



**Speech
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
on the Occasion of the
Celebration of 25 Years of Independence**

**The Parliament of Lithuania
Vilnius, 11 March 2015**

President of the Republic
Speakers of Parliaments
Ministers. Elected Representatives
People of Lithuania

In a time of turbulence we come together to reaffirm our liberty, our freedom, our democratic values; to celebrate how the will of the people ultimately defeated the iron fist of tyranny and oppression; to declare our commitment to honour, now and forever, the memory of those who kept the flame of hope in their hearts, of those who sacrificed everything, even their lives, to bring independence to the nation.

As the century of two world wars and totalitarian regimes moved towards its conclusion, the history of Lithuania and the Baltic nations became, in the final decade, a beacon of democratic revolution, a forum where national movements, nourished by culture and the memory of previous times, inaugurated a new era in Europe and the Western World.

This historic struggle, the dramatic days in your capital, your towns and your regions, will forever live in our minds and in the memory of people everywhere, as proof that no empire is strong enough to defeat the will of a united people, that the vision of democracy and freedom will ultimately prevail.

The events at that crossroads will continue to carry the message so eloquently expressed by Vytautas Landsbergis when, twenty five years ago, as the highest representative of your people, he was invited to be the guest of honour at the opening of the Althingi, the Icelandic parliament, the oldest legislative assembly in the world.

Never before in its history of more than a thousand years had the Althingi invited such a guest to participate in its annual inauguration, but as he walked with us, whom the Icelandic people had elected, from the Parliament to the Cathedral, as is the custom in my country, the crowd assembled in the square applauded warmly and firmly; thus expressing a national will that subsequently led Iceland to become the first country to recognize the full diplomatic sovereignty of Lithuania, confirming your complete independence; a national will that some years later made Iceland join other Nordic countries and the United States in strongly supporting your membership in NATO, a policy of granting permanent security which then was advocated by only a few in the Atlantic Alliance.

It has somehow been forgotten that not everyone was in favour of these moves; that many urged caution and patience, but we boldly went ahead and others later decided to follow.

These decisions showed the validity of the message that Vytautas Landsbergis presented twenty five years ago in his address to the people of Iceland; a message which is as true today as it was then. He declared that, like Martin Luther King, he had a dream; a dream of small nations coming together in an active alliance countering the domination of larger powers. The world could be saved by smaller nations lending each other a helping hand because they were endowed with a moral strength, the vision of democracy and liberty for all; they could act when others were chained by networks of regional dominance and the illusion of everlasting empires.

Small nations seek inspiration from the collective wisdom of generations who preserved the flame of freedom, from their culture and linguistic inheritance, qualities surviving the conflicts of wars and foreign oppression.

As Landsbergis stated, his dream came true through the action taken by Iceland, the smallest of the European nations, when others were influenced by considerations often applied by larger countries to each other.

The dream also guided the Lithuanian people on your journey to secure, together with the other Baltic nations, a firm position in the

European family of independent states and ultimately membership in the North Atlantic Alliance.

When others followed your example, we came to witness a new era in the long history of Europe. Never before have so many small and medium-sized states formed the mosaic of a continent which used to suffer from conflicts between the larger powers, but was now being moulded by the collective will of smaller nations, most of which also came to transform NATO where Iceland, as a founding member, had for decades formed, with a few others, the junior arm of the Alliance.

In this new century, Europe has for the first time become a commonwealth where the majority of states consist of small and medium sized nations, where diversity is the foundation of a successful future; hopefully organised not as a centralised system of highways but rather laid out as a park with many different groves and gardens, each with plants and flowers of its own.

The decisions taken by Iceland and the successful evolution of Lithuania and the other Baltic states, your journey from celebrating independence to full partnership in NATO and the European Union is a testimony to how the smaller nations of the world can indeed influence their common future, lead the way to transformation, bringing democracy, freedom and ultimately prosperity and welfare to all.

Now in Northern Europe, the eight Nordic and Baltic states are closely linked through multiple structures, regional and international organizations, working constructively together for peace, security, progress and the rule of law.

This has become for us a dynamic and practical Northern European partnership, based on our historic ties, shared commitment to human rights, tolerance and a respect for different customs and beliefs; and to others both a model and a reminder that nations can indeed join hands in new endeavours, seeking inspiration from the Nordic heritage and the Baltic achievements.

I therefore bring you here today a confirmation of our friendship, a message of solidarity from the people of Iceland, the assurance that our alliance will forever be rooted in those historic times when the will to independence brought our nations together.