



**Speech by
the President of Iceland
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Honourable Rector
Distinguished scholars
Ladies and gentlemen

In Novgorod there is extensive evidence of the great collective heritage of Russia and the Nordic people, a shared history stretching more than a thousand years back in time, a history widely referred to in medieval Icelandic records which were written down in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a history which becomes tangible when we see the numerous artefacts that have been excavated in this area.

When people from the Nordic countries were extending the boundaries of their culture to the west, launching their ocean-going vessels to settle in the Faroe Islands and Iceland – and in fact later venturing farther across the ocean to Greenland and all the way to North America in the year 1000 – they had also forged strong links with Novgorod. Here was a dynamic centre of culture, education and trade at that time: a melting-pot where influences and movements from all around converged to create a unique society which became a strong feature of a great realm.

For centuries, Nordic people used their ships to ply the great rivers that joined the lakes and waterways in these regions and had far-reaching dealings with the peoples who were already here, some of them on trading voyages, others in search of adventure or lands for themselves and their dependants, where they could settle down and tend the fields in peace and harmony with their neighbours. These Nordic people, called Varangians or Rus in contemporary chronicles, had a diverse impact on the evolution of a distinctive type of society and contributed to shaping the cities and centres which until our day have performed a key function in the entire region. These cities included Staraja Ladoga just south of Lake Ladoga, Novgorod, and Kiev to the south.

Opinions are divided as to the extent to which Nordic people influenced the developments that later led to the birth of the great Russian state; scholars have sometimes exaggerated this and underestimated the role of the East Slavs and Byzantine influence. I do not wish to become embroiled in this controversy here; suffice it to say that both sides certainly have good cases to argue.

The oldest recorded source of information about Nordic people in this regions is the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, attributed to Nestor. It describes how, in the years 860-62, the Varangians became involved in disputes with the peoples who were already here, drove them away and began running their own affairs. All manner of internal frictions developed and gradually escalated. Then the Chronicle says: “They said to themselves: ‘Let us seek a prince who may rule over us and judge us according to the Law.’ They accordingly went overseas to the Varangian Russes: these particular Varangians were known as Russes, just as some are called Svie, others Normane, Angliane, Gote, for they were thus named. The Chuds, the Slavs, the Krivichians, and the Ves then said to the people of Rus: ‘Our land is great and rich, but there is no order in it. Come to rule and reign over us.’ They thus selected three brothers, with their kinsfolk, who took with them all the Russes and migrated. The oldest, Rurik, located himself in Novgorod, the second, Sineus, at Beloozero, and the third, Truvor, in Izborsk. On account of these Varangians, the district of Novgorod became known as the land of Rus.”

Despite its familiar legendary character, this account preserves the essential story that Nordic people played a part in founding the city of Novgorod and other centres in this important trading area: the land of the Rus, or Russia.

Novgorod – or Hólmgarður, as the city was called in ancient Icelandic sagas – is often mentioned in our medieval Icelandic literature, not least in the *Heimskringla* or “Orb of the World,” a history of the kings of Norway written in the first half of the 13th century by Snorri Sturluson, the most accomplished of all medieval Icelandic authors. Russia also features in many accounts in the *Sagas of Icelanders*, since their heroes often ventured forth to the limits of the Viking world: westward to Greenland and Vinland (America), east to Russia and north to Lapland, south and east to Constantinople, Jerusalem and even Africa.

Here in Novgorod, Ólafur Tryggvason – later king of Norway and a vehement missionary who was instrumental in the adoption of Christianity in Iceland in the year 1000 – was fostered for nine years from the time he arrived around 980 as a young lad after being freed from captivity in Estonia by one of King Vladimir’s tax collectors. He ended

up under the protection of the queen after running into trouble when he killed his foster-father's murderer, because in Novgorod in the second half of the tenth century "the sacredness of peace is so respected, that it is law there to slay whoever puts a man to death except by judgment of law," as Snorri Sturluson says in his *Heimskringla*. Gudleikur the Russian undertook a mission here in 1017 for Ólafur Haraldsson, who was then newly crowned as king of Norway. "and he bought fine and costly clothes, which he intended for the king as a state dress; and also precious furs, and remarkably splendid table utensils," to quote Snorri again. These goods, as it happened, ended up in the hands of the Swedes, prompting further conflicts.

It is not without reason that Snorri Sturluson describes the great marketplace that was to be found in this city in the tenth century. On account of its location, Novgorod was effectively the key to the Russian trading routes for long distances along the great rivers. It is told how the goods on offer included rare merchandise from distant countries and continents: Persian glass and Chinese silk, bottles from the Muslim world east of the Caspian, Arabian silver, exotic wares from India, rare spices and fine wines: all these were to be found here in Novgorod, and were exchanged for what the citizens had to offer, namely weapons, honey, wax and furs in plenty.

Snorri also refers elsewhere to Vladimir, the son of Svyatoslav, who in the final quarter of the tenth century consolidated his power more firmly than any early ruler had ever done. Vladimir was converted to Christianity in 988 and made the providential decision then that the language of the Church should be Slavonic, instead of Greek or the Viking tongue. The Nordic countries had even more extensive contact with Grand Prince Yaroslav the Wise (1019-54), who was known for establishing the first school in this city in 1030. Yaroslav was the son-in-law of King Ólafur of Sweden and brother-in-law of King Ólafur of Norway, who was also known as St. Olaf, and one of his powerful supporters. Ólafur's son Magnús, who also became king of Norway, was brought up at Yaroslav's court, and Yaroslav was father-in-law to a third Norwegian king, Haraldur Sigurdarson. So there were certainly strong bonds between Novgorod and the Nordic countries during the eleventh century.

A wealth of other sources and accounts by medieval Icelandic historians could be cited to describe the dealings between Nordic people and Novgorod. The Nordic presence in this area is also evidenced by the remarkable archaeological finds that we saw earlier today. Thus we can base the cooperation between our nations in the 21st century on a common

heritage which may be traced back a thousand years: our cooperation has a strong historical dimension.

In the northern regions of the world, however, 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 now given the North a new importance, a new dimension.

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 Novgorod 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 given special emphasis to 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. 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.

In 1997 I had a meeting with President Clinton in the White House. There I put forward the idea that the USA, Canada and Iceland should join forces to commemorate the Viking voyages and the discovery of

North America in the year 1000 by Leifur Eiríksson, the first European to set foot in the New World. The outcome was that Iceland became one of five special partners of the USA in connection with the millennium celebrations. A diverse programme of events was organized throughout much of the USA and Canada, shedding light on this ancient aspect of American history: the attempts by Icelandic seafarers in the year 1000 to establish a settlement in North America and their dealings with the Native Americans.

The extensive promotion that was made in North America in 2000, organized by the Icelandic government in cooperation with the Canadian and US authorities, was a great success in all respects and opened up a perspective towards this joint history for new generations.

In my discussions with President Putin and other Russian leaders I have suggested that now we should join forces and arrange a similar profiling of the history that links up our nations – the region from Russia and across the Nordic countries, over the Atlantic to North America – with such strong bonds, presenting it with 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.

I hope that my visit to Novgorod will serve to strengthen these ideas even further, and it would be gratifying to see widespread cooperation on this issue by the nations of the north in the years to come. I applaud the plans for the Northern Research Forum here in Novgorod this September to arrange a seminar dedicated to the Vikings and the cultural currents, ideas and trade associated with the cohabitation of the Nordic people and the nations who lived in this area in times of old.

It is an important milestone in the history of the NRF that its second conference should be held here in Novgorod. I would like to thank Governor Prussak, the State Duma, the Novgorod Regional Administration and Novgorod State University warmly for the firm support they have given to the conference, and the generosity they have shown in hosting it.

I would like to express my special thanks for the great hospitality shown to myself and my entourage during my visit to Novgorod, and for all the interesting knowledge that has been imparted to us. The ideas that have emerged in our discussions will undoubtedly greatly strengthen our efforts to boost cooperation among the nations of the north in the new century.