



**A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the State Dinner
in honour of the President of the Czech Republic
Václav Klaus and
Madam Livia Klausová
Bessastaðir
22 August 2003**

Your Excellency President Václav Klaus and
Madam Livia Klausová
Distinguished guests

We welcome you with a warm heart and fond memories of your first visit to our country, welcome you now as an outstanding statesman who was in the forefront of the changes which have dramatically transformed the prospects for peace and prosperity, democracy and progress, not only in Europe but also all over the world.

I remember vividly our first encounter fifteen years ago when we both were Ministers of Finance in our countries. You had arrived in Iceland together with other prominent leaders of the democratic revolution on a celebratory journey across the Atlantic.

Late in the evening I assembled in the Ministry of Finance a small gathering of prominent Icelandic economists, the core of those responsible for policy formulation. Quite early in the discussions the strength of your arguments and the profoundness of your thinking impressed us all.

There was, however, one vision which we wrote off with bemused scepticism – but of course there you also turned out to be right. You insisted, with strong conviction, that within a few years the Soviet Union would cease to exist. It would quite simply collapse, disintegrate due to the inefficiencies of its economic system.

None of the Icelanders present had ever heard such a prediction – and that at a time when the West still deemed the Soviet Union to be a military and economic giant and Michael Gorbachev was considered together with the President of the United States to be the most influential leader in the world.

When momentous events shortly afterwards showed how uniquely foresighted you had been, that evening became a treasured memory for us all.

Later I drove you down to the old harbour because you wanted to see the ocean, to celebrate your freedom by enjoying the coming of the waves, a sight you had for years been prevented from embracing. It was a stormy night. The wind and the forcefulness of the waves greeted you strongly – and for a while you stood there alone on the small timber pier.

Perhaps the Icelandic winter storm was a forewarning of what was in store, of the challenging tasks which faced you, of the courage required to bring about the transformations which have given your country a place of respect and the nation a multitude of avenues for progress.

Fifteen years later we welcome you here tonight as a great statesman, a dear friend and celebrate the first state visit by the President of the Czech Republic to our country.

We have become allies in NATO and partners in the evolution of Europe, Iceland enjoying the benefits of the inner market without full membership of the European Union, while the Czech Republic decided with others to join.

Your voice has been important in the dialogue on the future of Europe and many people in Iceland have welcomed your words of warning, found your vision both timely and refreshing.

The people of Iceland have for decades enjoyed the benefits of our cooperation, the music, the culture and the literature which the Czechs have offered. The Icelanders have also shown by our free market choices how important the ties of trade have been.

Perhaps the Skoda car has been the best symbol of our successful cooperation since it has enabled thousands of Icelanders all over the country to enjoy mobility and family outings. It was actually the first car I bought shortly after obtaining my driving licence and my family has over the years indeed owned a number of Skodas. I doubt if many makes come with such a personal presidential recommendation.

Our nations have greeted the 21st century by bringing our leading entrepreneurs closer together than ever before. Now Icelandic investors have become prominent partners in the Czech telecommunication market and thus the advance of information technology has brought us new opportunities and enabled us to utilise growing globalisation for the mutual benefit of our people.

We can indeed look forward to exciting times with democracy stronger in Europe than ever before, with progress gaining momentum each and every year, with technology and the economic reforms opening up new avenues for cooperation.

The foundation of this transformation was certainly created by many people but we welcome here tonight one of the most outstanding leaders of those times – a pioneer and a visionary who has given his people and many others a new faith in democracy and human progress.

In the spirit of friendship and with optimism towards our growing cooperation I welcome His Excellency President Václav Klaus and Madam Livia Klausová here tonight and ask all of you to rise and lift your glasses in their honour and to celebrate the joint journey of the Czech Republic and the people of Iceland.