



Speech
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at a Gala dinner hosted by
Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation
The Kremlin
19 April 2002

Your Excellency Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation,
and Madame Putin
Excellencies, ladies and Gentlemen:

The ancient sagas that Icelandic farmers wrote down on calfskin when Europe was veiled in the darkness of the Middle Ages, preserve living accounts of the relations between our two nations a thousand years ago. Our forebears, the Vikings, were so widely travelled that their paths lay from the Steppes and great waterways of Russia, across Scandinavia and the continent of Europe, all the way to the Mediterranean. Later they sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to settle in Iceland, and from there they ventured forth to the continent that we now name America but they called Vínland. This world gave the descendants of the settlers of Iceland material for remarkable books which, for eight centuries, have preserved evidence of the cultural and historical heritage shared by the Icelanders and the Russians, and also by other nations in Europe and North America.

On this, the first State Visit to Russia by a President of Iceland, it is these invocations of our shared heritage that are uppermost in our thoughts. I convey to you, Your Excellency the President, my sincere thanks for the honour and friendship that you have shown my nation with this invitation. We greatly appreciate the remarks and statements that you have made here tonight and in our talks earlier today.

At the dawn of a new century, when our world picture is in the process of continuous change, it is healthy for us to nurture the cultural and historical roots that link us together and that give people in the Nordic countries, Russia and the USA access to shared experience from a stock a thousand years old. In 2000 we Icelanders joined forces with the USA and Canada to commemorate the bold explorers who in the year 1000 linked our countries together. It would be interesting in the years to

come to be able to arrange exhibitions, seminars and dialogues in Russia dedicated to interpreting the ancient times when the world picture of the northern regions was a homogenous whole. In this way, new pillars could be added for supporting cooperation among the nations of northern Europe and North America.

Northern regional issues have been particularly important for us Icelanders and we welcome the common course that we are following with Russia under the auspices of the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. We also greatly appreciate Russia's invitation to The Northern Research Forum, a cooperative forum for scholars and leaders which was founded in Iceland just over a year ago, to hold its second meeting in Novgorod here in Russia in September. We need to discuss the numerous issues facing the inhabitants of the northern regions, new forms of political relations, conservation of the environment, business development, security and the importance of the North for the evolution of Europe and for cementing solidarity between countries on either side of the Atlantic. In these fields, Russia and Iceland can take an initiative together towards introducing new focuses, and I welcome the many opportunities I am being given on this visit to discuss in more detail the common future of the Northern nations.

The people of Iceland have long cherished the warm friendship that Russia showed us at crucial times when we were fighting for the extension of our territorial waters, and for decades the trade between our countries was one of the mainstays of the Icelandic economy. We knew how the Russians were exceptionally fond of Icelandic herring and how it was praised as a delicacy throughout your country for decades. Many Icelandic fishing villages depended for their livelihoods on export of seafood products to Russia, in return for which we imported oil, timber and cars from you.

I hope that my visit here will serve to add new vigour to trade between our countries. Icelandic companies have now made agreements with Russian partners on cooperation in the modern fishing industry, in the harnessing of geothermal energy, in developing efficient international cargo logistics and innovations in the field of aviation, tourism and industry.

We also want to consolidate our cultural relations once again and on April 23 we will open an exhibition in St. Petersburg dedicated to the Icelandic Nobel laureate Halldór Kiljan Laxness, on the centenary of his birth. His books enjoyed widespread popularity in Russia and Laxness himself was a frequent visitor here, interpreting in his works the events and fates that shaped the history of Russia during the last century.

Russian literature and art have always been greatly admired in my country and visits by Russian artists are invariably grand occasions. Next week an exhibition of Russian art will open in Reykjavík and later this year we will send modern Icelandic paintings to Russia to go on show here. Russians and Icelanders both have deep patriotic feelings and a strong love for our languages and cultures, which is why it is so easy for us to understand each other.

Hopefully we will retain this quality in the new century and it will enable us to secure with other nations the bonds of peace and progress. It is highly apt that, next month, Reykjavík will mark the foundation for a new agreement on cooperation between Russia and NATO creating a new turning point in European security.

Russia and Iceland are now close allies in forging a new Europe and in combination we will also be able to make the North into a new forum for cooperation with America. In the new century, we have more common purpose than ever before.

In the spirit of all that we share I hereby invite you, Your Excellency President Putin, to make a State Visit to Iceland. It would be a great honour for my nation to have the opportunity, with your visit, to strengthen our cooperation even further and show you how our farmers and fishermen, who for centuries lived in hardship and poverty in the far north, have built a society which now enjoys living standards and technology that rank with the best in the world.

I convey to you, Your Excellency, my warmest thanks for your friendship and your heartfelt willingness for cooperation. I ask the guests to rise and raise their glasses in honour of Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, and also in honour of the thousand years of shared history between Iceland and Russia, and the joint projects that await us in the new century.