



**Address**  
**by the President of Iceland**  
**Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson**  
**at a gala dinner in honour of**  
**the President of Latvia**  
**Madame Vaira-Vike Freiberga and**  
**Mr. Imants Freibergs**  
**Bessastaðir**  
**12 August 2002**

Your Excellency the President of Latvia  
Madame Vaira-Vike Freiberga and Mr. Imants Freibergs  
Ladies and Gentlemen

The cooperation between our countries at the dawn of the new century testifies in diverse ways to the changed world picture and closer relations between the nations of the North. We have evolved close consultation between the eight Nordic and Baltic countries and are seeking to establish effective channels for European security and economic cooperation.

The results that Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania have achieved in the space of just over a decade are incredible and in many ways unexampled, given the difficulties that many new democracies have had to tackle. Democratic government has been consolidated, economic advances have totally transformed business and industry and brought greater prosperity for citizens, participation in international forums has both earned respect and created opportunities for influence.

We Icelanders have watched this development with interest and admiration and are grateful for having had the chance to assist you. Perhaps we perceive better than most nations how difficult a small nation's battle to achieve independence, prosperity and the recognition of the international community can be, and how much of a challenge it is to hold onto one's share of what the world can provide.

Our campaign for freedom here in Iceland was waged for roughly one hundred years and its cradle was the school that was once housed in the oldest building here in Bessastaðir. Here, schoolmasters and pupils

discussed the renaissance of the classical Icelandic language, sought inspiration from ancient sagas, composed poetry in a new spirit and listened to the breaking waves of revolution that in the course of time would transform European social structures and forms of government.

Similarly, songs and ballads, music and verse born from the momentous history of your country and its people inspired dissent and the march towards freedom by the mass movement that brought the demand for democracy to triumph in your country. The campaign for democracy and human rights flourished in the soil of cultural and national traditions, and the association between the history of centuries past and the demand for independence today became a promise that was kept alive during a difficult period of foreign domination.

You, Your Excellency the President, have advocated that nations should foster their heritage and seek inspiration and new strength from the treasure-house of national culture, and that firm roots in one's native soil should be combined with bold participation in the far-reaching cooperation among the nations of the world.

We still recall your powerful address at the Women's Summit in Reykjavík and your exhortation that justice and ethical values should be made the foundation for international cooperation, that improved cohabitation of nations would strengthen human dignity and the ability of individuals to enrich their lives independently.

You have shown that democracy involves not only formal constitutional provisions but also social awareness, mutual respect for the right of all people to a better life. The successes that the Nordic countries have recorded over the past century and the Baltic States over the last decade are evidence that even nations that are a long way behind the larger ones in terms of economic power and military might can become powerful champions of democracy and human rights.

Latvia and Iceland, along with the other Nordic and Baltic nations, have formed a group of eight countries which can make its presence felt in many ways in the new century.

We can exert a strong influence on the way that relations between nations in the North evolve, on the future of the area stretching from Russia, across the Baltic and Nordic countries, and to Canada and the USA in the west.

Hopefully we will soon be allies after the enlargement of NATO. The Icelandic government has supported the Baltic countries' request for membership of the Alliance from the outset.

When Latvia joins the European Union we will benefit from the opportunities presented by the European Economic Area and closer business contact will bring increased prosperity to our countries.

We welcome the fact that many Latvian business leaders have accompanied you on your visit to Iceland, and Icelandic companies are taking a steadily growing interest in activities in Latvia. Icelandic participation in the development of the Latvian economy has proved successful in many ways, both in traditional industries and new technology.

We have also benefited from collaboration between artists in our countries which has enriched our cultures and reputations. I recall listening to a concert by Latvian and Icelandic musicians in the USA a few years ago, a concert which earned rightful praise in the American press.

In the years to come we need to support such collaboration, give composers, writers, painters, dancers, filmmakers and other artists the chance to present the innovative contributions that they have to make. A particular factor determining the place of small nations in the international arena is whether we can manage to enrich the human spirit with new creative renditions of the culture that has been handed down to us.

Latvia and Iceland certainly have work to do and the bonds of friendship that we have tied enable us to begin these tasks without hesitation or fear.

Your visit now is a firm confirmation of such a desire and I convey sincere thanks to you for your profuse efforts to strengthen the bonds with us here in Iceland.

We are proud of having been able to lend your nation a helping hand at crucial times and together we perceive the mighty driving force behind independence.

Enchanting times lie ahead of us, bringing our nations ample opportunities for making new advances.

We are delighted to welcome you to Iceland, Your Excellency the President, and I ask all our guests to rise and raise their glasses in honour of Madame Vaira-Vike Freiberga and Mr. Imants Freibergs, and to the friendship between our nations.