A Small State’s Campaign to Get Elected to the UNSC: Iceland’s Ambitious Failed Attempt

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Summary

This article provides a case study of a small state, Iceland, and its motives for running for a seat on the UN Security Council for the 2009-2010 term, the domestic dispute about the affair, key campaign messages and the campaign strategy. The article fills a gap in the international relations and small state literature on small states’ campaign strategies in UNSC elections. We conclude that the decision to run for a seat and the core message of the campaign were largely based on the quest to enhance Iceland’s status among international actors. However, the country’s lack of resources, limited international engagement and domestic debate about the candidacy became a hindrance. Iceland succeeded in using its smallness to build good momentum for its candidacy but in the end it failed due to weaknesses associated with its small size and its lack of contributions, competence and ideational commitment in the UN.
Keywords

United Nations Security Council (UNSC) – United Nations (UN) – small states – Iceland – Nordic states – non-permanent seat – small state literature

1 Introduction

This is an empirical case study of a small state and its aspirations to become more relevant and protect its interests in the international system. It examines why Iceland decided to run for a seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for the 2009-2010 term, its campaign strategy and why the country did not succeed in its endeavour.

Iceland’s decision to run for a UNSC seat and its campaign took place during a crucial period in its international relations. Iceland, the far smallest of the five Nordic states, had not been as active as the others in the United Nations (UN). Up until 1998, Iceland had never participated in the Nordic UNSC rotation, in spite of the fact that it had been a UN member since 1946. The Nordic Group, a subgroup within the competitive Western European and Others Group (WEOG), has developed a rotation system where they seek election to the Council for one of their members every four years, deciding on a candidate for each period ten years in advance. After the end of the Cold War, the United States, Iceland’s main ally, started scaling down its activity in the military base in Keflavík, culminating in the closure of the base altogether in 2006. Consequently, Iceland decided to step up its international activity by contributing more to the international community in hopes of a continuation of a broad range of support from its allies, in particular the United States. Iceland’s opponents in the UNSC election, however, Austria and Turkey, were active participants in the international system and had already served numerous times on the UNSC (Austria in 1973-1974 and 1991-1992 and Turkey in 1951-1952, 1954-1955 and 1961).

The selection of candidates for the ten non-permanent seats on the UNSC takes place within five groups representing different geographic regions. The WEOG consists of 28 members, that is Western European countries (including Turkey), as well as Israel, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. The Group is unusual in that geography is not the sole defining element of membership.
(membership is also determined by Western democracy) and its UNSC campaigns are very competitive. To be elected, a running candidate needs at least two-thirds of the votes from present and voting members in the UN General Assembly, regardless of whether the election is contested or not. The ten seats are elected annually, five at a time for two-year terms. In October 2008, Turkey and Austria were elected in the first round of voting on the UNSC for the 2009-2010 term with 151 and 133 votes, respectively. Iceland lost after receiving 87 votes.

Iceland is a typical small state, according to the small state literature, with a population of about 360,000, no armed forces, total gross domestic product (GDP) of 25.7 billion USD in 2018 and a small public administration (including foreign service). Iceland is also considerably smaller than all of its neighbouring states in the North Atlantic, that is the Nordic states, Ireland, the United Kingdom (UK), Canada and the United States, taking into account a comparative or a relational element associated with the size of states. Moreover, Icelandic policy-makers and foreign actors have always perceived the country as a small state in the international system.

The small state literature and a newly developed theoretical framework, which takes special account of the size of states and small states’ quest for a seat on the UNSC, provides an ideal ground for examining Iceland’s campaign to get elected to the Council, and therefore the case of Iceland will be placed within that framework. Ekengren and Möller’s theoretical framework claims that states seek membership on the Council to shape decisions in the UN, improve their own international network and work on their status in the international system. The purpose of this single case study is to examine in detail a small state’s campaign for the Security Council in order to contribute to the small state literature and practice of small states in the UN.

The study will empirically map out the course of core events in detail, creating a comprehensive picture of the campaign using discourse analysis and literature review as well as semi-structured interviews. Discourse analytical tools were used to map, analyse and compare reports from the Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) (published, and unpublished and confidential); promotional materials from the Icelandic UNSC campaign; newspaper and other media coverage; Icelandic foreign affairs literature; reports from the

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2 Tahzib-Lie and Rosing 2019, 478.
3 World Bank 2021.
4 Mouritzen and Wivel 2005.
5 Thorhallsson 2006.
6 Ekengren and Möller forthcoming; Ekengren and Möller 2021.
New York-based think tank Security Council Report; and speeches by politicians in the national parliament as well as in the UN General Assembly. The discourse analysis was partly based on content analysis where predetermined themes were identified through Ekengren and Möller’s theoretical framework as important units of analysis, while the researchers also kept alert to other themes that were more locally embedded and that became evident through the analysis.

The study used semi-structured interviews, as it allowed for a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, giving the informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms. The researchers designed an interview guide based on the research questions and the selected themes from the theoretical framework with suggestions for follow-up questions. The creation of an interview guide for the research facilitated comparison of the results of the interviews. Seven in-depth interviews were conducted with both former Ministers for Foreign Affairs and high-ranking public officials. The empirical materials, in particular the interviews, provide valuable insight into the challenges of a small public administration with limited resources.

This article is divided into six parts, in addition to an introduction and implications/conclusion. The first part provides an overview of the relevant small state literature and the limited research on small states’ UNSC campaigns. The second section presents the theoretical framework of the analysis. The third section examines the domestic debate about Iceland’s candidacy to the UNSC. The next part analyses the main reasons for Iceland’s choice to become a candidate, followed by an examination of the campaign strategy and the campaign’s core message.

2 The Literature and UNSC Campaigns

Small states studies are occupied with states’ ability to defend their interests and have a say in the international system. The literature focuses on decision-shaping and network establishment, status-enhancing/maintaining, the importance of reputation and/or image of the Nordic states in international politics, and leadership, as well as how reputation, example-setting and norm
entrepreneurship can be used by small states to shape decisions. The small state literature has, however, neglected to examine a core factor in small states’ attempts to defend their interests and have a say in the international system, that is, their strategies to get elected to high office.

Recently, scholars have identified a gap in the International Relations (IR) literature regarding campaigning as an important factor that explains states’ success in getting elected to the UNSC. There is also a lack of studies on the strategies of small states to join the Council. Most studies on small states and the UNSC mainly cover their strategy to have a say in the Council. The aim of this article is to shed light on these two neglected fields of study regarding the UNSC, that is, the campaigns of small states to get elected to the Security Council.

Article 23 of the UN Charter describes the basis on which elected UNSC members should be selected and lays out that in the selection, special attention should be paid to states’ contribution to the maintenance of international peace and security, and to other purposes of the UN. Nevertheless, earlier statistical studies have identified that states need more to succeed in their bid for a seat on the Council than a good reputation, decisive contribution or highly respected delegates. In the case of Iceland, neither the state’s emphasis on conflict prevention and peace promotion, nor the advantage of being a first-time candidate, explains the state’s failure to get elected to the UNSC. In fact, previous findings do not capture why some states succeed while others fail.

Findings do indicate, however, that small states face a particular challenge to succeed in their campaigns due to their limited diplomatic and economic capacity compared with larger states. These findings are backed up by the growing small state literature on small states’ foreign services and how they have to adopt special strategies in order to overcome weaknesses associated to their smallness. Small states have to use different strategies based on the special characteristics of their public administration/foreign service, such as greater flexibility, informality and manoeuvre of officials, compared with

11 Ingebritsen 2002.
12 Sievers and Daws 2014; Ekengren, Hjorten and Möller 2020.
13 Ekengren and Möller 2020.
14 For example, see Thorhallsson 2012; Thakur 1996; Copeland 1999, 2010; Gillissen 2006, 23-24; Langmore 2013, 104-107; O’Brien 2015; Langmore and Farrall 2016, 59-61; Schrijver and Blokker 2020; Keating 2008; Kolby 2003.
15 Singer and Sensenig 1963; Maas Weigert and Riggs 1969.
16 Dreher et al. 2014.
17 Dreher et al. 2014; Ekengren and Möller 2020, 30-31.
18 Bartmann 2012; Panke and Gurol 2020.
larger states’ public administration. However, there is a lack of studies on what role ‘status-seeking’ plays in small states’ attempts to get elected to the UNSC. Most studies that deal with status simply note that reputation is essential in the Security Council without providing an examination. Moreover, most studies on status-seeking do not include small states in their analysis.

Iceland is an ideal case to study a small state’s campaign to get elected to the UNSC. After gaining independence from Denmark in 1918, Iceland relied heavily on its larger neighbouring states for security, economic and diplomatic backing, that is, Denmark until 1940, the UK at the beginning of World War II and then the United States. Iceland joined the post-war international organisations and became a founding member of NATO, and it received considerable assistance from them. Nevertheless, Iceland did not take an active part in them. The only exception was the establishment and application of the Law of the Sea. In the mid-1990s, Iceland’s foreign policy slowly began shifting from a reactive approach to a proactive approach in the international arena. The decision in 1998 to become a candidate for a seat on the UNSC was the clearest indication of this policy change as well as the creation of the Icelandic Crisis Response Unit (ICRU) (2000), which was explicitly earmarked for possible use by NATO, the European Union (EU), the UN and the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE). This policy shift can mainly be attributed to changed perceptions and preferences of the Icelandic political elite and external pressure from allies of the affluent Icelandic state to contribute more to the international community. Usually, a state is regarded as small in IR if it has fewer than 10 or 15 million inhabitants. In the period leading up to and during the Icelandic candidacy (and intended term on the UNSC) from 1991 to 2010, 42 states with populations of 10 million or fewer got elected to the Security Council.

Recently, a handful of studies have been conducted focusing especially on small states’ campaigning for a seat on the UNSC. They indicate the importance of decisive backing of domestic politicians and the harm a lack of political commitment to the core message of the campaign can have on the chances of getting elected. They ‘give us reason to assume that quality and attractive-

20 Thorhallsson 2006; Grøn and Wivel 2011.
21 E.g., Hurd 2002; Pouliot 2014.
22 E.g., Paul, Larson and Wohlforth 2014; Larson and Shevchenko 2010.
23 Thorhallsson 2006.
24 See discussions in Thorhallsson 2018, 18-27.
25 Thorhallsson 2012, 24-25.
26 Ekengren and Möller 2020; Chapnick 2019; Byrne 2011, 8 and 21; Tahzib-Lie and Rosing 2019, 470-472.
ness of campaigns can matter. However, the studies do not make use of the small state literature, with the exception of a study on Austria. Thus, they are in danger of missing an important variable, that is ‘the size of states’, in explaining contrasting campaign strategies, and states’ success or failure. The study on Austria also concluded that “[a] UN Security Council seat for Austria was not a question of a small state seeking status; rather, it was a quest for remaining relevant and maintaining status in a changing world system”. Austria is a small state according to the categorisation of states’ size. Nevertheless, Iceland is more of a typical small state with more limited financial and human resources and international presence compared with Austria. Furthermore, other studies identify the formulation of the campaign message, the size of the campaign budget, skilful people in charge of the campaign and a highly regarded UN mission at the UN Headquarters in New York as of importance in succeeding in the election.

3 The Theoretical Framework

Ekengren and Möller’s theoretical framework suggests that states venture into a UN Security Council (UNSC) candidacy because a seat on the Council can provide them with opportunities to a) shape decisions, b) improve their network and c) work on their status. a. Even though participation in international organisations can entail limitations on state sovereignty, it can also enable states to reach goals they would otherwise be unable to attain on their own. Ekengren and Möller therefore suggest that states run for a non-permanent seat on the UNSC in order to shape decisions and influence the political and legal order of which they are a part. For that reason, small and middle-sized states are more inclined to want to improve the multilateral order in order to limit the reach and influence of bigger states.

b. A seat on the UNSC may be tempting for states who are looking for ways to expand their network, according to Ekengren and Möller. The

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27 Ekengren and Möller 2020, 31.
28 Thorhallsson and Eggertsdóttir 2021.
29 Thorhallsson and Eggertsdóttir 2021, 53
30 Thorhallsson and Eggertsdóttir 2021, 56.
31 Whelan 2002, 8; Byrne 2011, 8, 19-21; Chapnick 2019; Langmore 2013; Malone 2000.
32 Ekengren and Möller forthcoming; Ekengren and Möller 2021.
33 Ekengren and Möller forthcoming.
34 Keohane and Nye 2011.
UNSC is arguably the most significant and powerful international body in the world and membership thereof, even if only temporary, can create opportunities for states to expand their diplomatic and political networks. Regular access to the Council's permanent five members, China, France, Russia, the UK and the United States (the P5), could also make a state more interesting in the eyes of other states, which in turn can pave the way for further networking outside the UNSC.  

35 Thorhallsson 2012.
36 De Carvalho and Neumann 2015.
37 Røren and Beaumont 2019, 12.
38 Towns 2010.
39 Iceland, NAP 2008-2013, 2.
40 Ingebritsen 2002.
41 Wohlforth et al. 2018.
42 Jakobsen, Ringsmose and Saxi 2018.

Moreover, status is more important for small states than for large powers, and small powers have to use other means than use of military and diplomatic force to gain prestige.  

41 Small states are not as concerned with practical benefits and physical security. Small states’ military engagement with the United States is not necessarily related to a sense of insecurity but rather is an attempt to enhance their status among US policy-makers. Austria sought membership on the UNSC in order to maintain its prominence, as discussed above. Theoretical discussions on status have led to the conclusion that
status-seeking ‘does not have to be explained as subservient to any other goal, it is its own goal’.43

Accordingly, we follow Ekengren and Möller’s understanding of status based on the domestic origin of status-seeking and the important role the size of states plays in their quest for prestige: the domestic arena shapes status-seeking of small states, and small states take on tasks internationally to gain prominence among external policy-makers. In this regard, the role of Icelandic public officials in the campaign to get a seat on the UNSC is particularly absorbing.

When it comes to campaigning for a UNSC seat, Ekengren and Möller introduce three campaign logics: a) demonstrating contributions, b) claiming competence and c) emphasising ideational commitment as methods for states to achieve favourable election outcomes, as shown in Table 1.44

| Demonstrating Contributions | Claiming Competence | Proving Ideational Commitment |
|----------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| Focus on previous and current contributions to the UN and the multilateral order, for example | Focus on current skills and expertise in leadership, for example by | Focus on the campaign’s consistent and trustworthy message, for example by |
| – a good historical reputation | – displaying competence in regard to promoted values | – promoting specific issues |
| – a good UN track record | – displaying resourcefulness when dealing with common challenges raised by the campaign | – defining certain global challenges |
| – a specific cultural/social capital | – proving domestic support | – displaying commitment to certain values and principles |
| – access to networks or economic and/or military resources that could be put at UN disposal | – promoting prominent politicians, diplomats and experts | – showing political dedication to the candidacy and promoted campaign messages |

43 Leira 2021, 208.
44 Ekengren and Möller forthcoming.
In our analysis we will examine to what extent Iceland showed signs of applying these logics during the campaign period, what meaning the logics had for them and if/how they were combined differently during the campaign.

4 Domestic Debate

The domestic debate about the UNSC candidacy in Iceland can be categorised into three periodical phases. The first phase, before 2003, was characterised by optimism and a generally positive, although very limited, debate about Iceland’s decision to run. The campaign was considered a timely event, confirming Iceland’s sovereign and independent status in the international arena. The candidacy also presented Iceland with a chance to establish itself as a nation among nations and a possibility to be an important role as a leader among smaller nations. Accordingly, we can identify clear domestic incentives behind this status-seeking attempt and the importance of enhancing prestige among external policy-makers. Size arguments were also applied; both the centre agrarian Progressive Party and the Left-Green Movement highlighted Iceland’s smallness as a strength and even a reason in itself to campaign, and because of Iceland’s smallness, contributions and actions in the UNSC were less likely to be met by suspicion, thus enabling a small state like Iceland to act as mediator in difficult and/or sensitive matters. At the same time Iceland was also regarded to be in a better position to safeguard its own national interests as a member on the Council.

The second phase was characterised by rising scepticism, beginning with Turkey’s decision to run for a non-permanent seat in 2003, followed by Iceland being placed on the list of the United States’ ‘coalition of the willing’. Discussions on the campaign’s financial costs sparked in late 2004 when an MP of the centre-right Independence Party, the largest and most influential political party in the country, announced that he felt that the campaign was hopeless and therefore it was inexcusable to waste substantial financial resources on a lost battle. Subsequently, voices of doubt became louder in Icelandic public debate and peaked when Oddsson, chairman of the Independence Party and Minister for Foreign Affairs, voiced similar concerns in April 2005.

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45 Gísladóttir 2007; Sverrisdóttir 2006; Ásgrimsson 1998a.
46 Benediktsson 2008; Ásgrimsson 2001, 2003a, 2003b.
47 Oddsson 2005a, 2005b.
48 Fríðgeirsson 2003; Halldórsdóttir 2003.
49 Morgunblaðið 2005.
50 Hauksson 2005; Oddsson 2005a, 2005b.
came into office in autumn 2004 after having served as Prime Minister since 1991. Oddsson would not declare his opposition to the campaign clearly until the very end of his year-long term in office in September 2005, but it would be demonstrated through declarations of doubt and the fact that the Icelandic Permanent Representation in New York received verbal directions from the ministry in Iceland to put the campaign on hold. Oddsson would become so sceptical about the matter that he would not even discuss it with officials responsible for the campaign’s organisation. The Foreign Ministers from the Independence Party were never really committed to the cause when they were in office.

The campaign was halted for almost a year, between September 2004 and September 2005, rendering the campaign without political leadership and the necessary financial resources for campaign activities. One high-ranking official said that the other Nordic states had scolded the Foreign Minister for dragging his feet: ‘It was not justifiable especially since Iceland had taken the Nordic spot from the Finns’. In early September 2005, Oddsson told the media that he had experienced a lot of pressure from his Nordic colleagues to proceed with the campaign, and this Nordic pressure was also echoed by Prime Minister Ásgrímsson: ‘Naturally the Nordic ministers are pressuring us. It was agreed that Iceland would run, not only on our behalf but also on the behalf of the Nordic countries’. In his address to the General Assembly in late September 2005, Oddsson made one vague reference to Iceland’s candidacy when he said that ‘Iceland has previously in this forum expressed its interest in participating actively in the work of the Council in the years 2009 and 2010’, thus demonstrating the low level of emphasis that he, as Foreign Minister, placed on the issue.

The third phase was marked by the campaign being back on track with Haarde as Foreign Minister in September 2005. The campaign was characterised by increased public awareness and interest, and a return to optimism.
The Decision to Run

The main reasons behind Iceland’s decision to campaign for a UNSC seat can be divided into four themes. Firstly, the personal ambition of politicians and individuals within the diplomatic corps was a significant driving force behind the decision to campaign for a seat on the UNSC. One interviewee described the undertaking as being part of ‘office politics; personal ambitions of individuals’, referring to both the Foreign Minister in office and high-ranking public officials within the foreign service. This is also reflected in public officials encouraging the Minister for Foreign Affairs in the mid-1980s to begin preparations for a possible UNSC candidacy by increasing Iceland’s activities within the UN. That resulted in Iceland becoming a first-time member on the UN’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which is considered a significant prerequisite and preparatory element before running for a seat on the UNSC. Furthermore, both Prime Minister Oddsson and Foreign Minister Ásgrímsson were encouraged by high-ranking public officials in the late 1990s to proceed with Iceland’s first candidacy for a seat on the UNSC. Iceland would again gain membership on the ECOSOC in 1997-1998 and shortly afterwards, in 1998, the decision to move forward with the UNSC candidacy was taken in government and announced publicly.

Seeking a non-permanent seat on the UNSC was regarded as a matter of principle and as a means to confirm Iceland’s sovereignty, thereby shouldering the country’s rightful duty to contribute to international politics. It was in view of this that the Icelandic foreign service grew considerably stronger in the 1990s, and in light of the optimism that characterised Icelandic society and its economy at that time, the MFA focused attention on Iceland’s readiness for assuming increased responsibility in the international arena, also within the UN. This was evident, for example, in Prime Minister Haarde’s descriptive words in 2007 when he talked about Iceland’s reasons to run:

The decision to run mirrors a new vision of Iceland’s position in international affairs and a new self-confidence and active engagement in foreign affairs. It entails a definition of Iceland as a strong, smaller state but rejects the identity of Iceland as a powerless microstate. It does
not mirror vanity but a natural revaluation and constant attempts to strengthen Iceland’s position.\textsuperscript{61}

Secondly, the candidacy was an important part of Iceland’s efforts to prove its international commitment to the US authorities, who had shown signs of declining interest in maintaining their military presence in Keflavík, as well as to the international community in general. Iceland was hoping to strengthen its traditional security by taking part in its allies’ international activities in the hope that they would keep their security commitments to the country.

Thirdly, the decision to become a \textsc{unsc} candidate was also to some extent justified as being economically rewarding, as it created opportunities to lobby for vital national interests and build relationships, which could prove beneficial for the country’s economy.\textsuperscript{62} In this regard, it was mentioned that during the campaign Iceland received visits from powerful people from around the world in relation to the campaign that otherwise would not have come, such as the leader of the League of Arab States.\textsuperscript{63}

Fourthly, a completely transformed domestic, international, political and geopolitical environment opened the door for new foreign policy decisions and a much more active foreign policy. This change is reflected in increased international activities, such as in the foundation of the Icelandic International Development Agency in 1981, Iceland joining the European Economic Area (\textsc{eea}) in 1994 and the first steps towards establishing the \textsc{icru} in the 1990s, when peacebuilding and peacekeeping became one of the \textsc{mfa}’s key international activities, particularly within \textsc{nato}. There was an increased willingness by Icelandic policy-makers to contribute to the international community within their field of expertise and not only receive direct gains from overseas activities.\textsuperscript{64}

Put in context with Ekengren and Möller’s theoretical framework, Iceland’s decision to run seems to have been mostly motivated by the opportunities to work on the country’s status internationally and to shape decisions in matters concerning both internal affairs and the international community. In that manner, the candidacy was a statement of Iceland’s maturity as an established, sovereign and active participant in the international arena and served therefore as a way for Iceland to seek a new and enhanced status in the international system. Furthermore, in hopes of maintaining its current status as an active

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Haarde2007} Haarde 2007.
\bibitem{Benediktsson2008} Benediktsson 2008; Ærnason 2007; Ásgrímsson 2001, 2003a, 2003b.
\bibitem{High-rankingofficial} High-ranking official B interviewed by Jóna Sólveig Elinardóttir, 15 February 2018.
\bibitem{Thorhallsson2009} Thorhallsson 2009.
\end{thebibliography}
US military base, Icelandic authorities hoped that by running for a seat they were confirming their international commitment to the US government and thereby also hoping to shape US decisions on Iceland’s traditional security. Another example of Iceland’s efforts to shape decisions was their relatively new-found willingness to contribute to the international community and not just reap the benefits of other states’ good work. As a result, Iceland saw the candidacy as a way to promote the country’s foreign policy goals and objectives, including principles and values that Iceland upholds, such as the importance of respect for international laws and norms, human and women’s rights, respect for democracy and so forth. Signs of aspirations to enhance Iceland’s network can also be detected. The chance to build new relationships while campaigning was not lost on Icelandic policy-makers, but instead of seeing it as a way to expand Iceland’s diplomatic and political network, it was rather regarded as a means to benefit economically. Hence, Iceland also had economic incentives to run as it was a good way to secure the country’s own interests in an increasingly globalised world.

6 The Campaign’s Strategy and Challenges

It was not until 2006/2007, when Gísladóttir, leader of the Social Democratic Alliance, came into office as Foreign Minister, that the actual campaign was properly launched and a more targeted campaign strategy was formed. Three strategies can be identified: focus on lobbying small state subgroups most sympathetic to the small state case; organising and co-ordination of the campaign by public officials; and leveraging Nordic support and co-operation to strengthen the optics, substance and resourcing of the Icelandic push. Each of the strategies was undermined by a particular associated challenge.

Firstly, Iceland targeted specifically the small state votes in the UN by emphasising Iceland’s main areas of expertise, that is, sustainable use of natural resources and gender equality, and referring frequently to Iceland’s recent history, namely the country’s rapid development from being one of the world’s poorest countries to being one of the most prosperous ones. Hence, Iceland focused specifically on subgroups of small states within the UN, the Forum for Small States (FOSS) (an informal group now compromising 108 countries) and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) (a distinct group of 38 UN member states and twenty non-UN member/associate members of the UN regional commissions, at present). Iceland put the greatest emphasis on small island developing states in the Pacific and Caribbean that face challenges due to global warming and, in its pursuit of votes in the UNSC elections, provided
these states with financial support through a special development fund. Common interests and closer co-ordination of the small island states have granted them more attention from UNSC candidates and they have become important voters for Council seats. In addition, the 53 African states in the UN were also of special importance and therefore targeted by all candidates, with Iceland offering to contribute from its well of knowledge and experience as a former poor dependency.65

This strategy was, however, undermined by a particular challenge associated with Iceland’s lack of resources, that is, its inability to match the promises of overseas development assistance (ODA) of its larger competitors to the small states (a common feature in the UNSC campaigning process). Although most interviewees agreed that Iceland’s rising ODA levels were of great value for the candidacy, other perspectives were also presented: ‘The island states and poor states just want money’, said one high-ranking Icelandic official.66 In fact, there were instances where developing states asked Icelandic representatives whether Iceland would be able to match its competitors’ contributions. When inquired whether Iceland’s low level of ODA had negative effects on the candidacy, one high-ranking official said:

Yes, states in our focus groups asked questions. It could be that they weren’t convinced that we could deliver what we said we would. Turkey for instance gave two modern fire-trucks to a certain state and they asked us ‘What are you going to do?’ One Permanent Representative for a small state in the Mediterranean said that Austria had donated three fishing boats. ‘Could you deliver the same?’ We said that we couldn’t, we were only 300 thousand, but that we would speak up for their cause and emphasised that we had a similar way of thinking and common interests.67

Secondly, the Icelandic candidacy was entirely organised and managed by Icelandic public officials. They were in charge when it came to the choices of key messages, strategic campaign planning and running of the campaign. Political involvement was very limited. In fact, no politician, other than the Minister for Foreign Affairs (there were five different ministers during the campaign period), had any direct or formal affiliation to the campaign. The President of Iceland at the time was indeed proactive during the final years, but apart from that he had no formal involvement in the campaign itself.

65 Utanriksráðuneytið 2009b.
66 High-ranking official C interviewed by Jóna Sólveig Elinardóttir, 19 February 2018.
67 High-ranking official D interviewed by Jóna Sólveig Elinardóttir, 19 February 2018.
This led to a particular challenge during the campaign. Weak political ownership of the campaign, regardless of cross-party support in the beginning, made the campaign vulnerable to domestic criticism in 2004-2005 and undermined it both at home and abroad. The criticism primarily concerned financial costs, which rose after Turkey announced its candidacy in 2003, but Iceland — like Austria — had been hoping for a much cheaper, clean slate election. It became evident with Turkey’s candidacy that all candidates would have to invest in costlier campaigns than otherwise if their goal of winning a seat was to succeed. This caused much dissatisfaction in Icelandic public and political debate and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Oddsson, contemplated the withdrawal of Iceland’s candidacy.68

The third strategy implemented by Iceland was to get the Nordic states to promote Iceland’s cause. For the sake of compensating for their own limited human resources, the Icelandic foreign service decided to seek expert advice from both the Nordic countries and Ireland for the planning and managing of the campaign.69 As a result, in 2003 the Nordic Foreign Ministries and Permanent Missions in New York developed a plan for the division of tasks, taking into account different locations of Nordic embassies and networks in the world, and organised how the other Nordic states could help lobby internationally for an Icelandic UNSC seat. Collaboration between the Permanent Missions in New York was also important. The Nordic Permanent Representatives met every week and Iceland also spoke, on numerous occasions, on behalf of all the Nordic countries in different committees.70 Throughout the second half of the campaign the Nordic ministries shared information, such as monthly campaign reports, support analysis and strength analysis on which Nordic state was most likely to succeed in which geographic area. So-called constituencies were developed for each Nordic embassy based on who had the best contacts in each UN member state or who had the best development aid record in each area. In addition, the Nordic Permanent Missions co-operatively organised numerous events in New York, which both helped emphasise that Iceland’s candidacy was a joint Nordic venture and drew more attention to the country’s campaign, thus setting a higher standard of the Icelandic candidacy.71 From 2007, five experienced ambassadors were assigned to liaise with Nordic embassies around the world to align their campaign efforts. As an example of political efforts, three letters were sent in the names of Nordic leaders, that is,

68 Hauksson 2005; Oddsson 2005a, 2005b.
69 Utanriksråduneytið 2002.
70 High-ranking official D interviewed by Jóna Sólveig Elínardóttir, 19 February 2018.
71 Utanriksråduneytið 2009b.
the Nordic prime ministers, foreign ministers and development ministers, to their colleagues in the UN member states, asking for support for the Icelandic candidacy. This had never been done before. In fact, involving important political personalities would prove useful both in the international campaign as well as in New York. During the last days before the election, Jan Eliasson, former Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations and President of the United Nations General Assembly from 2005 to 2006, and former Danish Foreign Minister Niels Helveg Petersen contributed to Iceland’s campaign through participation in meetings and events in New York.\textsuperscript{72} The President of Iceland also wrote personalised letters to all UN member states.\textsuperscript{73} In this way, the administration was able to build serious momentum for the Icelandic campaign, thereby threatening the position of both Turkey and Austria. In fact, shortly before the elections, the think tank Security Council Report described the competition between the states as being ‘hot’ and predicted that it marked a return to contested elections in the WEOG group.\textsuperscript{74} According to a high-ranking Icelandic official, the Foreign Ministry’s mapping of support, based on declarations of support and vote exchange agreements, was in Iceland’s favour in the months before the financial crisis hit Iceland.\textsuperscript{75} Nevertheless, the Nordic states are also small states and they were not able to brush off the devastating consequences of an upcoming crisis for the Icelandic campaign.

These three strategies were supposed to compensate for numerous domestic and international challenges associated with the candidacy. Iceland’s lack of experience and expertise in the UNSC’s main fields of work, combined with the fact that Iceland had never held a seat on the Council before, would work to its disadvantage.

Domestically, the fact that Iceland was competing against strong, much larger candidates who both had extensive outreach and experience in the UNSC’s fields of work affected the level of confidence with which Icelandic political leaders would tackle domestic disputes and doubts over the issue. This was made even more difficult to tackle by the fact that the campaign had thus far been organised and run solely by public officials, making the political elite vulnerable and unequipped to argue on behalf of continuing the campaign.

\textsuperscript{72} High-ranking official C interviewed by Jóna Sólveig Elínardóttir, 19 February 2018.

\textsuperscript{73} High-ranking official B interviewed by Jóna Sólveig Elínardóttir, 15 February 2018; Utanriksráðuneytið 2009b.

\textsuperscript{74} Security Council Report 2008.

\textsuperscript{75} High-ranking official D interviewed by Jóna Sólveig Elínardóttir, 19 February 2018.
Internationally, lack of experience and expertise would also prove a challenge. Iceland was a new, unknown player with little more than its Nordic identity and good intentions. This would prove insufficient when Iceland became the first state to be hit by the 2008 international financial crisis and nearly its entire financial sector and economy collapsed overnight, on 6 October 2008, just two weeks before the UNSC elections in the UN General Assembly. The fall of the Icelandic banks made headlines all around the world. On 8 October, the British government decided to use its anti-terrorism legislation to freeze assets in branches of Icelandic banks operating in Britain and, based on EU/EEA rules, demanded full compensation for its citizens who had lost their investments in the banks’ savings schemes. This led to the infamous so-called Icesave dispute between Britain and the Netherlands, on the one hand, and Iceland, on the other. Moreover, Britain engaged in diplomatic attacks on Iceland’s bid for the UNSC in order to pressure the Icelandic government to obey. The Icelandic Permanent Representative in New York had to make the rounds to fight back against propaganda by his British counterpart, who was making the rounds to Commonwealth states, island and African states, as well as the EU Member States at the UN, saying that Iceland was unreliable and that states could not vote for a state that did not follow rules and regulations. This targeted approach by the British diplomats hit the Icelandic campaign especially hard since Iceland had invested heavily in these countries during the campaign, as a former dependency and a small state who had a lot to give when it came to expertise in sustainable use of natural resources, such as fisheries, geothermal energy and environmental protection. Iceland had also worked hard at establishing itself as the candidate for small states’ interests, promising to initiate monthly ‘de-marginalisation briefings’ for the SIDS partners during the two-year term.

Not even the Nordic co-operation could overcome the impact of this exogenous shock, and the co-operation itself was in fact affected by it. The Nordic states began to distance themselves from Iceland within the UN, and later they denied the country loans within the International Monetary Fund framework to counter the effects of the economic crisis until the Icesave dispute had been resolved.

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76 Haarde interviewed by Jóna Sölveig Elinardóttir, 20 February 2018; High-ranking official B interviewed by Jóna Sölveig Elinardóttir, 15 February 2018; High-ranking official D interviewed by Jóna Sölveig Elinardóttir, 19 February 2018; Utanríksráðuneytið 2009b.
77 Utanríksráðuneytið 2009a.
78 High-ranking official B interviewed by Jóna Sölveig Elinardóttir, 15 February 2018.
79 Strauss-Kahn 2009.
In addition, at the height of the economic crash, the Icelandic government publicly hinted that it was considering accepting a loan from the Russian government. Accounts on the issue were thought to have caused significant damage to the campaign, creating anxiety among NATO allies and post-Soviet states. Iceland did not have the diplomatic resources to fight back nor did it have the Nordic states’ backing.

Contextualised with Ekengren and Möller’s theoretical framework, the Icelandic campaign’s special strategies bear signs of the three campaign logics, although to a rather limited extent. The Icelandic campaign team made attempts to demonstrate Iceland’s contribution by pointing out its historical reputation and its rapid development from one of the world’s poorest countries to one of the most prosperous ones. This also allowed for references to the country’s cultural capital, followed by offers to share knowledge as a former poor dependency and expertise in fields such as sustainable use of natural resources and gender equality. Other signs of demonstrating contributions, and perhaps more vital ones, were not at Iceland’s disposal, inasmuch as Iceland had up until then not played an active role within the UN, had provided a low level of ODA and did not have access to any significant economic or military resources. Efforts to prove ideational commitment were also limited by the fact that Iceland had no experience in the traditional working field of the UN and its message was therefore confined to matters related to soft security. Moreover, the candidacy did not enjoy any political dedication until late into the campaign, which made proving ideational commitment even more challenging. Finally, this brings us to the logic of claiming competence or, more decisively, the lack thereof. On account of the Nordic rotation, the Icelandic campaign team was indeed successful in engaging its Nordic partners and important political figures in the campaign, however, these were all individuals outside the Icelandic government. On the home front, the Icelandic candidacy suffered from weak political ownership, which rendered it vulnerable to criticism and made domestic and international campaigning less trustworthy.

7 The Campaign’s Message

The campaign’s core message was based on its small size, that is, Iceland, a first-time candidate, could and should serve on the UNSC because it is a small state with the identity of a former dependency which rose from poverty to

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80 US Embassy in Iceland 2008.
81 Utanríkisráðuneytið 2009a.
wealth through responsible utilisation of its natural resources and gender equality. Iceland therefore emphasised its ability to apprehend the challenges that developing countries and former colonies face by drawing attention to the country’s recent transition from foreign rule and poverty to independence and prosperity. In this regard, Iceland’s main challenge was, however, its limited track record in the UN and low levels of ODA. Iceland had little to show internationally during its campaign but promises.

With the intention of appealing to developing states and island states, the island’s expertise in marine affairs and the use of clean, renewable energy was accentuated in order to affirm the country’s commitment to sustainable development as well as its sustainable use of natural resources. As a part of this strategy the Island Growth Initiative (IGI) was launched in Barbados in 2008, and then subsequently the Small Island Fund, whose purpose was to finance development projects, worth 4.5 million USD, for three years. The fund’s main focus was on sustainable use of natural resources, the fight against climate change and the promotion of gender equality. When asked whether Iceland ever promised anything in return for support, Foreign Affairs Minister Gísladóttir said that directly it was not so,

‘but we knew that having a Small Island Fund to finance projects and collaboration in Barbados and surrounding countries, then we were doing that to get their support. Because we were showing them support, we may expect their support in return’.

Moreover, catering to the interests of these states, numerous conferences and seminars were hosted in collaboration with small island states on the role and influence of small states in the 21st century. To strengthen more specifically relations with states in Central and South America, Iceland became an observing member of the Organization of American States, and Iceland’s Minister of Industry attended the organisation’s annual meeting where he held bilateral talks with numerous colleagues, drawing special attention to possibilities for co-operation in the field of geothermal energy.

As the majority of UN members are small states, who as such face many similar challenges, size inevitably became a key point in Iceland’s campaign. Furthermore, limited experience in the field of hard security confined Iceland
to try and use its very scarce financial and human resources to ‘sell’ its small-
ness, and thus weakness, as a strength and a reason to be elected. This, and the
fact that Iceland is a Nordic country and a non-EU Member State that does
not have an army, enabled Iceland to be perceived as a more neutral state.
It added to the country’s credibility when the promotion of gender equality,
women’s empowerment and women’s participation in conflict resolution and
peacebuilding was introduced as one of the key pillars in the campaign.86
Other, more ‘traditional’ messages were also present in Iceland’s campaign.
This included highlighting the country’s strong and long-standing commit-
ment to the UN, contributions to peacekeeping operations and efforts for
reconstruction in war-torn areas. The promotion of fundamental human rights
and democracy, respect for international law, the fight against poverty, along
with Iceland’s firm support for the reorganisation of the UNSC, were themes
that were presented, as well as the country’s emphasis on the importance of
trade liberalisation, counter-terrorism, disarmament and non-proliferation
of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Much like its campaign opponents,
Iceland made statements and promises of rising ODA levels and contributions
to peacekeeping operations.87

From a theoretical standpoint, Iceland’s campaign messages are mainly char-
acterised by two logics in Ekengren and Möller’s framework: demonstrating
contributions and proving ideational commitment. As a reference to the coun-
try’s contributions and a reminder of a good historical reputation, Iceland’s
core message was focused on its swift development from a poor and isolated
dependency to a flourishing economy and an increasingly active participant
in world matters. Despite Iceland’s history as a poor island state with limited
resources to contribute to UN work, the Icelandic campaign team made efforts
to highlight the country’s UN track record and its willingness to co-operate in
recent years. Iceland’s cultural capital in the form of skills in peacebuilding as
a neutral state and knowledge of small state challenges was also emphasised,
whereby the creation of the Small Island Fund was yet another attempt to
demonstrate the country’s contribution to UN member states, made in hopes
of winning votes in the election.

As for ideational commitment, Icelanders were well aware that they would
not be able to contribute much to the work of the UNSC when it came to mat-
ters of hard security due to lack of expertise and limited resources, but instead
they established the country’s commitment to UN values by emphasising

86 Utanriksráðuneytið, 2009b.
87 Ásgrímsson 1998b, 1999, 2003c; Oddsson 2000, 2005c; Haarde 2004, 2008; Sverrisdóttir
2006; Hannesson 2006, 2007; Gísladóttir 2007.
matters related to soft security, for example gender equality, human rights and international law. Iceland managed to define a certain global challenge by focusing on the issues that developing states and island states face and committed to them even further by offering to share expert knowledge in environmental affairs. In spite of all of the above, however, Iceland’s numerous attempts to project itself as a worthy recipient of a UNSC seat were overshadowed by the country’s failure to claim competence. Even with the support of its Nordic partners and promotion by prominent foreign individuals, the lack of domestic political support for Iceland’s promoted values, along with leadership reluctance towards the candidacy, effected its credibility and undermined all of its campaign messages.

All things considered, Iceland’s track record, when it came to issues such as peacekeeping and peacebuilding, and its ability to demonstrate its strengths, was much more limited than those of its opponents, which in turn had a damaging effect on the country’s credibility. Moreover, the country’s low levels of ODA (notwithstanding a fast upwards trend in the decade before the elections) made it ill-equipped to showcase strong international and internal competence and commitment to the work and goals of the UNSC. Actually, Iceland had little to show during its campaign but promises, its Nordic partners’ track records and its own domestic performance in soft security fields that perhaps only partially related to the work of the UNSC. Ultimately, vigorous campaigning and lobbying during the last two years of the campaign did not suffice as the country suffered a great loss of credibility due to its economic crisis combined with the diplomatic and legal crisis that marked the country’s relationship with the UK.

8 Implications and Conclusion

Theoretically, Iceland’s motivations to run were in line with Ekengren and Möller’s framework to a certain extent. Firstly, we conclude that Iceland’s reasons were consistent with the importance for small states to seek status. Accordingly, Icelandic diplomats and politicians saw membership of the UNSC as a means to promote the country’s status among states around the world and within international organisations. Their own enhanced status in the world of diplomats and political leaders was connected to this potentially new and enriched status of Iceland in international politics. Our findings confirm earlier findings of the status literature that domestic features shape status-seeking.

88 OECD 2016.
Secondly, Iceland's candidacy was based on reasons to shape decisions, both in terms of affecting the US decision on the Icelandic military base, and in terms of having a say in fields where Iceland possessed knowledge and expertise, thereby increasing its contribution to the international community.

Thirdly, Iceland's UNSC bid was also related to prospects of economic benefits in the long run, and for that reason network-building was considered as an opportunity to lobby for vital national interests and reap financial gains. As a matter of fact, contrary to their opponents, Icelandic public officials and the Ministers for Foreign Affairs at the time had to engage in ideological and political debates on whether Iceland could and should strive to become a relevant international actor in matters of international security. A part of the Icelandic political elite still regarded it as of primary importance to prioritise concrete economic gains from overseas relations rather than active involvement in world affairs. In view of this, we find that Ekengren and Möller’s theoretical framework does not factor in a (small) state's ambition to secure its own economic interests through its candidacy. In Iceland's case this stance is evident in political discourse and might be explained as a remnant of a former struggling dependency's coping mechanism.

In terms of the campaign's theoretical standpoint, we conclude that Iceland's campaign as a whole, although bearing some signs of Ekengren and Möller's campaign logics, was overshadowed by a general lack of contributions, competence and ideational commitment. Iceland did not have the status within the UN to build a successful campaign. Firstly, when it came to demonstrating contributions to the UN and the multilateral order, Iceland, as proof of its good historical reputation, referred to its identity as a former isolated dependency that swiftly transitioned from poverty to high levels of prosperity through responsible decision-making. References to its good, although limited, UN track record were also made, promises of rising ODA were given, along with proof of the country's cultural capital consisting of skills and knowledge in the challenges of small island/developing states. In spite of this, the Icelanders fell short of successful demonstration of contributions as they had to rely heavily on their Nordic partners due to their limited UN track record, scarce financial resources and administrative capacity. Moreover, because of the country's non-existent UNSC background, Iceland was dependent on its Nordic identity and the credibility of its campaign messages, which were, for example, built on Iceland's history of development from rags to riches since gaining independence. This argument, connected with Iceland's history of success, then suffered considerable damage towards the end of the campaign period due to the economic crisis and the diplomatic crisis in Iceland's relations with Britain, which had detrimental effects on the country's international credibility. The
crises damaged the status Iceland had gained during the campaign period. There was little left of Iceland’s prestige within the UN, which had been limited to begin with.

Secondly, concerning ideational commitment, Iceland’s choice of campaign messages was dependent on the fact that Icelanders had little to no experience with the traditional working fields of the UNSC. As a result, they were confined to shaping their messages on their domestic performance in soft security fields that related, albeit only partially, to the work of the UNSC, such as gender equality and the sustainable use of natural resources. More ‘traditional’ messages involving hard security matters were also subject to Iceland’s limited experience with UNSC work. They included highlighting the state’s strong and long-standing UN commitment, as well as its contributions to peacekeeping missions and reconstruction in war-torn areas in recent years. Iceland acknowledged UN values and principles by emphasising its respect for international law and human rights, promotion of democracy and the fight against poverty, as well as confirming the country’s support for the reorganisation of the UNSC, alongside its focus on the importance of counter-terrorism, trade liberalisation, disarmament and the non-proliferation of WMDs. However, these were, yet again, matters that Iceland had limited resources and experience of working with, which arguably had an impact on the Icelanders’ confidence in their own capabilities, and on the country’s international credibility. Furthermore, the lack of domestic political dedication made proving ideational commitment even more challenging and undermined Iceland’s promoted campaign messages.

Thirdly, claiming competence is the logic that proved most troublesome for the Icelandic campaign. In fact, the campaign failed completely in some respects to display leadership skills and prove domestic political ownership. The fact that the Icelandic campaign was solely organised and run by Icelandic public officials, without much political participation in the strategic planning, choices of key messages or campaign management, resulted in weak political ownership of the campaign, which, despite cross-party support in the beginning, left the campaign vulnerable to domestic criticism and damaged the international campaign. Consequently, the campaign was not able to display competence and sufficient political backup in regard to Iceland’s promoted values. Ambiguous public officials, determined to enhance their status among international colleagues, did not have the weight to carry out a successful campaign. Their status-seeking lay behind the decision to run for the seat.

Finally, what are the broad lessons to be drawn out of this case for practice? Iceland probably sought membership of the Security Council too soon. The case of Iceland indicates that election probably depends more on past
performance than on promises for the future, though both are important. Our study indicates that small states have to engage in substantial activity in the UN prior to their UNSC candidacy. Hence, demands made in Article 23 of the UN Charter that states’ election to the UNSC should be based on their contribution to the maintenance of international peace and security and other purposes of the UN have a significant impact on the election outcome. Election to the UNSC is the culmination of a period of substantial national activity in the UN. Our findings are important for other small UN states including small island states, such as in the Caribbean, South East Asia and the South Pacific, especially since they now have a clear picture of what is needed prior to becoming a candidate to the UNSC and what is needed during the campaign for membership in the Council. Prior to UNSC candidacy, small states do not only have to prove themselves as active UN members but also have to have a reputation within the UN that has granted them status. We hope that this study opens the way for further research that draws on multiple cases of small states to develop the field more carefully.

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