



**Speech by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
The University of St. Petersburg
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Honourable rector
Distinguished scholars
Ladies and gentlemen

We assemble here on a day which for us Icelanders is an occasion for a profound remembrance and celebration. One hundred years ago our beloved writer and Nobel Prize winner Halldór Kiljan Laxness was born and thus a unique life began, a life that came to symbolize the turbulent times of the twentieth century and enriched our nation and the world with novels and poems, essays and stories which are at once essentially Icelandic in their nature and truly universal in their meaning and relevance for people all over the world.

Halldór Kiljan Laxness had a unique place in European literature because no other writer came to represent so many of the phases through which the literary, cultural, political and spiritual evolution of the twentieth century passed.

As a young man he became a Catholic although nearly all his nation was Protestant, devoted himself to religion in a European cloister, left the world of worship for adventures in America, tried his luck in Hollywood and became radicalised by the poverty he saw around him. Laxness returned to Iceland as a socialist and campaigned for social justice, supported the political struggle of the Communists, visited the Soviet Union and wrote glorified accounts of events and evolution during the times of Stalin, a part of his life he later dealt with in a frank, open and mercilessly honest way. His books reflected the struggle of ordinary people, farmers and fishermen, in times of poverty, the years of the Great Depression. He re-created the Iceland of past centuries to celebrate newly won independence, became inspired by the campaign against nuclear weapons and against the militarisation of the Cold War, emerged himself in the spiritual life of those who sought to interpret the essence of the human spirit, what it means to be a man in a world full of injustice and

conflicts, how one can acquire a true understanding of the purpose of our lives.

When Halldór Kiljan Laxness died at the age of 95 in 1998 his long journey had come to symbolize the turbulent upheavals of the twentieth century, the ideological struggles, the two World Wars, the transformation from poverty to prosperity, the deadly conflict of the Cold War, the tension between the arms race and peace, between oppression and freedom, terror and justice.

In his literary masterpieces he gave a new sense of being to the Icelandic nation and provided the world with a deep insight into how to preserve our humanity in times of struggle and desperation, how to be true to oneself when revolutions and conflicts seem to tear everything apart.

We were indeed fortunate to have in his works such guides to our understanding of the twentieth century and to be endowed with such profound lessons for the journey which the new century has brought about, a journey into the new world which now dominates our countries and regions.

In the northern regions of the world, relations, political dialogue, economic cooperation and cultural contacts were in effect deep-frozen during the Cold War. The transformation which has taken place since the beginning of the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War and the process of democratisation and political change, has given the North a new importance.

The creation of the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Baltic Council has brought into being new forums for cooperation between states and regions in the North. These international councils, although each with its separate purpose, constitute an interlinked network of contacts which range from Russia across the Nordic countries and the Baltic states over the Atlantic Ocean to Canada and the United States of America. For the first time all these countries of the North are institutionally linked in a cooperative effort dedicated to improving the future of the people in the North. We have also seen the new relevance of the North acknowledged by the European Union through the formulation of a set of policies termed the Northern Dimension, and furthermore the Government of Canada has also issued a specific Northern programme.

When the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, invites the President of Iceland to make a State Visit to Russia, the first such visit by an Icelandic President, we see this as a special confirmation of the role which Russia and Iceland can and must jointly play in the future of the North.

During my visit I have been profoundly impressed by the interest which Russian leaders take in the progress of the North and how we should utilize together the many avenues for cooperation that the new situation in the North has created. We have already seen many examples of how states and regional and provincial governments in the North can cooperate across national boundaries. Successful political innovations have richly contributed to economic and cultural cooperation in the North, the contacts between nation states and regional and local authorities have enriched us with new diplomatic practices. The problems and projects to be dealt with have brought about practical approaches aimed at finding successful and lasting solutions.

The North has profound relevance for the future of all mankind. The ocean currents and the environmental conditions in the North, the melting of the ice and the different composition of the warm and cold seawater can alter climatic conditions all over the world. The North is rich in fish stocks and other ocean resources and also in fuels for energy production. The biological universe of the North, its plants and vegetation, is an important part of the global environment. The people of the northern regions have preserved unique cultural traditions and their customs, languages and heritage provide the world community with special evidence of how man has related to diverse natural conditions.

In recent years scholars and decision makers, specialists and political leaders of the Northern communities have increasingly sought productive dialogue and cooperation. In November 2000 they gathered in Akureyri in northern Iceland to found The Northern Research Forum dedicated to a wide ranging dialogue on the future of the North. The second assembly of The Northern Research Forum will be here in Russia, in Novogord next September.

The Northern Research Forum, founded in Iceland and now brought to Russia, is a good example of how our countries can positively influence the progress of the North. It shows how universities and research institutions have ample opportunities to influence the development in coming years by initiating joint projects and engaging in an enlightened dialogue, how scholars from different disciplines can explore many areas of northern cooperation. The University of the Arctic is intended to further such academic cooperation and forums like The Northern Research Forum can help to build up a cohesive community of learning dedicated to furthering northern issues and awareness.

The new University in Akureyri in Iceland has put special emphasis on this development both by hosting the secretariat of The Northern Research Forum and by strengthening the newly established Vilhjálmur Stefánsson Institute, dedicated to the memory of the great Icelandic -

Canadian explorer who pioneered knowledge of customs and traditions of the native people in the polar regions of the North American continent.

The opening of the North following the end of the Cold War has given the Nordic countries and Russia a multitude of new challenges and opportunities for political, economic, cultural and academic cooperation. St. Petersburg is especially well placed to play a leading role in the evolution of these possibilities. The history of your great city, its dominant position in north-western Russia and its potential for the future of Northern Europe provides the governing authorities and the academic community in St. Petersburg with a leadership position which is of great relevance to the progress of the North. I know there is already a strong vision in this city to see St. Petersburg serve as a capital of the North and I have been especially inspired by the views expressed by your leaders. I sense in our dialogue a profound awareness of the fascinating future which we can build together.

Such a future will not only be an adventure because of the multitude of possibilities we can explore but it will also be deeply rooted in the heritage we share, a heritage which embraces the Viking explorations more than a thousand years ago but equally the turbulent history of the recent century, the times of revolutions and two World Wars, ideological conflicts and great human progress.

This heritage of the twentieth century can be found in much of Halldór Laxness' work and in the life of this distinguished writer who in many of his most interesting books brought Russia to Iceland and Iceland to Russia.

It is therefore symbolic and significant in many ways that, during the first State Visit by an Icelandic President to Russia, we are able to celebrate the centenary of Halldór Kiljan Laxness' birth by opening this exhibition here in the University of St. Petersburg.

Laxness was certainly a son of the North as we can see in many of his most outstanding novels and writings, but he was also a man of Europe, a cosmopolitan who combined the best of his cultural heritage with the creative forces of the world.

It is in that spirit that I hope we will explore in the coming years the great potential of the North and thus enrich Europe and the global community by a deeper understanding of our unique regions.

I thank the University and the leaders of St. Petersburg for the great welcome you have given us and for the honour you show my nation and the memory of Halldór Kiljan Laxness by hosting an exhibition dedicated to his life and opening it on the centenary of his birth. I also want to thank

those who through their generous financial contributions have made this exhibition possible and thus showed their dedication to strengthening Icelandic-Russian cultural relations.

I hope this exhibition will be a reminder of the heritage we share and inspire us to explore jointly the fascinating possibilities which the North offers.