

"Nobody Has Done So Much for Us"

Iceland and Lithuania, 1990-1991

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On March 12, 1990, the day after the Lithuanian declaration of independence, the Icelandic parliament sent its congratulations to Vilnius. This was the beginning of Icelandic support for Lithuanian independence, which culminated in the establishment of diplomatic relations between Lithuania and Iceland, in the wake of the attempted putsch in Moscow in August 1991.

When examining this period of eighteen months, three main questions spring to mind: 1) *Why* did the Icelandic authorities support the Lithuanian drive for independence? 2) *How* did they do it? 3) *What effect* did it have?

Historical overview

It is apt to begin with a very brief historical overview of Icelandic and Lithuanian relations, mentioning some basic facts about Iceland. Norsemen began to settle there in the 9th century AD. One of the first Icelandic men to be seen by Baltic people was the legendary viking, Egill Skallagrímsson. He and his entourage "robbed and killed" in Courland, as recounted in the saga of Egill.

In 930, the free men of Iceland founded their national parliament, the *Althing*. In 1262, after a long and bloody conflict between the various families and clans, the Icelanders accepted the rule of the Norwegian kingdom. Later, when Norway came under Danish rule, Iceland followed.

In the mid-19th century, national revival began in earnest in Iceland. In 1904 home rule was won and self-government followed in 1918. Iceland was still a kingdom, though, in personal union with Denmark, and the Danes continued to handle foreign affairs on behalf of the Icelandic authorities.

In early 1922 the Danish consul in Kaunas declared to the Lithuanian government that Iceland recognized *de jure* the

independence of Lithuania. The government in Kaunas in turn sent "especially warm thanks to Iceland, whose age-old culture was well-known and respected in Lithuania."¹ In the following year, a commercial treaty was concluded between Iceland and Lithuania.

In April 1940, Nazi-Germany invaded and occupied Denmark and the *Althing* resolved that, since the Danes could no longer manage the foreign affairs of Iceland, the Icelanders would have to do it themselves. When Lithuania was annexed to the Soviet Union later that year, Iceland did not recognize that act *de jure*. However, in 1944, when Iceland declared full independence and became a republic, recognition of this event by the great powers was considered of primary importance. The Icelandic authorities therefore had no qualms about establishing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, ignoring the question of the Baltic states.

It is obvious that over the next decades Icelandic authorities recognised the Soviet annexation, at least *de facto*. Various examples of this could be cited. Perhaps the most significant of these was the official visit to the Baltic republics, in 1978, of the Icelandic ambassador to Moscow.

1990: Lithuanian declaration of independence

Immediately after the *Althing* sent its congratulations to the Lithuanian people in March 1990, hopes were raised in Vilnius that greater support would be forthcoming, and disputes on further responses arose in Reykjavík. The Progressive Party (mainly a rural centre party), the People's Party (the Social Democrats) and the People's Alliance (the Socialists) held the majority in parliament. These parties had formed a coalition government from the autumn of 1988 to May 1991 (from September 1989 with the aid of a small centre party, the Citizen's Party, and one independent MP). The largest opposition party was the right-wing Independence Party which called on the coalition to grant the Lithuanians what they longed for. The media had quickly got in touch with Vytautas Landsbergis and other Lithuanian politicians.

¹ Archives of the Icelandic Foreign Ministry. *SU*: 8.G.2. Pack 2: The Danish consulate in Kaunas to the Foreign Ministry in Copenhagen, February 2, 1922. Copy in the archives of the Icelandic Foreign Ministry (Documents from these archives are hereafter cited as *SU*, with the number of the pack following).



• The author (*left*), with Professor Landsbergis in 1993.

Their message was clear: they wanted both, renewed recognition and the establishment of diplomatic relations from Iceland.

In late March, in a private message to Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, leader of the Social Democrats and Foreign Minister, Landsbergis emphasised the importance of these steps. "We ask you expressly to accord immediately a formal and legal recognition of the Lithuanian Republic as founded in the declaration of independence from 11 March 1990," Landsbergis said.²

Nobody doubted that Hannibalsson sympathised with the Lithuanian cause — but he was not ready to meet the wishes of Landsbergis. He stressed that, in a legal sense, the recognition of 1922 was still valid. Other Western states opted for caution, he said, mostly for fear of Mikhail Gorbachev's position in the Soviet Union. In one of his messages to Reykjavík at the end of March, Ólafur Egilsson, the Icelandic ambassador to Moscow, described how his Western colleagues thought little of Lithuanian actions and felt that Landsbergis was far too hasty and reckless: "Speaking of the speed of the Lithuanians in their quest for independence,"

² *SU-1*: "Telephone conversation with Vytautas Landsbergis, President of Lithuania," March 24, 1990.

Egilsson concluded, "one ambassador put it this way: once a firework was set alight, there was no way to follow it."³

Gadflies on the international scene

So Foreign Minister Hannibalsson faced a dilemma. On the one hand, he wanted to give the Lithuanians full support in their struggle for independence, but on the other hand he wanted to side with Western allies, cautious as they were. Hannibalsson soon came to realize that this would not work out. In June 1990 his radical remarks in support of the Baltic cause at a CSCE-meeting on human rights in Copenhagen were clearly noticed and indicated his position. But did that matter? Iceland was, and still is, a tiny state, with inherently limited influence. "I will never forget," Hannibalsson recalled later, "when the US delegate approached me after I had finished my speech, embraced me and said: "It's truly a privilege to represent a small country and be able to speak one's mind".⁴ The implication was that the Icelandic Foreign Minister could do so because his words did not carry any weight.

But the Balts praised Hannibalsson highly for his comments, and for the rest of the year he and his Danish colleague, Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, held the Baltic cause high wherever they could at international level. The Icelandic Foreign Minister's argument that this *did* matter is convincing:

"We were like gadflies, we stung them [other Western representatives and politicians]...Should small states interfere and have an opinion in matters which don't concern them directly? I thought so, especially when larger states had their hands strictly tied, because of German unification and the superpower agenda".⁵

Bloodbath in Vilnius

In late 1990 and at the beginning of 1991, Landsbergis felt that Hannibalsson and the Icelandic authorities were among his most ardent supporters in the West. This was clearly manifested on January 13 when Soviet military units attacked the TV-tower in Vilnius. After failing to reach Gorbachev, Landsbergis decided to

³ *SU-1*: The Icelandic embassy in Moscow to the Foreign Ministry in Reykjavik, March 30, 1990.

⁴ Interview with Hannibalsson, in *Althþdubladid* (Icelandic newspaper), March 17-19, 1995.

⁵ Author's interview with Hannibalsson, Reykjavik, November 2, 1994.

seek help in the West by trying to contact Mr. Hannibalsson in Icelenad first⁶

The Icelandic Foreign Minister felt the responsibility on his shoulders. He had spoken for the Lithuanians, but Landsbergis challenged him to do more, to come to Vilnius and visit the barricaded parliament. Hannibalsson agreed and during January 18-20 he visited the three Baltic states. He affirmed that the journey constituted a *de facto* recognition of their independence, even though he travelled on a Soviet visa. In Vilnius, he declared that the Icelandic government would "carefully consider establishing full diplomatic relations with Lithuania, and possibly the other Baltic states." This news was met with great applause.⁷

Vytautas Landsbergis and his team truly expected that this would come about within a short period of time, days or weeks. There were serious obstacles to this in Iceland, of which Hannibalsson had always been aware. Caution was expressed by members of the coalition, especially the Progressive Preime Minister, Steingrimur Hermannsson. Lithuania did not control her borders, diplomatic representatives could not deliver their credentials and while not admitting it publicly, Hannibalsson, Hermannsson and other ministers felt they had to consider the reaction of the Soviet Union, not the least because trade negotiations with Moscow were at a very sensitive stage.⁸

Still, hopes had been raised in Vilnius and right was obviously on the side of the Lithuanians. In Hannibalsson's mind, Soviet violence had demonstrated that the Kremlin would hardly conduct real negotiations with the Baltic states. After some hesitation the *Althing* formally confirmed, on February 11, that the recognition of Lithuania from 1922 was fully valid and declared that diplomatic relations would be established, "as soon as possible." The Lithuanians hailed the resolution and in their rejoicing even

⁶ Author's interview with Landsbergis, Vilnius, June 7, 1994.

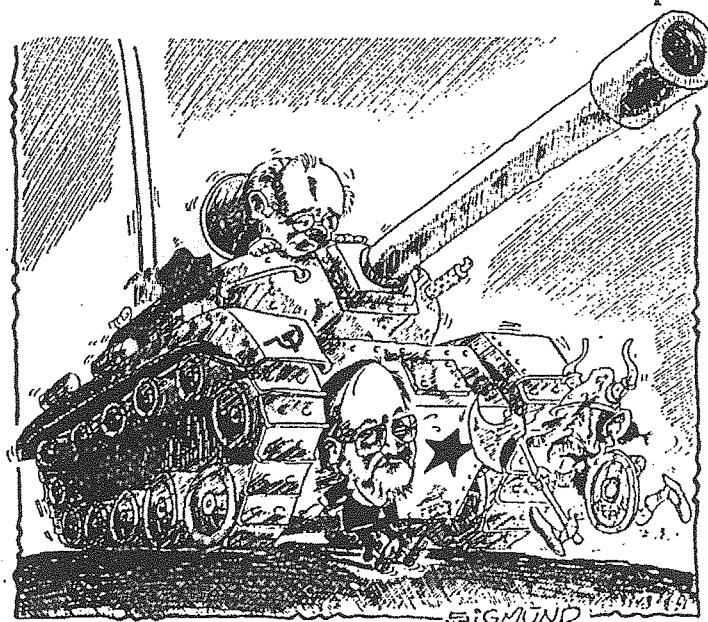
⁷ *DV* (Icelandic newspaper), January 21, 1991.

⁸ This can be seen from minutes of meetings of the Foreign Affairs committee of the *Althing* in January and February 1991.

mistook it for immediate establishment of diplomatic relations.⁹ Other Western states, however, did not follow the Icelandic lead, as Landsbergis had hoped. Iceland could offer Lithuania political and moral support but she could not change the mood or opinions of other states.

Stalemate

A stalemate in Icelandic and Lithuanian relations ensued. The Icelandic government had long proposed that negotiations between the Baltic states and the Soviet Union should take place in



• This cartoon by Sigmund Johnsson appeared in *Morgunbladid*, Iceland's largest newspaper, on February 17, 1991, after the Soviet Union had strongly protested Icelandic intentions to establish diplomatic relations with Lithuania. The cartoon shows Landsbergis struggling to stop the tank (driven by Gorbachev) while Jon Baldvin is running towards Landsbergis and calling out, "Now that I am here, Mr Landsbergis, you can let go!"

- Reprinted with permission from *Morgunbladid*.

⁹ See for instance "Iceland establishes diplomatic relations with Lithuania." *Estonian Independent*, February 21, 1991, and *SU-9*, a letter from A. Braziunas, Kaunas, to the Foreign Minister of Iceland, February 16, 1991.

Reykjavík, an idea which the Estonians highly supported. Landsbergis felt that efforts along these lines stood in the way of establishing diplomatic relations between Iceland and Lithuania.¹⁰ The idea of Icelandic mediation bogged down and in late March 1991 Hannibalsson was left to say of the Balts that he had "absolutely no idea what these friends of ours are thinking any more."¹¹ Then, in May, a new coalition took power in Iceland. The Independence Party and the Social Democrats became partners and throughout the summer of 1991 the new chairman of the *Althing's* Foreign Affairs committee, Independent Eyjólfur Konrád Jónsson, often called for the establishment of diplomatic relations with Lithuania. Hannibalsson, still Foreign Minister, seemed to agree, especially after Lithuania and Russia signed a deal at the end of July, recognizing each other's independence. It could be argued that Iceland would have gone ahead and taken up full relations with Lithuania later in 1991, even without the coup attempt in Moscow in August, which dramatically changed the scene.

The race for recognition

Things happened quickly after August 19, when the putsch began in Moscow. Two days later the Foreign Ministers of the NATO-states convened in Brussels. During the meeting, they contacted Boris Yeltsin who assured them that the coup was failing. As the conversation with the Russian President ended, Hannibalsson was due to speak. As he himself recounted, he did away with his prepared speech and capitalized instead on the latest events in Moscow, arguing that it was now or never to fully recognize Baltic independence. But nobody seconded that suggestion.¹²

Undeterred, on August 22 the Icelandic Foreign Minister contacted representatives of the three Baltic states and declared that Iceland recognized the independence of Estonia and Latvia, as had been done in the case of Lithuania on February 11, and was ready to resume diplomatic relations with the three of them. It was a unique statement at this stage, and on August 26 the Foreign Ministers of Iceland and the Baltic states were scheduled to seal these declarations in Reykjavík.

¹⁰ *SU-10*: Landsbergis to Hermannsson, March 6, 1991.

¹¹ *Tíminn* (Icelandic newspaper), March 26, 1991.

¹² Author's interview with Hannibalsson, Reykjavík, November 2, 1994.

Events accelerated in the final stretch of the "race for recognition". Hannibalsson was later to insist, tongue in cheek, that "we were first, although Uffe will never admit that."¹³ Ellemann-Jensen of Denmark had not spoken out as early as Hannibalsson on immediate Baltic independence, but he felt he had a strong card up his sleeve. Shortly before midnight on August 24 dispatches, confirming Danish resumption of diplomatic relations were sent to the Baltic capitals — "so we were the first in the world," as Ellemann-Jensen proudly claimed.¹⁴ Still, "nobody had done so much for us," Landsbergis later reminisced on Icelandic support.¹⁵ On August 24, he wrote to Hannibalsson, saying how he always

*"...believed that Iceland would be the first and this is finally happening. In January, the first time that the Soviet putsch choked on the blood of unarmed combatants, your unforgettable visit to Vilnius inspired hope in the people of Lithuania that someone in the West was not neglecting them. And now larger countries have resolved to follow Iceland. I press your hand so hard as if I had eaten, once again, a piece of [Icelandic] shark meat."*¹⁶

Two days later, the Baltic Foreign Ministers signed formal declarations on diplomatic relations in Reykjavík. Over the next days a score of nations did so, too; but did they "follow Iceland", as Landsbergis remarked? On September 2, the United States joined the pack and President George Bush brushed aside suggestions that he had been late in acting, insisting that "when history is written, nobody is going to remember that we took 48 hours [sic] more than Iceland, or whoever else it was."¹⁷

Conclusions

1) Why did Iceland support Lithuanian independence in 1990 and 1991? It began with some common historical experiences: foreign rule and freedom won in 1918. General sympathy because of the harm done under Soviet occupation also played a role. Then Icelandic politicians, with Foreign Minister Hannibalsson at the

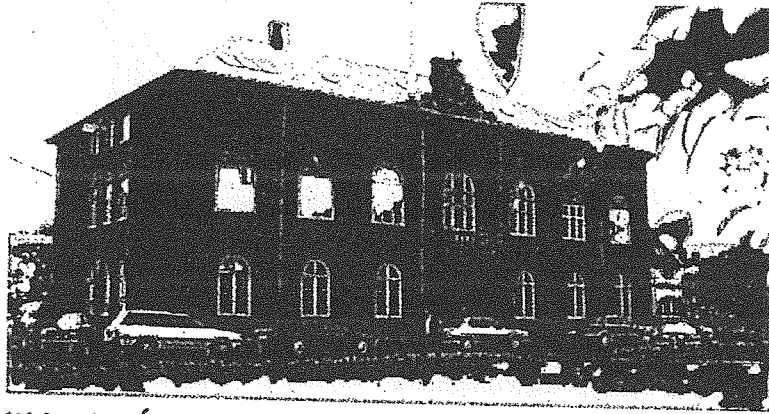
¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Morgunbladid* (Icelandic newspaper), August 27, 1991.

¹⁵ Author's interview with Landsbergis, Vilnius, June 7, 1994.

¹⁶ *SU-12*: Landsbergis to Hannibalsson, August 24, 1991.

¹⁷ Cited in Alfred Erich Senn: *Gorbachev's Failure in Lithuania*. New York 1995, p. 153.



• *Althingishúsid*, Iceland's Parliament House, built in 1880.

forefront, realized that most Western statesmen felt they had their hands tied and the Icelanders did not want to see Lithuania abandoned, in the face of Soviet aggression and intimidation.

2) How did Iceland support Lithuania? Firstly, Hannibalsson spoke on behalf of the Balts at international level, was a "gadfly" as he himself said. Secondly, Iceland offered political and moral support, with Hannibalsson's visit in January 1991, the *Althing's* reconfirmed recognition of Lithuanian independence the following month and Icelandic actions during and immediately after the attempted putsch of August 1991 being the most important.

3) What effect did Icelandic support have? It certainly gave the Lithuanians a moral boost, a feeling that they were not alone in their struggle. On the other hand, they exaggerated the importance of Iceland on the international scene. While Hannibalsson's efforts must have had some indirect effect, other states were not willing to follow Icelandic calls for greater support for the Balts. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the events in Moscow in August 1991 the Baltic states of course would have gained independence, regardless of Icelandic actions and decisions, noble as they were nonetheless.

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