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# History of Iceland formation as main Arctic crossroad

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**Abstract.** Despite its geographical remoteness from continental Europe, Iceland, a small island state in the Northern Atlantic, has been an important part of not only civilized Old World spaces, but also an appreciable element in the economic and political life of the Northern European region. Being the homeland of one of the oldest parliaments in the world, small Iceland has steadily taken high positions in various ratings of the states' development and well-being, showing that even severe climatic conditions are not an obstacle to successful development.

## 1. Introduction

The history of Iceland originates in the Vikings' epoch, when, in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD, the Old Scandinavians actively investigated the Northern Atlantic and occupied the islands of this region. It is traditionally considered that Iceland was settled by the Scandinavians (mainly, ancestors of the modern Norwegians) in the 860s. It was them who named the new lands Iceland – “the country of ice or snow” [1]. According to the other hypothesis, the island was named “Gardarsholm” (“Gardar's Island”) after a Swedish Viking Gardara Svavarsson, who is considered the first Scandinavian having lived in Iceland, but the name “Iceland” was fixed to the island, which characterized the island environment very well. Its pioneers had to adapt to new, sometimes extremely severe climatic conditions and to scarcity of local resources as well. Thereupon the Early Medieval Iceland represents an extremely interesting sociohistorical experiment.

The climatic conditions, in which the first settlers appeared, strikingly differed from the climate of continental Scandinavia. The considerable quantity of active volcanoes, proximity to the Polar Circle, remoteness from continental Europe and severe shortage of wood suitable for building, - all these factors predetermined the ways of developing Old Icelandic culture and strategy of the society survival. The settlers adapted their skills and abilities taken from the native land to the new conditions and learnt to use the resources available in the new ecosystem, in particular, building materials. Contrary to the island's geographical location, they managed to maximize the benefits from the severe climate, only slightly influenced by the Gulf Stream [2].

During all medieval period of its history, and many centuries later, Iceland remained entirely rural. On the island, there were no villages, to say nothing of towns, and, during the Vikings' epoch, the Icelanders only took a marginal part in the prospering international trade. Nevertheless, as well as other Scandinavians of the epoch of Vikings, Icelanders remained skilful mariners. It was them who later discovered and occupied Greenland, and their descendants reached the New World coast [3].

It is remarkable, that, having colonized Iceland, the settlers underwent not only evolutionary, but also a kind of revolutionary changes - they constructed the society of less complex structure on the island



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than that what they left. Unlike all the other Scandinavia, where there was a rather complex social hierarchy at which top there were jarls and kings with military functions accurately defined, Iceland, lost in the middle of the Northern Atlantic, became the state without the de facto head and executive power, the society of the unprecedented (for the Middle Ages) level of social egalitarianism.

Despite Iceland's peripheral location, scientists managed to create a very comprehensive picture of the island's social, economic and cultural life. Primarily, it became possible due to a unique heritage of the medieval literature - Icelandic sagas, representing a broad picture of the Old Icelandic society system [4]. It is difficult to ignore the role, played by the saga and, as a whole, by the poetic word in Old Icelandic society. The author of such outstanding monuments of the medieval literature as «Younger Edda» and «Terrestrial Circle», Snorri Sturluson was an Icelandic and informed descendants about many details from the island's life on his works' pages. Nearly all manuscripts (including sagas and ecclesiastical texts), concerning Iceland's early history, are written in Old Norse. It belongs to Old Western Scandinavian dialects – in fact, the Norwegians and Icelanders spoke the same language up to the middle of the 14th century. Then continental dialects in Norway underwent considerable changes, but, in isolated Iceland, the pioneers' language has changed a little up to now, as well as the ethnic structure of the island population.

It is interesting that S.Sturluson was not only a writer but also a politician: possessing a corresponding origin and comprehending laws, twice he was elected law-speaker (“chairman” in modern meaning) of the Icelandic Althing, an All-Icelandic legislative authority. Despite a lack of large settlements and the centralised power, since the earliest period in Iceland there has been a uniform and very detailed system of the law and the central legislature as well. Undoubtedly, Icelandic democracy is one of the oldest one remained up to now: in about 930, the Althing was formed on the base of local national assemblies, things [5]. The similar social system, a kind of primitive democracy, existed in Iceland before the loss of independence in the 13th century

Falling in 1262-1264 under the Norwegian kings' power, in 1380 Iceland, together with Norway, passed under the power of Denmark, which throughout the 2nd half of the 14th century was aspiring to unite Northern European countries under its own authority [6]. Under the Norway power in Iceland, Icelandic laws operated, and the Althing continued, more or less independently, to perform legislative functions. In the Late Middle Ages, in Iceland history there were some periods of blossoming, especially when, owing to long intestine conflicts, the continental Scandinavian control weakened, and German and English merchants visited Iceland for fish. But, by the Late Middle Ages there started a serious decline on the island which especially worsened in the Reformation time when, under the influence of absolutistic tendencies of King Christian III, the Danish monarchy power on the island considerably strengthened and, despite various forms of opposition and even a revolt, the Althing gradually lost the right to make laws. With introduction an absolute monarchy in Denmark in 1662, the legislative power passed to the king, and the Althing, still gathering annually, kept only judicial functions, which were later also transferred to representatives of the Danish authorities [7].

During this period and the next decades, Iceland remained entirely a farm country, and most population lived like the first settlers, so it remained extremely dependent on any displays of natural forces. Iceland is known to have the nature rich in volcanoes, and they regularly played their role in the island development. In 1783, on the island, there was an eruption of Laki. As the result of this accident, the most part of Iceland vegetation was destroyed, and about 75% of the livestock, a basic export, were lost. As the result of the subsequent famine and epidemics, more than 20% of the population of Iceland died [1]. The eruption, in particular, considerably affected continental Europe where there started a series of poor harvests, which became one of the factors promoting the Great French Revolution of 1789. In many respects, the famine was caused by the restrictive measures introduced by the Danish authorities in the 17th century, when Icelanders had been forbidden to trade directly with foreigners. Such commercial policy of Copenhagen continued to rigidly limit the development of Iceland economy before the middle of the 19th century. Only in 1854, on the large-scale national movement wave, Icelanders received the rights to international trade equal with the Danes [8].

## 2. Historical analysis

The period of infringement of public and political rights of Icelanders from Denmark came to its end only in the early 19th century. Despite all difficulties, Iceland remained the country of wide literacy and through centuries carried the fidelity to the language, culture and literature, keeping the aspiration to become an independent state. In the 1830s there appeared first public organisations for restoration the Icelandic Althing, and by 1840 this movement was headed by a outstanding Icelandic scientist, politician and public figure Jón Sigurðsson [8] (1811-1879), who subsequently became a key person in the history of Iceland.

Under his supervision, the Icelanders demanded from the mother country to grant the Althing full legislature and control over its own finance, complete liquidation of all trading restrictions and education improvement. In 1843 the Althing was restored, but received only consultative rights; in 1855, the freedom of press was introduced in Iceland, and since 1859, the laws, concerning the island, have been made in Icelandic [9]. Despite the obstacles from the Danish authorities, the Icelandic people firmly followed the way to independence.

At the turn of the 19th – 20th centuries there were such important, for formation of modern Icelandic statehood, events as foundation of the state bank, formation of political parties, occurrence of trade unions, establishment of cable and telephone communications with continental Europe, foundation of own university, etc. [1]

Not having a possibility to ignore that state of affairs, in 1903, the Danish party expanded Iceland autonomy, and, instead of the former key (for the island life) official, the governor, introduced the post of the minister of Icelandic affairs. He was to know the Icelandic language, live in *Reykjavík* (a city large enough by that time) and to be responsible to the Althing [6]. Undoubtedly, the Icelanders were greatly impressed by the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the dissolution of the Union between Sweden and Norway happened in the same year. The same year at the All-Icelandic assembly in Þingvellir, a traditional place of holding old sessions of the Althing, the participants demanded to transform the former Danish-Icelandic relations into the contractual ones.

The Danish king had to issue a decree on forming the bilateral parliamentary commission for developing offers on the constitutional status of Iceland. The commission developed the project on transforming both countries into independent states, but it did not provide full clearness concerning Iceland independence and in 1909, it was rejected by the Icelandic party. The Althing demanded that the relations with Denmark should be constructed on the base of personal union: the Danish monarch remained the head of Iceland, but otherwise, Iceland became independent completely [10].

Only after the end of the First World War, on December 1, 1918, Iceland became an independent state in the personal union with Denmark [9]. The Danish government acquired the right to conduct foreign affairs of Iceland, but the Icelandic party was able to send abroad its own diplomatic representatives; the young country started to print own money, and in 1920 the Constitution was adopted, according to which the legislature belongs to the two-chamber Althing [6]. The big role in the island parliament was played by the Social Democrats that corresponded to the political tendencies common for countries of Northern Europe. In general, the 1920s were very important for formation of Iceland as an independent state. It was the period of appreciable economic growth, growing export of fish and seafood, development of trade relations with other countries, quick general development of the Icelandic society. Nevertheless, the young country continued to remain closely connected with Denmark, which conducted a kind of patronage of the former colony.

However, after April 1940 when Denmark was occupied by the German army, Iceland was actually separated from the continent. On May 10, 1940, in Iceland, which had no army, as the result of successful "Operation 'Fork'", English troops landed: thus, Britain tried to prevent the German occupation of this strategically and conveniently located island, which was of great importance to secure transport communications between Britain and her potential ally, the USA. Neutral Iceland protested the British actions, but had to accept the real state of affairs. In July 1941, with the consent of the Great Britain and the Icelandic government, the American troops replaced the British [1].

The US president F.D. Roosevelt, addressing the government and the people of Iceland, characterized the country occupation as temporary and assured that immediately at the end of the war all American troops would be withdrawn [11]. Actively using Icelandic harbours and *Keflavik* airport, the USA guaranteed also non-interference in the internal affairs of Iceland [12], which at last remained unsupervised by the Danish authorities.

Taking the advantage of this opportunity, in 1941 the Althing made the decision on refusal of prolonging the contract with Denmark, and after the expiration of its validity period, in 1944 the referendum was held, where 97 % participants voted for the union cancellation. On June 17, 1944, on Jón Sigurðsson's birthday, in the major place for the Icelanders, Þingvellir valley, the mass meeting occurred where the Icelandic Republic was proclaimed [6].

In 1949 the Althing, proceeding from the safety reasons, which again became relevant in the context of the Cold War begun, ratified the country's joining the NATO, despite large-scale protests [12]. Participation in the Marshall Plan essentially promoted fast economic growth of the island, in particular, industrialization of its fisheries. Despite Iceland's military-political and economic proximity to the USA, in the post-war years the USSR used to become the main buyer of Icelandic goods, primarily canned fish.

Limited in access to the natural resources, Icelandic economy substantially has depended on fishing and connected branches of foreign trade that explains an exclusive attention of the Icelandic authorities to the fisheries. For this reason in 1952, the Icelandic government forbade foreign ships to fish in the Icelandic gulfs and bays that provoked diplomatic friction, and after 1958, Iceland started to expand the exclusive economic zone limits, aspiring to disrupt foreign fishers their habitual access to favorable trade areas of the Atlantic. These actions led to a series of conflicts between Iceland and the Great Britain in 1958-1976, which were named "cod wars" [13].

The British-Icelandic conflict became one of the largest collisions of interests between the NATO members which caused not only regular collisions of the Icelandic Coast Guard (one guardsman was killed) and the British Navy in the Northern Atlantic, but even the severance of diplomatic relations between the two parties [12]. The conflict managed to be resolved substantially due to the NATO leaders' role, who aspired to settle contradictions between the members.

Despite the considerable social and economic achievements realized by Iceland in the 20th century and a centuries-old experience of the adaptation to severe climatic conditions of the Northern Atlantic, the economy of this country is still influenced by the world economic processes very much.

### **3. Development of subspaces of geo-economic space of Iceland**

#### *3.1. Demographic subspace*

The population of Iceland is 321,857, 16 % of them are engaged in agriculture, 21 % - in fisheries, 18 % - in industry and crafts, 25 % - in trade and transport, 10 % - others.

The national structure is homogeneous: 98.99 % are the Icelanders - descendants of the Vikings speaking the Icelandic language. The average population density is 3.12 people per 1 sq.km. About 60 % of the inhabitants are concentrated in the southwest part of the country (Reykjavík and its suburbs).

There is no inflow of immigrants due the rigid migratory policy and the law on the nation preservation; there is an exception for the treaties on building objects by the Europeans (Germany, Poland). Nevertheless, except immigrants from nearby countries (Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Poland), in the country there also live a small number of immigrants (refugees) from distant countries – the Philippines, China, Thailand and some others, but they have a temporary status and the only right on temporary no-charge work and temporary material support, without recognizing their Iceland citizenship. The immigration laws in Iceland are very rigid, and it is almost impossible to acquire permanent residence there, especially for visitors from distant countries. The policy of the country resolves temporary immigration to Iceland with subsequent relocation to any European country; this right does not extend on the inhabitants of Norway, Sweden and the Faeroes.

The level of migration from the country is also very small, even in spite of the fact that many Icelanders leave to study in such countries as the Great Britain, Norway and others, they nearly always return to their homeland. Nevertheless, in Iceland the internal migration level is very high. Many Icelanders move from small fishing villages and tiny towns to Reykjavík and its suburbs, hoping for better work and accommodation. The government tries to fight it as, thereof, many villages and even towns existing within long years are deserted. Recently the tendency has stopped. [14; 15].

### 3.2. *Social subspace*

The Icelandic government pays a very close attention to development of the public health system in the country. Thus, it is necessary to notice, that due to the special attention and constant development of the public health system, Iceland possesses one of the highest indicators of life and very low indicators of children's mortality rate. As about formation of the public health system, it possesses a number of specific features. Thus, for example, the budget of the public health system is accumulated on the financial base, which is formed by gathering the tax raised from the country inhabitants by the state and municipal organizations.

Free medical aid can be acquired by the citizens of the country who are under age, and also those who have regular work and pay taxes. The country is divided into 50 medical regions where today 25 hospitals provide prompt medical assistance at the highest level.

Since 1911, after opening the first university in Iceland, the higher education system has been forming in this country. At present, in Iceland there are 7 higher educational institutions: State University of Iceland, University of *Reykjavík*, University of *Akureyri*, Agriculture University (*Borgarnes*), Higher School of Arts, University of Trade and Economics “*Bifröst*” (*Borgarnes*), University College of Biology and Tourism. Education in state higher educational institutions is free for Icelandic and foreign citizens. The choice of higher schools may be a problem for foreign citizens as almost everywhere Icelandic is the instruction language. Some higher schools train in English. Among them, there is State University of Iceland and universities in *Akureyri* and *Reykjavík* as well. For foreign students wishing to be trained in Icelandic, preliminary courses are provided. They function at higher schools and give the opportunity to learn the Icelandic language and Icelandic traditions and culture as well.

### 3.3. *Innovative and technological subspace*

The University of Iceland is the center of researches. There is a lot of work on geothermal energy sources. The National scientific fund finances researches, which belong to international federations, they are necessary for supporting physical and social researches. There is a department of engineering and department of social sciences at University of Iceland [16].

### 3.4. *Spiritual subspace*

More than 80 % of Iceland population are of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, more than 4 % - of other Protestant denominations (primarily, The *Seventh-day Adventist* Church), about 2 % - of the Catholic Church, 7 % - of other denominations.

On the island, there are many Lutheran churches. In Iceland, there is also a Catholic church and some churches of other denominations. Now in *Reykjavík* they plan to build a constant Orthodox church.

Recently the Lutheranism has had a “competitor” - new paganism *Ásatrú*. It is an ethnic religion of indigenous population of Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, England, Germany and some other European countries. Old Norse “*Ásatrú*” literally means “the belief in gods” [17,18,19].

Though in Iceland the state religion - Lutheranism - is accepted, the country hymn is often criticized for the religious subjects. Along with the state religion in the country, religious freedom is declared.

In Iceland, there is only one radio station, in *Reykjavík*, and three radio relay stations. Radio receivers are available in each house. Television broadcasting started in 1966. Besides the state TV, there is a television station at the American military base in Keflavík.

The traditional sport is national wrestling “glíma”. Each of two belted wrestlers keeps the contender’s belt of and aspires to raise and tumble the other down, thus, intricate footboards and others are allowed. Swimming has always been a popular sport, in the country there is a network of swimming pools with water from thermal sources. Riding competitions are often organized. Football is rather popular; from spring to autumn, the competitions are regularly held. Handball and basketball are very popular sports; sports orientation and tourism have recently developed. In winter, nearly all the country population go skiing and skating.

### 3.5. *Wildlife management subspace*

Today, fishing is considered to be the most important branch of economy in Iceland. The country shallows rich in fish are a unique Icelandic large-scale instant source of income since, in fact, in Iceland there is a shortage of all commercial minerals.

Fisheries and fish processors employ 12 % of the population and constitute 70 % of the country’s export earnings. The cod and herring are basic trade objects. Regarding the reduction of fishing herrings and cods and reduction of fish resources of the Northern Atlantic, in recent years, the value of capelins and pollocks has increased.

In fisheries, motor boats with trawls are widely used. The cod is processed, primarily, in *Reykjavík*. The herring is salted and processed into fish oil and fish flour in *Sigluðfjörður* and other towns on the northern coast.

The largest fishing companies of Iceland are HB-Grandi with the total of quotas in the cod equivalent of about 55,000 t. (11.7 % of all Icelandic quotas), Samherji with the total of quotas - 35,000 t. (7.4 %), Brim with the total of quotas - 27,000 t. (5.74 %). [20]

### 3.6. *Manufacturing and economic subspace*

The industry of Iceland started to develop only after the Second World War. Now there about a third of the population works. Since the end of 1960, aluminum has been manufactured from import raw materials (aluminum dioxide). The whole volume is intended for export almost completely. Two Icelandic mills are the Icelandic Aluminum (ICAL) (the owner Alusuis-Lonza, Switzerland) and the Northern Aluminum (the owner Columbia Ventures Corporation, the USA).

Attracted by eco-friendly energy of hydroelectric power stations and geothermal power stations at competitive prices, foreign investors are developing projects of more aluminum manufacture and magnesium processing.

Iceland possesses large reserves of hydro-energy. Potential generation of hydro-energy is assessed 80 billion kWh per year. Now only 6 % of hydro-energy resources is used.

Geothermal energy, which production potential is also very high in the country, is widely used in household and hotbed sectors. Earlier, about half of Iceland’s energy needs were met by oil import.

Enex is an expert company of renewable energies in the field of using hydro- and geothermal power for both electric power generation and direct application, for example, for heat supply.

Geysir Green Energy conducts search of optimum possibilities in the field of commercial using energy of geothermal sources, invests in developing and building geothermal stations, acquires geothermal stations, belonging now to power supply systems of general usage, and participates in privatization of power companies worldwide [21].

### 3.7. *Political sphere*

Independence Party (IP) is the largest political party of the country. It is founded in May 1929 as the result of associating conservative and liberal parties. IP has dominated in the political life of Iceland and took part in most Icelandic governments. In the field of economy IP has always supported the restriction of the state role in economic issues and businessmen’s privileges. In the party’s opinion, the main function of the state in economy is not direct intervention, but creation of favorable conditions for economic activity, development of researches, etc. According to the pre-election manifest of 2003, IP

achieves reduction of taxes and the national debt, strengthening of enterprise activity, enhancement of competitiveness and diversification of Icelandic economy. It intends to “simplify” the social insurance system and to keep the pension system efficiency. It declares the intention to increase child allowances, pensions and assistance to persons with disabilities. It calls for strengthening competition in education sphere and for developing private medicine.

Progressive Party (PP) is centrist, it was founded in 1916 by the heads of co-operative movement and has had the greatest influence among farmers of the country. It supported the national economy development, controlled attraction of foreign investments and farmers’ subsidies. It supports the membership of the country in the NATO, though among its members there were forces seeking more independence from external policy.

Social Democratic Alliance: Social Democratic Party (founded in 1916), People’s Alliance (founded in 1968 on the base of Communist Uniform Socialist Party) and Women’s List. They declare their adherence to the purposes and methods of social democratic movement, principles of freedom and democracy, women’s liberation, equality and social responsibility. According to the manifest of 2001, they support “the society which gives each individual the chance to use all variety of life opportunities and, at the same time, to study to give the same opportunities to others”. They gain expansion of democracy and the population participation in the government. Social democrats call to “equality through mutual aid”, to provision for all members of the society the rights to the public health system, education and other social services, to the worthy life, irrespective of their financial position. In foreign policy, SDA is for transformation of Iceland into “the window opened in the world”, for development of the international cooperation and assistance to less developed countries.

Left-Green Movement (LGM) is an association of the independent left, activists of trade unions of public services, teachers, students, former members of Trotskyist and Maoist groups, participants of ecological movement, various non-government organizations and civil initiatives. It was founded in the late 1990s. It opposes the government’s neoliberal policy, privatization and commercialization of social services, and protects the environment and human rights, justice, equality and social security.

Liberal Party (LP) was founded in 1998 by the former minister Sverrir Hermannsson. It defends the free market system and rejects centralization and state intervention in the economy. It calls to encouragement of free competition and business, to reduction of the state expenditure and taxes, to liquidation of the income tax and introduction of the profit tax. Simultaneously it declares condemnation of neoliberal policy of Iceland government and intention to continue assistance to old people, patients and persons with disabilities, to confront the curtailment of medical programs, to invest the development of education. It supports the preservation of the NATO role and strengthening of cooperation with Europe.

#### 4. Conclusion

Comparison of the degree of developing the Arctic geo-economic space of Iceland and the level of developing the spaces of the USA, the Russian Federation, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Canada, shows a sufficiently high level of development. According to the degree of developing the Arctic geo-economic space, Iceland is at the same level as Sweden, lags behind the USA, Denmark, Norway and Canada, but, nevertheless, advances Russia and Finland. It is important to note that in 1998 the Arctic geo-economic space of Iceland was the least developed among the given group of the countries. During the researched period Iceland managed to improve its positions.

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