



Address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at a State Dinner
hosted by the President of Hungary
Ferenc Mádl
17th March 2003

Your Excellency the President of Hungary Ferenc Mádl
Mrs. Dalma Mádl
Ladies and Gentlemen

Although the ancient and modern histories of Hungary and Iceland differ in many ways, they also contain remarkable parallels which reflect our common European roots, parallels that are uppermost in our minds at the dawn of this new century now that we are allies in NATO and will be working together to help to bring prosperity and progress to Europe in times to come.

Hungary and Iceland were both settled at the end of the ninth century, a period when our nations' identities began to take shape and awareness of our nationality and culture took root.

Our nations both adopted Christianity in the year 1000, an event which has always been given pride of place in Hungarian and Icelandic history, and both our nations showed how highly we value these milestones with millennium celebrations in the year 2000. We Icelanders organised a festival to commemorate our Christianisation at Thingvellir, our ancient national shrine where the Althing – Iceland's legislative assembly – was established in 930, the oldest national parliament in the world. The twin heritage of Christianity and democracy were the essence of the gift passed on by the settlers to generations to come, a gift that endowed the nation with determination and boldness in the difficult times it faced in subsequent centuries.

Like the Hungarians, we Icelanders have striven to preserve our language and regard it as the essence of what distinguishes us from others and the affirmation of our identity in the community of nations. A further correspondence between our nations in the history of European

Christianity is the fact that the Bible was translated into both Hungarian and Icelandic at virtually the same time, the holy book influenced our nations' literature and culture for centuries. Language and the Christian heritage proved to be a rich resource when 19th-century independence movements began to revolutionise our forms of government and social structures.

Icelandic students who paved the way for the Icelandic independence movement in Europe's great revolutionary year of 1848 were deeply impressed by Hungary's campaign for national independence under the visionary leadership of Kossuth. One of these students, Gísli Brynjólfsson, wrote a detailed account of this campaign in an Icelandic journal in 1849, which he prefaced with the following words:

“Of all the nations of continental Europe we have given the most detailed account of the Hungarians, who have shown this year that they have by far the best awareness of what constitutes the life of a nation and true liberty, and the history of their campaign for freedom will always be instructive. They will be given the most beautiful testimony in the history of all nations over the past two years, because they have conducted themselves nobly and have boldly defended the freedom they had inherited from their fathers and maintained intact for many centuries.”

After this was written by an Icelandic student in 1849, interest was kindled in Hungarian poetry and Icelanders began translating the unique poetry of Sándor Petöfi. Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, one of the best Icelandic poets of the 19th century, was particularly prominent in introducing his compatriots to Petöfi's inspired work.

The shared path we have followed is revealed through that ever since the fate of Europe has had a profound effect on us. We greet the new century as allies within NATO and partners in forging a new Europe.

Iceland was one of the founding members of NATO and for more than half a century, transatlantic cooperation has been one of the cornerstones of Icelandic foreign policy. Ten years ago we unhesitatingly encouraged the enlargement of the Alliance and applauded the membership of Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic in 1999 as major milestones. We also firmly underlined the Baltic countries' entitlement to membership and regard recent decisions on the enlargement of NATO and the special agreement with Russia as laying the foundation for a new security framework which could be particularly beneficial to Europe and the whole world.

We consider it important that the independent participation of each state should continue to be the format on which NATO operates, and that

it could be questionable if member nations align themselves into blocs. While we respect and understand the European Union's desire to strengthen a special security dimension, it must be ensured that NATO will not be split up into arms that vie for influence. The key to the Alliance's success has been that all member countries, large and small alike, have functioned within it on equal terms.

We Icelanders have been linked with the European Union through the European Economic Area Agreement and Hungary's membership of the Community will radically transform our nations' capability for stepping up their cooperation on the business and economic fronts.

The agreement on energy cooperation which Hungary and Iceland made in 2001 will also pave the way for exciting projects in the future. In the past few decades Iceland has achieved significant results in utilisation of geothermal resources for space heating, electricity production and healthcare, and we definitely want to share this experience with Hungary at the same time as benefiting from your advice on the development of sanatoria and enhancement of the spa culture, where you have shown exiting leadership. I would especially like to thank Hungary for the expert consultancy that it has granted us in this field in the past years, and the invaluable contribution made by Dr. István Fluck in this respect.

We Icelanders value highly the honour and friendship that Hungary has shown us with this invitation, the first visit to this country by a President of Iceland, and I hope that our discussions will lay the foundation for even closer cooperation between us in the future.

I express my sincerest thanks to you, Your Excellency President Mádl, and hope that I will be able to welcome you to my country in the future.

I ask all guests to rise and raise their glasses in honour of the President of Hungary, Ferenc Mádl, and Madame Mádl, and in confirmation of the friendship between our nations.