

Scientific Report

Short-Term Scientific Mission to Iceland, 7 September – 18 September, 2015

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Topic: Big Cities, Small Countries: State-Area-City Relations in Reykjavík, Iceland and Tel Aviv, Israel

Field of study: Political Science, Local Government

Receiving institution: Bifröst University, Iceland

Host: Dr. Magnús Árni Skjöld Magnússon, Associate Professor



The present report covers a short-term scientific mission (STSM) to Bifröst University, Iceland, to collaborate with Icelandic colleagues – Associate Professor Dr. Magnús Árni Skjöld Magnússon and Assistant Professor Kári Joensen – on a comparative project within the framework of COST Action IS1207 (Mr. Amir Hefetz, a researcher at the School of Political Science, University of Haifa, is also collaborating on this project). The present STSM followed an STSM by Dr. Magnússon to the University of Haifa in May 2015.

Our project aims to compare practices and models of local democracy within two "islands" – that is, two small and peripheral states – facing similar challenges at the local government level. In both cases, one very large urban area dominates the local government landscape, together with a multitude of much smaller municipalities. The question is how the presence of this dominant municipality affects relations between the central and local governments, between the large municipality and its neighbors, between smaller local communities, and between individual local politicians. In a nutshell, we are interested in the tension between local democracy and regionalism in the case of large dominant cities.

Why Iceland and Israel? Why Reykjavík and Tel-Aviv? In both cases, a combination of geographic and demographic factors (at the internal and geopolitical levels) mean that one large, central city dominates a relatively small and isolated state. In Iceland, more than two-thirds of the population live in the Greater Reykjavík area, while the Greater Tel-Aviv area (Gush Dan) is home to over 40% of Israel's population. In both instances, the political clout of these comparatively large cities almost suggests a "state within a state". Both are global cities that face similar challenges both internally, in terms of the allocation of responsibilities between the local government and the market or civil society, and externally, in relation to

the demands placed upon them by New Public Management (NPM) regimes and their successors.

Thus far, our research suggests that the Tel-Aviv and Reykjavík areas have developed quite different practices, strategies, and models of local democracy in their efforts to tackle regional area planning, cooperation and competition. These interesting differences will serve as a basis for two papers. The first paper, headed by Dr. Magnússon, will focus on state-city and city-city relations, and will rely primarily on interviews with different actors within the government system (local and state). The second paper, headed by myself, will tackle relations between the central city and other municipalities that make up its metropolitan area, with a particular focus on interactions and attitudes among local residents. For this purpose, we will conduct a survey to examine public opinion with respect to a number of key constructs, including centralization, governance, governability, and dependence vs independence, in relation to local administration, residents and communities.

Work on the project began with the STSM of Dr. Magnússon to the University of Haifa, during which we conducted twelve interviews with Israeli mayors, municipal CEOs and CEOs from the Interior Ministry. We followed this up during my STSM to Bifröst University and the Reykjavík capital area by interviewing the individuals listed below. In addition, during both STSMs, the Iceland and Haifa teams worked together to review the framework within which the various actors function, so as to provide an initial structure for the two case studies.

Interviews

During the present STSM, the following people were interviewed. All interviews took place in the individual's office. Interviews were recorded and lasted for 45 minutes to 1.5 hours.

- Mr. Haraldur Líndal Haraldsson, Mayor of Hafnarfjörður
- Mr. Páll Guðjónsson, Director of SSH (Association of Municipalities in the Capital Area)
- Mr. Hrafnkell Proppé, Director of Regional Planning in the Capital Area
- Ms. Ásgerður Halldórsdóttir, Mayor of Seltjarnarnes
- CEOs of the following Seltjarnarnes departments: Department of Finance and Governance, Department of Social Services, Environmental and Technical Department,

Department of Education and Cultural Affairs, and Department of Sports and Recreation.

- Mr. S. Björn Blöndal, Chairman of the City Council of Reykjavík

Seminar

During the STSM, we conducted a seminar on national and local politics within the framework of the 'International Politics' graduate course in the Faculty of Social Science, Bifröst University/Bifröst School of Business

All in all, this trip was enriching, extremely meaningful and rewarding, both professionally and privately. I learned a great deal about Icelandic local government and regionalism, and I discovered a wonderful state and wonderful people. I would like to thank Dr. Magnússon and his wonderful family for their hospitality and Kári for his great help. I am grateful to the Chair of the COST 1207 Action for giving all of us this important opportunity to learn, research and share.

Respectfully

Itai Beer