



Speech
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at a dinner
hosted by Governor Yuri Neyolov
in Yamal-Nenets District
Russia
21 April 2002

Your Excellency Governor Yuri Neyolov
Ladies and Gentlemen

After spending an exceptionally interesting and pleasant day here together I offer you, Governor Yuri Neyolov, my sincere thanks for the splendid reception and lavish hospitality that you have shown us.

My delegation and I were particularly eager to have the opportunity to come here and acquaint ourselves with the lifestyles, culture, tasks and challenges that shape the vision of the inhabitants of your district.

In my speech at a gala dinner with Vladimir Putin, the President of the Russian Federation, I mentioned that in recent years we Icelanders have firmly underlined the importance of cooperation between nations in the northern regions and that my visit now is a confirmation of our desire to strengthen and consolidate that cooperation still further.

With this visit to Yamal-Nenets district we are putting this intention into practice and suggesting how that close personal acquaintance with the way that people in the north live is a precondition for us to succeed in achieving genuine results.

The inhabitants of the northern regions have preserved a unique culture and their history and customs demonstrate how it is possible to adapt to the inhospitable elements, turn hardship into the pursuit of progress, harvest the bounties of nature to create satisfactory living standards for oneself and one's family.

In the minds of many people who live in other parts of the world, the north is 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 nights suggesting a mystique beyond compare, and the summer sun and bright midnights in spring symbolizing eternal day.

We inhabitants of the north know that this magical impression held by people who live far away is nonetheless an integral part of the experience that shapes our lives, an experience that demonstrates how the north can be a difficult adversary, can pose ordeals and tough struggles, can draw on all our energy if we are to triumph in the tests of strength that nature imposes on us.

The inhabitants of the northern regions have responded to these challenges in different ways and the diverse culture that moulds people's lives – from the northern districts of Russia to northwest Finland and the northern parts of Sweden and Norway, across the Atlantic to Iceland and from there to Greenland, Canada and the northernmost state of the USA, Alaska – is a remarkable testimony to man's cohabitation with nature. We certainly possess a rich heritage and the challenge we face today is to combine this with the necessary efforts to create favourable living standards for ourselves in the new century.

Nations in the northern regions can learn much from each other and we need to strengthen our cooperative institutions and consultative forums in order to make relations between us steadily more dynamic and productive.

It has been highly valuable to have the opportunity to find out about local attitudes here, and we are much the wiser for our visit. I am convinced that this knowledge will prove very useful to us in the years to come in our dialogues and cooperative projects on the issues of the northern regions.

The north is not only important for us who live here, since it also serves a vital function for conditions for life on the whole planet. The oceanic currents traversing these regions shape the climate around the world and the northern biosphere represents a unique collection of flora and fauna which is a precious component of the global ecosystem. Our decisions and actions therefore have consequences which patently affect other people. The fate of the north is tightly interwoven with the future of the world.

I particular welcome having had the opportunity during my visit to Russia to come to you, the inhabitants of Yamal-Nenets district, to see for myself what you have produced from the resources that the north can provide. I hope you have also felt that, by making this visit here, we Icelanders have shown our desire to link up cooperation among the nations in the north with the reality that the people themselves deal with in their daily lives.

I ask the guests to rise from their seats and raise their glasses in honour of Governor Yuri Neyolov, to the good fortune of the inhabitants of Yamal-Nenets district, and to successful cooperation among the inhabitants of the northern regions for all the future.