



**A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at
2nd International Arctic Forum
“The Arctic: Territory of Dialogue”
Arkhangelsk
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Prime Minister
Your Serene Highness
Excellencies
Distinguished scientists, officials
Ladies and gentlemen

It is indeed a profound honour to join you at the 2nd International Arctic Forum, convened by an historic institution, the Russian Geographical Society. The launching in Moscow last year sent a powerful signal, not only to other Arctic nations but also to the international community, that Russia was embracing a constructive dialogue on Arctic issues, encouraging others to share in projects and discoveries and join hands in scientifically-based policies which would honour the principles of sustainability and progress.

I thank the Russian Geographical Society for its leadership and for the honour it bestowed upon me when we first assembled. Its vision is strongly supported by Prime Minister Putin who, last year in Moscow, outlined the need for comprehensive cooperation among all countries in the Arctic. Again, here in Arkhangelsk, the Prime Minister shows his fundamental commitment to the success of our joint Arctic endeavours. No other leader of a major Arctic country has become so involved in our common journey, and I take this opportunity to thank Prime Minister Putin for this visionary leadership in Arctic cooperation.

The constructive role of Russia in the evolution of Arctic institutions, policy formulation and scientific projects is firm evidence of

how our region has been fundamentally transformed in the last 10-20 years. Cooperation and positive engagement have replaced confrontation and military tension; this is a model which other global regions might do well to follow.

Last year in Moscow, I drew your attention to how our northern periphery has moved centre stage, becoming: “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.”

In recent months, I have been privileged to witness how people from all the Arctic regions are coming together in wide-ranging networks of cooperation: scientists, scholars, political leaders, ministers, governors, mayors, officials, community representatives, indigenous spokespersons, cultural figures, young researchers and many others.

The Arctic is now vibrant in dialogues and discussions, choirs of different voices in a harmonious performance.

We see it today in Arkhangelsk. I saw it a few weeks ago in Iceland and Greenland, and during the summer in Alaska and Rovaniemi. In recent months all these places have served as venues for forward-looking conferences and forums, with both Arctic participation and a strong global involvement.

The future of the Arctic signifies the fate of the world: our destiny is also that of others.

The theme of this Forum bears witness to this fact. The development of Arctic transport systems, navigation along the Northern Sea Route and the North-West Passage, the need for infrastructure and environmental protection are all issues with a strong global impact. The melting of the ice will bring Asia closer to Europe and America than ever before.

It is paradoxical : new venues for economic progress and the well-being of our nations are being opened up, while at the same time we are reminded that the threat of climate change has become urgent. A failure to reach international agreements on carbon-emission reductions will expose us to the possibility of man-made disaster on a catastrophic scale.

In galvanising all nations to join forces to prevent irreversible climate change, we in the Arctic must prepare constructively for the coming situation in the North. While the ice will continue to melt, we must hope that humanity will come to its senses, saving planet Earth so that children not yet born will be able to rejoice in the majesty of creation.

It is an indication of how global these concerns have become that, earlier this month, scientists, experts, public leaders and officials from the Arctic countries who attended the Northern Research Forum's Open Assembly were joined by their colleagues from the Himalayan regions: from India, China, Nepal and Pakistan, and also from other parts of the world. It was indeed an historic occasion. It was the first time that such Arctic-Himalayan dialogue had taken place, the theme being "Our Ice Dependent World". My country was honoured to be the host, and I am grateful to Dr. Chilingarov and Senator Vladimir Torlopov and others who joined us from Russia.

We took the first step in what I described at the Forum in Moscow last year as the need to demonstrate "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 . . . Most of the challenges that relate to the North and the Arctic are also of direct relevance to the future of the Himalayas."

During my Presidency, I have frequently encountered the growing interest on the part of China and India in the evolution of the Arctic. A delegation from the China Polar Institute which visited Iceland this summer stated that next year, they might send the icebreaker Snow Dragon from China across the North Pole to Iceland in order to demonstrate both the reality of climate change and the need for constructive engagement and cooperation.

In recent years the Arctic has become a major pillar in Iceland's foreign policy, a welcome transformation from the Atlantic military tension which dominated our choices in previous decades. The Icelandic Parliament, the Althingi, unanimously passed a comprehensive resolution on our Arctic vision in March, stating that: "Iceland will concentrate its efforts fully on ensuring that increased economic activity in the Arctic region will contribute to sustainable utilisation of resources and observe responsible handling of the fragile ecosystem and the conservation of biota. Furthermore, to contribute to the preservation of the unique culture and way of life of indigenous people which has developed in the Arctic region."

Within this policy framework, we have constructively sought to strengthen our cooperation with neighbouring Greenland, mapping out new dimensions which have now become an everyday reality, strengthening the friendship between the people of Greenland and Iceland, two small nations whose future is so intertwined with the fate of the Arctic.

The success of the cooperation between Greenland and Iceland also carries the message that innovation and new venues are now possible in the Arctic.

Icelandair provides passenger and cargo transport to many locations on both the east and the west coasts of Greenland; an Arctic dimension as is the Icelandair-Yakutia cooperation within Russia. Our health system serves communities all over Greenland; treatment at high-tech hospitals in Reykjavík is available to people in even the most remote villages in that vast country.

An Icelandic construction company built the impressive new school in Nuuk and our engineers and technicians are participating in other projects. Earlier this month, the universities in Akureyri and Nuuk jointly hosted a high-level international conference on Polar Law, and next week at the President's Residence in Iceland I will receive a group of 11-year-old children from Greenland who are in my country, learning to swim in our warm geothermal pools.

For centuries, the people of Iceland and Greenland lived in worlds that were deeply separated from each other, even though our countries are geographically so close. Now we enjoy the benefits of multi-dimensional networks of cooperation; a model of what can be done in the Arctic with vision and determination.

The utilisation of resources – minerals, oil, gas, hydro-power – and the opening up of new sea routes will bring challenges to our countries; hopefully agreements among the Arctic states will allow these developments to harmonise with both the conservation of the environment and the economic and social progress of the indigenous communities.

Powerful corporate interests from far-away countries are now knocking on Arctic doors. Consequently, our decisions and cooperation have become more crucial than ever.

The Forum here in Arkhangelsk, with its wide-ranging and constructive agenda, is of the utmost importance, and I want to thank the Russian Geographical Society and the Russian Government again for bringing us together in this important endeavour.

The opening of the northern sea routes brings my country, strategically located in the North Atlantic, both opportunities and challenges.

For decades already, Iceland has served as an important hub in air transport, helping to connect cities in Europe and America. Similarly our

geographical position could make Iceland a convenient hub for cargo ships and other vessels which will use the northern sea routes to connect Asia with the Western World. How this will be done is a complicated challenge, but already harbour authorities in northern and eastern Iceland are examining the potential, analysing the need for infrastructure and land in order to provide container depots of the required size.

Similarly, the opening by the Icelandic National Energy Authority of bids for exploration of oil in the so called Dragon Area, off the northeast coast of Iceland in the Jan Mayen ocean we share with Norway, indicates how the resource-rich North faces us with unexpected challenges. Iceland, a country that has prided itself on its clean-energy success, with all electricity and space heating now derived from green energy resources, is cautiously taking the first steps into a potential oil-production future.

In all these endeavours, active and forward-looking cooperation in the Arctic is an essential requirement for success.

We can all bring significant experience, advice and suggestions to the table.

We have already demonstrated through the Arctic Council and various networks of Arctic cooperation that our policies must be based on science and the search for knowledge.

We are deeply aware that fate has made us guardians of some of the most sensitive, beautiful, dramatic and exotic places on earth; our region is blessed with rich resources and opportunities for progress.

We are not only people of the Arctic, but also citizens of the world: we carry a profound global responsibility.

This is why our dialogue here in Arkhangelsk is so important, and I thank you again for inviting me to join in your endeavours and deliberations.