

# Populism in Iceland: Has the Progressive Party turned populist?

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## Abstract

Though nationalism has always been strong in Iceland, populist political parties did not emerge as a viable force until after the financial crisis of 2008. On wave of the crisis a completely renewed leadership took over the country's old agrarian party, the Progressive Party (PP), which was rapidly transformed in a more populist direction. Still the PP is perhaps more firmly nationalist than populist. However, when analyzing communicational changes of the new post-crisis leadership it is unavoidable to categorize the party amongst at least the softer version of European populist parties, perhaps closest to the Norwegian Progress Party.

**Keywords:** Populism; Progressive Party; Framsóknarflokkurinn; Iceland

## Introduction

Right wing nationalistic populist politics have been on the rise throughout Europe, gradually growing in several rounds since the 1970s and heightening in wake of the financial crisis in the early new century. Though nationalism thoroughly is, and has always in modern days been, strong in Iceland, populist political parties similar to those on the European continent and throughout Scandinavia did not emerge as a viable force until at least after the financial crisis of 2008, which hit Iceland severely hard. Out of the Nordic five Iceland suffered the most profound crisis, when its entire oversized financial system came tumbling down. The currency tanked spurring rampant inflation and sudden economic devastation (for more, see Bergmann 2014).



Icelandic Review of Politics and Administration Vol 11, Issue 1 ( 33-54 )

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Article first published online June 23rd 2015 on <http://www.irpa.is>

Publisher: Institute of Public Administration and Politics, Gimli, Sæmundargötu 1, 101 Reykjavík, Iceland

Stjórnmal & stjórnsýsla 1. tbl. 11. árg. 2015 (33-54)

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Vefbirting 23. júní 2015 - Birtist á vefnum <http://www.irpa.is>

Útgefandi: Stofnun stjórnsýslufræða og stjórnmála, Gimli, Sæmundargötu 1, 101 Reykjavík

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13177/irpa.a.2015.11.1.3>

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On wave of the crisis a completely renewed leadership took over the country's old agrarian party, the Progressive Party (PP), which was at least partially rapidly retuned in a more populist direction. Only few political parties in Europe have been transformed from mainstream to become nationalist right wing populist, including the Swiss Peoples Party and Austrian Freedom Party.

In this case study I examine whether the Icelandic Progressive Party under the new post-crisis leadership has completed such transformation and whether it, thus, should be categorized amongst the flora of populist parties in Europe. If so, it was the first of such parties in at least the Nordics to head a government, coming into power after a landslide win in the Icelandic general parliamentary election in 2013 and forming a coalition with the mainstream previously hegemonic right-of-center conservative Independence Party (IP).

The paper is structured into four following sections. I start with an overview of scholarly debate on contemporary populism, ultimately attempting to frame how populist politics can be understood, particularly the Nordic version, as Icelandic politics is integrally linked to heritage of Nordic politics. Secondly I will contextualize developments in Icelandic politics since the nineteenth century and analyze its underlying emphasis on independence and sovereignty. In the third section I will map political movements, which can be understood to be either nationalist or populist. By analyzing the discourse of Progressive Party members post-crisis I will search for examples of populist communication discussed in section one.<sup>1</sup> In the last concluding section I will attempt to answer whether the Icelandic Progressive Party should be considered populist.

## 1. Framing populism

For more than two centuries nationalism has been underlying in European politics, even surviving the devastations of the two world wars of the early twentieth century. In the late 1980s Professor of Politics Klaus von Beyme (1988) identified three waves of extreme right movements since 1945: First the nostalgic wave of fascism found in Germany and Italy before soon dying out, secondly the anti-tax wave in the 1950s and 1960s, mostly found in France and finally a more pan European trend appearing in the 1980s.

Populism is a close relative of nationalism. Similarly to von Beyme's categorization three main waves of populism are here identified since the 1970s in order to frame how populism can be understood. Each wave occurred in wake of crisis or major social change and each growing stronger than the one before. All are identifiable by their own qualities and characteristics. First prominent post world war movements tapping into nationalist thought rose in opposition to multiculturalism in wake of the OPEC crisis in the 1970s, second was building in the 1990s after end of the Cold War and the third in wake of the international financial crisis starting in 2008. Before discussing these movements and waves I start with a short framing of how to understand populism.

The literature on populism is fast growing and definitions vary. These are often quite different groupings, holding varieties of positions, which can be changeable from country to country and most often constructed around respective national interest, which

can as well be contradictory across borders. Often they are even at odds with each other. UKIP in Britain for example refused cooperating with the French National Front in the European Parliament, which they accused of being racist (Newman 2014). Many of the populist movements held neo-liberal economic policies while others were mostly concerned with protecting the welfare system from infiltration of foreign immigrants – for the benefit of the ethnic population. This was for example the case in Scandinavia, where, interestingly, populist movements in the 1970s had however started out being neo-liberal. There existed modest versions, some were primarily nationalist, they could be far right or what is called extreme far right, sometimes even the militant version denouncing democracy. There were those of the more fascist nature, mostly found in Eastern Europe but also in Greece and other Western European countries, including for example Sweden. Then there were also left wing versions.

Populist politics are thus a broad church. It is not a well-squared set of rational policies. Influential analyst of European right-wing populist, Cas Mudde, defines populism a ‘thin-centered ideology’ separating society into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ emphasizing the ‘general will’ of the people (Mudde 2007). Alternatively, populism can be seen rather as a style or technique of political mobilization and communication (See Grabow and Hartleb 2013, 17). However, whichever viewpoint we take some similarities can still be identified, which might help in framing the issue. Here, ten general features are identified, further analyzed in flowing sections.

Most obviously right wing nationalist populist in Europe campaign against multiculturalism and strive to stem flow of immigration. Secondly populist movements tend to be rather authoritarian, often revolving around a strong charismatic leader. Most often they rely on what they claim to be a special relationship between leader and the ordinary public. Particularly, the leader is often seen to understand the burdens of ordinary public, which, vitally, are being overlooked by the established political elite. The populist leader on the other hand usually claims to know how to solve their problems.

This brings forward the third sheared characteristics. The message for solving the ordinary publics most pressing problems tend to be simple, these are straightforward solutions to meet complex national interest. Often they call for mobilizing answers, such as ‘out with the parasites foreigner’ and ‘we have paid enough’.

Forth, populism is rather moralistic than practical. Populists often have no problem with contradictions, for example simultaneously promoting economic liberalism and lowering of taxes while promising increased welfare services and easy implementation of high cost policies.

Fifth, right wing nationalist populism is usually exclusionary. It divides between ‘us’ who belong to society and ‘them’ who should not belong to it. Who ‘they’ are can be for example immigrants, asylum-seekers, ethnic or religious minorities, even the political elite. The ‘others’ are discursively turned into enemies of ‘us’, threatening ‘our’ identity and culture or exploiting and thus ruining the welfare state ‘we’ have built. ‘Others’ are here clearly distinguished from the ethnic natives, ‘us’. This often results in open xeno-

phobia and racism. In Western Europe this is most often aimed against Muslims, for example in Austria, Denmark, France and the Netherlands, while in Eastern Europe the targets are often Roma people or even Jews, as was the case in earlier times.

Sixth, populists are anti-elitist. Even though their leaders themselves often tend to come from the same privileged background as the elite they tend to discursively create elites out of their critics. Often they claim to be advocates of the nation and seek to speak in her name. In doing so they differentiate between honest ordinary people and corrupt elite. One of the main successes of populist parties in Scandinavia is indeed by criticizing consensus politics of the political elite.

Seventh, while often claiming to be economically liberal populists are more usually protectionist of national production from international competition, especially in the field of agriculture. Often they exploit lack of confidence, for example in wake of crisis. They voice dissatisfaction of those losing out accompanying increased globalization and rapid social change. This brings forward the eighth characteristics, which is rather speaking to emotions than reason and avoiding the more intellectual debate.

Nine, populist parties are usually tough on crime. They emphasize law and order, often claiming that the system rather protects criminals than their victims amongst the ordinary public. Finally, all of the contemporary populist parties are Eurosceptic. Some only talk about stemming further integration, while others strive to spill back Europeanization and even abolish the European Union. When tying these elements together a picture emerges: Right wing populists in Europe are anti-immigrant, anti-elitist and Eurosceptic moralists who are economically protectionist, promoters of law and order and foes to multicultural development on the continent. They speak rather to emotions than reason, distinguish between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and rely on strong charismatic leaders who advocate simple solutions to complex issues burdening the ordinary public.

Taken collectively they are perhaps most simply ‘Nay-sayers’ who resist change as Hans Georg Betz (2001) claims. In effect they strive to stop modernization and social change. Most of the populist parties here discussed and all of those in the Nordics accept democracy and parliamentarianism. This sets contemporary right wing nationalist populists apart from earlier fascism and Nazism versions who often favored authoritarian leadership.

Populists can be either right or left wing. Fundamental difference between the two is, though, that while the right is preoccupied with interest of the ordinary public the left is particularly concerned with the socially underprivileged. Both however unite in criticism of business and political elite, for example in the EU. Next I turn to identifying three waves of populism since the 1970s.

### 1.1 First wave

The French Front National founded and led by the colorful Jean Marie Le-Penn was one of the first right wing populist movements in Europe, constructed in the early 1970s, directly in opposition to post-war multiculturalism and immigration, mostly from Muslim countries. Meanwhile a different sort of right wing populism was brewing in Denmark

and Norway. Protesting against rising tax levels, the Danish and Norwegian Progressive Parties (d. *Fremskridtspartiet*, n. *Fremskrittspartiet*) (FP) promoted anarcho-liberalism and campaigned against increased economic and bureaucratic burden on the ordinary man. They argued against wide scope social services, immigration and cozy consensus politics in these corporatist social-democratic welfare states. This was not the regular right wing neo-liberal rhetoric but rather a new populist version, where charismatic leaders positioned themselves alongside the blue color public and against the political elite. The Nordic populist parties started out being fiscally libertarian before moving more middle ground on economic policy while turning even further hostile against immigration.

Danish politics were permanently altered in 1973 when previously unknown tax attorney, Mogens Glistrup, was able to snatch almost sixteen per cent of the votes in parliamentary election for his new anti-tax movement. Positioning himself against the established political elite Glistrup argued that tax evasion should be regarded civil liberty (See in Klein 2013, 107). The sudden success of his party was mostly at the expense of the Social Democratic Party, which was losing grips with the blue color working class. The FP held strong position in Danish politics until its leader was in 1983 sentenced to prison for tax evasion. Glistrup's absence gave way to his successor, the likable Pia Kærsgaard, who successfully maneuvered to fill the vacuum, adding thick anti-immigrant rhetoric to the mix of tax deduction, which she later started to tone down.

Same year as the Danish FP rushed to the surface, in 1973, the Norwegian version also found its first success on a similar platform, securing five per cent in parliamentary election. Initially named Anders Lange Party for Strong Reduction in Taxes, Duties and Public Intervention (ALP) the focus was on implementing libertarian policies of far reaching tax reductions. The leader, Anders Lange, was linked to nationalistic movements like The Fatherlands League (*Fedrelanslaget*), but it was his emphasis on breaking up the tax system and claiming to speak for the ordinary man against the elite that appealed to the public. Lange did not survive long in Norwegian politics. Rather, it was his successor, the charismatic Carl I. Hagen, who was able to firmly establish the FP within Norway's political party system, holding to power in the party for almost the next three decades (Jupskas 2013).

Skinheads emerged on the streets of many European capitals in the 1980s. Disgruntled youths were violently marching against immigrants, for example in Britain, Germany, Italy and through Scandinavia. Revealing in fascist symbols, such as Nazi tattoos, wearing swastikas and playing loud white pride rock music these demagogues were positioned on the fringe of society. Only later were nationalist populists disguising their neo-fascist nature, for a more mainstream façade.

## 1.2 Second wave

Some of the populist parties finding success in the second and third wave were established before, sometimes initially as mainstream parties, only later turning populist. These include for example the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* - FPÖ), rising to power during the second wave in the 1990s. After retuning the

party in a populist direction, by tapping into fears and emotions of the ordinary public, while avoiding the more intellectual debate, the charismatic leader Jörg Haider turned FPÖ to become perhaps the most influential in the country, entering government in 2000. With a wink of approval to Nazi veterans he told the people ‘I say what you think’ (Quoted in Grabow & Hartleb 2013, 19). This he was however only able to do with active support from the country’s largest tabloid, the *Kronenzeitung*. The tabloid joined in on the defiance against the elite, for example turning against the established serious media elite. Such was to become the recipe for populist parties success throughout Europe: charismatic leaders backed by the tabloid media, relating to ordinary publics fears of the foreign rather than participating in the intellectual political debate.

On that platform the Flemish block (*Vlaams Belang*) rose in Belgium as well as the Swiss Peoples Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei*) in Switzerland, coming into government in 2004, travelling from once being mainstream agrarian party to become populist. Similar trends were occurring in Italy, where the neo-fascist Italian *Alleanza Nazionale* had joined Berlusconi’s first government a decade earlier, in 1994, and Umberto Bossi’s Northern League (*Lega Nord*) was rising. The hooligan British National Party (BNP) was also building in this period. In the Netherlands Pim Fortuyn’s List (*Lijst Pim Fortuyn*) claimed to be protecting Dutch liberalism against authoritarian Islamism. Geert Wilders Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid – PVV*) established after Fortuyn’s murder in Amsterdam did indeed honor that liberalist heritage while adding to the mix more general anti-Muslim rhetoric.

The second wave of populist nationalist right rose partly in response to anticipated integration with the post-communist Eastern Europe – most of the newly free countries were expected to be joining the EU in fullness of time. This was also a time of rising nationalism throughout Eastern Europe in wake of the collapsed communist model. Most notorious was ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. Populist nationalists rose in Russia and throughout the former eastern block. The Slovak National Party (*Slovenská Národná Strana – SNS*) was established already in 1990, in Poland the Kaczynski brothers rose to power with their party Law and Justice (*Prawo I Sprawiedliwość*) and Lithuania similarly saw rise of their version named Order and Justice (*Tvarka ir Teisingumas*). In a more militant style the Jobbik-movement was gaining strength in Hungary, toying with full-blown neo-Nazism.

In Scandinavia nationalist populism was also being remodeled during the second wave. Pia Kærsgaard established the Danish Peoples Party (*Dansk Folkeparti – DF*) in 1993. By carefully crafting her message to become more socially acceptable the DF was fast moving into the mainstream, toning down the anti-tax rhetoric but still maintaining hardcore anti-immigrant policies. The DF campaigned against multi-ethnic Denmark and what it called foreign infiltration of Danish society. Its 2002 manifesto for example stated that Denmark should belong to the Danes (Danish People’s Party 2002).

Arguing that immigrants were parasites on the Danish welfare system, which as a result would be severely weakened, to the detriment of ethnic Danes when in need of services, the party was to become perhaps the most influential in Denmark, rapidly

becoming one of the largest in Parliament and coming into position of power when backing the right of center governments of 2001 to 2011. Stirring up fear amongst the public that influx of Muslims was threatening national Danish culture and identity the party was able to alter the rhetoric on immigration, which in the years to come became the center issue in Danish politics. In many steps they moved to strip immigrants and asylum seekers of rights and benefits, which Social Democratic governments had previously introduces.

These troubled immigrant relations, which had mostly occurred without much attention abroad, only came to international attention in 2005 when established national Danish daily Jyllands-Posten commissioned several cartoonists to mock prophet Mohammed in drawings published in the broad sheet paper, causing rage by many Muslims. In 2011 this dramatic change in Danish politics came further to light in Europe when Denmark unilaterally decided to reintroduce checks on its borders with Germany, violating at least the spirit of EU's open borders policy.

In Norway Carl I. Hagen was steering his Progressive Party towards center, to become perhaps the softest version of populist right wing parties in Europe. However, still, similarly to Denmark, the focus of the party shifted from tax reduction to increasingly voicing concerns that Norway was being turned in a multicultural direction – a development the party set to stop. In a dramatic 1994 party congress the liberal wing of the party lost influence over to the more nationalist Christian conservative faction. The party emphasized importance of protecting Norwegian culture against foreign influences and protecting the welfare system from being exploited by immigrants and asylum seekers. Furthermore the Norwegian PP turned hostile on the Sami ethnic minority in Norway, for example in a resolution of dissolving the Sami parliament (See further in Jupskas, 2013).

When Social Democrats in Europe in the 1990s, after collapse of the communist block, went looking for new voters and seeking more lucrative alliances in center, in what was branded the new economy, even in some places toying with neoliberal economic policies, the once strong links between Social Democrats and the working class was rapidly evaporating. Becoming increasingly occupied with newer and more sophisticated political tasks such as gender equality, democratic reform, professional administrative practices, higher education and environment protection Social Democratic parties were by late twentieth century loosing support of blue color working class throughout Europe. Many of the traditional working class voters on the left felt politically alienated, which allowed nationalistic populists to sneak past and fill the vacuum. Like similar parties were able to do elsewhere The Danish Peoples Party was in this climate for instance able to mobilize popular support by criticizing established political parties for being elitist and alienated from lives of the ordinary public.

The traditional Social Democratic strongholds in Scandinavia for example were hit severely. In Denmark the Social Democrats were instantly pushed out of the top place it had occupied for decades and in Norway the Progressive Party was surging, however also at the cost of the conservative party Høyre. In Sweden the Social Democrats were

losing their former hegemonic power status. This was also the time of similar populist party-building in Sweden and Finland. The Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna – SD) and The True Finns (Perussuomalaiset – PS), though rather found success during the following third wave, which I turn to next.

### 1.3 Third wave

Support for populist parties surged again in Europe in wake of the international financial crisis starting in 2008, marking rise of the third wave of post-war right wing nationalism (See for example Wodak & Khosravi 2013). The crisis shook foundations of Western capitalism, bringing economic uncertainty, severe public austerity and increased hardship on the ordinary public, which largely felt victimized by both business and political elites. In this climate of fear and anger nationalist populists found fertile ground for their message criticizing elite and campaigning against immigration and European integration as well as perhaps even more generally the entire capitalist order, which they claimed was eschewed against the ordinary public.

Once again after retuning their rhetoric in a more mainstream direction and away from open xenophobia populist parties were founding much greater public support. In the UK the more modest populist version UK Independence Party (UKIP) was replacing the openly racist BNP. In France, Front National found renewed support under leadership of the more composed looking Marine Le Pen, who had replaced her more aggressive father Jean-Marie Le Pen, winning a fifth of the vote in the 2011 presidential elections and 14 per cent in the parliamentary election in the following year, after almost two decades absence from the national parliament.

In Norway Siv Jensen replaced long-standing leader of the Progressive Party, Carl I. Hagen, eventually landing the party in government as coalition partner with the conservatives. In Denmark Pia Kærsgaard had successfully moved the Danish Peoples Party from the fringe to be considered almost mainstream. This she had done by changing the discourse in the country rather than modifying much her message.

At the same time more militant and openly racist parties were also gaining support in many other European countries. In Hungary the Jobbik movement was still going strong, making populist premier Viktor Orbán, leader of the Fidesz, almost looking mainstream. In Bulgaria the Attack Party (Ataka) was growing and in Greece the Golden Dawn was outright neo-Nazi. In Norway notorious terrorist Anders Behring Breivik, responsible for the Utøya massacre in 2011, had left the Progressive Party, which he believed was too soft on immigration and plugged into loose knit underground network of militants, mostly communicating their racist message below surface online.

Contrary to Denmark and Norway where populist parties have been part of the political flora since 1970s such parties only saw rising support in Finland and Sweden during the third wave. Xenophobic right wing populist movements had though always existed in Sweden, many deeply rooted in neo-Nazi rhetoric. These had though previously always been marginalized on the fringe of Swedish politics. This changed in 2010 when the Sweden Democrats won their first seats in parliament, then surging from five



to 13 per cent in 2014. Though its young leaders still had ties to Sweden's neo-Nazi past and even while bringing forward a more chauvinistic nationalistic message than populists in neighboring countries the new version movement was able to transform itself enough to emerge as viable option to many disgruntled voters (See Klein 2013).

Despite this development towards mainstreaming of nationalistic rhetoric, militant far right movements still exist throughout all of the Nordics, often linking ancient Norse mythology with neo-Nazi ideology. Though the Norwegian Progressive Party is perhaps the softest version of European populist parties it was the political breeding ground of far right terrorist Anders Bhering Breivik. The Progressive Party only suffered a minor crisis after his Oslo and Utøya attacks in 2011. After sinking severely in the municipal election later in the year the party had fully recovered already in the 2013 parliamentary election when its new leader Siv Jensen found her way into government.

In 2011, year after Sweden Democrats hit its first electoral breakthrough, the True Finns won much larger across the border, landing impressive roughly 19 per cent of the vote in the Finish parliamentary election. The True Finns can be traced to the populist Finnish Rural Party (Suomen Maaseudun Puolue) – and even partly all the way through to the nationalist Lapua movement in the late 1920s and 1930s. In wake of the crisis True Finns leader, the charismatic Timo Soini, rode a wave of increased intolerance for contributing to EU's plan of bailing out troubled states, mostly in southern Europe. During the Euro-crisis, when rescue packages for nations in need were being negotiated, The True Finns for example successfully campaigned on the slogan 'Paid enough' (Quoted in Grabow and Hartleb 2013, 31).

Similarly to populists elsewhere, Soini was able to position himself on the side of the ordinary man and against corrupted elites, both domestic and European. In line with counterparts in Denmark and Norway the True Finns can also be positioned central on the socio-economic left/right scale, in protection of the Nordic welfare system. Referring to ethno nationalism and Christian social values Soini emphasized Finnishness and protecting the national culture from being contaminated by immigrants and by other foreign influences (Raunio 2013).

Greatest success of populist parties in the third wave came in the European Parliament elections of 2014. Most spectacularly, in three western European countries populist surged to the very front, in Denmark and the UK where they won 27 per cent each and in France, winning 25 per cent. This was the first time in Europe when populist parties finished first in national elections. More militant fascist version also saw significant gains, including the fascist Golden Dawn and rather leftwing Syriza in Greece, Jobbik in Hungary and Attack in Bulgaria. Euroscepticism was also finding its way to Germany and to many of the more traditionally pro-EU countries.

In an attempt to stem the electoral tight towards populist parties many mainstream parties have reverted to adopting some of their rhetoric, thus shifting the general political discourse in the populist direction and widening what is considered acceptable in public debate, as for example has occurred in Austria, Denmark and the Netherlands (Grabow and Harleb 2013, 25).

## 2. Heritage of the independence struggle: Icelandic nationalism

Politics<sup>2</sup> in Iceland revolve around a double axis: the traditional left–right axis and an internationalist–isolationist axis structured by the issue of Iceland’s sovereignty in relation to mostly NATO and European cooperation. This somewhat mirrors the tension in the national identity created in the independence struggle of the 19th and early 20th century (1830–1944). Since politics in Iceland have been dominated by the nationalist discourse.

Postcolonial theories emphasize the importance of analyzing the impact of colonial contact on contemporary politics and the cultural legacy of colonialism, and thus critically explore the link between the past and the present – which I claim is central to an understanding of the development of Icelandic politics. I maintain that it is through that relationship that Iceland’s postcolonial cultural–political national identity was created, emphasizing formal sovereignty as well as a desire to be recognized as a partner in the Western world (See Bergmann 2014b).

Most students of Icelandic politics indeed acknowledge the importance of the independence struggle in the development of its contemporary political identity (see Grímsson 1978; Hálfðanarson 2001; Hermannsson 2005 and Karlsson 2000). I however furthermore claim that this is not a question of a temporary situation fading out over time after the country had gained independence, but rather an established and regularly reconstructed political culture, still ongoing in contemporary politics (for more, see Bergmann 2011).

The independence struggle was led by a small group of Icelandic intellectuals in Copenhagen, who, by referring to Iceland’s history of independent Vikings, developed a national myth that served as a justification for their emphasis on sovereignty and independence. The term myth is here used in the sense that Iceland’s history was creatively interpreted to fit the claim for self-rule. According to the myth, Iceland is a unique nation and it is the duty of all Icelanders to actively guard its sovereignty and independence. History professor Guðmundur Hálfðanarson (2001, 96) explains how Iceland’s independence hero Jón Sigurðsson has since become the symbolic father of all Icelanders.

Iceland’s national myth, which developed in the independence struggle, creates a Golden Age starting with the settlement in the year 874, peaking after the state-like formulation in 930 and ending when Iceland fell under foreign rule with the Old Treaty with Norway in 1262. Further deterioration occurs when falling under Danish rule in 1380 and with introduction of Absolutism in 1662. Several texts were later influential in reaffirming this myth. Jón Jónsson Aðils (1869–1920), who in 1911 became Iceland’s first history professor, described the society of the Golden Age as superior to all others and its unique and pure language as the key to its soul (Jónsson Aðils 1903).

According to the myth, Icelandic society started to deteriorate after the country entered into the Old Treaty. Then only in the early 19th century, courageous and wise men finally rose up and reclaimed the nation’s own worth and lifted the national spirit by fighting for its independence. As Nielsen Germaud (2010) explains, the myth creates a U-shaped curve of history, whose two peaks – in the distant past and at the end of the story – represent autonomy and the avoidance of external influence.

This myth was kept alive throughout the 20th century, for example, in schoolbooks. The most influential was written by Jónas Jónsson frá Hriflu, an educator who also was the founder and leader of the Progressive Party and one of the most influential figures in Icelandic politics and culture. According to his textbook (1924), read by all elementary students for decades, Iceland's economic prosperity is directly attributed to its gaining independence from Denmark. Icelanders are furthermore pictured as the finest 'selection' of Norwegians, descendants of the strong and independent-minded farmers who fled the oppression of King Harald to protect their freedom. He then claims that this noble breed of Norway's finest social class was through the centuries shaped by the harshness of the natural surroundings, creating the unique Icelandic nation, which compares to no other. Historian Guðmundur Finnboğason (1925) further claimed that the harsh Icelandic environment had through the centuries weeded out the weakest and thus even increased the quality of the population. This same myth was then for example reproduced in the boom years in early 21st century by Iceland's president Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson when explaining how Icelanders were all but destined for greatness in the new global economy (See in Bergmann 2011, Ch. VI).

## 2.1 An Everlasting struggle

It should be stressed here that Iceland's national myth is not unique. Indeed, many nations base their nationhood on similar kinds of myth creation. This is what Anthony D. Smith (1993) calls the 'Cult of a Golden Age': the fact that national leaders often refer to a Golden Age in time of hardship to reinforce a sense of community. What is, however, interesting is that after Iceland had gained full independence the independence struggle did not end. Rather, a new one started: the ever-lasting independence struggle. And a new political idea was born: the notion that the fight for independence is a constant struggle and that it will never end (Bergmann 2011). Accordingly, it is the collective duty of all Icelanders to guard the country's independence. In his landmark study on Icelandic politics, including the Icelandic political identity, political science professor Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson (1978), later President of Iceland, claimed that this common understanding of Icelandic nationalism, created in the independence struggle, had since become one of the most important ideas in Icelandic political discourse.

Historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson (2001, 36–39) explains how this sense of nationalism was stronger in Iceland than in most other European states at the time, being based on a historical conviction that justified the full formal sovereignty and independence of the nation. The nation became almost a concrete natural fact in the Icelandic mind. A free and sovereign Icelandic nation became an integral part of the self-image of the nation. Icelandic nationalism was thus created on the basis of a romantic notion of a natural and pure, or at least special, separate nation. This notion became a vital force in the independence struggle.

When studying Iceland's nation-building, it can be seen that the fragility of the nation is always present. The notion of constant threat to its very existence can, for example, be found in the writings of parliamentarian Bjarni Jónsson at the beginning

of the 20th century. After claiming that the nation as such is the core of their spiritual life he insists that all ‘good Icelanders’ should do their utmost to ‘protect and promote their nationality’ (quoted in Bjarnason 2013, 21). Otherwise, Icelanders ran the risk of ‘vanishing in the vast ocean of nations.’ To prevent such devastation, Icelanders had to nourish their cultural heritage and indeed ‘prove both to themselves and to others that they are a living nation.’ In 1907, the largest newspaper in Reykjavik similarly wrote that Icelanders must be proactive in showing others that on the island lives a ‘separated and remarkable cultural nation [...] this we must strive to become recognized for throughout the educated word’ (quoted in ‘Ísland fyrir Íslendinga,’ 1907).

The dual insistence of being formally sovereign as well as on being recognised as an equal partner in Europe has developed into what can be termed the Icelandic Postcolonial Project (see Bergmann 2014b). It has also developed into a divide in Icelandic politics between isolationists and internationalists. One side emphasizes independence while the other expresses a wish to be a fully functioning modern economy on an equal footing with other participants in Western culture. While one part of the national identity pulls Iceland away from others, by emphasizing its uniqueness, the other part is pushing for participation in the global economy to further Iceland’s prosperity.

### 3. Populist politics and the Progressive Party

Perhaps similarly to Ireland, where O Malley (2008) argues that existence of populist Sin Fein hindered rise of radical right, this almost universal acceptance of nationalism across party lines in Iceland can explain lack of specific prominent right wing nationalist parties emerging until the financial crisis. Still a few such movements have survived on the fringe. Out of a relatively broad movement of Icelandic nationalists (Þjóðernishreyfing Íslendinga) a small Nazi party (Flokkur þjóðernissinna) was formed in 1934 – somewhat inspired by German interwar Nazi politics – but dying out during WWII when German Nazi devastations came to light (for more, see Jökulsson & Jökulsson 1989).

Nationalist politics however always remained within the Icelandic mainstream parties. In the 1980’s a movement called Nordic Race (Norrænt mannkyn) emerged in opposition to Icelanders mixing family ties with people of other races. Reportedly a few Progressive Party representatives and leaders frequented their meetings (Jökulsson 1995).

Around turn of the millennium a group of young males in southern Iceland founded the Association of Icelandic Nationalists (Félag íslenskra þjóðernissinna), these were mostly uneducated skinheads types rallying on racist views, such as that black people were intellectually inferior to whites. In its wake a more sophisticated association called Party for Progress (Flokkur framfarasinna) was established in opposition to multiculturalism and protection of Iceland’s Nordic heritage. More fringe militant factions were also found in for example Icelandic versions of international hate-movements like Combat 18 and Bood&Honor (for more, see Bergmann 2007). In the wake of the January attacks on Charlie Hebdo in Paris an Icelandic PEDIGA association was founded – the German initiated association fighting against Islamization in Europe.

None of these movements however enjoyed mainstream support. First party represented in parliament to toy with populist nationalist tendencies was the so-called Liberal Party (Frjálslyndi flokkurinn), which in autumn of 2006 turned against multiculturalism and immigration. The party had been founded in 1999 in opposition to Iceland's fisheries policy. By late 2006 the party was polling far below the threshold of remaining in parliament in the coming spring elections. In a coordinated move its MP's stormed the media in November 2006 armed with anti-immigrant rhetoric. Its Reykjavik leader wrote that Iceland should be for Icelanders and that he did not want 'people from brotherhood of Mohammed' (Magnússon 2006). The chairman said that immigrants should be tested for diseases (Kristjánsson 2007) and the vice-chairman said it was a 'black day in the history of the nation' when citizens of the EU eastern enlargement gained rights to work in Iceland in 2006 (Hafsteinsson 2006). The leader of youth movement feared that immigration would bring 'drug pushers', 'human trafficking', 'tuberculosis', forced labor', and 'planned rapes' (Guðjohnsen 2007). In less than a month the party's support quadrupled in opinion polls, securing its three seats in the spring 2007 elections (for more, see Bergmann 2008).

### **3.1 The new Progressive Party**

The Progressive Party, Iceland's established agrarian party, had for decades seen steadily diminished support leading up to the Crash of 2008 and seemed more likely to be leaving Icelandic politics. After the Crash, however, a completely renewed leadership took over stewardship and rapidly retuned the party in a more populist direction. As a result the PP surged leading up to the 2013 elections, grabbing quarter of the vote and landing at the helm of subsequent coalition government, together with the old hegemonic IP.

Though rooted in traditional agricultural society and based on national sentiments the PP had in the years leading up to the Crash gradually been modernizing and moving to bait urban voters. Traditionally the party had been reluctant regarding EU relations but since the 1990s it had become at least EU curious – for the period 2000–2004 even leading the pro-EU debate (see Bergmann 2011). The new post-crisis leadership, headed by novice Sigmundur Gunnlaugsson, however quickly reversed to older era politics, aggressively fighting against the EU application put forward by the left wing government in 2009.

In public debate the EU application was directly linked to the so-called Icesave-dispute Iceland fought with the British and Dutch governments over responsibility of deposits in the fallen Icelandic owned Icesave internet-based bank, a branch of the Icelandic Landsbanki. Gunnlaugsson had emerged as one of the most defiant voices against the foreign pressure Iceland felt in the dispute, rising onto the public stage with his group InDefence formed in opposition to British actions against Iceland, for implementation of Anti-Terrorist legislation<sup>3</sup> (The Landsbanki Freezing Order 2008, 2008).

The appearance of leniency of the left wing government in the dispute helped sparking a new wave of protests. At once, the dispute with the British and Dutch governments fell into familiar trenches of nationalistic rhetoric. In the long-drawn out dispute,

the Icesave agreements appeared to have become the most unpopular since the Old Treaty with Norway in 1262, when according to the national myth Iceland's economy started to deteriorate after it had fallen under foreign rule and entered into a period of humiliation by losing its independence.

The change in the national rhetoric, from the superiority discourse of the boom years to the idea of being under siege by ill-willed foreigners after The Crash of 2008, was quite rapid (See Bergmann 2011, Ch. VI). On the surface it might even seem that those two ideas were in contradiction. However, when analysing the harsh nationalistic rhetoric of the Icesave debate, it can be seen that it had the same origin as the rhetoric on the Icelandic economic miracle heard in the first decade of the new millennium: Iceland's postcolonial national identity. The core of both ideas is found in the national myth created during the independent struggle in the 19th century, written down by Jón Jónsson Aðils at the beginning of the 20th century and kept alive and nourished by politicians of all ranks throughout the decades and then put into new perspectives by the likes of President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson.

Tapping into this rhetoric the new PP leadership claimed that Iceland was a victim of vicious foreigners who had conspired to bring Iceland to its knees. Once again in autumn 2010 thousands of protesters were surrounding the parliament building. Flags symbolizing Iceland's independence could now be seen flying high in front of the Parliament building. Amongst them were blue EU flags on which a red no-entry sign had been painted right across the yellow stars.

PP leader Gunnlaugsson (2009) went as far as accusing then PM Ms Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir of 'humiliating the nation' by 'forcing her nation to pay the Icesave debt burden'. Instead of protecting the nation, he claimed, the government was working on behalf of the British and the Dutch to attack Iceland. Similarly, one of the PP's most prominent MP, Ms Eygló Harðardóttir (2009), accused the government of high treason. The rhetoric was very much emotion driven. PP leaders forcefully and systematically accused those they claimed belonging to the left wing Reykjavik elite of betraying their nation at time of need.

Being the only of the four mainstream parties to consistently fight against any agreement on Icesave the PP was gaining new ground in wake of two extraordinary referendums on the issue in 2010 and 2011, spurred by a presidential veto. After the EFTA Court ruling in favor of Iceland on 28 January 2013 (EFTA Court ruling, 2013) the PP surged.

The party gained further popularity by promising to force foreign creditors, which they systematically referred to as 'vulture funds' (*hrægammasjóðir*), to pay for debt relief of household loans, which Gunnlaugsson indicated would be 20 per cent, amounting to estimated 300 billion krona (reported in Vilhjálmsson 2013). Aligning themselves alongside the ordinary household's and against the international financial elite this is perhaps an example of providing simple solution to complex problem. In a radio interview on his policy of forcing foreign creditors to pay for household debt relief he linked the issue to the Icesave dispute, describing Icelanders as David knocking down Goliath

(Gunnlaugsson 2014). When opposition grew Gunnlaugsson said it was time for Icelanders to legislate against lobbyism of foreign stakeholders (see in Karlsson 2014).

In the end the party claimed to have made good on their promise by implementing state funded debt relief of 80 billion kronas to households with inflation indexed loans.

Gunnlaugsson used his first ceremonial PM address on Iceland's National Day, on 17 June 2013, to place himself even more firmly than most of his predecessors within the established postcolonial discourse, mainly emphasizing Iceland's heritage and celebrating the nation's defiance against foreign oppression in the Icesave dispute. While dismissing IMF's concerns he added that international institutions – which he mockingly referred to as 'international abbreviations' – would no longer dictate Iceland's economic policies. Referring to the Viking heritage, he explained that precisely because they were descended from Vikings, Icelanders were independently minded and would thus not surrender to foreign authority (Gunnlaugsson 2013). This is an example of how the discursive representation of the past is indeed continually present in Icelandic politics. Accordingly, it can be argued that the contemporary political condition in Iceland is very much a result of its historical relationship with neighboring countries. At his party congress after the 2013 election the new leader referred in a romantic fairytale style to Iceland as the model country of the world (Gunnlaugsson 2013).

Skipping over the more liberal and pro-EU times in the PP's recent history the post-crisis leadership aligned itself closer to the further back and more nationalistic in the party's history, most commonly to its founder Jónas Jónson frá Hrifu, but also referring to his inspiration, the nationalistic writings of historian Jón Jónsson Aðils, both discussed earlier in this paper. The party's use of imagery and symbols mirrored this turn to nationalism. New version of its logo used at the 2011 party congress for example underlined the change. Showing the Icelandic flag being born as a rising sun out of the party's agrarian flag under slogan reading: Iceland in bright hope (Ísland í vonana birtu). Symbols expert, Guðmundur Oddur Magnússon, Professor at Iceland's University of the Arts, maintains that the party's new imagery refers to nationalistic – bordering on fascist – ideology of the 1930s, as for example was found in the collection of its founder Jónas Jónsson frá Hriflu (Magnússon 2011).

More benign display of nationalism was for example when PP leader Gunnlaugsson, remaining true to his party long standing heavy protectionism of Icelandic agriculture, announced his new diet of only eating Icelandic food (Gunnlaugsson 2011b).

These changes are all in line with development of populist politics in Europe described earlier in the paper – that is; being nationalist, anti-elite, anti-EU, emotionalist and protectionist and providing simple solutions to complex issues. As a result, many members holding more liberal views were leaving the party in opposition to the change. Amongst the more prominent was MP Guðmundur Steingrímsson, son and grandson of two of the party's former leaders, who left with the more liberal faction of the PP and established a new centrist liberal party called Bright Future, together with splinters from the SDA and people of the so-called Best Party – a humoristic protest party in Reykjavík. Bright future won four seats in the 2013 parliamentary election.

The last of the liberal faction left when the PP delved further into populist communication by increasingly raising concerns of immigrants in Iceland. In Parliament's question time Gunnlaugsson for example implied that the state should specifically map organized crime of asylum seekers (Gunnlaugsson 2011a). This led the PP's own association in Kópavogur, neighboring town to Reykjavik, to publicly object to the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the new leadership – most of the critical members subsequently left the party. With critical voices gone from the party, Gunnlaugsson became its uncontested and indeed celebrated leader, holding its MPs firmly on the new party line, which also is common feature in populist politics. The party's anti-immigrant rhetoric was only to heighten, for example when one of its leading MP's, Vigdís Hauksdóttir, suggested that asylum seekers should wear GPS tracking device around their ankle (Hauksdóttir 2013b).

This change in the party's rhetoric was causing even some of its traditional nationalists to object, for example its former leader, Jón Sigurðsson, who described himself as what he called being a 'nationalist' (see his book (2013) celebrating Icelandic 'Nationalism' (þjóðhyggja).

This transformation of the established Progressive Party in a populist direction caused widespread criticism in society, which Gunnlaugsson and his new team however easily dismissed as undermining tactics of urban elitist left leaning liberals. Many in the leadership widely complained of being victim of bullying by the left wing intelligencia in politics, academia and media, which collectively was without merit branding the PP as populist. It was though not only the critics who were linking the PP with populist parties in Europe. For example, when on Facebook linking to a documentary on Nigel Farage one of the PP's more prominent members, former chairman of the party in Reykjavik, Jón Ingi Gíslason, wrote that UKIP was the British version of the PP (Gíslason 2014).

However, with anti-Muslim rhetoric mostly lacking, critics of the PP were still not able to firmly ranking it with contemporary right wing populists in Europe. This changed leading up to the 2014 municipal election when PP candidates objected to a Muslim mosque being built on a lawn in Reykjavik, which City Council had already assigned for that use to the Association of Icelandic Muslims. Its top candidate Sveinbjörg Sveinbjörnsdóttir (2014) wrote: 'while we operate a [Christian] National Church, we should not provide building lawns for houses like mosques or Greek Orthodox Church.'

When explaining her statement in a following TV debate she added: 'Would you like to live in society, which, like the Swedes had to implement last week, that it is punishable – who could have imagined, that Swedes had to implement laws making it punishable to force people into marriage?' (Sveinbjörnsdóttir 2014b).

There are less than thousand registered Muslims in Iceland and no serious incidents of clashes between Muslim community and Icelanders had been reported. Sveinbjörnsdóttir's comments thus spurred aggressive opposition in public debate – but also widespread support, for example in social media and on talk radios in-calling segments. Many ordinary PP members went much further than their representatives. One described Muslims generally as vicious rapists and murderers while stating: 'We Progressive Party members do not want any Mosque' (Einarsson 2014).



Suddenly, a debate on Muslims in Iceland became perhaps the hottest topic in the campaign. Many called on the PP leadership to condemn the move of its Reykjavik candidates but Gunnlaugsson kept silent. When opinion polls showed subsequent massive increase in support of the party he criticized those who objected to the anti-Muslim rhetoric of political correctness and forcefully suppressing an issue, which indeed, he claimed, was important to discuss. Some PP candidates in other municipalities followed suit. In Kópavogur one candidate said it was time to protect Christian values, which were under attack, and linked Muslims with notoriety such as honor killings, acid attacks, rapes and stoning's (reported in Jóhannsson 2014).

Not all PP candidates however agreed to the anti-Muslim rhetoric. The candidate occupying second place of the party's Reykjavik list resigned, describing an atmosphere of bigotry in the party, where Muslims were widely mocked while members emphasized promotion of Christian values (reported in Guðjónsson 2014).

The PP was not represented in Reykjavik City Council in the term before the 2014 election, had fallen below the 5 per cent threshold in the previous election – the capital being the party's weakest spot. Before the anti-mosque move the PP was polling at around 2 per cent. However, after applying anti-Muslim rhetoric the party went on to increase its vote six fold, securing 12.8 percent and winning two representatives. This bears clear resemblance to what the Liberal Party was able to do leading up to the 2007 parliamentary election discussed earlier.

Instead of backpedaling away from anti-immigrant rhetoric after the election, they kept going. In January 2015 the PP announced appointment of one of Iceland's most vocal campaigner for Christian values and harsh critic of Muslims and gay rights – former talk radio host Gústaf Níelsson, who incidentally was registered member of the IP – to Reykjavik City committee on human rights. This caused such outrage both in society and also within the PP that the appointment withdrawn (Hilmarsdóttir 2015).

Often, party members referred to Iceland as somehow pure and benign while describing other countries as not so pure and not so benign. MP Vigdís Hauksdóttir made one of the more peculiar comments, in a debate over laying a landline for exporting electricity from Iceland through the seabed to the European continent. Claiming that the Icelandic energy was the purest in the world she asked: '... are we then ready to mix our pure energy with energy of the European Union countries, and in doing so degrading our own and pollute it with the dirty energy which there is found?' (Hauksdóttir 2013a).

### 3.2 Change in IP rhetoric and other movements

Nationalist sentiments have always been strong in the Independence Party, as I have established in my previous research studying discourse on European relations (Bergmann 2011). However, anti-immigrant rhetoric had until recently mostly been absent. In wake of the PP's increased populist rhetoric a few IP representatives did however follow suit. Former IP leader and long standing PM Davíð Oddson, turned editor of the daily Morgunbladið, wrote that concerns over immigration, like those voiced by some PP representatives and also so-called populist parties in Europe, should be openly discussed. While defending both he linked the PP to such populist parties in Europe and accused

those who objected to their rhetoric on Muslims of political correctness and violent silencing of widespread concerns (reported in Eyjan 2014).

This was for example echoed by one of the IP's most influential neo-liberal scholar, Hannes Gissurarson, who wrote that the populist surge seen in European countries like the UK and Sweden was a result of mainstream right wing parties not listening to widespread and natural concerns which many people had over immigration (Gissurarson 2014).

Much more blatant anti-immigrant rhetoric was found on Facebook, for example in a post by IP's MP Ásmundur Friðriksson, who, when responding to the attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris in January 2015, asked whether Icelanders were safe from similar Muslim terrorists and arguing that Iceland's security was at stake. He asked: 'Has the interior ministry or the police taken measures to protect Icelanders from such attacks? Has the background of the 1500 Muslims living in Iceland been checked and investigated whether some of the 'Icelandic Muslims' have gone for training or fought in Afghanistan, Syria or other countries of unrest amongst Muslims' (Friðriksson 2015).

Many were to criticize Friðriksson but quite a few also came out in support. For example former PP deputy MP turned talk radio host, Arnþrúður Karlsdóttir, who said Friðriksson was only saying out loud what people were thinking (see in Hrafnsson 2015).

Importantly, though, contrary to when PP party members voiced similar views on the Muslim mosque, many prominent IP leaders immediately dismissed Friðriksson's concerns as unfounded, bordering on being racist, and pointing out that the MP was in fact asking for serious human right violations, which the IP would never stand for, which also was directly in violation of the Icelandic constitution.

#### 4. Conclusion

Nationalism has always been integral part of contemporary Icelandic politics, as was established in part two, based on identity simultaneously emphasizing independence and external recognition as a fully functioning modern state deeply rooted in Western culture. Though populism is a close relative of nationalism such movements had until the 2008 financial crisis mostly been absent, save for few fringe groups and a period of the short lived Liberal Party.

Integral tension in the two-sided national identity still characterizes Icelandic politics. Sometimes the success of this struggle for independence and external recognition is threatened. The most recent threat was felt in the financial crisis of 2008. Iceland's economic relationship with others is interpreted through a romantic nationalistic discourse; thus, the meaning of the crisis cannot be reduced to a purely economic level. Anxiety over misreporting in the international media after The Crash spoke for example directly to the longstanding fear of misrecognition by foreigners.

The crisis opened up a space for a new leadership in the established agrarian Progressive Party to subsequently tap into this fear. Rapidly the party was transformed in a populist direction, as was established in the preceding part. This development was in line with third generation surge of populist parties in Europe, discussed in the first part,

many of which moved away from the more openly racist and fascist factions of earlier times.

In academic debate there is no single accepted definition of populism. Here, however, I have identified ten features, which often characterize contemporary populist political parties in Europe: anti-immigrant, anti-elitist and Eurosceptic moralists who are economically protectionist, promoters of law and order and foes to multicultural development on the continent. They speak rather to emotions than reason, distinguish between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and rely on strong charismatic leaders who advocate simple solutions to complex issues burdening the ordinary public.

As was documented in the papers third section, examples of all these elements can be found in communications of the post-crisis PP. It is firmly nationalistic and skeptical of multiculturalism, aggressively anti-EU and heavily protectionists of domestic agricultural production. Its leaders are prone to discursively creating an elite out of their advocacies and claiming to speak for the common man, most often the rhetoric revolves around protecting ordinary households against both domestic left leaning elite and immense foreign forces. In doing so they firmly separate between ‘us’ who belong to the inner society and ‘others’ who they see fall outside of the fence. Its members are furthermore, to a higher degree than what is common in other parties, accustomed to praising their young leader and often provide what can easily be described as simple solutions to complex problems. Moralistic communications are perhaps less evident but anti-immigrant rhetoric has heightened, often pointed against asylum seekers but more recently being anti-Muslim.

Being rooted in agrarian society and ranking as Iceland’s oldest mainstream political party the PP is of course not entirely populist. It is still perhaps more firmly nationalist than populist. However, when analyzing communicational changes of the new post-crisis leadership it is unavoidable to categorize the party amongst at least the softer version of European populist parties, perhaps closest to the Norwegian Progress Party (with whom it even shares the name). Elsewhere populist parties have most often been founded in opposition to mainstream political parties. Retuning of established mainstream party to rank amongst populist movements is comparable to the Swiss Peoples Party but in doing so and arriving at helm of government is only comparable to Austria’s Freedom Party in European politics.

## Notes

- 1 Qoutes have been translated by author from Icelandic.
- 2 Since early 20th century Iceland’s political party system has consisted of four main but shifting parties. The right-of-centre Independence Party (IP) (*Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn*) emerged as the largest political party and indeed the country’s hegemonic power, simultaneously taping into the heritage of the independence struggle and promote liberal economic policies. The agricultural Progressive Party (PP) (*Framsóknarflokkurinn*) occupied the centre, before turing right. The left wing in Icelandic politics was weakened by frequent fragmentation in 20th century, now represented by The Social Democratic Alliance (SDA) (*Samfylkingin*) and the further leftist Left Green Movement (LGM) (*Vinstri Hreyfingin – grænt framboð*). Kristjánsdóttir (2008) explains that it was a peculiarity of Icelandic

socialists in the early 20th century that they were far more nationalistic than similar parties in other European countries. In addition to these four main parties, a fifth and sometimes also sixth parties have temporarily occupied up to 15 per cent of the seats in Parliament.

3 Anti Terror, Security and Crime Act, 2001

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