



**A Speech  
by  
the President of Iceland  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
at the conference of European Cities Against Drugs  
“Combating Drugs – A World Challenge?”  
Vilnius  
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Mayors, city officials, experts, scholars.  
Ladies and gentlemen:

We are reminded here today, in the beautiful capital of Lithuania, a city where all the major religions of Europe have constructed their churches, where the history of northern and southern countries, of eastern and western regions provides both insights and understandings – reminded how the world has changed in recent decades, how our continent is now blessed with democracy and opportunities for progress. Never in the annals of Europe have there been so many free and democratic countries, enjoying peace and security which were the dreams of many in previous times.

But this success did not come easy, the journey has not always been full of joy or high spirits; there were sacrifices and struggles, tragedies and terror which determined the fate of generations. And forever will we honour the memory of those who hoped, but did not live to enjoy their freedom.

Certainly the transformation of Europe has brought many blessings, replaced conflict with cooperation and laid the foundation for prosperity and welfare, providing people with opportunities to excel and enjoy new endeavours, in the arts as well as in science, in business as well as services, combining the roots of their home countries with global careers.

Compared to previous centuries we are living in exciting and challenging times. There are, however, shadows in this sunny picture, dark clouds gather on the horizon. There are developments so grave and scary that they threaten the health of our communities.

The openness of our borders, the innovations which technology has brought – although on the whole producing freedom and progress – have also given the pushers of dangerous drugs, hard and soft, new opportunities to market their deadly products, to extend their networks across Europe, to draw every day thousands of new young people into their strangling webs, making millions depend on these dangerous substances, causing every year the deaths of hundreds or even thousands in each and every one of our cities, leaving families and friends in grief as if a war had been started – and certainly the sufferings and the sacrifices are akin to a war.

In addition, the marketing and production of these dangerous drugs have brought a new level of criminalization to our societies, making life in our cities dangerous and risky, bringing cruelty and sorrow into many homes.

We ask ourselves: What can we do? How can we combat these new and dangerous forces? How can we save the lives of those who are now being threatened?

There are, regrettably, no easy solutions, no answers with the magic touch.

This will be a difficult and long-lasting struggle but the profound importance of our task gives it priority beyond other endeavours.

I was privileged last year to attend your meeting in Oslo, to be asked to become a patron of a special project involving ten or more of your cities, a project based on research and scholarly findings which scientists in my country have produced, supported by more than two decades of studies.

In the year which has passed I have attempted to actively support your cooperation, your important endeavours and engagements in different cities. I have attended meetings in Stockholm and Sofia, St. Petersburg and elsewhere, learned from a dialogue with officials and local leaders, with people who bear the daily burden, with police officers and doctors, welfare officials and others, met with drug addicts who want to be cured, listened to their worries, felt the desperation of their struggle, shared in the fear which their families suffer.

This has for me been a valuable journey, giving me insights and a broader understanding. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve you in this way and hopefully my participation has been of some help.

The most important lesson which I have learned is that we are all in this together and only cooperation can bring solutions, cooperation both

across the boundaries of our countries and across the boundaries which divide our societies into different sectors.

We have much to teach each other. The experience of every city brings important elements to our common understanding. The successes and the failures which we all encounter can help others to find a better way.

The cities of Europe must be the core of the cooperation across our borders because it is in the cities where the fight takes place, where the challenges have to be met, where the young must be saved. Your endeavours, your dialogue, your cooperation are of the utmost importance.

But cooperation must also be across the boundaries within our own communities, aimed at bringing different sectors together, creating a solid foundation for a common effort.

It has struck me, both in discussions within my own country and in dialogue with many people across Europe, how isolated the efforts to combat drugs can be from each other, how institutions do not combine their efforts, how often bureaucratic barriers prevent the use of good ideas, how far apart concerned people can be.

We must therefore create solid networks of cooperation, both in our cities and within our nations, reaching out to all who care and are willing to help, bring together public movements and non-governmental organizations, involve the media and communities in different areas of our respective cities; also schools and sport associations, the boy scouts and the girl scouts, teachers and parents, and attempt to make each and everyone aware that their role is important, that together we can reduce this threat.

In the spirit of such endeavours, in the hope of bringing different sectors together, we have decided in Iceland to dedicate one day next autumn to sending an important message to the nation, describing the most important measures in successful prevention, explaining how we can help the young to say no, how we can save the lives of millions. We intend to bring the message to every home, every school, every village, every town.

We have created a special framework of cooperation for this purpose, focusing on what we have termed “A Day of Prevention”. The association of municipalities in Iceland – embracing all cities, towns and villages – has agreed to participate in this effort. The Icelandic Sports and Olympic Association has also promised to be with us and so have the

Youth Association, the Scouts Movement and others. The University of Iceland and the University of Reykjavík have agreed to provide the scholarly foundation and the State Radio and Television Network will help in carrying the message to each and every home.

The idea to create such a national Day of Prevention was born last December on the flight from St. Petersburg where I was present together with the Mayor, Governor Matviyenko, at the signing ceremony which confirmed our cooperation. We can therefore thank our Russian friends for having helped in initiating this effort, a new form of cooperation within my country.

We hope that such a day will offer important lessons; and we intend to repeat it the following year and then again and again because regrettably we can never cease in our important endeavours.

The cooperation which you have created, European Cities Against Drugs, does provide hope and a vision, courage and lessons in which we all share, demonstrates how together we can move forward and help each other to achieve success.

It has been a privilege to be a part of your endeavours, I thank and congratulate you all and am grateful for the opportunity to be a part of your journey.