

The might of the weak? Icelandic support for Baltic independence, 1990–1991

Draft 1, 05 08 2011

Gudni Jóhannesson

gj@akademia.is

Introduction

The structure of the paper is meant to encourage debate and discussion. It should not be considered as a draft chapter or article. At the workshop, I hope to pose some questions and thoughts which I hope will be answered - or at least debated! Still, I also aim to publish a chapter or article at some point about Icelandic support for Baltic independence in 1990–1991. From my point of view, the primary question there would be about the scope and content of such a product: What does the international academic community most need? What would be most welcomed in the Baltic states? Should the emphasis be on a narrative, a sort of ‘what happened when’; what the Icelandic authorities actually did and how that was received, in the Baltic states, in Moscow and not the least in Washington and other Western capitals?

Or should there also be a heavy theoretical aspect? Two things come to mind there:

- 1) The status of small states (microstates) in the international system. Is it possible that a small state, even a microstate, can influence monumental events in international affairs? Is Icelandic support for Baltic independence in 1990–1991 possibly a fine case study to demonstrate that?
- 2) Realism and idealism. Does Icelandic support for Baltic independence in 1990–1991 demonstrate the difference between an idealistic, moral outlook and cold-blooded *Realpolitik* in international affairs?

The latter point also raises the question of a comparative approach: How much emphasis should be on the policies of other Western states?

Finally, I would like to emphasise that I would especially welcome recommendations about sources on the Baltic independence struggle in 1990–1991, both in general and in particular about Western attitudes.

Capabilities of small states in the international system

The study of small states is of course an established, and growing, field within political science and IR. Most small states theorists agree that small states can have an impact in the international arena, i.e. that they can ‘punch above their weight’. This is of course enthusiastically supported by the statesmen and politicians in small states all over the world. How can small states achieve this? Here are a few considerations:¹

- 1) ‘possession of superior military and economic force cannot guarantee small power compliance with big power interests. ... it is evident that small states on the rim of the alliance wheel can pursue active, forceful and even obstreperous policies of their own’ (Keohane)

- 2) ‘Societal forces in small states may, on occasion, outsmart the strong.’⁶
- 3) ‘Small states in international relations may serve as examples to others in the international system.’⁶
- 4) ‘Small states are in the position to protest the actions of more powerful states precisely because of their relative capacities.’⁶

Today, few would question the potential capabilities of small states to act with success on the international scene. Apparently, that factor is no longer debated that much within IR. To quote the Norwegian small state scholar, Christine Ingebritsen, ‘Third- and fourth-wave theorists no longer question the relevance of small states in the international system and are further refining arguments concerning relative capacities of small states, reputation and image in international relations, and the role of small states as global agenda-setters’.²

Naturally, some scholars remain pessimistic that small states can influence events to any meaningful degree. *Realpolitik* rules the world, they claim an point to the oft-quoted remark of Thucydides in his history of the Peloponnesian Wars, that the strong do what they want and the weak have to obey (in pol-sci speak that if Actor A is stronger than Actor B then Actor A can get Actor B to do what Actor A wants Actor B to do...). In the words of Icelandic political scientist Jón Ormur Halldórsson, ‘Small nations do themselves no favour by harbouring illusions about their capabilities to influence world affairs.’³

Realism, idealism, the West, the Baltic states and the end of the Cold War

I am influenced here by a) various declarations by Baltic statesmen and politicians (esp. Landsbergis in Lithuania), b) Kristina Spohr Readman’s article in *Cold War History* in 2006⁴ and c) general press coverage in 1990–1991.

The connections to IR theories are of course obvious here as well. The conflict between idealism and realism, or morality and expediency, has been called ‘the first debate’ of International Relations.¹ Although abundant subdivisions of the two contrasting perspectives may be established,² the core issue is to all intents and purposes clear, as put for instance by Reinhold Niebuhr in the early 1930s: ‘Politics will, to the end of history, be an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises’.³

¹ Stefano Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 1998), 16. For other overviews on realism and idealism in international relations, see for instance the classic work, Martin Wight, *Power Politics* (London: Penguin for the RIIA, 2nd edition 1986, edited by Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbraad (1st edition 1946)), Raino Malnes, *National Interests, Morality and International Law* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1994), and Frances V. Harbour, *Thinking about international ethics. Moral Theory and Cases from American Foreign Policy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

² See for instance Martin Griffiths, *Realism, Idealism and International Politics. A Reinterpretation* (London: Routledge, 1992), and Ngaire Woods (ed.), *Explaining International Relations Since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society. A Study in Ethics and Politics* (London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1933), 4.

Western attitudes to the Baltic struggle for independence in 1990-91 serve as a fine example of this conflict,⁴ and the fact that expediency usually trumps morality in international politics. While fine declarations of support for the oppressed Balts could be heard, Western policymakers were much more cautious in action, claiming that their reservation was based on a realistic assessment of the situation. Their critics, however, insisted that the discrepancy between words and deeds was hypocritical, immoral and unjust. Accordingly, in a vivid impression of the all-important position of the United States in these years one commentator argued that President George Bush ‘thought and acted like Nixon, but borrowed the rhetoric of Wilson and Carter’.⁵

The history of Western attitudes to the Baltic states was discouraging. For tactical reasons Britain had admittedly given vital assistance to the Balts in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. Even so, Western states only grudgingly recognised the independence of three new states, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and had little faith in their ability to survive in the international system. Soviet annexation in the Second World War then showed that Western commitment to Baltic freedom was weak. Both Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt found themselves forced to accept that the Baltic states would not regain their status after the war, although neither Britain nor the United States recognised the annexation *de jure*. On the whole Western governments accepted that state of affairs *de facto*, feeling as time went on that the fate of the Baltic states was an established fact which nothing could change.⁶

Notwithstanding this thinking, moral support was voiced in the West, especially in the United States where exiled Balts held the plight of their nations aloft. A Captive Nations Week was held every year and in 1989, on the eve of the Baltic struggle for international support, President Bush declared that ‘America stands with you’.⁷ It remained to be seen, however, whether these were only empty words, uttered in the apparently safe knowledge that they would not have to be lived up to. German reunification would be a comparative example, where some Western statesmen admitted how they had supported that aspiration, assuming it would never be realised.⁸

Icelandic actions

In 1990–1991, four main events or episodes determined Icelandic-Baltic relations:

- The Lithuanian declaration of independence, March 1990. The Icelandic parliament, the *Althing*, sent congratulations on the restoration of statehood to Vilnius.⁵

⁴ The terms ‘Balts’ and ‘Baltic’ are used here, as is common practice, to cover Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and the home population there, although the Finno-Ugric Estonians are strictly speaking not Balts.

⁵ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., ‘What New World Order?’ *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 71, No. 2, 84.

⁶ V. Stanley Vardys and Romuald J. Misiunas (eds.), *The Baltic States in Peace and War 1917-1945* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978), and Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992). [fint the right pages]

⁷ See *Newsweek*, 7.5.1990, 5.

⁸ See *Der Spiegel*, 25.9.1989, 16-17, 18.12.1989, 17, and Werner Weidenfeld (with Peter M. Wagner and Elke Bruck), *Außenpolitik für die deutsche Einheit. Die Entscheidungsjahre 1989/90. Geschichte der deutschen Einheit*, Vol. 4 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1998), 92.

- The ‘January events’, 1991. Soviet harassment reached new levels in the Baltic states.⁶ The Icelandic Foreign Minister, Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, went to Riga, Vilnius and Tallinn, offering moral support and promising that Iceland would establish diplomatic relations ‘as soon as possible’.
- Recognition of Lithuanian independence confirmed by the *Althing*, February 1991. Diplomatic relations were to be taken up ‘as soon as possible’.⁷
- Recognition of independence, August 1991. In the wake of the failed coup in Moscow, Iceland established diplomatic relations with the three Baltic states.

These actions were deeply appreciated in the Baltic states. ‘Nobody did as much for us’, Vytautas Landsbergis, the leader of the Lithuanian struggle for independence, later insisted.⁸ But is this a true assumption? It is an undisputed fact that the authorities in Iceland took an active interest in the Baltic struggle. But why did the Icelanders get involved? How did they intend to make a difference, and did they succeed? What effect could Iceland, a tiny state on the international scene, have in the Baltic struggle for independence?

Incentives and dissuasions

In the cold war era calls for support from Baltic representatives in exile went unanswered in Iceland.⁹ The rationale for inaction was simple. Icelandic politicians calculated that they could do little or nothing to assist peoples under the Soviet yoke. This was their *Realpolitik*. On the other hand, by 1990 the situation had changed and the Icelandic authorities appeared willing to assist the subjugated peoples in Estonia, Latvia and Estonia by almost all possible means, although doubts also arose about the wisdom or feasibility of such a commitment. Ten points might be mentioned here:

Change in Moscow. The reforms, unleashed by Mikhail Gorbachev, had of course altered the scene. Leaving aside how much happened because, despite or regardless of his intentions, by 1990 the Baltic nations could seemingly aim for complete independence without risking death or Siberian exile. This of course changed perceptions abroad as well. The rise of Boris Yeltsin and his tactical unity with the Baltic independence movements must also be kept in mind. From the spring of 1990, Gorbachev vacillated between repression and radical reform, but appeared firm on the latter side in the summer of 1991 – a policy which led directly to the August coup. That fiasco was the best example of changes in Moscow explaining Icelandic attitudes to Baltic independence. ‘A window of opportunity’ existed, as Foreign Minister Uffe Ellemann-Jensen of Denmark and Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, put it. But they had not opened it, rather the hard-liners in the Kremlin.¹⁰

Sincere sympathy. Despite the pragmatic aloofness of the cold war years, most Icelanders had sympathised with the Baltic nation. That feeling grew steadfastly, especially after the Soviet atrocities in January 1991 when Hannibalsson, who was by and large allowed to determine Baltic policy, became convinced that only solidarity with the Baltic peoples would convince Gorbachev to heed their demands.¹¹ There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Icelandic actions. The rulers in Reykjavik were moved by moral considerations of compassion and justice. Still, there was room for other incentives and more cynical thoughts also influenced their thinking.

Willingness to matter. The Icelandic authorities soon discovered that actions on behalf of the Baltic nations could provide a rare opportunity to play a role on the international scene. Offers to house negotiations between Moscow

and the Baltic side in Reykjavik were marked by that notion. In addition, the alleged tendency of other Nordic states to think little of Icelandic pretensions spurred on the authorities. Hannibalsson later underlined that he just could not stand 'Scandinavian paternalism'.

As time went on, Icelandic involvement also served to explain continued support for the Baltic independence. 'If you have meant anything by your words so far,' Landsbergis told Hannibalsson immediately after the killings in Vilnius in January 1991, 'then I dare you to come and stay with us in the parliament'.¹² The foreign minister stood up to the challenge, no doubt partly influenced by the willingness to live up to the trust shown him.

Domestic pressure. From 1988 to May 1991 a centre-left coalition was in power in Iceland. In opposition, the right-wing Independence Party constantly called for the fulfilment of Lithuanian wishes on full recognition and diplomatic relations. After all, the majority of Icelanders seemed to favour that step.¹³ Domestic pressure thus has to be taken into account, especially when explaining the decision to reiterate the recognition of Lithuania in February 1991. Despite common agreement then, the ruling parties usually claimed that the opposition was reckless and mostly concerned with scoring cheap points in internal politics. Such accusations were not wholly unfounded and were substantiated after May 1991, when the Independents entered government, with Hannibalsson's Social Democratic Party. Yet no recognition of Lithuania followed.¹⁴

Size and location. Small nations do not necessarily have to see the 'big picture', as greater states feel committed to do. This capability or temptation to leave out the wider context was bound to influence decision-making in Reykjavik, intentionally or not. Iceland enjoyed 'the unique freedom of small nations', in the words of Vytautas Landsbergis.¹⁵ Another aspect, related to geopolitical realities, was voiced by Lennart Meri, Foreign Minister of Estonia during the struggle for independence. When asked why the Icelanders, of all people, were so forthcoming he swiftly replied by saying that they were so far away from Russia that they had nothing to fear.¹⁶

Western caution. The Balts became very disappointed by prevalent attitudes in the West to their aspirations. At best, they were kindly asked to show patience; at worst they were accused of selfishness and disregard for the precarious position of Gorbachev in the Kremlin.¹⁷ Soon after the Lithuanian declaration of independence in March 1990 the Icelanders therefore began to criticise the general mood in the West. The USSR had retaliated against decisions in Vilnius by imposing an economic blockade, but outside criticism was rather mooted, which was best expressed when President François Mitterrand and Chancellor Helmut Kohl encouraged the Lithuanians to rescind 'the effects of their declaration'. Hannibalsson in turn thought of appeasement,¹⁸ and on the whole Icelandic politicians shared the disappointment in the Baltic states. Although the more drastic events in January 1991 were initially condemned, as the dust settled it could be seen that Western attitudes to Gorbachev and the Baltic independence struggle had hardly changed

All these factors above explain why the Icelanders became involved in the Baltic struggle for independence. There were, however, also considerations, which worked to discourage them from committing themselves wholly to the Baltic cause.

Western clarifications. While fault was found with Western attitudes they also had a restraining effect. The US Ambassador to Iceland regularly conveyed the message that appreciation must be shown to the complexities of the world agenda, for instance German unification, disarmament, and a united front against Iraq.¹⁹ Everywhere Soviet

goodwill and co-operation was needed, whether one liked it or not, and if the Icelandic authorities wanted to be taken seriously, they could not completely ignore these considerations, even if Landsbergis reminded them of their ‘unique freedom’.

Baltic disunity. The Baltic nations were divided on ways to achieve independence, both internally, and on state level. The Estonians and Latvians were more pragmatic and cautious than the temperamental Lithuanians, led by Landsbergis — ‘the catholic martyr in the south’, as Lennart Meri labelled him. In Lithuania, Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene and Algirdas Brazauskas, leader of the revamped Communist Party, wanted to proceed slower than the more powerful parliamentary leadership, guided by Landsbergis.²⁰ This absence of common policy could hinder effective assistance. Acceptance of Lithuanian tactics might not be appreciated in Tallinn and Riga, and vice versa.

Diplomatic custom. At times the question of diplomatic relations with Lithuania dominated Icelandic-Baltic relations. Tradition and technicalities constituted a formidable hindrance here. Legally, Iceland considered the Baltic states independent, but when Hannibalsson went there he had to apply for a Soviet visa. That paradox could not be tolerated if diplomatic relations were to be established. Envoys would have to deliver their credentials, even if they were not stationed permanently in Iceland and Lithuania, and it was inconceivable that they would apply for permission to do so through a third country.

Soviet warnings. Probably the most serious stumbling block was found in Moscow. The validity of the observation on the protective distance between Iceland and the USSR turned out to be shortlived. From the summer of 1990 Icelandic officials had to listen to constant protests from the Soviet side, and even indirect warnings on the future of trade relations, which were of considerable importance for Iceland.²¹

The Soviet response to the *Althing's* re-recognition of Lithuanian independence in February 1991 was particularly harsh. In Moscow some are to have insisted that it was ‘about time to teach the Icelanders a thorough lesson’.²² The Ambassador to Reykjavik was recalled and notice was made, in connection with the promise to establish diplomatic relations with Lithuania ‘as soon as possible’ that such an act would necessitate a rupture of relations with the USSR.²³

Action and inaction

These were the incentives and dissuasions which determined Icelandic attitudes in the Baltic struggle for independence. But how were they revealed in practice? What was the outcome?

Linkage. From the summer of 1990 onwards, cultural links were established with the Baltic states and trade connections examined. Baltic representatives visited Iceland, and some Icelandic politicians went eastwards. Still, when dignitaries from Tallinn, Riga or Vilnius came to Reykjavik care was taken to treat them a step below leaders of fully independent states.²⁴ In this aspect, Hannibalsson’s journey to the Baltic states was the clearest example of the tight relationship established between the two sides during these years.

Mediation. Soviet-Baltic meetings were never held in Reykjavik. Until the very end the Kremlin considered the ‘Baltic question’ an internal affair and negotiations outside the USSR were in fact unthinkable. Even when promoting the idea Prime Minister Hermannsson admitted that the thought of Soviet acceptance was ‘ridiculous’.²⁵

With Iceland so clearly on the Baltic side later on, especially with regard to Lithuania, the possibility could only become more remote, as Hannibalsson explained to Estonian and Latvian leaders, who favoured this idea surprisingly long.²⁶ Hence the considerable willingness to placate Vilnius worked against efforts to assist the other Baltic states. And at the same time the will to act the mediating role mitigated the temptation to go all the way with the Lithuanians. In both cases the inevitable result, all things considered, was inaction.

Diplomatic relations. The dissuading considerations, outlined above, were strong enough to deter the Icelanders from fulfilling Lithuanian wishes in this matter until the world changed in August 1991. The decision to stall was not easy, and during the tumultuous times of early 1991, in particular, the conflict between morality and expediency crystallised completely inside Hannibalsson's head. Whilst in Lithuania, he almost promised diplomatic relations within days: 'This is not just a question of diplomatic conditions and legal wrangle. This is a question of morality, justice, solidarity — courage'.²⁷ But in the closed confines of the *Althing's* foreign affairs committee, far away from the killing sites, the barricaded parliament and the emotional leadership of Lithuania, he argued, conversely, that the government could not merely consider morality and justice; hard facts had to be observed as well.²⁸

Agitation. This may have been the most important aspect of Iceland's support for Baltic independence. Led by Hannibalsson, Icelandic politicians and officials raised the plight of the Baltic nations in all possible venues, inside NATO and the Nordic Council, at the United Nations and the Council of Europe and so on. 'We were like gadflies, we stung them all the time', Hannibalsson was to reflect.²⁹ Soviet intransigence in dealing with the Baltic issue was also protested, and after the January events the strongest condemnations came from Iceland.

Effects and non-effects

Did the 'stings', or other Icelandic efforts, make a difference? In order to establish the true power of Icelandic involvement it is necessary to look in various directions: to Moscow, the Baltic states, and Western capitals. Developments during the August coup also need special attention.

Moscow. Despite the annoyance raised by Icelandic declarations and actions, the rulers in Reykjavik never managed to directly influence decision-making in the Kremlin. The power asymmetry was far too wide. A headline which once appeared, 'Iceland warns the Soviet Union',³⁰ was as surrealistic as it sounds. And immediately after the failed coup, when the Icelanders were establishing diplomatic relations with the Baltic nations, a monumental step for the two sides, President Gorbachev's spokesman was asked to comment and somewhat sarcastically replied that the Soviet leadership 'now had other things on [their] minds than Icelandic statements'.³¹ Still, the Icelanders had an indirect effect in Moscow, by contributing to developments in the Baltic states and the West.

The Baltic states. As in Moscow, Icelandic activities never determined directly the course of the Baltic fight for independence. Yet they reassured the Baltic peoples. Nearly all of them argue that the moral support, given by Iceland, was invaluable, even unique.³² Visits, declarations and resolutions enhanced the feeling that they were not alone in their struggle. Lithuanian disappointment over the absence of diplomatic relations, quite strong behind the scenes,³³ did not overcome the general appreciation, manifested in countless ways and most notably in Lithuania where crosses were erected in honour of Iceland and streets renamed after that 'courageous nation in the north'.

The West. In June 1990 Hannibalsson made one of his battle calls for the Balts in international forums, at a CSCE conference in Copenhagen. Afterwards the head of the US delegation embraced him and said that that this was the best speech he had heard about this 'bloody situation', adding that it was 'indeed a privilege to represent a small nation and be able to express one's feelings freely'.³⁴

The unintended indication could be that the representative from Iceland could say more or less what he wanted; he had no influence, no effect. Icelanders often found that their actions either went unnoticed or, as happened after Hannibalsson's Baltic visit and the re-recognition of Lithuania's independence, that it was thought impermissible to follow emotional futility of this kind.³⁵ Baltic representatives had hoped that he would 'open the gates', and Landsbergis assured the rulers in Reykjavik that if they went ahead with diplomatic relations, others would follow, for instance Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel, full of sympathy to oppressed nations. This was wishful thinking. The newly liberated East Europeans, already seeking integration into Western Europe, had their priorities set on keeping relations with the USSR as cordial as possible.³⁶ Even so, the constant pressure at international level had to have an indirect effect. It helped to keep the Baltic cause on the agenda, even if it could not be moved to the top of it.

The August Coup. The most convincing case for Icelandic influence might be made in connection with the August coup and world-wide recognition of Baltic independence. In February, Foreign Minister Ellemann-Jensen of Denmark had initially criticised Iceland's re-recognition of Lithuania but then signed similar declarations with his Baltic colleagues. The ambition to play a leading role had told, for Ellemann-Jensen was 'obviously irritated' because of the praise which Baltic representatives heaped on the Icelanders.³⁷

The chain of events was similar in August 1991. While the Icelanders offered diplomatic relations on August 22, almost immediately after the failure of the coup, Ellemann-Jensen, as other Western statesmen, hesitated. He changed course, however, and two days later declared Denmark ready to resume full relations with the Baltic states. Then and afterwards the Danish Foreign Minister insisted that changed circumstances in the east had made the turnaround possible, first and foremost the sudden prominence of Boris Yeltsin. Again, however, the Icelandic example should not necessarily be disregarded.³⁸ The knock-on effect had started in Reykjavik. The Danes then had enough power to persuade others, primarily in Nordic circles. The Baltic nations had long since won public sympathies there and the more cautious statesmen in Norway and Sweden, not to mention Finland, would have found it extremely difficult not to follow Denmark.

So on August 25, the day after the Danish declaration, similar promises were made in Oslo, Stockholm and Helsinki. And by then the process was almost irreversible. The smaller states of the European Community followed, and the large ones as well, if more grudgingly.³⁹ At the end of August only the United States was left. Washington wanted to move with caution but Secretary of State James Baker later admitted that the swift actions of the Nordic states had put pressure on the administration, especially through public opinion.⁴⁰ When the United States at last decided to resume normal relations with the Baltic states, at the beginning of September, President George Bush brushed off all suggestions of undue delay by saying that when history was written, 'nobody will remember that we took 48 hours more than Iceland, or whoever else it was'.⁴¹ The comment insulted the sensitive Icelanders, but should still serve to show that at least the President had noticed their efforts. They could for instance take perverse delight in that he had not mentioned Denmark.

Conclusions

Icelandic support for Baltic independence was based on various conditions and considerations. The monumental changes in Moscow were the determining prerequisite, and sincere sympathy the single most important reason for the show of solidarity, although other factors, such as domestic pressures and a willingness to matter — which might perhaps be called vanity — also influenced Icelandic decision-making. Furthermore, the location and apparent enfeeblement of a tiny country like Iceland could free it from considering wider issues which worried statesmen of larger states.

Then again, the prevalent attitude in the West restrained the Icelanders to a degree. Baltic disunity did so as well, and with regard to Lithuanian wishes for diplomatic relations, tradition and hard facts of Soviet rule in the Baltic hindered their fulfilment. Here the Icelandic government was mostly held back, however, because of Soviet protests and warnings which had to be taken seriously.

Diplomatic relations, so helpful in the minds of many Lithuanians, were not established. Neither were Soviet-Baltic meetings held in Reykjavik, as was only to be expected. On the other hand, various connections were made and visits took place, most notably Foreign Minister Hannibalsson's journey to the Baltic states in January 1991. Last but not least, the Icelanders constantly agitated for the Baltic cause on the international scene, and issued declarations of support, with the re-recognition of Lithuanian independence in February having the greatest effect, at least in Lithuanian minds.

The trickiest issue is the effectiveness of Icelandic actions. The Baltic peoples deeply appreciated the moral support involved while the Kremlin was at most annoyed, but never persuaded and — if it need be said — never forced to make amends due to pressure from Reykjavik. Similarly, in Europe and the United States, policy was not changed because news was heard of the latest decisions by the Government of Iceland. After all, Icelandic efforts often went unnoticed in the larger capitals of the West.

The constant agitation for the Baltic cause should not be underestimated, still. And the knock-on effect which led to world-wide recognition of Baltic independence in August 1991 started in Reykjavik. It pushed the Danes into action. They had enough power behind them to persuade other Nordic states and thus the process gained momentum. In this sense Iceland was an 'icebreaker on the international scene', as the Foreign Ministers of the Baltic states declared at the signing of diplomatic relations in Reykjavik on August 26, 1991.⁴² Of course it is impossible to ascertain what would have happened, had the Icelanders simply stood by. Keeping in mind Danish hesitation and general attitudes in the West it might be surmised that the recognition of Baltic independence would have been delayed somewhat — and maybe linked to agreements with Moscow on a transitory period, security guarantees and rights for Russian-speaking minorities.

Myth and reality

Icelandic support for Baltic independence in 1990–1991 has been firmly established in the collective memory in Iceland. Five, ten, 15 and now 20 years after the reestablishment of Baltic independence, the authorities and the

media gladly recall how Iceland offered moral support when other states dared not to, and how Iceland was the first state to recognize Baltic independence and establish diplomatic relations.

There is truth in all of this. Yet, we run the risk of creating a myth about the small nation which showed courage and ignored risks when others dared not rock the boat, thinking about their own interests. The whole story is more complex, however.

¹ See Christine Ingebritsen, 'Conclusion', in Christine Ingebritsen, Iver B. Neumann, Sieglinde Gstöhl and Jessica Beyer (eds), *Small States in International Relations* (Seattle and Reykjavík, 2006), 286-291. See also: Baldur Thórhallsson, 'What features determine small states' activities in the international arena? Iceland's approach to foreign relations until the mid-1990's' *Stjórnsmál og stjórnsýsla* 1:1 (2005), [<http://stjornmalogstjornsysla.is/images/stories/fg2005/baldur.pdf>]

² Christine Ingebritsen, 'Conclusion', in Christine Ingebritsen, Iver B. Neumann, Sieglinde Gstöhl and Jessica Beyer (eds), *Small States in International Relations* (Seattle and Reykjavík, 2006), 286.

³ Jón Ormur Halldórsson, *Sameinuðu þjóðirnar: tálsýnir og veruleiki* (Reykjavík 1995), 12.

⁴ 'Between political rhetoric and realpolitik calculations: Western diplomacy and Baltic struggle for independence in the Cold War Endgame', *Cold War History* 6, 1 (2006)

⁵ *Althingistidindi A*, (Parliamentary records) 1989-90, 2957.

⁶ For various accounts and aspects see Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution* (New Haven, 1993), 244-255, Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford, 1996), Alfred Erich Senn, *Gorbachev's Failure in Lithuania* (New York, 1995), *Lithuania 1991* (Vilnius, 1992), and Mikhail Pustabaev, *Khronika agressii* (Vilnius, 1994), 162-65.

⁷ *Althingistidindi A*, 1990-91, 3374.

⁸ Interview with Landsbergis, 7.6.1994.

⁹ National Archives, Iceland (Foreign Ministry): 8.D.4. Various appeals by Baltic organisations in the West to Icelandic missions abroad in the 1960s.

¹⁰ Ellemann-Jensen's letter to the author, 29.5.1996. Interview with Hannibalsson, Reykjavik, 2.11.1994. For accounts on the August coup see for instance Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, Gerd Ruge, *Der Putsch* (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), and William E. Odom, 'Alternative Perspectives on the August Coup', *Problems of Communism*, vol. 40, no. 6, 1991.

¹¹ Interviews with Hannibalsson, 2.11.1994, and Steingrímur Hermannsson (Prime Minister, 1988-91), 5.3.1996.

¹² Interview with Hannibalsson, 25.3.1995.

¹³ Around 75% in March-April 1990 and 80% in January-February 1991. *DV* (Icelandic newspaper), 11.4.1990 and 2.2.1991.

¹⁴ Interview with Hannibalsson, 2.11.1994, and Geir Haarde (MP for Independence Party), 10.5.1996.

¹⁵ In Reykjavik in October 1990. *Morgunblaðið*, 11.10.1990.

¹⁶ Clare Thomson, *The Singing Revolution* (London, 1992), 222.

¹⁷ See Michael Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels* (London, 1993), 198-203, 216-223, 318-325, 443-444; Jack F. Matlock jr., *Autopsy on an Empire* (New York, 1995), 268-273, and Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 374-384. Unfortunately, no thorough account has been written on Western attitudes to Baltic independence in the Gorbachev era.

¹⁸ Foreign affairs committee of the *Althing* (henceforth cited as UR): 735. meeting, 28.5.1990.

¹⁹ Letter from Charles E. Cobb jr., US Ambassador to Iceland in 1990-91, to the author, 29.3.1996.

²⁰ Interview with Hannibalsson, 2.11.1994. Also see Senn, *Gorbachev's Failure in Lithuania*, 118.

²¹ For instance archives of the Foreign Ministry, Iceland (henceforth cited as SU): 8.G.2-3 Memorandum on a meeting with Igor Krasavin, Soviet Ambassador to Iceland, undated, written at the end of September 1990, and SU: 8.R.6-18: Memorandum on Soviet-Icelandic trade, 14.2.1991.

²² Interview with Yuri Fokine, Oslo, 21.5.1997. Fokine was head of 2nd European Department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, covering the Nordic countries, Britain, Ireland, Austria and (West)-Germany.

²³ SU: 8.G.2-8: Moscow Embassy to Foreign Ministry, 5.2.1991.

²⁴ Interview with Hermannsson, 5.3.1996.

²⁵ Archives of Icelandic State Radio (henceforth cited as RUV): Evening news, 29.3.1990.

²⁶ SU: 8.G.2-7: Account of Hannibalsson's meetings with Baltic leaders, 18.-20.1.1991.

²⁷ *DV*, 22.1.1991.

²⁸ UR: 751. meeting, 22.1.1991, and 753. meeting, 5.2.1991.

²⁹ Interview with Hannibalsson, 2.11.1994.

³⁰ *Berlingske Tidende* (Danish newspaper), 24.3.1990.

³¹ *Morgunbladid*, 24.8.1991

³² Interviews; in Vilnius with Vytautas Landsbergis, 7.6.1994, Algirdas Brazauskas, 15.6.1994, and Kazimiera Prunskiene, 17.6.1994; in Tallinn with Lennart Meri and Edgar Savisaar, 30.5.1996.

³³ See for instance SU: 8.G.2-10: Landsbergis to Hermansson, 6.3.1991.

³⁴ Interviews with Hannibalsson, 2.11.1994, and US diplomat Max Kampelman, Reykjavik, 3.10.1996.

³⁵ See for instance SU: 8.G.2-7: Stockholm Embassy to Foreign Ministry, 29.1.1991. Interviews with David Oddsson (Prime Minister of Iceland from 1991), 23.10.1996, and Arni Gunnarsson (Icelandic MP), 20.6.1996.

³⁶ UR: 753. meeting, 5.2.1991. SU: 8.G.2-8: Hannibalsson's memorandum to the Althing's foreign affairs committee, 7.2.1991.

³⁷ RUV: Evening news, 26.2.1991. Dag Sebastian Ahlander, *Spelet om Baltikum* (Stockholm, 1992), 221.

³⁸ See for instance Karsten Haag and Peter Hagemund, *Uffe* ([Copenhagen], 1991), 181.

³⁹ See for instance Niels von Redecker, *Die Haltung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland gegenüber den Baltischen Staaten* ('Ost-Reihe', no. 1; Hamburg, 1994), 35.

⁴⁰ James Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy* (New York, 1995), 524.

⁴¹ *New York Times*, 3.2.1991.

⁴² *Morgunbladid*, 27.8.1991.