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Icelandic support for Baltic independence: myth, memory and detachment

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ABSTRACT

This article describes Iceland's support for Baltic independence in 1990–91. It analyses the importance of Iceland's initiatives. Did they affect the real turn of events or were they just empty gestures of a minor state, attempting in vain to have a say on the big stage of global politics? Furthermore, the study covers the later narration of events, the construction of a "grand narrative". Clearly, there exists a mutual determination to recount the avowed heroics and influence of Iceland during these fateful years. Arguably, a more detached version might be constructed as well. Eyewitnesses and participants may offer a precious view of events, but surely it is influenced by their experiences, as well as the purpose of narrating the tale.

Keywords: Icelandic-Baltic relations, Baltic independence, small states

On 11 February 2016, the former foreign minister of Iceland, Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, was awarded an honorary doctorate at the Vytautas Magnus University in Vilnius. The main reason was his "courage", the rector stated during the ceremony. "I am a doctor in courage," Hannibalsson joked afterwards.[1] In 1990–91, representatives of Icelandic authorities, led by him, regularly supported the Baltic struggle for independence. This they did in international venues, publicly and behind the scenes. Hannibalsson also visited the Baltic countries in January 1991, at a critical juncture in their struggle. Prominent figures in the independence movements were invited to Iceland and treated as official guests. Finally, in the wake of the failed coup in Moscow in August 1991, Iceland was the first country to sign agreements on the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Baltic states.

This study analyses the importance of Iceland's initiatives. Did they affect the real turn of events or were they just empty gestures of a minor

[1] "Einnar mínútu þögn fyrir Samfylkinguna", Bylgjan radio station morning program, 19 February 2016, <http://www.visir.is/section/MEDIA98&fileid=CLP43387> (accessed 27 February 2016).

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state, attempting in vain to have a say on the big stage of global politics? Furthermore, the study covers the later narration of events, the construction of a "grand narrative". In particular, Hannibalsson has kept the story alive, encouraged by admirers in the Baltic states (the honorary degree in Vilnius is just one of many examples, demonstrating gratitude and admiration). Clearly, there exists a mutual determination to recount the avowed heroics and influence of Iceland during these fateful years. Arguably, a more detached version might be constructed as well. Eyewitnesses and participants may offer a precious view of events, but surely it is influenced by their experiences, as well as the purpose of narrating the tale.

The story, the myth: "icebreaker on the international scene"

Three episodes stand out in Icelandic-Baltic relations in 1990–91. In January 1991, immediately after the Soviet crackdown in Vilnius, Foreign Minister Hannibalsson visited Lithuania and then Latvia and Estonia. "Viva Islandija", the people called outside the barricaded parliament in the Lithuanian capital. Vytautas Landsbergis and others in the Lithuanian independence movement were grateful to Hannibalsson but deeply disappointed over the absence of visible support from other Western states.[2] Gratitude was again expressed on 11 February when another landmark was reached: Iceland's parliament, the Althing, reiterated that the country's pre-war recognition of Lithuania's independence was in full force.[3]

In the wake of the failed putsch in Moscow in August 1991, appreciation for Icelandic actions was again evident. Immediately, Foreign Minister Hannibalsson argued within NATO that a "window of opportunity" had opened up. On 22 August, he confirmed in writing to his Estonian and Latvian colleagues that Iceland recognized the independence of Estonia and Latvia, echoing the Althing's February proclamation on Lithuania.[4] Four days later, the foreign ministers of the three Baltic states convened at Höfði House in Reykjavík, the Icelandic capital, and signed declarations

[2] Pétur Gunnarsson, "Tilbúnir að berjast með haglabyssum gegn skriðdrekunum", *Morgunblaðið,* 24 January 1991; "Áhrifaríkast að finna fyrir hlýhug almennings", *Morgunblaðið*, 17 October 1991.

[3] Foreign Ministry Archives, Iceland (hereafter SU), 8.G.2-9: A. Braziunas and wife to Foreign Minister Hannibalsson, 16 February 1991; "Þingið í Vilníus gefur Íslendingum hús undir sendiráð", *Morgunblaðið,* 19 February 1991.

[4] SU, Foreign Ministry Press release, no. 79, 22 August 1991; SU, 5.B.83-1: Hannibalsson to Meri, 22 August 1991, and Hannibalsson to Jurkans, 22 August 1991. Also author's interview with Hannibalsson, 2 November 1994.

on the resumption of diplomatic relations with Iceland. The Icelanders had been an "icebreaker on the international scene", the Latvian minister, Janis Jurkans, remarked. His colleagues, the Estonian Lennart Meri and the Lithuanian Algirdas Saudargas, spoke in similar vein.[5]

Ever since, Icelandic and Baltic statespersons, politicians and officials have repeatedly championed a story of Icelandic bravery, honour and importance during the Baltic struggle for independence. In other words, an "icebreaker-theory" has been created. On the Icelandic side, Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson has been particularly eager to maintain the memory of the country's actions.[6] In the Baltic states, Hannibalsson has received a number of high honours.[7] Likewise, in Vilnius a street was rechristened *Islandijos gatve* in appreciation of Iceland's actions. In Tallinn, the area in front of the Estonian Foreign Ministry was renamed *Islandi väljak* and a square in Riga bears Iceland's name. Throughout the Baltic states, the general public has appeared as indebted to the Icelanders. Textbooks and other documents also describe how Iceland was the first country to recognize Baltic independence.[8] In Iceland, meanwhile, people seem to remember well that the Icelandic government was the first one "to recognize Baltic independence", as it is often put.[9]

The valiant stance of the Icelanders has been compared favourably with a general Western approach of undue caution, even cowardice, and ill-fated hopes in Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. "To Iceland – They Dared When Others Remained Silent", reads a graffiti on a part of the barricades around the Lithuanian parliament which were erected in January 1991. "Those who dare", is the title of a recent Icelandic-Baltic documentary on Iceland's support.[10]

Moreover, Icelandic policies towards the Baltic states have been situated within a wider frame of the country's sympathy for oppressed peoples,

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[5] "Ísland er ísbrjótur á alþjóðavettvangi", *Morgunblaðið*, 27 August 1991.

[6] For one of the most recent example, see the documentary, "Those who dare", which highlights Hannibalsson's actions in 1990–91. See e.g. "Those who dare", *Iceland Monitor*, 12 March 2015, <http://icelandmonitor.mbl.is/news/culture_and_living/2015/03/12/those_who_dare/> (accessed 4 September 2015).

[7] Curriculum Vitae of Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, <http://www.jbh.is/default.asp?s=cv> (accessed 5 June 2015); <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%B3n_Baldvin_Hannibalsson> (accessed 5 June 2015).

[8] See e.g. Zigmantas Kiaupa, Ain Mäesalu, Ago Pajur and Gvido Straube, *The history of the Baltic countries* (Tallinn: Avita, 3rd ed. 2002), 210.

[9] For a summary, see Guðni Jóhannesson, "Skiptum við máli? Áhrif Íslands á alþjóðavettvangi", *Stjórnmál og stjórnsýsla*, 4:1 (2008), 47–53.

[10] "Those who dare", *Iceland Monitor*, 12 March 2015, <http://icelandmonitor.mbl.is/news/culture_and_living/2015/03/12/those_who_dare/> (accessed 4 September 2015).

as well as the capabilities of a small state to influence larger developments – to punch above their weight. Iceland's "vital" support for the creation of the state of Israel at the United Nations in 1947 is cited in this regard.[11] Similarly, the effects of Iceland's policies during the Baltic struggle for independence have been compared with the country's influence on the law of the sea, a crucial issue in the second half of the twentieth century.[12] Expressions of sympathy for the Baltic cause during the cold war are also recalled: Iceland never accepted the Soviet annexation of 1940 *de jure*, an Estonian consul in Reykjavík maintained his title, and books on the Baltic plight were published.[13]

Put simply, a grand narrative has been formed.[14] We have a state-sponsored version of events, constantly enhanced by the recollections of those who were involved. This story is commonly – and uncritically – accepted by the media, the public, and even within the academic community. A more critical look is overdue, however. In its purest form, the grand narrative of Icelandic support for Baltic independence is too idealistic and one-dimensional.

Rebuffs: did Iceland "cause the collapse of the Soviet Union"?

Public statements during independence anniversaries or official visits are composed to honour the recipient. They are not conduits for criticism or debates. If we were to write history through such speeches and communiqués, a rosy version would certainly appear. Other sources and perceptions are needed.

In celebratory exchanges, the substance and significance of Iceland's actions is customarily misunderstood and exaggerated. First, the Althing's celebrated declaration of 11 February 1991 was essentially a statement on

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[11] See e.g. Matthías Johannessen, "Af David Ben-Gúríon", *Morgunblaðið*, 11 January 1987; Jón Hákon Magnússon, "Ísland tryggði Ísrael sæti hjá Sameinuðu þjóðunum", *Morgunblaðið*, 23 July 2011; Sigríður Víðis Jónsdóttir, *Ríkisfang: Ekkert. Flóttinn frá Írak á Akranes* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2011), 121–124.

[12] For a summary, see Jóhannesson, "Skiptum við máli?", 49–50.

[13] For a summary, see "Gissurarson: fate of Baltic nations little-known", *RNH: Free People and Free Markets*, 6 November 2013, <http://www.rnh.is/?p=5522> (accessed 4 September 2013); Guðni Jóhannesson, *Stuðningur Íslands við sjálfstæðisbaráttu Eystrasaltslandanna, 1990–1991*, MA-thesis in history (University of Iceland, 1997), 9–15.

[14] For "grand narratives" in history, see esp. Jean-François Lyotard, *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Gary K. Browning, *Lyotard and the end of grand narratives* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000).

the status quo, a confirmation of the fact that Iceland had never accepted legally the Soviet annexation of 1940. While the leaders of the Lithuanian independence movement welcomed such words, especially at this particular moment, many other Western states had reconfirmed their non-recognition stance throughout the years. Moreover, Foreign Minister Hannibalsson had in fact opposed a declaration of this kind since a statement now would imply that Iceland had previously recognized the Soviet annexation.[15] In the same way, Iceland's Prime Minister, Steingrímur Hermannsson, was only lukewarm towards the statement and absented himself when it came to a vote in the Althing.[16] Afterwards, however, these doubts all but vanished from the public discourse on Iceland's actions.

False hopes may also have been raised. During his January visit, Foreign Minister Hannibalsson declared that the Icelandic government wanted to resume diplomatic relations with the Baltic countries "as soon as possible". This intention was reiterated in the Althing's February declaration.[17] In Vilnius, Landsbergis was convinced that the establishment of diplomatic relations was imminent. The Lithuanian parliament even donated a house for the embassy of Iceland.[18]

At the same time, the leaders of the Estonian and Latvian independence movements informed Hannibalsson that they were in fact not eager to establish diplomatic relations. Never putting pressure of any kind on the Icelandic authorities, they supported instead the idea of Icelandic mediation, another course which the authorities in Reykjavík favoured as well. The two paths were contradictory, however, since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Iceland and Lithuania would always be condemned in Moscow. In any case, the Soviet leadership never saw the Icelanders as possible neutral mediators and did not accept foreign arbitration at all.

After the highlights of Hannibalsson's January visit and the Althing's declaration the following month, an impasse had therefore been reached. The leaders of the Estonian and Latvian independence movements lost interest in the idea of Icelandic facilitation when the Soviet refusal became

[15] Records of the Althing Foreign Affairs Committee, 754th meeting, 7 February 1991. See also "Skýringa krafist frá stjórninni í Moskvu", *Morgunblaðið,* 24 January 1991.
[16] Þorsteinn Pálsson, "Kærleiksblóm stjórnarheimilisins", *Morgunblaðið*, 16 February 1991; Dagur B. Eggertsson, *Forsætisráðherrann Steingrímur Hermannsson. Ævisaga*, III (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2000), 330–331.
[17] "Stjórnmálasamband við Eystrasaltsríkin", *DV* [*Dagblaðið Vísir*], 21 January 1991; *Alþingistíðindi* [Althing proceedings] A 1990–1991, 3374.
[18] "Stjórnmálasamband við Eystrasaltsríkin", *DV,* 21 January 1991; "Þingið í Vilníus gefur Íslendingum hús undir sendiráð", *Morgunblaðið*, 19 February 1991.

clear. Meanwhile the Lithuanians, led by Landsbergis, grew increasingly impatient and frustrated. While they certainly appreciated Iceland's previous actions and couched their feelings in tactful language, their displeasure was clear.[19] In late March, Hannibalsson was left to say that he had "absolutely no idea what these [Baltic] friends of ours are thinking anymore".[20]

Domestically, the right-wing Independence party came to criticize the government's Baltic policy, insisting that diplomatic relations could and should be established at once, as the Baltic peoples wished. One fax would suffice, it was even asserted.[21] Hannibalsson and Prime Minister Hermannsson could easily counter that the Estonians and the Latvians did not wish this step to be taken, fearing that it would only provoke Moscow instead of actually advancing the independence cause. More importantly, as the foreign minister underlined in particular, Icelandic actions would be of no use unless other states followed the lead.[22]

Arguably, this is the most serious weakness in the tale of Iceland's vital support for Baltic independence. Instead of an icebreaker, the country could be cast as a lone boat adrift. No Western minister followed Hannibalsson to the Baltic countries in January 1991. As Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, Denmark's foreign minister at the time, pointed out, a visitor would have had to apply for a Soviet visa, thus acknowledging Moscow's sovereignty in the region.[23] While Hannibalsson brushed that aspect aside as mere formality, he did not manage to encourage or shame Western colleagues into action. Likewise, no state was going to follow Iceland in February 1991 and resume diplomatic relations. No further ice would have been broken if the Icelanders had actually gone ahead. On the contrary, Icelandic policies were deemed reckless, ineffective and empty, especially in the Nordic camp.[24]

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[19] SU, 8.G.2-10: Landsbergis Hermannsson, 6 March 1991. Later, Edgar Savisaar recalled this Lithuanian displeasure over Iceland's stance. Author's interview with Savisaar, 30 May 1996.

[20] "Botna ekkert í vinum okkar", *Tíminn,* 26 March 1991. See also Alexandra Duval Smith: "Quiet Triumph in Tallinn", *Guardian,* 19 April 1991.

[21] UR, 751st meeting, 22 January 1991, 753rd meeting, 5 February 1991; Iceland state radio news transcripts (hereafter RÚV), lunchtime news, 5 February 1991.

[22] "Vísa öllum efasemdum á bug", *Alþýðublaðið,* 8 February 1991.

[23] Ellemann-Jensen to the author, 29 May 1996.

[24] Such views were summarized in a number of Foreign Ministry memoranda and despatches. See UR, 8.G.2-8: "Stjórnmálasamband við Litháen", Foreign Ministry memorandum, 7 February 1991; "Varðar: Spurninguna hvort Tékkóslóvakía og Pólland muni fylgja fordæmi Íslands og taka upp stjórnmálasamband við Litháen", Foreign Minister memorandum for the Althing Foreign Affairs Committee, 7 February 1991; "Stjórnmálatengsl við Litháen", Icelandic Embassy in London to Foreign Ministry,

Iceland's alleged lead in the wake of the failed coup in Moscow may be questioned as well. In early September 1991, Danish diplomats agreed that, while a "shouting match" with Iceland should be avoided, Denmark had actually been first to enter into diplomatic relations with the Baltic states.[25] Ever since, Ellemann-Jensen has championed this prevailing notion in Denmark.[26]

Outside the Nordic region, Icelandic proposals usually went unnoticed. As early as June 1990, when Hannibalsson argued at a CSCE conference that the Baltic states must regain their independence, the US representative, Max Kampelman, praised the Icelandic minister and said how delightful it must be to represent a small nation and be able to speak one's mind.[27] The tribute was double-edged, however. The superpower representative was basically implying that an Icelandic statesperson could say whatever he or she wanted because the words did not carry any weight.

Similarly, it is an undisputable fact that the Icelandic authorities reiterated their recognition of the independence of Latvia and Estonia on 22 August and resumed diplomatic relations with all Baltic states four days later. Did that prompt others, however? The false logic must be avoided that just because one thing happened after another there has to be a direct connection between them. When the United States resumed diplomatic relations with the three Baltic governments on 6 September 1991, President George Bush brushed off accusations that Washington had lagged behind others by saying that his administration had not wanted to be "stampeded into something the whole world knew we were going to do in the first place". Moreover, the president added that "when history is written,

7 February 1991. See also Dag Sebastian Ahlander, *Spelet om Baltikum* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1992), 222.

[25] Danish Foreign Ministry Archives, UM-5.K.82.a: Hoppe to Villadsen, 2 September 1991.

[26] Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, *Din egen dag er kort* (Copenhagen: Aschehoug, 1996), 144–145. See also e.g. Flemming Pradhan-Blach, "NATO-luftrumsovervågning over Baltikum (NATO Air Policing mission in the Baltic States", Centre for Military Studies, Copenhagen University, March 2014, <http://cms.polsci.ku.dk/publikationer/baltikum/NATO-luftsrumsoverv_gning_over_Baltikum.pdf> (accessed 4 September 2015); "Østblokkens opløsning og Danmark", *Den Store Danske,* <http://www.denstoredanske.dk/Danmarkshistorien/Gr%C3%A6nser_forsvinder/Et_land_i_opbrud/Ved_den_kolde_krigs_oph%C3%B8r/%C3%98stblokkens_opl%C3%B8sning_og_Danmark> (accessed 4 September 2015).

[27] Author's interview with Hannibalsson, 2 November 1994, and with Max Kampelman, 3 October 1996. See also Kristina Spohr Readman, "Between political rhetoric and *Realpolitik* calculations: Western diplomacy and the Baltic independence struggle in the Cold War endgame", *Cold War History*, 6:1 (2006), 1–42 (18).

nobody is going to remember that we took 48 hours more than Iceland or whoever else it is".[28]

Later on, Charles Cobb, the US Ambassador in Iceland at the time, supposedly revealed that the Icelandic government had actually worked as a proxy, or a trial balloon, for the Washington administration.[29] If true, that would finally sink the "icebreaker" argument. As it happened, however, US officials grew increasingly unhappy with Iceland's radical approach and encouraged the country's representatives to fall in line.[30] Also, they suspected that by giving the Baltic nations loud vocal support, Hannibalsson had one eye on the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Iceland.[31] This interpretation was certainly false but confirmed that US officials in Reykjavík did not commend, let alone control, Hannibalsson's actions. Indeed, the impulsive and proud foreign minister was extremely unlikely to take orders from the US Embassy in Reykjavík.

In any case, conspiracy-like theories are not needed to explain away the mythical image of Iceland causing "the collapse of the Soviet Union", as one sceptic of the "icebreaker"-theory said ironically.[32] In general, big changes require big factors. In the large scheme of things, the pivotal decisions were taken in Moscow, Washington and Brussels. Realpolitik ruled.[33]

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[28] "The President's news conference in Kennebunkport, Maine", *The American Presidency Project*, 2 September 1991, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=19931> (accessed 4 September 2015).

[29] See Joseph Kazickas (with Valdas Bartasevičius, transl. by Vijolė), *Odyssey of hope: the story of a Lithuanian immigrant's escape from communism to freedom in America and the return to his beloved homeland* (Vilnius: Tyto alba, 2006), 326–327. For a modified version of the theory that "Reykjavík was probably at the same time [summer of 1990] also a covert actor for the United States", see Kristina Spohr Readman, *Germany and the Baltic problem after the Cold War: the development of a new* Ostpolitik *1989–2000* (London: Routledge, 2004), 24–25.

[30] E.g. author's interview with Davíð Oddsson, 23 October 1996, and Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, 2 November 1994. See also Hannibalsson's unpublished speech, "Western policies towards the restoration of independence of the Baltic countries". The speech was delivered in Vilnius on 12 March 2006, commemorating the declaration of Lithuania's restored independence on 11 March 1990.

[31] George Bush Presidential Library. National Security Council. Nicholas Burns and Ed Hewett – Russia Subject Files. 1.2.0. U.S. Relations with Russia. Policy on the Debate Over the Union. Baltics. CF01536-14.

[32] Email to the author, 16 August 2011.

[33] For other examples of that contention, see e.g. Walter C. Clemens, *The Baltic transformed: complexity theory and European security* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), xix; Ļubova Zīle, "Baltic-Russian co-operation during the restoration of independence (1990 until the 1991 putsch)", *The Baltic states at historical crossroads: political, economic, and legal problems in the context of international cooperation on the doorstep of the 21st century*: *a collection of scholarly articles published in rememberance*

Furthermore, the examples of small state capabilities which have been cited in Iceland, do not hold. Iceland played no decisive role in the creation of the Israeli state at the UN, Icelandic influence on the law of the sea was limited, despite great interest in the subject. In this sense, the grand narrative of Iceland's support for Baltic independence can be added to a list of other stories on overstated influence.[34]

Moreover, sympathy with the Baltic plight during the Cold War was always trumped by commercial interests. For Iceland, the Soviet Union remained an important trading partner right up to its collapse. In January 1991, in the midst of the onslaught by Soviet units in Riga and Vilnius, Icelandic and Soviet officials prepared a new trade agreement in Moscow.[35] Similarly, parliamentary delegations and the Icelandic ambassador in Moscow visited "the Soviet Baltic Republics", unlike representatives from other NATO member states. Up to the final years of the Cold War, they adhered to the general rule of not accepting Soviet sovereignty there in this manner.[36]

In short, the Icelanders had not always held the moral high ground. On that note, some Nordic statesmen and officials also complained that Foreign Minister Hannibalsson and other representatives did not only have Baltic welfare at heart. Allegedly, the Icelanders enjoyed the selfish and irresponsible wish to be celebrated as heroes who were "first" and "best" in Baltic minds.[37] Taken together, the conclusion can easily be reached that Iceland's Baltic policy in 1991 was at times contradictory, unsatisfactory, ineffective and reactive, not proactive, reasonable and decisive.

"Grains of truth": revisionism revised

Why, then, is the mythical "icebreaker-theory" so strong? First, its proponents have had every reason to maintain it. After independence was regained, the Baltic leaders sought membership in international organizations, including NATO. They welcomed Icelandic support and gladly

[sic] of Senator August Loeber and the 75th birthday of Professor Dietrich André Loeber (Riga: Academy of Sciences of Latvia, 1998), 453–466. For an Icelandic perspective, see "Ísland hefur engin áhrif á alþjóðavettvangi", *Stúdentablaðið*, 67:6 (1995), 12.

[34] See Jóhannesson, "Skiptum við máli?".

[35] "Viðskiptanefndinni verður ekki snúið við", *DV,* 14 January 1991; *Alþingistíðindi* B 1990–1991, col. 2796.

[36] Jóhannesson, "Stuðningur Íslands", 11–14.

[37] See e.g. Steffen Olesen, *Fra frontlinje til frontløber*, unpublished history paper (Roskilde University, 2010), 67, <http://diggy.ruc.dk/bitstream/1800/5037/1/Fra%20frontlinje%20til%20frontl%C3%B8ber.pdf> (accessed 4 September 2015).

entertained Icelandic representatives by recounting the glorious days of the "icebreaker" on the international scene.

In Iceland, as elsewhere, retired politicians and statespersons usually want to control their legacy. Through his repeated tales of the country's support for Baltic independence, Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson has shaped the discourse in a way that could even be compared with the influence which Winston Churchill's works had on the historiography of the Second World War.[38] In Hannibalsson's mind, two feats stand out during his tenure at the foreign ministry in 1988–95: Iceland's entry into the European Economic Area (EEA), and the country's support for Baltic independence. The former event has been marred by constant debates about the pros and cons of involvement in the European integration process. Conversely, Iceland's support for Baltic independence has remained an undisputed and laudable achievement. Neutral observers agree that he deserves personally most of the honour bestowed upon Iceland in the Baltic states. Even Hannibalsson's staunchest rivals accede that he acted well. Understandably, he has been willing to maintain this flame.[39]

More is needed, still, to explain the vitality of the "icebreaker-theory". "Myths, like comedy, only work if they contain grains of truth," it has been said.[40] Below the lofty expressions of Iceland's brave lead lies a more solid story of constant moral support. While the leaders of the Estonian and Latvian independence movements would probably have liked to see the idea of Icelandic mediation come true, and the Lithuanians certainly desired the establishment of diplomatic relations, Icelandic expressions of solidarity were always appreciated. Specifically, Hannibalsson's visit of January 1991 was understandably welcomed and remembered. The actual presence of a Western foreign minister overshadowed the formal detail that he had arrived with a Soviet stamp in his passport.

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[38] See in particular David Reynolds, *In command of history: Churchill fighting and writing the Second World War* (London: Penguin, 2005), esp. xxiii and 506–522. See also Brian Bond, *Britain's two world wars against Germany: myth, memory and the distortions of hindsight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 8–24; Patrick Finney, *Remembering the road to World War Two: international history, national identity, collective memory* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1–36.

[39] See for instance Ragnheiður Elín Árnadóttir, "Afar síðbúið frumkvæði", *Morgunblaðið*, 17 September 2011; Egill Helgason, "Þeir sem þora", *Pressan*, <http://eyjan.pressan.is/silfuregils/2016/01/14/their-sem-thora-glaestasta-stund-islenskrar-utanrikisstefnu/> (accessed 27 February 2011).

[40] Martin Alexander, "Dunkirk in military operations, myths and memories", *Britain and France in two world wars: truth, myth and memory*, ed. by Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 93–118 (96).

Apart from the moral boost in the Baltic countries, the essence of Iceland's support lay in constant reminders in international venues about the Baltic case, usually in tandem with the Danish foreign minister Ellemann-Jensen. "We were like gadflies, we stung them," Hannibalsson later said in reference to such efforts to influence other Western states: "Should small states interfere and have an opinion in matters which do not concern them directly? I thought so, especially when larger states had their hands strictly tied, because of German unification and the superpower agenda."[41]

In this form, the story of Iceland's support for Baltic independence becomes less decisive, its impact more indirect. Even so, a case can still be made for the "icebreaker-theory", admittedly in a modified version. Symbolism matters in politics and international relations. Personalities and egos count as well. Once Hannibalsson had visited the Baltic states and the Althing had reaffirmed Iceland's recognition of Lithuania's de jure independence, Iceland had, in the words of Swedish diplomat Dag Sebastian Ahlander, "taken the lead in the Nordic countries' race for influence in the Baltic".[42] In Denmark, Ellemann-Jensen, who was both ambitious and passionate about the Baltic cause, realized that action was needed if the Danes were to be seen as the Balts' best friends. Thus, in late February and March, Denmark signed protocols of cooperation with the three Baltic countries where their formal independence was reaffirmed. Diplomatic relations were also promised, "when the situation so allows".[43] Most likely, the Icelandic initiative encouraged Ellemann-Jensen to take this step, although he has politely rejected that line of reasoning.[44]

Similarly, the Danish foreign minister learned on 22 August about Iceland's reaffirmation of Estonian and Latvian independence, as well as the intention to establish diplomatic relations with the three Baltic states in the immediate future. Again, decisions had to be fast if the Danes were to remain in the forefront. Shortly before midnight on 24 August, dispatches which confirmed the resumption of diplomatic relations were sent from Copenhagen to the Baltic capitals, "so we were the first in the world", as Ellemann-Jensen proudly claimed.[45] The following day, the authorities in Norway, Sweden and Finland signalled their intention to take the same

[41] Author's interview with Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, 2 November 1994.
[42] Ahlander, *Spelet om Baltikum,* 221.
[43] "Pressemeddelse vedrørende undertegnelse af protokol om samarbejde mellem Danmark og Litauen den 28. februar 1991", *Dansk Udenrigspolitisk Årbog 1991* (Dansk Udenrigspolitisk Institut, 1992), 202.
[44] Uffe Ellemann-Jensen to the author, 29 May 1996.
[45] "Danir segjast vera fyrstir", *Morgunblaðið,* 27 August 1991.

step. Arguably, therefore, the Danish move encouraged other member states of the European Community, as well as the other Nordic states, in a way that tiny Iceland was unable to do. Most other Community members would have advised patience, Germany in particular.[46]

Meanwhile, at the same time as the Baltic states were declaring their independence in the midst of the coup attempt, President Bush reiterated that US Baltic policy "has not changed", and that "we are not giving up on the restoration of constitutional government in the Soviet Union itself".[47] By 26 August, the day of the diplomatic recognition ceremonies at Höfði House in Reykjavík, Bush still insisted that he did not want to contribute to chaos in the Soviet Union. Secretary of State James Baker had to admit, however, that pressure on the United States was mounting, not the least because of the swift Nordic moves.[48]

It is possible, therefore, to argue that the Icelanders started the "race for recognition" by spurring the Danes into action, who then pushed on the other Nordic states, which in turn encouraged the EC and the US to act. It might also be argued, subsequently, that had this "window of opportunity" not been used, the resumption of diplomatic relations with Baltic states would not have occurred in the immediate aftermath of the failed Soviet putsch. While it is impossible to ascertain whether a delay would have mattered in the long run, it might certainly have done so. In this sense, small Iceland may have caused great effects. Admittedly, however, this chain of events leaves out one vital factor, the decision by Boris Yeltsin, President of Russia and the rising leader in Moscow, on 24 August to recognize the independence of the Baltic states. "The road to independence lies through Moscow," US National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, had stated earlier in the year.[49] That remained the fact, despite Gorbachev's fall and Yeltsin's ascendancy.

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[46] Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, *Din egen dag er kort* (Copenhagen: Aschehoug, 1996), 145; Niels von Redecker, *Die Haltung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland gegenüber den baltischen Staaten seit dem Beginn des "nationalen Erwachens" im Jahre 1987*, Ost-Reihe, 1 (Hamburg: Dt. Ges. für Osteuropakunde, 1994), 35; Spohr Readman, "Between political rhetoric and *Realpolitik* calculations", 27 and 39.

[47] Bush Presidential Library. National Security Council. Nicholas Burns Files. Subject File. USSR Coup Attempt August 1990 [sic] (2). CF01308-14. Press conference by the president, 20 August 1991, 10:35.

[48] James Baker, *The politics of diplomacy: revolution, war, and peace* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 524.

[49] Bush Presidential Library. National Security Council. Nicholas Burns and Ed Hewett –Subject Files. 1.2.0. POTUS Meetings March-July 1991. President's meeting with Landsbergis May 8, 1991. CF01422-21. Scowcroft memorandum, 8 May 1991.

Conclusions

The "icebreaker"-version of Iceland's support for Baltic independence has prevailed in Iceland and the Baltic states because it is credible. There can be no doubt that Icelandic actors, with Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson in the forefront, played an active role on the international scene. Furthermore, this Icelandic stand contrasted sharply with Western hesitation to support wholeheartedly the Baltic cause. As Hannibalsson pointed out on Icelandic radio in a conversation about his honorary "courage" doctorate, when people have only one friend in a time of need, they remember who that is.[50]

The undiluted "icebreaker-theory" has survived as well, however, because politicians and practitioners have dominated the stage. The story of Iceland's actions has repeatedly been narrated at independence anniversaries and other commemorative events. Each time, the grand narrative of unwavering support that mattered is repeated and enhanced. With only a few exceptions, academics and other observers have not offered a more nuanced and detached version of the developments in question. When they have done so, their stage is the far less visible medium of academic works and conferences.[51]

I certainly do not wish to suggest here that academics can provide the one and only objective account of how events really unfolded. Usually, however, they need not be influenced by their own memories or an understandable yearning to highlight a memorable part of their past. In the case of Icelandic-Baltic relations in 1990–91, detached observers should therefore be able to point the inconsistencies and ineffectiveness which sometimes characterized Iceland's position.

A toned-down version of the "icebreaker-theory" still leaves room for the conclusion that small states can play an influential role on the international scene. Icelandic support for Baltic independence was not crucial. Yet it mattered. Thus, Iceland's actions and viewpoints can be used as a case study into the options and capabilities of small states on the global stage. Unburdened by wider geopolitical considerations, the small state could offer much appreciated moral support. It could also try to make sure that

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[50] "Einnar mínútu þögn fyrir Samfylkinguna", (Bylgjan radio station morning program, 19 February 2016) <http://www.visir.is/section/MEDIA98&fileid=CLP43387> (accessed 27 February, 2016).

[51] See "Ísland hefur engin áhrif á alþjóðavettvangi", *Stúdentablaðið*, 67:6 (1995), 12; Katrín Jakobsdóttir, "Ísland í aðalhlutverki. Þjóðernisstefna Morgunblaðsins", *Þjóðerni í þúsund ár?*, ed. by Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, Kolbeinn Óttarsson Proppé and Sverrir Jakobsson (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2003), 167–180 (180); Jóhannesson, "Stuðningur Íslands".

the legitimate interests of oppressed peoples would not be overlooked in international forums. Finally, the small state may even have been able to encourage greater powers into action which then proved important in the larger scheme of things.

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Kokkuvõte: *Islandi toetus Balti riikide iseseisvusele: müüt, mälu ja erapooletus*

Artikkel käsitleb Islandi toetust Balti riikide iseseisvuspüüdlustele aastatel 1990-1991. Analüüsitakse Islandi diplomaatiliste initsiatiivide olulisust. Kas Island suutis mõjutada sündmuste kulgu rahvusvahelisel areenil või oli tegu väikeriigi tähtsusetute žestidega? Kas Islandi püüdlused sekkuda suurde globaalpoliitilisse mängu jooksid liiva? Uuritakse ka Islandi välispoliitika hilisemat tõlgendamist ja nn suure narratiivi kujunemist. On selge, et paljude huvides oli tõsta esile Islandi väidetavat kangelaslikkust ja arvatavat mõju tollastele saatuslikele sündmustele. Kuid suure narratiivi kõrvale ja asemele on võimalik pakkuda ka tunduvalt kriitilisemat käsitlust. Tuleb märkida, et tollaste pealtvaatajate ja osalejate mälestused sündmustest on väärtuslikud, kuid neid meenutusi mõjutavad isiklikud kogemused ja kahtlemata ka huvid, mille toetusel kujunenud suurt narratiivi võib nimetada ka "jäälõhkuja teooriaks". Teooria on kindlalt juurdunud nii Islandil kui ka Balti riikides, sest see on usutav.

Pole kahtlust, et Islandi poliitikud, eelkõige välisminister Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson olid rahvusvahelisel areenil aktiivsed. Islandi aktiivsus oli tugevas kontrastis enamike teiste lääneriikide kõhkleva hoiakuga, mis ei lubanud neil Balti iseseisvuspüüdlusi täielikult toetada. Nagu Hannibalsson ise on hiljem piltlikult öelnud: kui inimesel on äärmises hädas vaid üks sõber, mäletab ta hiljem hästi, kes see sõber oli.

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"Jäälõhkuja teooria" on lahjendamata kujul püsinud ka sellepärast, et poliitikud ja praktikud on kujundanud hilisemaid interpretatsioone. Islandi "kangelastegusid" on jutustatud ja korratud iseseisvuse aastapäevadel ja mälestusüritustel. Iga kord kinnitatakse taas suurt narratiivi Islandi raugematust toetusest. Vähese erandiga ei ole ka teadlased ega kommentaatorid pakkunud nüansirikkamat ja kriitilisemat versiooni käsitletavatest sündmustest. Kui nad seda ka teinud on, levivad nende töö tulemused vähem märgatavates akadeemilistes kirjutistes ja konverentsidel.

Ma ei väida, et vaid teadlased suudavad produtseerida objektiivset kirjeldust. Kuid üldiselt võib öelda, et teadlasi ei mõjuta nende oma mälestused või mõistetav soov tõsta esile märkimisväärseid seiku oma minevikust. Mis puutub Islandi-Balti riikide suhetesse aastatel 1990–91, peaksid kriitilised vaatlejad seepärast suutma välja tuua ebakõlasid ja ebaefektiivsust Islandi seisukohtades ja tegevustes.

Nii jõuame "jäälõhkuja teooria" tagasihoidlikuma versioonini. Isegi see versioon võimaldab järeldada, et väikesed riigid võivad mängida olulist rolli rahvusvahelises poliitikas. Islandi toetus Balti riikide iseseisvusele ei olnud kriitilise tähtsusega, kuid see oli oluline. Seega võib Islandi tegevust ja positsiooni kasutada näitena väikeriigi võimalustest ja suutlikkusest tegutseda globaalsel areenil. Väikest riiki ei koorma geopoliitilised kaalutlused ja seetõttu võib ta osutada väga vajalikku moraalset tuge. Väike riik võib hoolitseda selle eest, et rahvusvahelisel foorumil ei vaadataks mööda rõhutud rahvaste legitiimsetest huvidest, või utsitada suurriike tegudele, millel võib olla juba otsustav mõju sündmuste hargnemisele. Just seda Island suutis.