

# Iceland's Jon Baldvin Hannibalsson: The untold story of Lithuania's do or die struggle

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This year Lithuania celebrates the 30th anniversary of its restored independent statehood. Among the key international players in this drama was Jon Baldvin Hannibalsson, Iceland's former Minister of Foreign Affairs. In 1990-1991 he spearheaded Lithuania's call for international recognition. Iceland was initially the first and only country to do so. Mr. Hannibalsson kindly agreed to share his recollections with *Draugas News* regarding his role in Lithuania's struggle for statehood.

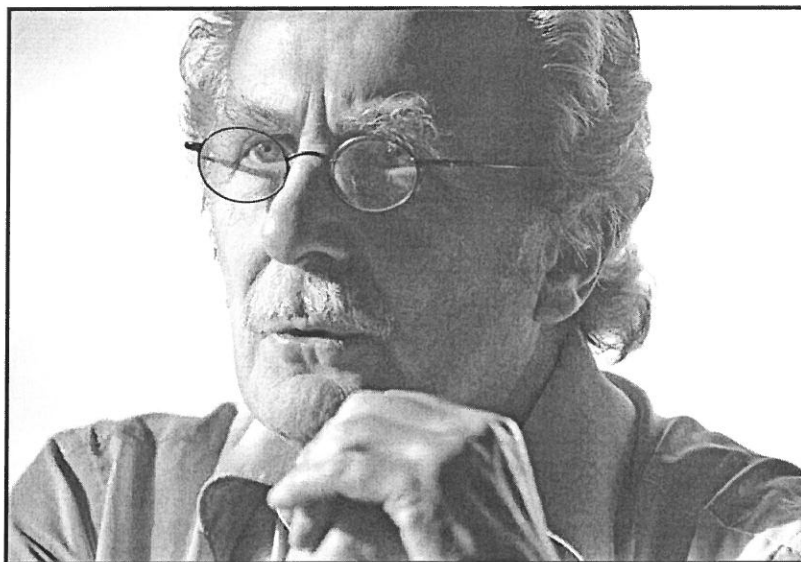
Iceland was the first country to recognize Lithuania's restored statehood. When did Lithuanians first approach Iceland? Was it before it declared independence?

The first contacts were made in early 1989. I assumed the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in September 1988—a position I held until mid-year 1995. The Estonians came first. Endel Lippmaa, a distinguished biophysicist, was the first one. Next, two representatives from Sąjūdis, Emanuelis Zingeris, a Chairman of the Seimas (Lithuania's Parliament) Foreign Affairs Committee and Ramūnas Bogdanas, special foreign affairs advisor to Landsbergis, came to Iceland, having first solicited support in Norway. They were well received.

They were facing a dilemma: Western leaders—President George H. W. Bush, Chancellor Helmut Kohl, President François Mitterrand, and the Iron Lady Mrs. Margaret Thatcher—were wholly preoccupied with ending the Cold War but in partnership with Gorbachev. The repeated mantra was: "Don't say or do anything that may endanger Gorbachev's hold on power, because then the hardliners (meaning real communists) will return. Then everything will be lost." This policy excluded the possibility of the Baltic countries breaking away from the Soviet Union. The Baltic independence movements were, therefore, potential "spoilers of peace." They were told to settle for a compromise with their colonial masters—strengthened home rule, yes, but Western support for restored sovereignty, no.

Most of the leaders of other Western nations followed the herd in this regard. There were only two exceptions: myself and the Danish Foreign Minister Uffe Ellemann Jensen. I thought it was unwise, to say the least, to put all the stakes of the success of Western policy on the political fate of a single individual—Gorbachev. Not the least when it should have been evident to all that Gorbachev's reform attempts were going nowhere, and he was becoming increasingly dependent upon the hardliners themselves.

Our dissent was put to the test at a Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) meeting in Copenhagen in June 1990. The meeting was to deal specifically with human rights. My Danish colleague, Mr. Jensen, had invited the newly appointed foreign ministers of all three Baltic countries—(Estonian) Meri, (Latvian) Jurkans, and (Lithuanian) Saudargas—to plead their case at this



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conference. They were already seated when the Soviet representative made an ultimatum. "Throw them out, or we shall leave—and then you are responsible for the consequences."

Our Danish hosts capitulated, and the Baltic representatives were shown the door. Out of the 37 foreign ministers from all European countries and North America, I was the only one to stand up and protest. I spoke spontaneously solely on the Baltic issue. I said that under no circumstances would it be acceptable to sacrifice the legitimate rights and aspirations of the Baltic nations, which had suffered the most from the consequences of World War II, having been invaded, occupied by both the Nazis and the Soviets and finally illegally annexed into the Soviet empire. A political gain in negotiations between the superpowers would never justify this.

I lent them my voice since theirs had been silenced. I continued in this role, especially within NATO, until the very end. This was not merely an emotional reaction against injustice. This was a strategy based on a different analysis of the internal situation within the Soviet Union and hence Gorbachev's hold on power. My analysis turned out to be right. Theirs turned out to be wrong.

January 1991 was a turning point. Gorbachev, increasingly dependent upon hardliners' support, decided to prevent the break-up of the Soviet Union and calculated he had the support of Western leaders to effect such a policy. Landsbergis, the leader of Sąjūdis, appealed to foreign ministers of several NATO countries, to travel to Vilnius to demonstrate their solidarity for Lithuania's legitimate claim to independence. I was the only one to do so. I visited all the capitals of all three Baltic countries at that time. At the last moment, the Nobel Peace Prize holder Gorbachev backed off. In doing so, he saved his soul and reputation. It was the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union.

Was there unanimity in the Icelandic coalition government for this policy?

Icelanders are never unanimous on anything. Of course, some felt I was risking important business interests in our bilateral trade with the Soviet Union. But this criticism was mostly behind closed doors because among the general public there was strong support for the cause of the Baltic countries. Being cit-

izens of a small and recently independent nation, Icelanders tend to back David in any confrontation with a Goliath. Also, I had solid support from our then prime minister Mr. Steingrímur Hermannsson.

Was it your idea to pursue this policy—or did Lithuanians request it from you?

Was it my idea? Yes, it was. Why? Well, the answer is both personal and political. I was the leader of Iceland's Social-Democratic party at the time. In my early youth, I was attracted to Marxism, but having studied the situation in the Soviet Union, I rejected that



Jon Baldvin Hannibalsson meets with Lithuania's President Dalia Grybauskaitė.

illusion early on. Being the third generation of social-democratic leaders in my extended family, we have had to battle Moscow oriented communists for a long time.

To do so successfully, you need to know your adversary. Two of my elder brothers studied in Russia, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. They had close contacts with leading dissidents. So I was better informed about the domestic situation in the Soviet empire than most of my colleagues.

Also, I had done post-graduate work at Harvard on comparative economic systems. As a consequence, I understood that the Soviet Union was bankrupt. I realized that Gorbachev, even if well-meaning, didn't have a clue how to reform the system. The only way for democratic reform to succeed in Russia would have been through massive support by the West for the real democratic forces inside Russia.

Wasn't this a risky policy for Iceland to pursue against the Soviet superpower?

Indeed, it was. Especially since the Soviet Union was our major trading partner. This came about as a consequence of our Cod Wars with Great Britain. In the early 50s, Iceland, in an informal alliance with

a group of coastal states, fought to increase control over its marine resources, by extending its exclusive economic zone from four to 200 miles. Every time we extended our fishing limits from four to 12, 12 to 50, and ultimately to 200 miles in 1976, the British sent in the Royal Navy to protect their fishing fleet. We responded with guerrilla warfare; our small gunboats cut the fishing gear from the British vessels right under the noses of Her Majesty's commanders.

We won, and the British lost. There are several explanations for this. One is that we played our cards right in the game of Cold War poker. We used our position within NATO to press the U.S. to restrain the weakened British colonial power by threatening to expel a NATO naval base from Iceland. Another reason is that the Soviet Union offered to buy our fish, to break the British sanctions, and to supply us with oil and fuel for our fleet, airplanes, and internal transport. Admittedly, the significance of this trade deal rapidly diminished in the early 90s due to the Soviet Union's decline. Nonetheless, we had to make arrangements behind the scenes to secure replacements if the Soviets would have stood by their threats to cancel this trade.

**Were you personally subjected to Soviet pressure, not to go through with recognizing Lithuania's restored independence?**

Of course, the Soviet Union applied pressure, as was to be expected, politically. They threatened to cancel the trade deal, as I noted previously. At one point, they recalled their Ambassador from Reykjavik, which is usually a prior move before canceling relations. I took this very seriously. I put together a team of legal experts—with substantial input from Estonia—and presented the Soviet government with a position paper. The essence of the legal argument was that we were not interfering in the internal affairs of the Soviet Union.

The annexation of the Baltic countries had been illegal, and the recently elected Congress of People's deputies itself recognized this by declaring the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact with its secret protocols, null and void. This pact between the dictators, Hitler and Stalin, was the original justification for the annexation. We also argued that based on the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 and other international treaties, the Soviet Union had accepted the obligation to respect the borders of other countries. In conclusion, we said: "In particular, it should be viewed in the context of the democratic revolution that the European political landscape has undergone; a revolution rendered possible primarily by the policies of the Soviet Union." Finally, the Icelandic government offered its services to act as a mediator between the democratically constituted governments of the Baltic countries and the Soviet government in settling this dispute.

Needless to say, we never received an answer to this generous proposition.

**Do you believe that the Soviet Union could have been salvaged?**

No, I don't think so. And as a matter of fact, the restoration of independence of the three Baltic nations turned out to be the beginning of the end of the Soviet empire. It simply collapsed of its own dead weight, peacefully—not with a bang but a whimper. And it was not due to Ronald Reagan—as many Americans seem to believe—but to Mikhail Gorbachev, and to the legacy of the failing system which he inherited and tried, half-heartedly, to reform. Ironically, he was ultimately swept away from power by the tumultuous changes he had initiated.

The failure of Western leaders to face the collapse of the Soviet Union is apparent and confirmed by subsequent events. President Bush was utterly unprepared to deal with the situation. He failed to seize the opportunity which the collapse opened up to implement democratic reform in Russia. This is confirmed by his infamous "Chicken Kiev speech" given in the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) in Ukraine on August 1, 1991. It was three weeks before Ukraine declared its independence and exactly 145 days before the collapse of the Soviet Union. What was his message? He appealed to the Ukrainians not to succumb to nationalism but to keep the Soviet Union together—in the name of peace and stability. A colossal misjudgment of a historical opportunity, if ever there was one.

If we wanted to seize the opportunity to democratize Russia, what was needed was a new Marshall Plan. It had to be comparable in scale and imple-

mentation to the one that helped rebuild Europe from the ruins of World War II. The Grigory Yavlinsky plan (of 1990) was such a plan. To implement it, it would have cost some \$150 billion over five years. Its objective was to set the Soviet Union along a managed path to a market economy so as to avoid economic collapse.

Could we have succeeded in laying the foundations for a new Eurasian-Atlantic security system for the future? I don't know. No one knows because this was a lost opportunity. But beforehand, there was no reason to believe that this was a "mission impossible." In an article to be soon published in *The Baltic Times*, I present the economic arguments why this should not have been deemed impossible beforehand. But the consequences of doing nothing are grave. After the chaos and disintegration of Yeltsin's years, Russia has returned to her past as an authoritarian state with imperial ambitions, "claiming a sphere of influence" over her neighboring countries and dreaming of a restored empire. Thus, Russia has again become dangerous to its neighbors. The war of attrition against Ukraine is there to prove it.

The high hopes we had at the time of a "new world order" based on solid foundations of a social-market economy, democracy, and the rule of law, have not been realized. We have swung from one extreme to the other, from the inefficiency and shortages of the centralized command economy to the rampant inequality of market fundamentalism out of social control. The rising oligarchies—both in the U.S. and in Russia—have become a threat to genuine democracy.

**Did you consult with Scandinavian colleagues before Iceland recognized Lithuania's restored independence?**

My Danish colleague, Mr. Uffe Elemann Jensen, and I were allies in this struggle. He kept the argument running within the councils of the European Union, where I had no access. Also, I consulted with my personal friend, Thorvald Stoltenberg, the Norwegian minister, who was very supportive behind the scenes. However, the political situation did not allow him to take the lead openly.

**How did other Western leaders react to your initiative?**

After the failed coup d'état in Moscow in August 1991—which signified the end of Gorbachev's rule—Western policy towards the collapse of the Soviet Union, if we could ever use the word "policy" for their attitude—was in tatters. For a while, there was a political vacuum in Moscow and total confusion in the West. This was the "window of opportunity"—to take the initiative. After a meeting at NATO, two days after the coup, I appealed to my colleagues to respond to Yeltsin's call for support for the democratic forces inside the Soviet Union. The democratic forces were nowhere as strong as in the Baltic countries.

Receiving no response, I seized the opportunity to invite the Baltic foreign ministers, Meri, Jurkans, and Saudargas, to Reykjavik to formalize Iceland's recognition of their restored independence. In political terms, that was already an accomplished fact, but this act set the example. Subsequently, what had been initiated

in Reykjavik was repeated in most European capitals. In the end, the U.S. managed to be a day ahead of the Soviet Union. That was mission accomplished. I consider this to be an example of the solidarity of small nations. It can succeed when the leadership of major powers fails. It did succeed in achieving the Law of the Sea Convention in 1982, and it succeeded in this case. After all, establishing the rule of law and peaceful solutions to international conflicts, rather than raw power, is in the vital interest of small nations. Why not assert it?

**What do you believe is the essential lesson of your recognizing the restored independence of Lithuania?**

The solidarity of small nations against the major powers' failure of leadership.

**Do you see any threats to Lithuanian independence now?**

Yes, unfortunately, I do. Our failure at that time to respond effectively to the collapse of the Soviet Union explains why today the world is a more dangerous place. The rupture in the Trans-Atlantic relationship, which was the ultimate deterrent during the Cold War, caused by the current occupant of the White House, is another. The total lack of leadership and subsequent malaise of the European Union is yet another. The rampant increase in inequality caused by market fundamentalism run amok, out of social control, is the fourth. The threat of an unreformed system against our environment is the gravest.

The forces of authoritarianism in the hands of privileged oligarchies are advancing. Genuine democracy is in full retreat. Is there any hope? Yes, there is always hope. "It is not the acts of the malevolent that is the worst; it is the silence and passivity of the good-willed." In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends. So speak up.



After the people of Lithuania declared independence from the then Soviet Union on 11 March 1990, Iceland was the first country in the world officially to recognise Lithuania's independence, eleven months later in February 1991. Jon Baldvin Hannibalsson meets with Vilnius Mayor Remigijus Šimašius on Iceland Street in Vilnius.