Lessons we can teach

Iceland's President Guðni Th. Jóhannesson explains how small states can play a role in the international arena

Most theorists agree that small states can have an impact in the international arena. 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? In short: 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.

Still, some scholars remain pessimistic that small states can influence current events in a meaningful way. *Realpolitik* rules the world, they claim, and point to the often-quoted remark of Thucydides in his history of the Peloponnesian Wars, that the strong do what they want and the weak have to obey.

I give you some examples of how a small state can indeed play a role on the international stage, some food for thought as you will – here, at the Rondeli Security Conference – focusing on the major challenges to international and regional security through the prism of global competition between democracies and autocracies.

Lessons small states can teach

Iceland is small, and we are few. We must avoid the temptation of overestimating our capabilities to influence international developments. Still, we can and should do what we can for the common good of humankind. And can we not offer some advice, some words of wisdom, something from our experience?

There are many things we can do better in my home country, but still much else is in good order. It is one of the most secure countries in the world, with high living standards, where it's always sunny and warm.

We have no army. We have no immediate neighbours threatening us with violence and war. We live on an island in the middle of the Atlantic. Still, history tells us that our safety and security depend on the safety and security of others. We know that as long as the Russian invasion of Ukraine rages, freedom is at risk in the whole of Europe.

The more gender equal a society is, the happier and healthier its people are, and the more peaceful and prosperous it can be.

Seventeen June 1944, ranks among the greatest days in Iceland's history. At Thingvellir, where the island's chieftains founded their parliament some thousand years before, Iceland declared its independence. In 1944, almost a quarter of the population was gathered there to witness the moment Iceland became a fully sovereign republic. The country's first president was also elected on that day. In the summer of 1944, Soviet forces captured the Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Three years of Nazi rule came to an end, but decades of Soviet oppression followed.

On 17 June 1994, tens of thousands of Icelanders convened again at Thingvellir to celebrate 50 years of independence. It was a glorious day, bright and sunny. On that day, I was not among the happy crowd. On that day, I was in Vilnius. As a history student at the University of Iceland, I had decided to write my Masters thesis about Iceland's support for Baltic independence in 1990-1991.

During my visit to Lithuania, I interviewed politicians, statespersons and officials. They all voiced their deep gratitude for Iceland's support when the Baltic countries were fighting for their rightful place among the world's free states. All mentioned the moral support they received when Iceland's foreign minister visited the three countries during the fateful days of January 1991. All mentioned the decisive step taken by the government in August of that year when Iceland became the first country to resume diplomatic relations with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Iceland did not cause the collapse of the Soviet Union, but we were able to offer moral and political support when bigger states had larger fish to fry.

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It was also Iceland that elected the first female head of state in 1980. For over a decade, Iceland has topped the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index. What we know is that the aspiration for gender equality is not

longer and better lives, when there is less corruption and more human rights.

only an ethical and human rights issue, but a practical one. Gender equality benefits everyone. If one-half of a population is undervalued and not given the opportunity to show their full potential, the whole community suffers. The more gender equal a society is, the happier and healthier its people are, and the more peaceful and prosperous it can be.

In our Icelandic Sagas, written in the 12th and 13th centuries, are stories, for instance, about women making peace. They put garments on weapons, literally, thus preventing or stopping battle. We may be small, but one may also say that this is the exact reason why we were ready to listen to what our sagas tell us and make sure that women have the same opportunities and political representation as men.

We often hear autocratic statesmen talk about the honour of their country that must be defended, about the dignity of the people that must be defended — they talk a lot about honour and strength. Let us talk about honour and dignity when you have built better schools and hospitals, when people live longer and better lives, when there is less corruption and more human rights, and when you strive for peace and prosperity, not war and strife. Being small may have told us to have fewer aspirations and focus on what really matters. Maybe this is a major lesson we can teach bigger states.

This article is a transcript of President's Gudni Th. Johannesson's speech delivered during the Rondeli Security Conference 2024 in Tbilisi.



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