



Speech by His Excellency
Dr. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
President of Iceland
at the Riigikogu
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Distinguished President of the Parliament
Honourable members

It is with deep respect that I come before to you to pay homage to your democracy, to salute the heroes who fought for your independence and sovereignty, and to verify once again the desire of the Icelandic people to preserve our friendship and cooperation into the new century.

The lessons of our own history, our belief in the fundamental right of nations to freedom and self-determination made the entire Icelandic nation your allies in the hours of need. Together we celebrated your victories which inspired the democratic movements all over of Europe.

The democratic heritage, the society of tolerance and human rights, has this century primarily been preserved by smaller nations, most of which – in particular the Nordic nations – also have an outstanding record in terms of welfare, living standards and economic prosperity.

When the large blocks and the powerful countries in Europe are identified as offering the main guidance for the future, it is worth recalling that at the beginning of this decade when you here in Estonia and your fellow champions of freedom in Latvia and Lithuania were fighting for independence and democratic rights, the leaders of various large European nations urged you to show patience and moderation in your demands. It was the small Nordic states, especially Iceland and Denmark, which made a stand and provided you with support at the crucial moment.

Iceland, the smallest member of NATO, unbound by compromises made within the European Union, was able to defy the dissuades and provide the Baltic States with the necessary support in your campaign for independence. I am well acquainted with those developments from the inner circles of Iceland's government and parliament during these years. The small island nation in the North Atlantic was like David then among the Goliaths who wanted to wait and ask for more time.

It was the small Baltic nations which took the lead in breaking the Soviet yoke from within, and it was the small Nordic nations in the west which made the first decisive stand. We in Iceland will always proudly cherish the memory of that struggle. It provides an encouragement to continue to stand guard over democratic evolution in Europe.

The momentous history of this century clearly reveals the key role played by the small nations in safeguarding and strengthening democracy. The Nordic nations have made an exceptionally clear contribution and are virtually unrivalled for their unbroken democratic traditions. And here in the Baltic it was your democratic revolution that tore down the barricades of the Soviet dictatorship.

As we greet the approaching millennium, it is healthy for us all to contemplate this historical lesson.

Two world wars, dictatorships and times of tragedy, economic depression and political oppression, millions of lives sacrificed – unfortunately these can almost entirely be attributed to the larger nations on the European continent, which continually have insisted on a leadership role for themselves and still are vying for the place of honour and influence, either within alliances or outside.

When we discuss the evolution of Europe in the new century and take our standpoints towards proposals and ideas concerning desirable frameworks for government, security and economic development, it is important to bear in mind that the basic condition for success is to allow the diversity of the continent to flourish, that Europe should be not be organised like a vast highway system but rather modelled as a splendid park, the work of creation not being a single pillar of iron but rather a mosaic of many different coloured stones.

A democratic society must be given a scope to consolidate itself and shape its culture, the education and the lifestyle. Western studies have shown that democratic government is not founded primarily upon laws

and constitutions, important as they may be. The roots of democracy are above all contained in society's civilisation, its traditions, customs and beliefs, not only within government institutions but rather throughout the community at large, at places where people gather and work, in day-to-day discussions and the media, in academic establishments and art centres, in village councils no less than the national parliaments. Civilisation is the soil which nourishes the growth of democracy; it creates the unswerving conviction that the right of every individual to protest and think differently is as natural as the right to the air that we breathe.

In the evolution of the new security structure in Europe it is important to remember that the rights of the small state is the test of endurance and moral strengths of those security reforms. As a founding member of NATO, Iceland is deeply involved in this process and from the very beginning we have emphasised the rights of the Baltic states to be included in the new NATO. At the NATO summit in Madrid and ever since this policy has been the cornerstone of Iceland's position and I take the opportunity here today to reiterate it strongly.

Unless the rights of the smaller European states are fully respected, the new Atlantic security structure will be democratically and morally flawed.

The conscience of the new Europe is not provided by the economically powerful. The heart of the new Europe is in those communities which, although small, kept the spirit of freedom and democracy alive during the darkest decades of this century.

Iceland has made a particular point of using the close Nordic cooperation to develop powerful relations between these five nations and our newly independent friends in the Baltic, so that these eight states can in various ways collectively exert an influence on the evolution of Europe in the century, on solving many problems in the northern regions and on measures to attract Russia and other neighbouring states towards creative participation in progress and positive developments, aimed at reinforcing democracy and human rights, and strengthening peace and security that provide each and every individual with the opportunity to be the master of his or her own fate.

In this respect the new regional organizations in northern Europe present the Nordic and Baltic countries with a host of opportunities for actively involving the United States and the European Union, together

with Russia, in a strong cooperation. I believe that these three regional organizations – the Baltic Council, the Barents Region Council and the Arctic Council, which have all been established in the present decade in the wake of the new world order – will play a key role in global developments and are in fact already of decisive importance.

Although their tasks and membership differ, these three organizations link a core area from the Baltic, through the Barents Region to the Arctic, from the borders between the Baltic States and Russia to North America, Canada and the United States. They span an area of key importance for life on earth and the environmental safety of all mankind, an area which has a priority place in disarmament and security issues in the joint quest by the US and Russia to create a successful new world order.

Looking at the three organizations on a continuum, their origins and structures locate the Nordic and Baltic nations in a key role, although circumstances naturally differ from one organization to the next. Through these regional institutions, the traditions and cooperative spirit the Nordic nations and our new alliance of friendship with the Baltic States can together exert a formative impact on relations between the United States and Russia, and between Russia and the European Union, strengthening their successful cooperation and help to solve urgent problems, while leaving them free from the tension and the power struggles that always tend to escalate when the forums are moved towards the center of the continent itself.

It is important that increased cooperation among the Nordic and Baltic countries in the international arena should take the development of these new regional organizations firmly into account. There are many signs that both the United States and Russia have realized the positive potential of strengthening these three regional organizations, making it vital for us not to neglect our own contributions.

The regional organizations are not only an instrument for developing cooperation and relations with the new Russia, but also a suitable forum for taking advantage of the best aspects of the US contribution to the European process, without this being complicated by the sensitive reactions which some powerful continental nations show towards the presence of the American influence.

Iceland's history during this century from Home Rule at the beginning to the establishment of the Republic and beyond that to diverse

international participation at the end of the century, offers countless examples of how small nations can make important contributions towards strengthening democracy, security and progress in Europe.

We are proud of having been able to provide you with support at a crucial moment during your struggle for freedom and independence. Our contribution was a testimony that, in the international arena, small nations can play a decisive role, that David can still stand up to Goliath. It is in this spirit that, in league with the people of Estonia and our other friends in northern Europe, we want to move with strength towards the new century.