



**Speech by the President of Iceland,
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson,
at the conference
“The Barents Region Today - Dreams and Realities”
Rovaniemi, Finland
September 15.-16. 1997**

Prime Minister
Governor
Rector
Distinguished guests

For a new President of Iceland to visit Finland twice within a period of few weeks shows in itself that the old relationship between our two countries has clearly entered a new era.

The transformation from the strictures of the Cold War to dynamic global flux has enabled countries and regions in Northern Europe to create new forms of co-operation.

I am very grateful to the Governor of Lapland and the University of Lapland for the invitation to participate in this conference. I welcome the opportunity it provides to acquaint myself more closely with the thinking of distinguished public representatives, scholars and researchers as well as leaders of industry, commerce and finance. By accepting the invitation I also wanted to indicate the importance that we in Iceland attach to co-operation within the Barents and Arctic regions, how important we feel it is to strengthen the development and the dialogue in our part of the world.

Looking to the Barents regions in the east and the American-Arctic regions in the west, Iceland has encouraged and welcomed the institutionalisation of multi-dimensional co-operation between our nations and communities. The emphasis on military security during the Cold War era prevented us from understanding the importance of such concerns. Now, however, we must define our common interest

in a broader way, seek urgent solutions to fundamental economic and environmental problems, and strengthen our social and cultural foundations by a great variety of joint endeavours.

The end of the Cold War and the dramatic transformation of the political and economic landscape in Europe has brought the Barents and Arctic regions into a key position, influencing strongly the success and stability of the new Europe and the important Russian-United States relationship.

The Barents-Arctic regions provide the Northern European countries with significant opportunities for co-operation, both among ourselves and with Russia, the United States and the European Union – co-operation endowed with regional, national and global dimensions.

The integration of the communities in the Euroarctic regions can further harmonious relationships between large and small European states, between non-EU and EU member states, and between non-NATO and NATO member states.

Development of economic, scientific and cultural co-operation in the Barents Euroarctic region and integration of investments in energy projects and communication systems can enhance this region's contribution towards a better understanding of such fundamental global problems as climate change and ozone depletion, which in turn can further efforts by global institutions to deal with fundamental threats to our civilisation and biosystems.

The involvement of the European Union in active co-operation among countries and regions in the Barents and the Arctic part of the world could deepen the understanding of its member states in other parts of Europe about how wide-ranging the concerns of the new European institutions must be.

Co-operation and dialogue between Russia and the United States within the institutionalised frameworks of the Barents Regional Council and the Arctic Council could enable these two important states to develop new and positive ways of harmonizing their relationship, as well as actively participating in the evolution of the polar regions which significantly affects the environmental future of Planet Earth.

It is of utmost importance that we in the Nordic countries bring our long and well-established tradition of co-operation, open dialogue, friendship and informal approaches towards solving practical problems into the new institutional frameworks created for Barents and Arctic co-operation. The Nordic contribution may have gained an additional importance in providing a role-model for the new regional institutions.

The Icelandic vision, our reflections on the future of the Barents and Arctic regions, incorporates a number of ideas, emphases and proposals.

First. The need for active co-operation and co-ordination between the activities of the Barents Region Council and the evolution of the Arctic Council, and also between these two councils and the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy. Such institutional integration is both practical and cost-effective. Furthermore, the underlying structure of membership, with respect to both formal members and observer states, is designed to make co-ordination of activities both beneficial and productive.

Second. The environmental significance of the entire Arctic region, and its links to the European, American and Asian continents, is so critical for the Earth's biosystem as to make intensified co-operation between all states and regions in our part of the world both a moral duty and an obligation towards fellow members of the human race.

Third. The oceans which link the Barents and the Arctic regions are not only of great importance for the livelihood of our own people but also play a key role in global weather systems. Increased ocean research must therefore be a major part of our future co-operation.

Fourth. The fish stocks in the Barents, Norwegian, Iceland and Greenland Seas and other ocean polar areas can only be preserved and harvested profitably if we jointly acknowledge our responsibility towards the future of our fishing communities. It is also our duty to demonstrate to others how governments and regional authorities can responsibly manage and preserve marine resources.

Fifth. The opening of the Northern Sea Route could fundamentally transform opportunities for economic co-operation and trade with Asia. It would place the Barents Euroarctic Region in a pivotal position in the global economy of the 21st century. Active

research into the feasibility of this project should therefore be a major priority.

Sixth. The Icelandic experience in the development of energy, energy saving and water projects could create interesting opportunities for joint research and joint ventures. Many Icelandic companies in other fields, such as fish processing, fish technology and the global marketing of marine products, have also shown interest in creating active partnerships with other enterprises in the Region.

Seventh. The history of modern Iceland, how a poor nation of farmers and fishermen numbering only about 70,000 for most of the last century, in a harsh land of volcanoes and glaciers, mighty rivers, mountains and fjords, could create a highly prosperous society with comprehensive networks of communication, educational institutions and health service, - this history can offer important lessons for other communities in the Region. In a certain sense we could look at Iceland as a laboratory where solutions can be examined and discussed.

Finally, in this list of our thoughts and concerns, I want to dwell briefly on the threats of climate change and ozone depletion.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has concluded that continued increase at current rates could raise the average global air temperature by between 1 and 3.5 °C by 2100. The average rate of warming would probably be greater than any other seen in the past 10,000 years. The IPCC also pointed out that the consequences could be a rise in the sea level of somewhere between 15 and 95 centimetres by the end of the approaching century. Our children's generation would have to deal with colossal problems resulting from this transformation of the oceans.

Climate change might furthermore enhance ozone depletion by cooling the stratosphere and by changing circulation patterns in a way that would bring low-ozone air into the Arctic. At present Arctic ozone depletion is poorly understood and it is therefore difficult to estimate the risk of future ozone holes. It is clear however that ozone depletion would lead to increases in ultra-violet radiation that could severely damage living cells. The most important long-term effect on the Arctic ecosystem could be fundamental changes in the composition of the species.

It is a shocking fact which reflects the direction of modern scientific research that at present no international programs are focusing on the development and application of climate models for predicting future changes in the Arctic.

The scientists working within the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme have concluded that monitoring the changes in the Arctic must be given a high priority: “This should include intensive studies of particular sites or systems as well as extensive observation throughout the circumpolar area. Detection of permafrost by remote sensing and ground networks is critically needed, along with studies of sea-ice extent and thickness”.

Among the potential changes in the Barents Region resulting from climate change could be that higher water temperatures would further increase sea level rise and thus aggravate soil erosion and affect living conditions in dramatic ways. Winds and water currents are likely to change, fundamentally affecting the temperature, humidity and seasonal characteristics of the area. A warmer climate would introduce into the Barents- Arctic region southern plants and species which would outcompete the native species. It has been suggested that a warming of 2°C would result in a 400 to 500 kilometre northward shift of vegetation types within the next 25 years.

The scientists of the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme have reminded us that “the survival of Arctic peoples has always been intricately linked to climate. Arctic settlements are typically located close to food, water and shelter, all of which are affected by climate. To the extent that people continue to harvest plants and animals and live permanently or seasonally on coastal spits or along river banks and lake shores, climate change will directly impact their lives.”

In my opinion the consequences of climate change and ozone depletion for the Barents and Arctic region make it of paramount importance that global research and co-operation should be given top priority by the institutions which the nations and the communities in this part of the world have created.

During my recent visit to Finland I was deeply impressed by the clear determination to be involved directly in the search for new solutions to global and regional problems.

In my conversations with President Martti Ahtisaari, Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen and other public officials I sensed a profound understanding of the new realities and the complexity of the tasks that face us all.

The end of the Cold War has opened up new opportunities for co-operation between Finland and Iceland, the two republics in the Nordic family, the outposts among the five Nordic states, one in the east and the other in the west, to encourage fresh approaches to the evolution - economic, environmental and cultural, - of the northern part of our continent and the entire Barents and Arctic Regions.

It is in the spirit of this new opening that I look forward to the presentations and the discussions here in Rovaniemi. I express again my deep thanks for the invitation and salute the Lapland Authorities and the University for their initiative in hosting this conference.