

## RISKS AND THREATS IN A SMALL STATE: ICELANDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY

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### Abstract

The Icelandic public believes that its security is most threatened by economic and financial instability, as well as natural hazards, but thinks there is a very limited chance of military conflict or terrorist attacks directly affecting the country. These findings are in many ways incongruent with the main emphases of Icelandic authorities, as they appear in security policy and political discourse. It is therefore important that the authorities understand how to engage with the public about the criteria upon which risk assessments and security policies are based.

### Key findings

- The security discourses emerging from the executive branch of government in Iceland is far more focused on 'hard' security than the discourse stemming from the legislative branch
- The Icelandic public is relatively unaware of the significance of Iceland's international security arrangements and their importance to the state
- Public debate of security in Iceland is very limited and under-developed

### Executive summary

Very little is known about public attitudes to foreign and security policy in Iceland. The Icelandic National Election Survey included a question about the public's attitude towards the US military base in Keflavik until the base closed in 2006. Thereafter, surveys on attitudes to foreign affairs and security were limited to opinion polls gauging the public's attitude to potential EU membership. In late 2016, a survey on national perceptions of risks and threats to individual and national security was conducted. The findings demonstrated that the Icelandic public has limited concerns of military threats to the state and perceives most threats to the country's security as stemming from natural hazards and environmental change, in addition to economic instability and financial uncertainty. This reflects the priorities of Iceland's legislative branch, but diverges significantly from the priorities present in the executive branch's policy documents. This indicates that the government has some work to do in order to raise awareness about Iceland's security alliances and in improving dialogue on foreign policy in society in general.

### Analysis

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Foreign affairs are often marginal in public discourse, and in the post-Cold War environment, security policy in particular faded into the background in Icelandic politics, as debate turned more frequently to concerns about European Union membership than security arrangements. The information presented herein gives an insight into the perspectives of Icelanders on their security environment and the threats and risks they see in their external environment.

Drawing from a survey of nearly 5000 respondents who were asked to rank eleven types of threats to the state, we see that 25.8% believe natural disasters are the greatest threat, and environmental risks come a close second. Cumulatively, natural and environmental risks and threats are perceived as the greatest threat by nearly half the respondents. This is then followed by financial crises, organized crime, and, finally, terrorism in fifth place. This ranking suggests the public is more concerned about risks and threats stemming from environmental and societal factors, rather than the intentional act of either individuals, groups or states. Armed conflict and nuclear threats are ranked as the main threat by only 1.8% of respondents each. Terrorism stays in about the same position throughout the ranking, and it is only in 8<sup>th</sup> place that armed conflict, terrorism, and nuclear threats start to move to the top of the ranking, suggesting that these issues are not really regarded as significant threats by Icelanders in general.

Similar priorities emerge when we ask about threats to individual security, although financial insecurity and financial crises outrank the environmental factors in this instance, ranked as the greatest threat to personal security by 37.5% of the respondents. Natural disasters are then ranked in first place by 18.7% and environmental threats by 16.1%. These three factors are considered the greatest threats to personal security by 72.3% of the respondents. Much as with perceived threats to the security of the state, organized crime and terrorism come in at 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> place. Just as in the case of threats to state security, there is minimal perception that armed conflict or nuclear hazards and threats pose any threat to the personal security of the respondents. These are ranked in first place only by 1.7% and 1.5% respectively.

A final question asked respondents to identify the sources of Iceland's security, choosing from a set list of six options, i.e. Iceland's non-militarized status, peaceful relations with neighbours, the country's smallness (hence not a threat to anyone), NATO membership, other Western cooperation, and finally membership in the Schengen Agreement. Here it is clear that Iceland's peaceful relations with its neighbours is considered most important, as 41% believe they contribute most to Iceland's security. Other items are considered far less important, but it is worth noting that 16% believe it is Iceland's non-militarized status that most ensures its security, while 17% believe it is NATO membership. The country's smallness ranks equally high. Other Western cooperation (assumed to be Nordic Cooperation and/or membership of the European Economic Area) comes in at 7%. Only 1%, however, look to the Schengen Agreement for Iceland's security.

The debates surrounding the formulation of Iceland's first National Security Policy indicated that there was a rift between the executive and legislative branches, with the legislative branch aligning closer with the findings of the public opinion survey. The public opinion and the legislative branch in particular indicate the need to emphasise societal security aspects in policy making and debates. The survey also reflected a fairly strong partisan divide when it came to perceptions of risks and threats and of Iceland's security arrangements. It therefore appears necessary to elevate the debate on foreign and security policy to improve public debate and discourse on this important issue.

### **What should Iceland do?**



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Iceland should consider establishing a platform, possibly a think tank, to encourage a less divisive discussion on security and foreign affairs.

- Iceland should strive to engage the public in a more informed discussion about security, for example through cross-political dialogue and public events
- Icelandic authorities need to make visible the costs and benefits of international engagements and step into misleading public discourse
- Iceland must put an emphasis on the provision of soft security and strengthen relevant organizations

## **Conclusion**

Iceland needs to consider the importance of the public debate on foreign and security policy, and raise the level of awareness of the country's security environment and arrangements. Public perceptions of risks and threats align fairly well with those of the legislature, as apparent in debates on the National Security Policy, but these two diverge quite significantly from the executive branch's policy emphases. This reflects to some extent the left-right divide on foreign and security policy during the Cold War and an effort must be made to break that pattern.



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