



**A speech  
by  
the President of Iceland  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
at  
International Arctic Forum  
“The Arctic – Territory of Dialogue”  
Moscow  
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Prime Minister  
Your Highness  
Your Excellencies  
Ladies and gentlemen

It is both an honour and a privilege to participate in this distinguished forum and return to Moscow where, eight years ago in a dialogue with President Putin, we jointly outlined the importance of the Northern Regions for global development in the new century. Following those constructive discussions, I then journeyed to Yamal-Nenets, and later Chukotka, to witness at first hand the challenges facing the indigenous people who for thousands of years have made the frozen tundra their permanent home.

In those early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Arctic was still peripheral in the theatre of global concerns. While the rest of the world continued to focus on other regions and different issues, the inhabitants of the North preserved their unique culture, demonstrating how it is possible to adapt to inhospitable elements of nature, turn hardship into the pursuit of progress.

In the minds of others, the North remained an enchanting realm of frost and cold, with white expanses of snow and crystal-clear ice exemplifying purity and beauty, the northern lights and winter darkness suggesting a mystique beyond compare, and the summer sun and bright spring nights symbolizing an eternal day.

In recent years, however, we have witnessed a dramatic transformation. Our northern periphery has moved to centre stage. The Arctic Regions and other northern parts of Russia, the United States, Canada and the Nordic countries have become crucial to the future of the world, to developments in energy production and global transport, to the monitoring of climate change and the future well-being of those who rely on the ice and the oceans for their very survival.

New regional organisations have been created, and now provide an interlocked network of systematic consultation embracing the entire area from Russia across the Baltic and the Barents Sea through the Nordic countries, over the Atlantic Ocean and Greenland into North America; constituting together a new reality which has fundamentally changed the political and economic landscape in the North.

The federal structures of Russia, Canada and the United States have furthermore brought regional, provincial and state governments into significant cooperation with the smaller nation-states in the Northern Regions. New forms of cooperation in economic, social, cultural and political affairs have been created. Thus, the Arctic and the North can now be seen as a laboratory of how the old nation states and the regional, provincial and state bodies within federal structures can develop forms of intensive international cooperation on many levels and thus transform the old traditional model of diplomatic exchange.

Taken together, these developments have been so extensive that they have already created an elaborate new political system which I decided in St. Petersburg a few years ago to call “the New North” – an effective, broad and elaborate framework of cooperation.

The New North is, in global terms, uniquely democratic. It allows citizens and scholars, students and activists from cities and regions to come forward with ideas, propositions, suggestions, projects and plans. Through their connections with the formal councils of cooperation – the Arctic, the Barents and the Baltic – these democratic currents can reach the highest levels of the decision-making process. Political innovation in the North has thus within a single decade produced a framework for cooperation and dialogue that offers many opportunities for initiative and progress which is no longer hindered by the boundaries of old diplomatic rules.

Within the New North, everyone can work with everyone else: regions in Russia can work with independent states in Northern Europe; Alaska can work with the Nordic nations; universities and research

institutions can work directly with state representatives. The possibilities are unlimited, and the institutions in the North give indigenous peoples' organisations formal access to the decision-making process. Thus the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, the Saami Council and the Association of Indigenous Minorities in the Far North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation now have the right to formal representation within the international framework of cooperation among the Arctic states.

This new framework for open dialogue and effective decision-making will be tested in the coming years by how we deal with the many challenges facing the Arctic and the Northern Regions, challenges which are also of great relevance for the rest of the world.

How the rich energy resources, about a quarter of the world's untapped reservoirs, oil, gas, hydro and geothermal power, will be utilized and managed.

How the development of the northern and other new sea routes linking America and Europe to Asia in a new way will be planned, potentially transforming commerce, communication and business, creating a new dimension in the global economy, as the Suez Canal did for world trade more than a century ago.

How the North can be monitored to serve as a barometer of climate change, since the evidence suggests that the warming is taking place three times faster in the Arctic than anywhere else in the world.

How sustainable human development can be secured by basing social, cultural and economic progress on the responsible use of natural resources.

How legal concerns can be met regarding the position of indigenous peoples, their cultural and human rights, land ownership and other issues that are becoming the focal point of a new discipline, Arctic Law.

These, and other challenges already on the agenda in the North, will not only be of relevance for our own dialogue. They are also of great interest to people in other parts of the world.

One could even say that with respect to the Earth as a whole, the Arctic and the North have become the new intellectual frontier in the sense that they call for scientific research and cooperation, discoveries and active scholarly participation in the same way as, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, exploration on frontiers in different parts of the world was based on academic endeavours.

This new intellectual frontier must focus not only on research and scientific cooperation, but also on new policy discussions between representatives of the countries that formally belong to the Arctic and representatives of the entire global community. We cannot conduct the dialogue of the future of the North in political isolation; it must become a global concern.

I was impressed, if not a little surprised, on a visit to Bangladesh two years ago, when the Minister of the Environment started asking me highly informed questions on the new institutional framework in the Arctic, on the decision-making process, because he was seeking guidance from the Arctic experience for his own, and other Asian countries.

Last January, in Delhi, I had fascinating discussions with many Indian leaders on how the Arctic Council and other forms of Northern cooperation could serve as a model for the evolution of a more productive dialogue among the states in the Himalayan region since it closely resembles the Arctic. China and India, and a number of small countries, are there the main players, just as the Arctic is dominated by Russia on one hand and the United States and Canada on the other, with the Nordic countries in between.

A year ago I suggested at the University of Bergen, in Norway, that it could be an interesting exercise to convene a joint forum on the Arctic and the Himalayas, inviting people not only from Russia and the United States, Canada and the Nordic countries, but also from China, India and the other Himalayan nations, to come together and talk about our joint experiences. Most of the challenges that relate to the North and the Arctic are also of direct relevance to the future of the Himalayas.

In my recent visit to China earlier this month I encountered a strong interest in a dialogue on mutual concerns, both in my meetings with scientists and experts at the Polar Research Institute of China, based in Shanghai, and at the headquarters of the Institute of Tibetan Plateau Research in Beijing.

I take the opportunity to reiterate these ideas here today in order to emphasize how our conduct in the Arctic and the North is not merely relevant to our own nations but could also inspire others to seek new venues, new forms of productive cooperation.

Ever since I was privileged to start a decade ago constructive dialogues with the leaders of Russia, the President, Ministers, Governors, Mayors, scientists, scholars and representatives of the indigenous people, I have come to respect profoundly the dedication of the Russian people to

the future of the North. This Arctic Forum, convened in Moscow, has been yet another confirmation of your commitment to a successful dialogue in the North and I thank you profoundly for the invitation, the inspiring wisdom and knowledge which has characterized the discussions.

For Iceland such cooperation with Russia and other countries in the North is a crucial pillar of our strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is rooted in the common history, the heritage of Russia and the Nordic people, stretching more than a thousand years back in time, closely recorded in the medieval Icelandic sagas written down in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and made tangible by archaeological evidence found in many parts of Russia.

While our task is to create, through successful dialogue, a new future of the North, it is inspiring to know that our common destiny draws strength from the fate of our forebears; is a continuation of the journeys made by our ancestors more than a thousand years ago.