



**NATIONALISM IN TURBULENT TIMES:  
LESSONS FOR SMALL NATIONS  
IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC**

**Lecture  
by  
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Rector of the University of the Faroe Islands,  
dear listeners.

We need to talk about nationalism. Or do we not? Is it not receding as a defining force in our globalized world, where interdependence matters more than independence? There was a time in our recent past when influential policymakers and scholars suggested that we were entering what was called a post-nationalist world. The Soviet Union had collapsed, the map of Europe had changed, the process of European integration was deepening. It was even the “end of history”, as the academic Francis Fukuyama famously suggested. An enlightened road lay ahead, many believed or hoped: The road towards a more globalized world where national barriers would decline and international order rise.

As it happened, this thinking was fairly Euro- or West-centred and it was also short-sighted and misguided. We only had to look at reasons behind the break-up of Yugoslavia, and it was and is easy to mention other examples about the strength of nationalism in many people’s minds.

Not all such examples are negative and destructive, far from that. Allow me to recount a personal and positive anecdote about the recurring strength of nationalism in contemporary times. A number of years ago, well before I became president, the Association of Icelandic Historians – of which I was and remain a proud member – announced an evening symposium on the “end of nationalism?”, admittedly with a question mark. This promised to be an interesting event but when the scheduled day arrived, we all received an email saying that, unfortunately, the planned meeting on the

end of nationalism had to be postponed until a later date. Why? Well, the thing was that Iceland's men's handball team – “our boys” – had an important game that evening and nobody wanted to miss that, not even to discuss the end of nationalism.

Nationalism is alive and kicking. We would indeed do well to remember that from time immemorial, people have sought strength and support in the formation of a group, a unit with common identities and interests. Nations are “imagined communities”, as the political scientist Benedict Anderson pointed out so brilliantly, but because they want to, not because they are in some sense fake or false constructs.

Today, therefore, we can hear historians, social scientists and other academics describe the vitality of nationalism more often than was the case a few decades ago, or so. “Nationalism is back on the agenda,” one such expert, Craig Calhoun, wrote recently, adding this explanation of international relations and order: “Organization onto national rather than imperial states is not an optional add-on to the modern world-system. It is basic.”

Here I would also like to mention a point made by Jake Sullivan, the US National Security Adviser. In early 2019, before he took up that post, Sullivan discussed briefly the position of nationalism in the world. Now, we can all safely assume that he was not referring to us Icelandic historians who wanted to watch our national team rather than debate the end of nationalism. No, he was writing about two books by distinguished experts in the field of international relations, Stephen Walt's *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*; and John Mearsheimer's *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. You may have heard the latter's name fairly frequently in debates about why Vladimir Putin ordered the massive invasion of Ukraine, the West's responsibility and how the West should respond to that atrocious action.

It is fair to say that on that score, Sullivan and Mearsheimer disagree but the point I recount here is that the current National Security Adviser in Washington admitted that in recent years, many liberals in America had tended to downplay the importance and merits of nationalism, or, as he put it:

Mearsheimer has been especially powerful, including in this new book, in pointing out that too many liberal internationalists have failed to contend with the enduring power of nationalism and identity. Recent history has proved him more right and the American foreign policy community more wrong. On this and many other points, practitioners owe these scholars (and the academy in general) a fuller hearing and more thorough consideration — even if they don't end up agreeing with them.

So, yes, we need to talk about nationalism. It is not going anywhere and rather it is up to us to shape this basic tenet of the international order, this basic tenet of states and nations. So let us not forget the positive impact nationalism can have on our societies, how it can foster solidarity and support for each other, how it can enhance our love and care for our nature and environment, how it can connect our past, present

and future, how nationalism can and should maintain our culture, language and history.

In other words, we need to praise a positive version of nationalism. Allow me to mention Benedict Anderson here again. Almost fifty years ago, that author of the lasting phrase about “imagined communities” provided this warning, this call to avoid the temptation to denounce nationalism in all its forms:

In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals (particularly in Europe?) to insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love. The cultural products of nationalism – poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts – show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles.

Indeed, the artists themselves have provided a similar reminder. In her song, *Declare Independence*, singer Björk famously salutes national sovereignty:

With a flag and a trumpet,  
go to the top of your highest mountain.  
And raise your flag (higher, higher).  
Declare independence.

Yes, it could be argued – and it has certainly been done – that the history of Iceland demonstrates the welcome aspects of nationalism. We have a well-established version of our past that seems to be deeply ingrained in the collective memory of most Icelanders. For most of the twentieth century, it was state-sponsored and promulgated by Icelandic statespersons, especially on special occasions like our national holiday or anniversaries of particular events in our history.

Boiled down to its basic essentials this common history is simple: Norse people settled in Iceland, chieftains with their families and other entourage. This we know through the Book of Settlements and the Book of Icelanders, written at least partly to convince the outside world that honourable and noble people lived on that island in the north, no descendants of slaves and thugs. True, inhabitants of the British Isles also arrived in Iceland, mostly slaves or captive women but modern Icelanders have had no problem in admitting that, often saying half-jokingly that this influx only added to our beauty, wisdom and wit.

The settlers of Iceland were quick to found their national parliament, the oldest in the world, as we are often tempted to add – although maybe not here in Tórshavn. The chieftains then formed a Commonwealth, a political unit without executive power. They adopted Christianity and we were also blessed with poets and writers who composed epic tales and sagas, a unique contribution to our global culture and civilization.

Moreover, the sagas contain stories of voyagers who ventured onto uncharted waters, discovering America long before Columbus as Icelanders were often quick to

mention with pride as well. While those journeys can still be lauded as feats of daring and navigational skills, Icelandic representatives have learned not to emphasize “discovery” in the same manner that was the custom some decades ago.

Then, however, disaster befell us, as the story is told. In the thirteenth century, civil strife led to the downfall of the Commonwealth. Centuries of foreign rule followed, centuries of decline after days of glory. It was only in the mid-nineteenth century that the Icelanders enjoyed a national awakening, led by the national hero Jón Sigurðsson, with home rule in 1904, sovereignty in 1918, full independence in 1944 and ever-increasing prosperity until the present day – well, more or less, but always based on the fact that we had become the masters of our affairs, the creators and defenders of a successful nation-state on the international stage.

This is Iceland’s traditional national narrative, an ode to the benefits of positive nationalism, as it were. It is a feelgood story and for decades, Icelandic historians and others have been hard at work, criticizing and deconstructing this collective memory of Icelanders, this state-favoured grand narrative.

I think it is safe to maintain now, even for the president of Iceland, that in nineteenth-century Iceland, all of the leaders in the struggle for independence were not always that concerned with individual freedom, workers’ rights, equality, welfare assistance and other aspects which we now deem essential in a progressive society. And often they would argue fiercely among themselves. Now we should tell that multifaceted story, not only a positive tale of progress from foreign rule to full independence.

And while I ask you not to forget what I have just outlined about the potential benefits of positive patriotism, I want to emphasize that for a frank appraisal of our past we have to add caveats and clarifications. We have to add an international context and we have to admit to faults – we have to face up to the darker side of our nationalism. We should not make that part central of our appraisal but we should certainly not try to ignore it.

I will only offer a few examples here. Icelandic nationalism had racist elements – it nourished the popular notion that the Icelandic nation had to be pure, that the nation must not be contaminated. Thus, on the eve of the Second World War, Icelanders were extremely hesitant to accept Jewish refugees to the country – there was unemployment, it was said, but also that these outsiders were alien, a potential threat to the purity of the Icelandic people. Likewise, during the war and in the first decades afterwards, Icelandic authorities instructed the US administration that there should be no coloured people in the American military forces on the island, or at least as few as possible.

Icelandic nationalism could also be self-centred, ignoring or overriding ethical aspects. For instance, at the same time that practically all Icelanders foresaw a complete break from Denmark (with the exception perhaps of maintaining the royal union), a fair number of people – led by politicians and intellectuals – wanted Iceland

to claim sovereignty over Greenland, assuming that the country's inhabitants could never be masters in their own home.

Here I could also refer to a foreign policy of selling fish wherever possible, whenever possible. When the League of Nations imposed a trade embargo on Italy, for instance, after the fascist invasion of Abyssinia in the 1930s, Iceland could sidestep that action because the country was not a member of that international organization. In the post-war period, profitable trade often outweighed moral considerations.

Now, it can of course be argued that a small state needs to take care of its interests in a cruel world, that it cannot afford the luxury of wondering overmuch what is the right thing to do from a moral, Christian or ethical point of view. Furthermore, this does not only apply to small states, and Iceland is certainly not a unique case in this matter. It was not and certainly is not a rare rascal on the international scene. The world is a tough place where idealism alone can not be a guiding light. However, if we abandon all moral, ethical and idealistic considerations, we support the notion, directly and indirectly, that power and strength should matter most in the world, not the rule of law and ethical values.

Similarly, I strongly believe that we should only praise the virtues of nationalism if we are at the same time ready and willing to admit to its potential dangers, so visible in our past and present. We must never forget the evils of excessive nationalism, the danger of xenophobia, racism and intolerance based on the alleged need to defend the purity, honour and integrity of the nation. As I was initially meant to deliver this lecture yesterday, I keep the initial observation that the ninth of May is an apt day to recall this historical truth, the day of the final surrender of Nazi Germany in 1945.

Furthermore, when we recall the dark side of nationalism, beliefs and policies that have led to warfare, genocide and utter evil, we may be reminded of a negative definition of nationalism – the notion put forward by the Czech-born American scholar Karl Deutsch that a nation is “a group of people united by a mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbours”.

“A hatred of their neighbours”. We Icelanders are and have been in a special situation when it comes to the nation and the state – the nation-state. For centuries, Iceland was a relatively homogenous society. Iceland was, is, and will remain, an island in the middle of the North Atlantic. We do not share land borders with our neighbours and you and the Greenlanders are our closest neighbours. We may sometimes quarrel about fish but that's about it. No Icelander will forget the Faroe Islanders' assistance and friendship, for instance after the avalanches in the West Fjords of Iceland in 1995, or the financial loan with no strings attached after the banking crisis in 2008.

The main point here, however, is that if we are going to look for historical examples about the pros and cons of nationalism, we will get a skewed picture if we look at a single nation-state far away from other countries, in the middle of the ocean. How easy life would be, how tension-free the international system would be, if all

nations lived separate from each other, without disagreements, quarrels or conflicts about to whom this and that piece of land belongs. Such notions are of course wishful thinking but more than that, much worse than that, they can lead to such violence as we see today with the invasion of the Russian army into Ukraine.

Such consequences of extreme nationalism led E. H. Carr, no admirer of that force in the international system, to write this in 1945: “Perhaps the apex of nationalism is reached when it comes to be regarded as an enlightened policy to remove men, women and children forcibly from their homes and transfer them from place to place in order to create homogeneous national units.”

Moreover, the apex of ugly nationalism is reached when people are told that they cannot belong in society because they are somehow different from the majority, not like “us”. In recent decades, Icelandic society has changed tremendously. It is more diverse in many ways, not least since many of our inhabitants have moved to the island from abroad. Icelandic nationalism must develop in this manner as well. All people who want to live in peace with others on our beautiful island should be able to call themselves proud Icelanders, regardless of their skin colour or faith, regardless of other beliefs or whom they want to love, regardless of how well they speak the Icelandic language, regardless of all other factors and labels that can be used to sow mistrust, fear and even hatred.

In all these fields, there is work to be done. Iceland is not a perfect society, far from it. But if we want to do better, it is easier to understand and correct our visible faults.

So, to conclude, when we look at nationalism in turbulent times we need to be aware of both its benefits and its perils. We need to be willing and able to modify our nationalism, make it positive, inclusive and multi-faceted, not aggressive, restrictive and dangerous. We need to survive in the world as best we can – we need to be realistic. But that does not mean that we should only be guided by material, financial and economic considerations from day to day.

Again, this is not something that is somehow a unique issue for a small state in the North Atlantic. The conflict between idealism and realism, or morality and expediency, has been called “the first debate” in the academic field of International Relations. The core issue is to all intents and purposes clear, as put for instance by the US thinker Reinhold Niebuhr in the early 1930s, yet another male thinker I quote here: “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.”

Yes, this holds true for Iceland like others, and also for me, enjoying the immense honour of being my country’s head of state, proud of my country, its history and culture, but also aware of what we could have done better and what we still need to do better.