



Opening address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at
"NORTHERN VECHE"
The 2nd meeting of the Northern Research Forum
Novgorod, Russia
19 September 2002

Honourable Governor Prusak
Distinguished Delegates, Scholars and Researchers
Ladies and Gentlemen

We assemble here today for the second meeting of the Northern Research Forum in the spirit of optimism and cooperation, convinced that the new century will bring the North a wealth of opportunities for progress and innovation.

The North is rich in history and culture and our people have always showed persistence and strength when faced with new challenges; the forces of nature which have so dramatically moulded our environment have also provided inspiration and encouragement.

We welcome the changes which in recent years have brought us together. The end of the Cold War and the spirit of cooperation and peace which now dominates the European and Atlantic vision of the future have transformed the international dialogue and given the North a new relevance in the global evolution.

The Northern Research Forum is a strong manifestation of this transformation and the wide-ranging agenda which awaits us in the days to come demonstrates how comprehensive Northern cooperation has already become.

It is furthermore highly symbolic to host the Northern Research Forum here in Novgorod, a region which reminds us of the thousand years of history that link us together, a region which in a fascinating way demonstrates the dynamism of the new Russia.

At the opening of our meeting I express our heartfelt thanks to Governor Prusak, the Novgorod Oblast Administration, the Oblast Duma and the University of Novgorod for their excellent work in preparing the Northern Veche and for their generosity in offering to host this distinguished assembly of scholars and officials from the northern countries.

During my State Visit to Russia earlier this year I sensed the positive interest which the leaders of Russia show towards increased cooperation in the North. From my very first meeting with the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin and throughout the dialogue with other leaders, ministers and governors of this great country, it was absolutely clear that the Northern dimension is a prominent part of the Russian vision for the 21st century.

This emphasis is of great importance not only for other countries in northern Europe, the Nordic countries and the Baltic States, but also for Canada and the United States of America.

We now have a new opening in the North and the countries and regions, ranging from Russia across Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea to Iceland and Greenland and into North America, can now utilize the potential of our people in a multitude of ways which only a few years ago were almost unthinkable and beyond our reach.

By hosting the Northern Research Forum under the fitting banner of Northern Veche, Russia has shown both leadership and determination, signalling to other countries in the North that we have entered a new era. The hindrances and restrictions from previous times have now been abolished and we are being challenged to show that we are capable of creating together a renaissance of the North, a new alliance of far-ranging cooperation which through its success demonstrates how dramatically the world has changed.

I take this opportunity to thank President Vladimir Putin, the Government of Russia and the governors and regional leaders involved for their initiative and vision towards the North and I am convinced that this second meeting of the Northern Research Forum will lay solid foundations for our extensive cooperation in the years to come.

Novgorod is indeed a symbolic place for our endeavour. A thousand years ago princes and kings from the Nordic countries came here to learn and to gain new experience. The Icelandic sagas, written on calfskin in the middle of the 13th century, describe the journeys to this great city by discoverers and poets whose families had settled in Iceland before the year 1000. Ever since, the Icelandic language has preserved the ancient Nordic name for Novgorod – Hólmgarður. Our Viking ancestors were certainly the most widely travelled people of their times, highly cultured, skilful navigators and experienced traders. We can be profoundly proud of the legacy they gave us, a legacy that a thousand years ago brought Russia, the Nordic countries, the Baltic Region and the newly discovered continent in the west – which five hundred years later

became known as America but the Icelandic discoverers named Vinland – into a single world which we now have the opportunity to bring together again.

The North embraces the radical transformation which has taken place in international relations in recent years and it provides the global community with a new vision, creates a platform for North America and Russia to cooperate in a dynamic and positive way in the company of the smaller states of Northern Europe. In this respect the North paves the way towards the future and is free of the problems and restraints which dominate attempts to create greater harmony in the central and southern parts of the European continent.

The North has become in many ways the laboratory of the new world, rich in initiatives for political, social and economic cooperation. The Arctic Council, together with the Barents and Baltic Councils, has become the vehicle for active coordination of efforts and policies by the member states. Iceland hopes to use our upcoming presidency of the Arctic Council to further Northern cooperation in significant ways and the ideas and the proposals which will be made during this Northern Veche will be incorporated into our preparations for the Arctic presidency.

We have also seen effective forms of cooperation between the nation states and the regional and provincial governments in the North, a network which supersedes the old traditions of diplomatic protocol and creates productive avenues for progress. I therefore welcome especially the statements by both President Vladimir Putin and the Prime Minister of Russia, Mikhail Kasyanov, in our meetings earlier this year that the respective regions in Russia, their governors and Oblast Administrations, should seek a direct form of cooperation with the other northern states.

There are many areas which promise substantial results from northern cooperation in the years to come.

We have seen many positive examples of successful business enterprises from our countries linking their efforts in order to gain a stronger position in regional, national and global markets. In many ways corporations from the northern territories share experience, culture and professional outlook and are therefore well equipped to reap the benefits from joint efforts. At the meeting of the Northern Research Forum here in Novgorod we have decided to devote a special session to business initiatives in the North and it is especially encouraging to see how enthusiastically the business community decided to join our deliberations. By building commercial and economic bridges we can make the North a promising area for industrial and financial progress.

Our countries are rich in resources such as oil, gas and hydro and geothermal power and this gives us a unique advantage. Some of our countries are in the forefront of information technology, among the leaders in the world in mobile phone usage, internet connections and the ownership of personal computers. We have traditionally given a high priority to education and training and consequently our workforce is among the most skilled and

technically advanced in the world. All these factors contribute towards making the North extremely rich in the factors required for progress and development in the new century. We could be on the top of the world not just geographically but also in terms of prosperity and human well-being.

With improved communications, new routes for ships and airlines, road networks and modernised railway systems we can enhance these potentials of the North in significant ways. By focusing more exclusively on the North as an interconnected area, the communication companies could indeed establish a profitable basis for operations. The Icelandic experience provides an interesting example in this respect. Icelandair flies regularly from the capitals of the Scandinavian countries to destinations on the North American continent, thus making our island in the Atlantic a strategic hub in bringing North Europe and North America together. An Icelandic shipping line has in recent years established an extensive network in Russia and thus succeeded in broadening its traditional European routes. The Northern emphasis has proved to be a profitable approach.

We have also seen in recent years a tremendous increase in cultural cooperation among our countries. Exhibitions, concerts, films, books, theatre and ballet have all enjoyed intra-north relations and the cultural experience of our people has benefited greatly. Our countries are rich in cultural history and in modern times we have been blessed by an extraordinarily creative community of artists and writers, painters and composers, singers and actors, filmmakers and theatrical directors. When St. Petersburg celebrates next year the three-hundredth anniversary of its spectacular history we should note that it was especially the thriving cultural creativity of the city which made it so great, and that the treasures it preserves are unique in the heritage halls of mankind. We should let the example of St. Petersburg be an inspiration to us all and consolidate our determination to make cultural exploration the foundation of increased northern awareness. Our countries have a lot to offer and there are many cultural centres throughout the North which have enriched the lives of the people and broadened human experience in profound ways.

We have already decided to increase our educational cooperation. The University of The Arctic and bilateral university agreements, as well as the establishment of many forums and associations to promote research and scholarship, all manifest the existence of a vibrant academic community in the North which continuously brings us new visions and fascinating results. The meeting here in Novgorod will manifest this in many ways and I would like to congratulate the scholars and researchers who are contributing significantly to broadening the basis for northern cooperation and progress.

There are indeed many other areas where urgent tasks await us. The preservation of the environment, the strengthening of sustainable development and the utilisation of the complex bio-systems in our regions are all challenges which will loom large in northern cooperation in the future. We have been given great responsibilities in this field and it is of utmost importance that the

environmental record of the northern countries meets the highest global standards.

This year we have seen dramatic confirmation of the new cooperation across the North Atlantic in the field of security and peaceful coexistence. The agreement between NATO and Russia which was finalised in Reykjavík in May and signed in Rome a few weeks later signifies a new era. The countries of the North can now develop new dimensions in our security cooperation and remove some of the vestiges of the Cold War which can still be found in our regions. We must also make sure that the nuclear arsenals which can still be found on land and in the oceans are systematically reduced and the risks of environmental nuclear disasters be absolutely minimised.

The times ahead do indeed offer us numerous opportunities, challenging tasks and new avenues for progress. It is highly encouraging to see how the nations of the North have moved swiftly to prepare ourselves for this exciting future. The meeting of the Northern Research Forum here in Novgorod is a clear manifestation of our will and determination.

I want to thank all those who have so skilfully prepared the meeting, both the executive committee of the Northern Research Forum, the organisers here in Novgorod and the secretariat in Akureyri, Iceland. I also deeply appreciate the support given to the meeting by the Oblast Government in Novgorod, the Oblast Duma and the University and I also thank the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York for their financial support.

There are many who have helped to bring the Northern Research Forum into existence and provided it with firm foundations and at the opening here today we declare our appreciation of their vision.

The members of the Honorary Board, which include the former presidents of Finland and Estonia and my colleague the President of Latvia, are proud to be of assistance and on their behalf I wish all of you successful and productive deliberations.