



THE NEW NORTH

A Speech

by

the President of Iceland

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at

The IASCP Northern Polar Regional Conference

"The Northern Commons:

Lessons for the world – Lessons from the world"

Anchorage Alaska

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Distinguished Governors,
Alaskans, community leaders, scholars,
Ladies and Gentlemen

The journey has indeed been long. For the first time a President of Iceland visits Alaska – and I was asked how many other presidents have arrived in your magnificent state, even including the presidents of the United States. Whatever the answer, I am deeply honoured and grateful for the invitation and eager to engage in our dialogue in the coming days.

My mission is to further wide-ranging and effective cooperation in the North and to encourage all of you Alaskans to benefit from the vast opportunities which have now been created by the transformation taking place in recent years.

Nowhere did the Cold War so deeply freeze the political situation as in the North. The strategic arsenals, the nuclear confrontation, the ideological conflicts, the times of threats and crisis made the North a forbidden territory. The United States and the Soviet Union, the West and the East, confronted each other in the vicinity of Alaska and the Nordic countries.

The Cold War view of the world was often represented by the flat maps that hung in schoolrooms and the corridors of power where the North American and the European continents maintained the chief focus and the North and the Arctic somehow fizzled out at the top. Although centuries ago scientists had proven that the earth resembled a ball the political landscape had not yet recognised the polar neighbourhood in the North.

During those times a visit by a president of my country would probably not have served any great purpose but our gathering here today and many other events in recent years bear witness to the fundamental transformation which has taken place in the North.

We now have a new political landscape, challenges and opportunities which make it imperative for me to seek active cooperation with the people of Alaska and which provide us all with opportunities for progress and advancement that did not exist before.

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 on economic, social and political issues 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 an elaborate political system which we could call “the New North” – an effective, broad and elaborate framework of cooperation that has been institutionalised on four levels.

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

The second level consists of the Northern Forum, which embraces representatives of regions, cities and provinces – and facilitates cooperation across national boundaries.

The third level consists of the University of the Arctic – a network of over 50 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 political system presents an elaborate framework for 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 understand fully 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 far and wide. 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 a single 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: 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.

The purpose of my visit to Alaska is to urge the people of this magnificent state, your leaders and representatives, your entrepreneurs and scholars, to become actively involved in the New North and to strengthen the role played by the United States at all levels within this new framework.

I fundamentally believe that Alaska can in special and significant ways maximize the 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.

Let me also note that within the New North framework the United States and Russia have better opportunities to develop their cooperation and to become strong partners than in many other international forums. In the North only Canada and the Nordic countries are the additional players but the operations of other international frameworks are complicated by the presence of a different group of countries, as the recent history of disagreements within NATO and on Iraq, and the tension between the US and France and Germany so clearly demonstrates.

Through the North the United States can advance its relations with Russia and deepen a partnership which President Bush so clearly values without the complexities of having the continental European countries at the table. The company of Canada and the Nordic countries is indeed conducive to achieving concrete results in the new US-Russian dialogue and here Alaska will, I hope, provide a pioneering leadership, being the key to successful American involvement.

There are indeed many important tasks which await us.

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 response to such changes.

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.

We need to enhance our cultural exchanges, including art exhibitions, musical events, film festivals, publishing and theatre, as well as the important tasks of language preservation and fostering 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.

Our countries have much 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.

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.

Alaska has in many fascinating ways been a pioneering state. Your constitution and your vision of how to preserve and utilise the commons for the benefit of all the people are a fountain of new thinking, ideas and proposals.

Alaska is a prominent player in the New North in its own right and as the representative of the United States the predominant provider of leadership and responsibility.

I hope my visit to your magnificent state shows our determination to seek your active involvement in years to come.

It is up to us to make the most of these new opportunities and I thank you profoundly for the invitation which enables me to share in your deliberations.