

Accession is a logical next step



ICELAND Launching its bid for EU membership. REUTERS

The financial crisis may have re-triggered the debate, but Iceland's application for EU membership is driven by a deeper, longer-term logic, writes Össur Skarphedinsson

I will today present Iceland's application for membership of the EU to Carl Bildt, representing the presidency of the European Union. This follows the Icelandic parliament's decision last week to empower the government to negotiate an accession agreement and then to hold a national referendum. For me, this will be an honour. For Iceland, it will be a historic milestone.

It is also only the latest, albeit the most important, step in a long-standing relationship with the EU. Since the 1950s, we have shared a labour market, passport union and social legislation with our Nordic neighbours. In 1970, Iceland joined the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and, in 1994, the EU's internal market. As a member of the Schengen area since 2001, Iceland is already an integral part of the EU's external border.

This means that, all in all, we have adopted 22 out of 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire* into Icelandic

law. As Olli Rehn, the European commissioner for enlargement, has put it: "If EU accession is a marathon, Iceland has already completed the first 40 kilometres."

Beyond that, Iceland co-operates closely with the EU in numerous international institutions and in peacekeeping missions. It has also expressed its solidarity with Europe's less prosperous regions since 1994, through the financial mechanism of the European Economic Area.

Some suggest that Iceland's application is an opportunistic reaction to the economic storm that hit Iceland last October. This is not so. Although certainly a catalyst for a renewed debate about the EU, the global financial crisis is not the main reason. Given Iceland's clearly European identity, the more fitting question is why Iceland did not apply earlier. Issues of independence, sovereignty and natural resources were crucial, and they remain sensitive. A key issue is fisheries: 40% of our exports are fish products and income from fisheries

is worth more than €2,500 per person, 100 times more than the EU average. While Iceland supports the aims of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) – responsible and sustainable use of living marine resources in the interests of all – it is no secret that a failure to deliver on the CFP's promise has consistently reined in our membership ambitions.

I am encouraged, however, by the current discussions on CFP reform and optimistic that solutions are within our grasp. Agriculture will also need special attention, given its role in food security and land maintenance in a country that would be the Union's most remote and northerly member.

So why apply now? Above all, our application reflects our will and readiness to chart a new, sustainable path, anchored this time in the EU. We believe, too, that we can make substantial contributions in areas of growing importance for the EU in which we have considerable experience and considerable interests, such as sustainable fisheries, renewable energy, arctic policy and the environment.

Security is also a factor. Iceland's security arrangements are well grounded, above all in NATO, but it is natural to look to the EU for enhanced long-term security co-operation.

And what kind of member would the EU get in Iceland? It would be admitting a small but developed nation of 320,000 citizens; the only country located in its entirety within the Arctic; a nation with a strong track record of using renewable energy and marine resources in a sustainable manner; and a Nordic nation with deep democratic roots and a firm commitment to social welfare. I am confident that in the not so distant future, Iceland will be able to contribute to the EU's competitiveness, environmental goals and social cohesion.

The European Council will now assess Iceland's application on its merits. There will be challenges to overcome, but, with good faith and understanding, we will be able to find solutions that respect the EU's principles while safeguarding Iceland's vital national interests.

As a European nation already closely linked to the European integration process, Iceland has long contributed to Europe's common goal: ensuring peace and prosperity. This step will deepen that contribution. It will deepen a long relationship. It is, in short, the next logical step.

Össur Skarphedinsson is the foreign minister of Iceland.

Sea, saunas, beer and a chance to revive the Baltic region

Urmas Paet navigates a course for the Baltic Sea strategy and for regional co-operation in other parts of Europe

Did you know that the Baltic Sea is the shallowest sea in the world, just 52 metres deep on average? Its connection to the ocean is so narrow at the Danish straits that it takes decades for the waters of the Baltic Sea to circulate fully. Or that the Baltic Sea is one of the busiest maritime trade routes in the world?

The Baltic Sea's environmental fragility, its commercial importance and the vulnerability of its industries, such as fisheries, make a macro-regional approach crucial.

So the European Commission's strategy for the Baltic Sea region – laid out in June – is welcome. It has already broken ground: the consultations across the region were uniquely comprehensive.

If the strategy is acted on, it will be a modern milestone in a history of regional co-operation that stretches back to the Hanseatic League.

But it needs to be understood that we are not creating anything new. The strategy brings together numerous forms of co-operation and policies already being applied in the region. The problems are old and the possible solutions have long been known.

The failings in the past have been a lack of implementation and the lack of a cross-sectoral and trans-national vision. Too often we have not seen how actions in one area might influence other areas.

On a national level, countries acting individually risk creating a zero-sum

game. Essentially, therefore, the strategy sets out a fuller, more coherent development path and should act as an accelerator.

But the proof of this pudding is in the eating. We need clear results. To get results, we need to focus on what is realistic. For that reason, Estonia would like to shorten the short-list of projects set out in the Commission's action plan. We need to concentrate on those that are most important and already enjoy widespread support.

That kind of concentration should help garner the clear political commitment needed from member states, the Commission and regional bodies. The commitment needed does not necessarily entail much more work, since so much is known of the problems and solutions. What is required is for us to shepherd goodwill and our collective efforts.

It also means we should understand what this strategy represents. This

strategy is not an obligation for the EU; instead, it is an opportunity to revive a region. It is also an opportunity to create an example. Regional co-operation across Europe is so intense and on so many levels that there is now a clear need for co-operation to be managed.

It would be a welcome outcome if successful management of co-operation in the Baltic region were to encourage management initiatives elsewhere, particularly in the Danube area.

But the approach to managing co-operation would need to be tailor-made for each region, not off-the-shelf. Those who live by the Baltic Sea know that cold beer in a sauna is a match made in heaven. To some that might seem odd, but such differences make Europe interesting. Such peculiarities should also shape our approach to a region's problems.

Urmas Paet is the foreign minister of Estonia.