



**Opening address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the First Northern Research Forum
"North Meets North"
Akureyri
4 November 2000**

Distinguished scholars
Forum participants
Dear friends

The opening of the first Northern Research Forum marks a wide-ranging recognition of both the changes taking place in the northern regions of the world and the need to bring scholars and policymakers together in order to further an extensive and scientifically based understanding of the tasks facing the people of the North.

I am deeply grateful to the University of Akureyri and the University of Lapland for their endorsement of the proposal I described in Rovaniemi in the autumn of 1998. I also thank the members of the organizing committee which was established in 1999 for their leadership and persistence.

My vision was to bring into being what I called a village square where scholars and students, researchers and policymakers would come together and discuss the transformation of the North, its historical legacy and the structural innovations affecting governments and regional co-operation, and to analyse the economic and social changes, the environmental conditions and the forces affecting the security, livelihood, culture and prosperity of the Northern communities. When the North now meets the North here in Akureyri this village square has become a reality, a forum for dialogue among those who value the importance of the North and understand its uniqueness, complexities and interdependence.

The division of the world along the axis of East-West and North-South has for a long time dominated academic research and political, economic and strategic thinking. The impact of these divisions was often to enhance conflict and underline tensions.

By bringing forth an emphasis on the North-to-North relationship we are not only establishing a new global vision but also seeking ways to enhance co-operation and mutual understanding. We are brought together by our joint interests in the North and our common determination to give Northern issues and concerns, problems and challenges a higher and more sustained priority in the future.

The enthusiasm with which the proposal on the Northern Research Forum was greeted, and the participation in the first Forum by representatives and scholars from the United States, Canada, the Nordic countries, Russia and other states shows that the time had come to establish a permanent network for these new and much-needed discussions. The support given by the University of the Arctic and other academic and research institutions in the Northern Regions and the financial assistance provided by the governments, the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation demonstrate a profound understanding of the nature of the new challenges facing people in the North and their importance for the rest of the world.

In the final decade of the 20th century the forces of change fundamentally altered the academic and political map of the world and consequently the North achieved a greater importance than ever before. Up to that decade there was very little interest in the course of events in the Northern Regions; they were primarily considered to be a status quo part of the world. The deep frost of the Cold War somehow harmonised with the colder climate up north, so the end result was as uneventful as the never-ending wilderness of snow and ice where monotonous whiteness covered everything in all directions to the horizon.

But just as the Summit Meeting of President Reagan and Secretary General Gorbachev in Höfði House in Reykjavík in the autumn of 1986 began the transformation of the entire world, and heralded the dawn of the new times which replaced the darkness of the Cold War, so the North has experienced vibrant changes, similar to the arrival of spring which breaks the ice covering lakes and rivers; suddenly there is movement everywhere and the newly released streams move forward with force and vigour.

New states and regional organisations have been created. For the first time in our history there now exists an interlocked network of organisations embracing the entire area from Russia across the Baltic States and the Barents Sea through the Nordic countries, over the Atlantic Ocean and Greenland into Canada and the United States of America.

Three regional organisations – the Baltic Council, the Barents Region Council and the Arctic Council – all of them created in the present decade and all gaining relevance and scope with each year that passes, are a clear demonstration of this political transformation; not only bringing into being new states and new territorial bodies within states, but also creating for the first time exclusive forums for co-operation between the Northern European states, Canada and the two most important states of the twentieth century, the United States of America and Russia.

Although the Baltic, Barents and Arctic Councils are all different in composition and purpose, they constitute together a new structural reality. They show how the end of the Cold War has fundamentally changed the political and economical landscape in the North and brought our regions into key positions, influencing strongly the success of the new Europe and the stability of the Russian-American relationship.

The federal structures of Russia, Canada and the United States have furthermore brought regional, provincial and state governments into significant co-operation with the smaller nation states in the Northern Regions. Thus an interesting form of regional and nation state co-operation in economic, social and political affairs is now being created. New entities have entered the framework of co-operation in the Northern Regions. In many ways the area can now be seen as a laboratory situation of how the old nation states and the regional, provincial and state governments within the federal structures can evolve intensive forms of international co-operation in the 21st century and thus transform the old traditional model of diplomatic exchange.

These structural innovations are further enhanced by the growing independence of both the Faroe Islands and Greenland, which, although formally parts of the Danish state, are increasingly taking more power into their own hands and dealing independently with their neighbouring countries, for example Iceland and Canada. In addition it will be interesting to witness how Scotland, which for the first time in more than three hundred years now has its own parliament and its own regional government, will develop its relations with neighbouring countries and regions in Northern Europe and Canada.

The foreign policies of the USA, Canada, Russia and the European Union have in recent times acknowledged these new realities in the Northern Regions and their importance for the evolution of Europe and the Atlantic relationship in the 21st century. Thus the European Union has formally accepted the so-called “Northern Dimension” as a pillar in its policy framework for the 21st century. Canada has decided on a new northern policy, the US State Department has sought active participation

in the new regional councils and in particular Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbot has been very active in this area. The Russian Foreign Ministry has similarly paid increasing attention to these regional institutions and emphasised the need for successful solutions to fishing disputes with neighbouring countries. Whereas the Northern Regions ranked fairly low on the priority scale of the USA, Russia and the European Union some years ago, we have in recent years witnessed a significant change which indicates a new set of priorities for the 21st century.

These new challenges call for active co-operation, especially in order to preserve the environment and prevent climate change and nuclear catastrophes. The Arctic area, the Barents Sea region, Northern Europe, Greenland and northern Canada are highly significant for the entire global environmental system in the event of further climatic change. The motor that drives the world's network of ocean currents, and thus the foundation for the global weather system, lies around Iceland. Its mechanism is created by the combination of warm ocean water generated by the Gulf Stream and the cold ocean water created by the melting of the Arctic and Northern icecaps. Excessive melting of the ice could stop the combination that drives the motor of the ocean currents, and consequently the entire global weather system would suffer disastrous effects.

In addition, the environmental relevance of the Northern Regions is enhanced by the presence of vast nuclear arsenals, submarines and military systems, especially in the north-western part of Russia, some of which are in very bad shape as far as safety is concerned. Sustained international co-operation is therefore needed to maintain the safety of these weapon systems and nuclear installations in order to prevent global disasters. Furthermore, the biological systems in the North – the vegetation and the fishing stocks – are important global resources, and without intensive co-operation there is a significant danger of their extinction.

When all these developments are taken together, they demonstrate how the end of the Cold War has dramatically transformed the political and economic landscape in the North, provided it with new significance which will influence strongly the success and stability of the new Europe and the Russian-American relationship.

Let me note some areas which urgently need more research and deeper understanding, areas where new questions need to be asked and new concepts and referential frameworks need to be formulated so our actions and decisions, views and conclusions can be directed by knowledge and wisdom.

First, there is the political innovation – we could even say the political creation – which in the last ten years has dominated the evolution of the North. New states have gained independence; increased rights have been given to local and regional institutions. The decision-making structures are in a continuous flux and the classical question – Who governs, where and how? – now requires new answers, bringing into focus the nature of democratic accountability in the modern world. We could even say that the North has become a working laboratory of new political institutions and relationships: local, regional, national and global.

Second, the relationship between environmental protection and sustainable economic growth is a crucial element in the successful development of the North. How we treat this relationship is not only of fundamental importance to ourselves but will also greatly affect the global environmental situation.

It is, for example, a sad reflection on the direction of modern scientific research that at present we lack international programmes focusing on the development and application of climate models for predicting future changes in the Arctic. Our regions harbour some of the most sensitive biosystems in the world; plants and species balance on the edge of extinction, our oceans and seas are the home to important fishing stocks which could be threatened by the failure of our political systems to reach agreements on the management of these critical ocean resources.

Third, we have the transformation of security structures and security arrangements following the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Here there is a tendency to hide the new reality by still using in part old conceptual frameworks. Scholars and researchers should explore how these developments have changed the security concept, the notion of alliance and non-alliance; how new forms of security co-operation have affected the thinking, training and culture of the armed forces; how applicable or redundant traditional security studies are to understanding these new realities.

Fourth, economic growth and income distribution in the North are issues of critical importance and will influence the growth of successful and stable political co-operation between central and territorial institutions. It is indeed an interesting question whether the successful model for balanced economic growth should be the integrated, centrally-directed European Union model or the more decentralised American model where the respective states and regions operate as independent actors in global markets.

These four areas and indeed many others, for example social disintegration, growing crime and narcotics trade, cultural transformation, education and human rights, would each be a sufficient challenge in itself. Taken together, they constitute a transformation of the perspectives facing the universities and research institutions in the North.

We need an inter-connected network of sustained co-operation and dialogue among the entire community of scholars from the North and those specialists from other parts of the world who are interested in sharing in our explorations.

Reflecting on how to create such an integrated community of northern scholars dealing with issues, projects and problems related to the future of our countries and regions – an academic network which year by year would deepen and extend our understanding and provide northern institutions with sound substance for the democratic decision-making process – I decided to propose in the opening lecture which I gave in 1998 on the 20th anniversary of the University of Lapland, the creation of an annual or biannual forum which would bring together in a systematic way the wealth of academic talent now existing in the North.

The creation of such a forum would provide regular opportunities for introducing research papers and holding workshops on significant problems, enabling young researchers and scholars to present their findings to audiences of distinguished and learned experts. It could also further co-operation between scholars from different parts of the North and integrate new institutions of learning and research into the world of the more established universities.

The Northern Research Forum which now assembles for the first time is the realisation of these ideas and I salute all who had the vision and the will to make it possible.

In a certain way it is appropriate that such a new exploration of the North should begin in the year 2000 when we are celebrating the 1000th anniversary of the Northern voyages which led the Icelandic and Nordic seafarers to the great continent in the West.

The Vikings were indeed the greatest explorers of their times. With the North as their home, they were determined to reach into the unknown, to cross dangerous oceans and enter strange lands. They were certainly the most travelled people of their times, going deep into Russia, all the way down to Ukraine, exploring the Baltic and the entire Scandinavian peninsula, moving over the European continent and along the Atlantic coast as far as Africa, the Mediterranean and the Arab world, and of

course moving from Iceland to Greenland and further on to the place they called Vinland.

Five hundred years before the explorers from continental Europe decided to set sail and found America the seafarers of the North had discovered that great continent and in the case of the remarkable Icelandic woman Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, arguably the greatest female explorer of all times, had travelled all the way down to Rome to report these findings to the highest authority in the Vatican.

The people who lived in the North a thousand years ago, our forefathers and foremothers, were indeed among the greatest standard bearers of discovery and exploration in the history of the world. In their journeys, their poems and sagas, deliberations and visions they brought the North together, making the regions ranging from Russia across the Nordic countries, the Atlantic and into North America their common home. Their legacy is our heritage; a reminder of the great tradition of exploration, discovery and interdependence which the North has inherited and now for the first time in the modern era can become the foundation for productive co-operation and progress.

The discussions and deliberations in the Northern Research Forum will thus not only be moulded by the modern disciplines of science and academic research, advanced policymaking and the tools of the information revolution; they will also be rooted in the culture which thousand years ago made the North the centre of exploration and discovery. We should thus be inspired to take advantage of the great opportunities provided by North-North co-operation and not let the orientation created by the East-West or North-South divisions distort our determination.

It can serve as a stimulus for great advances to be at the same time highly modern and steeped in a deeply rooted culture. This new Northern creation is certainly blessed with such endowments.

I welcome you all to Akureyri and Iceland and express the hope that your deliberation will lead to a sustained and productive dialogue in the years ahead.

I thank you for the honour of inviting me to open the first Nordic Research Forum and I look forward to listening to your conclusions and your proposals for further progress.