

ICELAND'S EU REFERENDUM: TALES OF NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

MAXIMILIAN CONRAD
UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

TEPSA COMMENTARY
09/2026



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Co-funded by
the European Union

Although Iceland's recent referendum was about whether or not to reopen European Union (EU) accession negotiations, the accompanying debate framed it as a vote on membership with potentially disastrous consequences for the country's national sovereignty. In a campaign rife with mis- and disinformation, the 'yes'-campaign failed to persuade voters of the benefit of negotiating mutually agreeable terms for Iceland's full membership of the EU.

Iceland's recent referendum on reopening EU accession negotiations raises many puzzling questions. A current member of the European Economic Area, Iceland had initially applied for EU membership in the aftermath of its financial crisis in 2009 but subsequently suspended its accession negotiations after a change in government in 2013/2014. The issue resurfaced following the 2024 parliamentary elections that brought to power a coalition government consisting of three parties, two of which – the Social Democratic Alliance of Prime Minister Kristrún Frostadóttir and the Liberal Reform Party of Foreign Minister Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir – are outspoken proponents of Icelandic EU membership. The decision to subject the reopening of accession negotiations to a referendum was a condition for the participation of the third coalition partner, the EU-sceptical People's Party of the Minister for Education and Children Inga Sæland. Although the question asked in the referendum could not have been clearer, the first major success of the 'no'-camp – which started campaigning more or less immediately after the announcement of the referendum in late February 2026 – was to frame the referendum as a vote on *membership*. Unsurprisingly, EU

membership was construed as having potentially disastrous consequences for Iceland, especially in terms of control over its natural resources and, in particular, its fishing grounds.

This framing success set the tone for the entire debate, making it difficult for the 'yes'-campaign to get its message of "*já til að sjá*" (i.e., "yes to seeing") to resonate with the Icelandic electorate. The subtext of the 'yes'-campaign's slogan was that the previous round of negotiations, in which many negotiation chapters had already been provisionally closed, had not given Icelanders a concrete image of what full membership would entail in the most sensitive areas, that is: fisheries and agriculture. The 'yes'-campaign's message therefore focused on the idea that making an informed decision about whether EU membership might be a feasible option for the country requires negotiating all chapters and getting to see the actual accession treaty. Or, as the campaign said, Icelanders should get a chance to look at the package – "*að kíkja í pakkann*".

This claim was however, hotly disputed by the 'no'-campaign, which argued two things. First, that EU accession negotiations are no neutral fact-finding mission, but a process of adjusting to the EU's *acquis communautaire*. And second, that the EU had nothing to offer Iceland in terms of possible derogations or special solutions that would adequately take Iceland's conditions – especially in the fields of fisheries and agriculture – into account. Efforts to use the examples of Finland and Sweden as countries that successfully negotiated derogations prior to their accession in 1995 had no impact on this claim. Instead, the 'no'-camp – supported by claims made by the former European Free Trade Association Court President Carl Baudenbacher, one of the three judges in the "[Icesave case](#)" – argued that the mere [reopening of membership negotiations would create a path dependence](#) that would be difficult to depart from at a later stage.

The debate ahead of the referendum also played out in an extraordinarily polarised environment. [Opinion polls](#) had previously indicated that, in early 2026, 42% of the Icelandic population were in favour of joining the EU, 42% were opposed and 16% undecided. The undecided segment shrank as the date of the referendum drew closer. In addition, the [advantage of the 'yes'-camp declined noticeably and continuously](#) in the months between the announcement and the date of the referendum. In fact, the 'no'-camp only drew even with the 'yes'-camp on the day before the referendum and ultimately won the vote by a considerable margin (53% to 47%). Polarisation therefore increased as the referendum approached, and hostility between the two factions was palpable. This was reflected not least on the opinion pages of the most important newspapers and news sites. Audience fragmentation also contributed to a sense of affective polarisation, i.e., a dislike for rather than a mere disagreement with the opposing camp. Iceland's traditional leading broadsheet newspaper *Morgunblaðið*, strongly advocated for a 'no' vote, while the recently founded (in 2023) independent newspaper *Heimildin* broadly made the case for reopening membership negotiations.

Apart from the observed fragmentation and polarisation, the debate was also rife with mis- and disinformation. While there are no clear signs of foreign information manipulation and interference *to date*, the Icelandic Media Commission had pointed out the [country's vulnerability to external influence](#) ahead of the referendum. But elements of post-truth politics were also discernible at the level of domestic debate. What stands out in this respect are the 'no'-campaign's efforts, from the outset, to misconstrue the referendum as a vote on membership. Efforts to undermine the credibility of the National Electoral Commission of Iceland's [official information on the referendum](#) need to be seen in this light also. *Morgunblaðið* publicly questioned the National

Electoral Commission's [allegedly overly positive interpretations](#) of the accession negotiation process. The newspaper furthermore [reported](#) that information on the National Electoral Commission's website was changed in response to this criticism – an allegation [that the Electoral Commission has denied](#) and for which no evidence has been provided. But maybe the most remarkable item of disinformation was the claim – which, as anecdotal evidence suggests, was used by the 'no'-camp in the days before the referendum – that, in the event of membership, young Icelanders would be conscripted to fight wars in a European army that, as should be well known, does not exist.

Despite this claim, the geopolitical context of the revival of Iceland's EU membership bid played at best a highly subordinate role in a debate that focused much more on questions of sovereignty and economics. This was somewhat surprising given the attention that was paid to Donald Trump's repeated remarks about the possibility of a takeover of Greenland by the United States. After all, these had played a catalysing role in the Icelandic government's decision to schedule the referendum much sooner than initially planned.

What happens now?

As a member of the European Economic Area, Iceland remains closely associated with the EU. It still has to adopt the vast majority of the EU's legislation governing the internal market, with the notable exception of the provision of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy. Unless new crises fundamentally reshape the cost-benefit calculations of Iceland's relationship with the EU, it has to be considered highly unlikely that the question of full membership will be placed back onto the political agenda in the foreseeable future. The referendum itself evidently does not change the evolving geopolitical landscape within which it has occurred. And despite demands from the

Icelandic opposition parties – in particular the Independence Party and the Centre Party – to withdraw the membership application once

and for all, [Prime Minister Krístrún Frostadóttir has made it very clear](#) that this was not what the Icelandic nation was asked in the referendum.

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Editing and formatting: Allegra Wirmer (TEPSA)

Maximilian Conrad is Professor of Political Science at the University of Iceland. His main research interests include European integration and political theory, in particular issues connected to democracy, communication, civil society, and the public sphere. Ongoing research includes work on disinformation and post-truth politics. Conrad was the Academic Coordinator/Principal Investigator for the recently concluded EU-funded Horizon Europe project [RECLAIM - Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age](#) (2022-2025). His work has been published in journals such as *Journal of European Integration*, *Comparative European Politics*, *German Politics and Society*, and *Javnost – The Public*. Recent and forthcoming publications include the co-edited volumes [Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics](#) (Palgrave/Springer 2023), [Post-Truth Populism: A New Political Paradigm](#) (Palgrave/Springer 2024), and [Reclaiming Liberal Democracy in the Postfactual Age](#) (De Gruyter 2026). Conrad has recently also concluded a three-year term as co-editor of the Nordic Political Science Association's journal *Scandinavian Political Studies*.

