works of literature was no cheap task in their time. Hence Össur had mentioned the question by Iceland's sole

Nobel laureate, Halldór Laxness, who had asked how Iceland had the capital to create them. On that basis, Össur argued that the memories that were built throughout Iceland's national history have survived up until this century have distinguished Icelanders to be Arctic, perhaps without them defining themselves as such.

On those grounds, Össur argues that the Arctic is a part of the Icelandic national identity, a sort of historical identity that is built upon romanticized ideals by the Icelanders of themselves: "This was a part of Icelanders' nationalist romanticized speculations of themselves. It was a part of their achievements." As part of Iceland's historical identity, whether people actually realized it or not is another thing but nonetheless, Össur argued that the Arctic has always been a part of Iceland's perceived ideals of Icelanders.

The changing Arctic environment may be awakening that connection between the Icelanders and the Arctic. A change that is manifested not only through the threat of climate change as noted by all interviewees as well as the Policies, but also the prospect of a greater degree of military tension than has already developed, as well as a broader kind of security concerns according to Guðlaugur. This is also hinted at in both Policies.

#### 4.1.4 Iceland's Arctic Identity in Relation to Others

The third and final dimension examined in this chapter is that of relationality. How Iceland's Arctic identity is perceived in relation to Others and in that context, its narratively perceived uniqueness. Moreover, this section will examine how and whether a shared Arctic state identity is to be found within the narratives examined. As rightly mentioned in the earlier 'relationality' section within the theoretical section, difference is spatiotemporally bound. Much like in that earlier section, those differences will not be reiterated as they are explored in the two previous sections. Instead, it will explore other aspects.

*All you need to do is go up on the next hill here in Iceland to realize that Iceland is in the Arctic. Then it's obvious that Iceland is an Arctic state in its entirety.*  
(Gunnarsson, 2021)

The picture below serves as an illustration as to what Einar was referring to by the quote above. Granted, it is not exactly 'the next hill' but rather given for context. As has been noted earlier in this chapter as well as in this quote, it is a common narration that Iceland is completely within the Arctic. Common, not unified, Ólafur notes for example that the majority of all of the Arctic states' territory is outside the Arctic region. The two interviewees that are still in their roles as representatives of the state do however uphold this claim. It is one of the things that makes the Icelandic case unique, much like Einar argues.

*All of Iceland's representatives possess the trait that they are themselves Arctic, which is rather an exception among the representatives of the other Arctic states. We are familiar with most of the issues we are dealing with from our own experience and are taking care of our own interests, not some distant members of our constituency. I believe that is what makes us unique. (Gunnarsson, 2021)*



*Image 2: Skálavík, Iceland, taken in September 2016. Just South of the Arctic Circle (Sumarliðason, E. Í.).*

Following this narrative, it is not only the state that is Arctic but also its nation. This is briefly noted in the previous section and is expanded upon in this section as this aspect of Icelanders being an Arctic nation, according to the narrative currently explored, is one of the things that make the state unique. Guðlaugur has said on more than one occasion that in his view, Icelanders are an Arctic nation.

*Our entire identity is built on the fact that we have been here for a very long time, a major part of it very isolated. If that isn't what characterizes nations that live in the Arctic, then I don't know what it is. (Þórðarson, 2021)*

As the quote above demonstrates, Guðlaugur argues that the Icelandic nation is unquestionably Arctic. He does not go as far as saying that it is the only one but rather one of many. However, when it comes to the state-to-state level:

*Being in Iceland, I feel like it may shape us to a greater extent and I feel like people approach us with that in mind. Most of our colleagues do not hesitate to ask because they are conscious of our position. We are listened to when these matters are being discussed and there our location, history, culture, and experience make us better shaped to handle these issues than those who do not live in this region. (Þórðarson, 2021)*

The extent of Iceland's Arctic-ness is therefore unique according to Guðlaugur because of Icelanders' "location, history, culture, and experience". Össur would seem to agree with that as he stated that all Icelanders have a sense of the fact that

they are Arctic and play an important role there. However, Össur also notes that: “Within Icelanders’ consciousness that role is larger than in reality.” Ólafur fundamentally disagrees with this concept of an Arctic nation. According to him, Iceland is not an Arctic nation because “no nation is an Arctic nation.” It is simply nonsense as the majority of Arctic state’s residents live in areas that are outside of the Arctic region.

Another unique factor of Iceland among the Arctic states is that it is the only one without an Indigenous population, as is mentioned in the introduction of this thesis. However, Einar argues that Icelanders’ way of life and the challenges they faced a century ago stood closer to Indigenous Peoples’ way of life and their challenges than most European’s way of life at the time.<sup>4</sup> In his experience, it is also easier for Icelanders to communicate and cooperate with Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic than with their own countrymen. That in contrast to the other Arctic states, the Icelanders do not have to carry around the original sins when communicating with Indigenous Peoples. This may also be a factor in facilitating a dialogue with Indigenous Peoples, Einar said. Guðlaugur goes further with this connection of the Icelanders to Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic. Admitting that Icelanders do not fall under the definition of Indigenous Peoples and that the Icelanders do not have an Inuit culture, but citing similarities when it comes to history, distance from the largest cities and civilizations, low amount of commerce, and owing everything to nature, he poses the question: “Aren’t we Indigenous to some degree?” Arguing that Iceland, much like the other Arctic states, can be said to have Indigenous Peoples in a sense. This is the only instance of that level of connection with Arctic Indigenous Peoples found in the material. Outside of this notion from Guðlaugur, little was seen to be in common among the Arctic states. They were said to be too diverse to have some commonalities outside of their shared location in the Arctic. There were rather perceived to be commonalities among Arctic residents and those living in the Arctic.

The narrative on other Arctic states from Iceland’s perspective was a mostly positive one. Össur spoke on the general Nordic comradery on most issues as to diminish their smallness in the name of mutual benefit from their cooperation. Especially in the case of Iceland-Greenland cooperation, where he described just how similar their situation is. Being two small states right between the great powers in the Arctic. He and Einar however both mentioned the Ilulissat Declaration of 2008 and the Arctic Five, denouncing it as a way to undermine the Arctic Council and Iceland’s role in the Arctic. Furthermore, just a few years after that, Iceland fought a losing battle with Norway over who would host the Arctic Council Secretariat. To which Össur noted that:

*We strongly advocated for hosting the first Arctic Council Secretariat here [in Iceland] and we had the majority for it. We had won the support of the Americans and were fighting the Norwegians for it. Then the war in Libya broke out and the*

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<sup>4</sup> There he refers to the fact that the Industrial Revolution did not reach Iceland until around 1900, Iceland being a dependency of Denmark, minimal commerce outside the island, and other factors that I will not delve into. For more information: Chartier, D., & Ísleifsson, S. R. (Eds.). (2011). Iceland and Images of the North. Presses de l’Université du Québec.

*Norwegians sent half their air force there to try to bomb the man who ruled there, Gaddafi. [...] After that the Americans came to us and said that they had to change their minds, they couldn't support us any longer. They had to support Norway because of their contributions in Libya. (Skarphéðinsson, 2021)*

To which Össur argued showed how the other Arctic states viewed Iceland's position as an Arctic state. According to him, politics got in the way of the Arctic Council Secretariat being hosted in Iceland, but the trust was there for Iceland. This perception is further strengthened among the public through the tourism industry's performance of bringing the Arctic closer to Iceland, as was noted by Einar and Össur. Arguably, this applies both to the Icelandic public as well as to the tourists visiting the island.

*"Every other tourist company that has pulled 'Arctic' into their name or description of their products in some way or another. So, I think that comprehension of this has grown very fast in Iceland." (Gunnarsson, 2021)*

The Icelandic state's perception of its own Arctic-ness is a positive one. It is an Arctic state in all cases but just how much varies among the narratives explored. From being essentially the most Arctic state of all, with an Arctic nation that may even be Indigenous. To it being an Arctic state, but no such thing as Arctic nations existing. When it came to the Arctic states as a whole, there seemed to be a consensus that such a thing as a shared Arctic state identity does not exist in their perception. Commonalities were rather seen among Iceland's neighbors but its position among the states was perceived to be highly positive.

## 4.2 Discussion

This chapter will discuss the previous section's analysis of Iceland's Arctic identity. The discussion will be based upon the three-dimensional conception of state identity that is adopted in this thesis's theoretical framework. By doing so possible answers to the three sub-research questions are explored. Compiled together, the three sub-questions contribute to answering the main research question, that is:

*How does the Icelandic state perform its Arctic identity?*

Maintaining the red thread of this thesis that is its structure, this section is loosely divided into the three dimensions of spatiality, temporality, and relationality. Much like previously has been the case, these three dimensions are interconnected and remain so. They should not be seen as separate but parts of a whole, that is the performance of the Icelandic state's Arctic identity. It should also be emphasized that the narratives examined can hardly be said to be impartial. The narratives analyzed are from the point of view of protagonists that tell a story concerning themselves. In the context of the type of narrative analysis utilized in this thesis, there is a character-bound focalization present (Bal, 2009; Wibben, 2018). The narratives derive from state representatives that (either currently or used to) actively promote the Arctic-ness of Iceland for a living, as well as the Arctic Policies of a state that sees itself as Arctic. On the story-level, the way the content

of the narrative is presented, Iceland, therefore has an advantage over the other characters in the story (Wibben, 2018). This factor in the presentation of Iceland's Arctic identity receives the most attention.

Space is the difference between what is and is not Arctic. It is a spatially bordered region of the world. As much is argued by Annika Bergman Rosamond & Ben Rosamond (2015). The narratives analyzed in this thesis support that claim. This bordering of the Arctic is predominantly perceived to be done by states directly, or indirectly, through the Arctic Council. A few other international organizations are noted in this context, but none are perceived to be as consequential in this international bordering process as the Arctic Council. The narratives examined were also indicative of the growing global centrality of the Arctic. Further strengthening the claim of its bordering and dismissing the narrative of the Arctic being a peripheral region, or an empty space as it had been (Young, 2019). However, as Rumford (2008) and Paasi (2021) argue, border work is not only conducted by state actors as it can also involve othering and a more everyday kind of bordering performed by individuals, groups, and others. This type of bordering narrative will be implicitly detailed under the relationality part.

Following Söderbaum's (2013) understanding of regions as politically contested, whereby the Icelandic state's grand narrative discussed here is just one of many. Despite that, neither the presentation of Iceland's Arctic identity nor the content that came up is not completely unified. Different narratives of the region arose among the interviewees when it came to perceiving Iceland within the Arctic. There were discrepancies in the narratives when it came to just how much of the state lies within the Arctic. It is largely seen to be entirely within the space that is the Arctic, this claim is championed by the current Foreign Minister as well as the former Chair of the Arctic Council's Senior Arctic Officials. The interviewees all present this narrative as not always having been present. That it has just been a few years since Iceland started to identify with this region of the world. It is therefore fair to say that the Arctic region is very much a case of a region in constant reproduction, one that is becoming, rather than being, as Paasi & Söderbaum conceptualize regions (Paasi, 2011; Söderbaum, 2013). Even while this particular case is just a question of one state's perceptions of the Arctic region. Ultimately, this recurring narrative element of Iceland being wholly Arctic (explicitly argued by the two current state representatives interviewed as well as more implicitly by the 2011 Policy and the Skarphéðinsson) is the starkest defining factor of Iceland's spatial Arctic identity performance.

Temporally, this identification of the Icelandic state and its people with the Arctic was presented to have started just in recent years. Nonetheless, the same Icelandic narratives examined argue that it has always been an Arctic state, even if it had not started to talk about itself as such. It is in the last 10, 15 years that this has changed, becoming one of the current pillars of Icelandic foreign policy. That was not the case six to eight years ago according to President Grímsson. Furthermore, interest in Iceland as an Arctic state on the international stage did not even register until two years ago, along the same time as its Chairmanship of the Arctic Council. Nonetheless, Iceland is always perceived to have been an Arctic state, but it is not until recently that this is presented as a positive thing. It had even

been seen as a flaw according to Foreign Minister Þórðarson. Whereas the state and the nation had been looking South for direction, they are now looking North for new opportunities. What is now a given part of Icelandic state identity, and feels almost natural and obvious, that did not use to be the case. Rather, it is an example of a construction of a stable and linear history that seeks to establish the Arctic as always having been part of Icelandic identity (Kinnvall, 2017; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020).

While Iceland is now presented to be at the center of a new region, putting Iceland in a favorable position. It had historically been seen to be at the “edge of the habitable world”, as President Grímsson put it. Iceland’s Arctic memories are thereby of a more peripheral conception of the region where its location may have been viewed as a disadvantage. Össur’s more implicit Arctic historical connection perceives a more intimate one, whereby the Arctic can be seen to have allowed Iceland’s literary tradition to grow. Enabling the creation of works of literature such as the Sagas that are a vital part of Icelandic culture.

Alongside the growing global interest in the Arctic in the past two decades or so, the strength of Iceland’s link to the Arctic has been put into doubt. Most notably by the Ilulissat Meeting and following declaration in 2008, where the Arctic Five met without the other three Arctic states, widely seen to undermine the work of the Arctic Council as is noted in this thesis’s introduction. Possibly contributing to a temporal link to the region whereby the Arctic has become constructed as part of Icelanders’ historical identity (Andrews, Kinnvall, & Monroe, 2015). Following the narrative analyzed, this seemed to cause quite some anxiety for the Icelandic state, even ontological insecurity. In the following years, there were several actions taken to strengthen Iceland’s status as an Arctic state. The first Arctic Policy was published 3 years after the Ilulissat Meeting and that same year the Secretariat of the Arctic Council was lost over to Norway. Two years after that, in 2013, the Arctic Circle held its first Assembly. The second Icelandic Chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2019-2021) is then presented as a confirmation of Iceland’s Arctic-ness without any doubt. It is however difficult to say whether there is a causal relationship between the perceived anxiety post-Ilulissat and the actions taken after that. Kinnvall & Mitzen’s work on ontological security and anxiety as a trigger for change would allow for an argument along those lines but more material is needed to confirm the link (Kinnvall, 2017; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020).

Nonetheless, there is a consensus among the individuals interviewed that these factors are seen to have had an immensely positive impact on Iceland’s Arctic identity. This applies both to the state as well as the Icelandic nation. As Hom & Steele (2020) note, small states have been found to find their national selves impacted by their international selves. The narratives examined in this thesis would indicate that this is one such case. That is at least the perception of the elites interviewed. That should however not be taken to apply to the Icelandic nation as a whole and is therefore inconclusive.

In exploring the difference between the Icelandic Arctic state identity, what makes it unique compared to Others outside the Arctic is its location. As much has been covered. No state can be Arctic without being located within the Arctic. It is difference among the Arctic states that is much more noteworthy. Among the Arctic



states, Iceland's perceived spatial uniqueness has been covered. Hence, it is other factors that receive most of the attention here. Predominantly, it is the people that are presented to make it unique. Due to Iceland's location, its representatives are said to be unique because they are in their entirety Arctic. Unlike their colleagues from other Arctic states which are presented as often representing "distant members of their constituency" rather than representing themselves. In order to secure a unique Arctic state identity, Iceland, therefore, secures its self-certainty by presenting itself to be the most Arctic of the Arctic states (Connolly, 2002).

Furthermore, it is not only an Arctic state but an Arctic nation as well. Assuming such a thing exists at all (which is doubted by one interviewee), Iceland's "location, history, culture, and experience" are all seen to be what make it an Arctic nation. Hence, previously covered factors such as Iceland's location, history, and culture (through the literary tradition), are noted to be what not only make the state Arctic, but also the nation. According to the elites interviewed that is since once again it should be emphasized that the material analyzed is a viewpoint of Icelandic political elite. This top-down view thence perceives the imagined Icelandic political community to be Arctic (Anderson, 2006).

As is the case in the Relationality section of this thesis's theoretical framework, the imagined spatiotemporal uniqueness of Iceland's Arctic identity has essentially been covered above. A greater emphasis is therefore put on culture and experience. On the cultural front, it is perhaps most notably this connection between the rich literary tradition and the Arctic that former Foreign Minister Skarphéðinsson proposed. If that link would be established, it would no doubt contribute greatly to perceiving a link for the Icelandic nation to the Arctic. This is due to their importance in Icelandic culture and tradition (Hastrup, 1984). It would establish a cultural, linguistic, as well as a cultural Icelandic link to the Arctic. This indirect connection between Iceland and the Arctic was the only linguistic connection between the two. Whether this is actually the case for the Icelandic nation cannot be said based upon the material analyzed. The Arctic intimacy of the only Arctic state without Indigenous Peoples is further strengthened by notions of their own Indigeneity due to similar circumstances when it came to their location, history, and ways of living in the not too far away past. The presentation of the elites interviewed of Iceland's Arctic roots and their uniqueness is reminiscent of how Loftsdóttir (2018) perceives Iceland's internal perceptions of themselves, exceptional. In the case of the Arctic, they are exceptionally Arctic, both the state and the nation.

The narrative performance of the Icelandic state's Arctic identity as a whole is largely unified. The state sees itself to be located within the Arctic region where the Arctic Council is perceived to be the most important performer of bordering. There were some discrepancies in the content of the narratives when it came to just how much Iceland is within the Arctic. Current state representatives present it as wholly within the region, whereas former are not as certain of the conceptualization of that. An indication of how this matter has evolved in recent years. Nonetheless, while Iceland is presented to not always have had an internal perception of being Arctic, nor is it presented to have always wanted to, it is now unquestionably an Arctic state. In the last decade or two, Iceland started to identify more and more with being Arctic, climaxing with the recently concluded Arctic Council Chairmanship.

The region is one that is in the process of becoming. Even internal narratives are not completely unified of what it means but the fact is that Iceland would like to be perceived as belonging to it. Some indicators of anxiety concerning whether that status had been secured can be seen in the aftermath of the Ilulissat Meeting and the Arctic was greatly emphasized within Iceland afterward. This could have opened Iceland's eyes to the chance that they may be getting left behind and triggered a change in emphasizing the Arctic within its foreign policy. If so, this may also have been the reason why the Icelandic nation perceived itself to be the Arctic, according to the elites interviewed at least. Whether this is a case of ontological insecurity is difficult to establish with the material at hand as the steps taken in the aftermath of the Ilulissat Meeting could have been a mere natural progression of greater interest in the Arctic. Nonetheless, Iceland now perceives itself to be exceptionally Arctic, both the state and the Icelandic nation. Due to its location, history, culture, and experience.

Why this development of Iceland embracing an Arctic identity came to be is difficult to say. The narrative of the Icelandic state indicated that this was almost a natural progression of where the state was directed. One possible reason is simply that the world has never felt smaller due to globalization, even reaching the Arctic. Climate change was also mentioned as a reason why the Arctic has started to feel closer to Iceland, and the world as a whole. Finally, when it comes to a shared Arctic identity, this thesis would indicate that as Bergman Rosamond & Rosamond's (2015) claim, it is too early to talk about "a shared overarching Arctic identity." A construction of one may however be underway.

## 5 Conclusion

Using a three-dimensional approach to state identity the narrative performance of Iceland's Arctic identity has been examined. This performance is a relatively novel development for the Icelandic state, occurring in the last decade or two. In that time the narrative performance of Iceland's Arctic state identity has grown in prominence. The Arctic has now become an essential part of the Icelandic state identity. Its narrative performance is characterized by a spatial construction of the state having always been largely, perhaps entirely, within the Arctic region. Although only recently identifying as an Arctic state. A change that may be influenced by anxiety after its Arctic-ness was doubted. Nonetheless, now the state's Arctic roots are perceived to be traceable all the way back to the settlers, to the Icelanders' very way of living, their culture, and experience. The nation is even perceived to be Arctic on those grounds. This narrative does however not originate from the nation itself but Icelandic state representatives' perceptions of it.

As a whole, the Icelandic state performs its Arctic identity first and foremost on a narrative spatial basis. After all, that is what initializes any connection to the Arctic region. Temporal narratives are then used as a way to legitimize that Arctic-ness by illustrating that these connections are not mere situational links but have always been there. Finally, relational narratives construct the Icelandic state identity in comparison to other states within the Arctic as location excludes all external Others.

As this thesis has concerned itself with internal perceptions of Iceland's Arctic state identity, several avenues for future research come to mind. A similar approach to state identity could for example be used in analyzing the other seven Arctic states and their identities. Furthermore, since this study involved internal perception and narratives of Iceland, external perceptions of the state's Arctic identity naturally follow. If greater insight into Iceland's Arctic identity and its development were desired, then a comparison of Iceland's first Arctic Council Chairmanship (2002-2004) and its recently passed one (2019-2021) would be well suited for the task. Finally, an examination of the Icelandic nation's connection to the Arctic would contribute to answering the question of whether it is an Arctic nation. Does such a thing as an Arctic nation even exist?

To conclude, this thesis has illustrated the growing global importance of the Arctic from the perspective of the Icelandic state. It has explored the narrative performance of the state's Arctic identity and what that entails for the Icelandic state. Whereas the Icelandic state has not always seen itself to be Arctic, it has always been so and now constructs the region to be one of the pillars of its foreign policy.

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# 7 Appendix

## I. Interview Guide

English / Icelandic

### 1. General / Almennar

- a. What characterizes an Arctic state? / *Hvað er það sem skilgreinir Norðurslóðaríki?*
  - i. Is it a prerequisite to be in the Arctic Council to be an Arctic (norðurslóðaríki) state? / *Er það skilyrði að vera í norðurskautsráðinu til að teljast sem norðurslóðaríki?*
    1. If no, is membership a prerequisite to be an Arctic state? / *Ef nei, er það skilyrði til að teljast sem norðurskautsríki?*
- b. What is your understanding of Iceland as an Arctic state? / *Hver er þinn skilningur á Íslandi sem norðurslóðaríki?*
  - i. What is it that makes Iceland an Arctic state? / *Hvað er það sem gerir Ísland að norðurslóðaríki?*
  - ii. Is it just a question of the state or is Iceland an Arctic nation? / *Er þetta bara spurning um íslenska ríkið eða mætti segja að að við séum norðurslóðaríki?*
  - iii. Could you even say that being Arctic has become a part of the “soul” of the country? / *Mætti jafnvel segja það að við séum norðurslóðaríki sé orðið hluti af þjóðarsálinni?*

### 2. Territory/Space / staðsetning/svæði

- a. Is it first and foremost territory within the Arctic Circle that makes Iceland an Arctic state? / *Er það fyrst og fremst staðsetning okkar innan norðurheimskautsbaugsins sem gerir Ísland að norðurslóðaríki?*
  - i. *Að þínu mati, skiptir máli að vera strandríki á Norðurslóðum?*
- b. Has the location of the Arctic Council Working Groups, CAFF & PAME, strengthened the position of Iceland as an Arctic state? / *Hefur staðsetning vinnuhópa Arctic Council, CAFF & PAME, styrkt stöðu Íslands sem Norðurslóðaríki?*
  - i. What about the Icelandic Chairmanship of the Arctic Council? / *Hefur formennska Íslands í Norðurskautsráðinu styrkt stöðu Íslands sem Norðurslóðaríki?*
  - ii. What has the role of the Arctic Circle been in these matters? / *Hvert hefur hlutverk Hringborðs Norðurslóða – Arctic Council verið í þessum málum?*

3. History/Temporality / *saga/tími*
  - a. Has Iceland always been in the Arctic, or is this perhaps a recent development as interest in this region has grown? / *Hefur Ísland alltaf verið á norðurslóðum eða er þetta ef til vill nýleg þróun eftir því sem áhugi á þessu svæði hefur aukist?*
    - i. If this is a recent development, when did it begin and what do you believe caused it? / *Ef nýleg þróun, hvenær hófst hún þá og hvað telur þú að hafi ollið henni?*
4. Others/Relationality / *Í sambandi við aðra*
  - a. Would you say that there is such a thing as a shared Arctic identity among the Arctic states? / *Myndir þú segja að það væri til einhver sameiginleg ímynd eða einkenni ríkja á Norðurslóðum?*
  - b. Do you think your or Iceland's perception of the Arctic is different from the other Arctic states? / *Finnst þér þinn skilningur á Íslands eða þinn á Norðurslóðum öðruvísi en meðal hinna Norðurslóðaríkjana?*
    - i. If yes, what does that difference entail? / *Ef já, í hverju felst sá munur?*