



THE NEW NORTH:
INNOVATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
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at the
Northern Forum Assembly
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Distinguished Governors,
Mayors, Representatives of Northern Regions,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

We assemble in St Petersburg at a time when the world has once again witnessed war and great human tragedies. We have seen suffering, deep-rooted sorrow and anger. We have seen how poverty, religious hatred, tyranny and oppression have brought nations to their knees.

We feel a solidarity with those in faraway places who dream of peace and prosperity, and we hope that the new century will bring the world firmly towards democracy and human rights.

Throughout most of the 20th century, Europe was torn apart by wars, revolutions, tyranny and totalitarian ideologies; the relationship across the Atlantic was dominated by a costly arms race and ever-growing nuclear arsenals. The deep frost which characterized the Cold War profoundly affected the North. It prevented productive cooperation across national boundaries and delayed solutions to many burning problems.

The transformation of Europe and the Atlantic relationship in recent years has certainly been profound, and brought with it wide-ranging changes – although some nations are still struggling to find internal harmony and successful avenues of economic and social progress.

The positive impact of these dramatic developments has been especially strong throughout the North, bringing with it a new political landscape, reminding us of the arrival of spring, which breaks ice-covered lakes and rivers – and suddenly there is movement everywhere, and newly released streams move forward with force and vigour.

New states and new forms of regional cooperation have been created. For the first time in our history there now exists in the North an interlocked network of organizations embracing the entire area from Russia, across the Baltic States and the Barents Sea, through the Nordic countries, over the Atlantic Ocean and Greenland, into Canada and the United States of America.

Three international organizations – the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Baltic Council, all of them created in the last decade and all gaining relevance and scope with each passing year – are a clear demonstration of this political transformation, creating for the first time exclusive forums for cooperation between the Northern European states, Canada and the two most important states of the 20th century – the United States of America and Russia.

Although these three international councils are all different in composition and purpose, they together constitute a new structural reality in the North. They show how the end of the Cold War has fundamentally altered the political and economic landscape in our regions. The federal structures of Russia, Canada and the United States have furthermore brought provincial and state governments into significant cooperative efforts with the smaller nation states in the North. Therefore an interesting form of regional and nation state cooperation in economic, social and political affairs has been created. In many ways the area can now be seen as a laboratory model of how the old nation states and the regional, provincial and city governments within the federal structures can evolve intensive forms of international cooperation in the 21st century – and thereby transform the old model of diplomatic exchange.

These developments have now been so successful that they have already created what we could call “the New North” – an effective, broad and elaborate framework of cooperation that has been institutionalized on four levels.

The first level consists of the three councils of international cooperation: the Arctic Council, the Euro-Asian Barents Council and the Baltic Council.

The second level consists of the Northern Forum, which now assembles here in St Petersburg, embracing representatives of regions, cities and provinces – and facilitating effective cooperation across national boundaries.

The third level consists of the University of the Arctic – a network of over 40 universities and research institutions dedicated to creating and training an academic community devoted to furthering knowledge of the North.

The fourth-level consists of the Northern Research Forum, which first met in Iceland in the year 2000, then in Russia last year – and will assemble next year in Canada. The Northern Research Forum facilitates a continuous and open dialogue amongst scholars, researchers, public officials, political leaders, business entrepreneurs and cultural innovators, with special emphasis on giving young people access to the broad dialogue on the future of the North.

This four-level model presents an elaborate political framework of the New North. It is at the same time formal and well established, yet also dynamic, democratic and open – allowing innovation, new thinking and initiatives to facilitate positive change.

It is important for us to fully understand how this model of the New North offers us opportunities for effective cooperation and political innovation. It opens up new avenues for economic and social progress, as well as cultural enrichment and an inspired democratic dialogue. In this respect, the New North is unique in the world. No other part of the globe now enjoys such an elaborate and interconnected framework for cooperation – embracing regions that range from Asia to the Atlantic, from Alaska to the Nordic countries – bringing Russia and the United States together in a network of cooperation in the company of both new and old democratic states.

The core of the institutional framework in the New North is the emphasis on open dialogue and opportunities for participation by people from all over. The New North is therefore, in global terms, uniquely democratic. The Northern Forum, the University of the Arctic and the Northern Research Forum allow citizens and scholars, students and activists in cities and regions to come forward with ideas, propositions, suggestions, projects and plans. And, through the connections to the formal councils of international cooperation – the Arctic, the Barents and the Baltic Councils – these democratic currents of reform reach the highest levels of decision-making. Political innovation in the North has – within one decade – produced a framework for cooperation that offers us many opportunities for initiatives and progress. We are no longer hindered by the boundaries of the old diplomatic rules.

Within the New North everyone can work with everyone else: A city like St Petersburg can work with a country like Iceland; Alaska can work with the Nordic nations; regions in Russia can work with independent states in Northern Europe; universities and research institutions can work directly with state representatives in the Arctic and the Barents Councils; ideas and proposals formulated in the open NRF process are presented to ministers and ambassadors. The possibilities are unlimited, and it is up to us to demonstrate through our actions that we are fully utilizing the opportunities offered by the New North institutional framework.

In recent years, we have seen many examples of how this new model in the North is really working. Let me illustrate with some examples from my own experience as President – examples that would have been unthinkable in previous times when the world was dominated by rules stating what we could not do, what was forbidden. The New North is – in contrast – rich in opportunities for a new type of dialogue and cooperative efforts, which I have so clearly and pleasantly experienced.

As President I have established a close relationship with the Mayor of St Petersburg, and the resulting cooperative ties between Iceland and this great city can be felt both in prosperous business enterprises and cultural projects.

As President I have enjoyed productive relationships with the governors of the Novgorod and the Yamal-Nenets regions of Russia – manifested by their official visits to Iceland and in cooperation within the Northern Research Forum.

I have accepted the invitation to explore possibilities for Alaska having a more active involvement in New North institutions because I fundamentally believe that Alaska has a special and very significant role to play in maximizing advantages created by the New North. Alaska is, in fact, the standard-bearer of the United States in northern cooperation and through Alaska's active involvement, the President and government in Washington are directly linked to the progress of the North. It is similar to how the Russian regions bring President Putin and Moscow into the decision-making process concerning the future of the North. Therefore, the New North framework is an important pillar in Russian–American relations in the 21st century.

Through my participation in the general meetings of the Northern Research Forum, my active and ongoing dialogue with its leading participants, and attendance here at the Northern Forum in St Petersburg – meeting regional leaders, governors, mayors and other distinguished representatives of people living all over the North – I can benefit from a broad and stimulating dialogue, an experience that heads of state could not enjoy in previous times.

I have referred here to my own experience in recent years, but we can all acknowledge many instances of how the New North has transformed our opportunities for effective and productive cooperation. And such cooperation is indeed urgently needed.

We need to improve the management and utilization of the rich natural resources in the North, both on land and in the oceans, including oil, gas, hydropower and geothermal power.

We need to improve the protection of the Arctic marine environment – especially the fight against pollution of the oceans. And we need to improve the conservation of Arctic flora and fauna with emphasis on biodiversity and sustainable use. We need to expand studies regarding the impact of climate change on the Arctic region and the conceivable reaction to such changes. The likely melting of ice in Greenland and in the North Pole regions will cause dramatic transformation of conditions in coastal cities, as well as to the global climate, as a result of possible alterations to ocean currents that move from the North to all other parts of the globe. Therefore, climate change in the North can dramatically affect the entire world. We consequently need to give high priority to strengthening circumpolar and cross-disciplinary monitoring in order to help us determine and analyze environmental changes in the North, integrate the monitoring of biodiversity, and assess pollution as well as other environmental, social and economic factors.

We need to strengthen economic progress through business partnerships, facilitated by investments in information technology and communications networks. With improved communications, new shipping and airline routes, road networks and modernized railway systems, we can enhance the potential of the North in significant ways. By focusing more exclusively on the North as an interconnected area, communications companies could indeed establish a profitable basis for operations. The Icelandic experience provides an interesting example in this respect. Icelandair flies regularly from Scandinavian capitals to destinations on the North American continent, thereby making our island in the Atlantic a strategic hub – bringing Northern Europe and North America together. An Icelandic shipping line has in recent years established extensive networks in Russia and thereby succeeded in broadening its traditional European routes. This northern emphasis has proven to be a profitable approach. We have furthermore seen many other positive examples of business enterprises from our countries linking efforts in order to gain a stronger position in regional, national and global markets. In many ways, corporations from the northern territories share experience, as well as a cultural and professional outlook – and are therefore well equipped to reap the benefits from joint efforts.

We need to enhance our cultural exchanges, including artistic exhibitions, musical events, film festivals, publishing and theatre, as well as the important tasks of language preservation and preservation of traditional patterns of social interaction. Our countries are rich in cultural heritage and, in modern times, we have been blessed by an extraordinarily creative community of artists, writers, painters, composers, singers, actors, filmmakers and theatrical directors. When St Petersburg celebrates the 300th anniversary of its spectacular history, we should note that it was especially the thriving cultural creativity of the city that made it so great. 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 indeed many cultural centres throughout the North that have both enriched the lives of people and broadened human experience in profound ways.

We need to promote collaboration between funding agencies and research councils. By doing so, we facilitate joint financing of research programmes – giving emphasis to developing existing cooperation between Europe and North America in order to link educational and research institutions dealing with Northern research. The University of the Arctic and many bilateral university agreements, as well as the establishment of numerous forums and associations to promote research and scholarship, manifest the existence of a vibrant academic community in the North, which continually brings us new visions and fascinating results.

There are indeed many other areas where urgent tasks await us and provide opportunities for economic and social progress. And let us not forget that last year we saw dramatic confirmation of the new cooperation across the North Atlantic in the field of security and peaceful existence. The agreement between NATO and Russia, which was finalized in Reykjavík in May and signed in Rome a few weeks later, signified a new era. The countries of the North can now develop new dimensions in our cooperative security efforts and remove some of the vestiges of the Cold War, which can still be found in our regions.

The times ahead do indeed offer us numerous opportunities, challenges and new avenues towards progress. It is highly encouraging to see how the nations of the North have moved swiftly to prepare ourselves for this exciting future.

The North embraces the radical transformations that have taken place in international relations in recent years. It provides the global community with a new vision and creates a platform for North America and Russia to cooperate in a dynamic and positive way along with 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 that 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 collaboration. It is up to us to make the most of these new opportunities and I thank you profoundly for the invitation to share in your deliberations and decisions here today. There is no better place than St Petersburg to confirm the great future of the North.