



Speech by His Excellency  
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President of Iceland  
at the University of Tartu, Estonia  
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Your Excellency Mr. Lennart Meri, President of Estonia,  
Mrs. Meri,  
Honourable Chancellor of the University  
Members of the University, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great pleasure for me to be invited here to this learned institution and have the opportunity to discuss the position of small nations in the new Europe, and the impact of the changing world picture on the evolution of democracy and security. These topics have a particular appeal to me not only because of the responsibilities vested in the office of President of Iceland, but also because of my interest and research when I was professor of political science at the University of Iceland and was one of the team which, a quarter of a century ago, helped to lay the foundation for modern social science in Iceland.

My introduction to international scholarship involved taking part in the first research project devoted to democracy in Europe. Leading political scientists at that time, Robert Dahl of Yale University, later president of the American Political Science Association, and Stein Rokkan, the doyen of the social sciences in Scandinavia, formed a research team to undertake a project called "Smaller European Democracies." I had the good fortune as a young student in 1965 to become a member of the academic team working on that project and was associated with it for the next five years.

The European order at that time made it easy to define the subject area: there were incredibly few democratic states in Europe. Central and Eastern Europe was not the only group of nations outside the borders of democracy; Spain and Portugal were also victims of dictatorships and Greece and Turkey were dominated by military regimes for some while.

Today, discussions about the speed of the democratic evolution in countries which were once under communist dictatorship often tend to forget how few countries in Europe have enjoyed democratic government for the whole of the century. We can almost count them on the fingers of one hand. When I was a young boy growing up in an Icelandic fishing town – and I do not consider myself to be particularly old – virtually all of Europe was under fascist, nazi or communist dictatorships, deprived of democracy and human rights. It cost millions of people their lives to smash the iron rule of Hitler and Mussolini, yet fascist rulers remained in power in southwest Europe for several decades afterwards.

I mention these familiar facts here because they are sometimes ignored when impatient and critical voices from Western Europe demand that the nations which were oppressed during the tyrannical era of the Soviet Union and its satellites should almost immediately, in the space of a few years, emerge as fully-fledged, flawless democratic societies.

Historical experience ought to have taught the people of Western Europe moderation, patience and tolerance in this regard.

We are now reaching the end of a century which has been characterized by more human sacrifices, bloodshed and suffering in the battle for democracy and human rights than have ever been seen before. Both Western and Eastern Europe have in this respect had their periods of tragedy, although at different times.

A democratic society must be given scope to consolidate itself and shape its culture, education and 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 civilization, its traditions, customs and beliefs, not only within government institutions but rather throughout the community at large, at places where people gather and work together, in day-to-day discussions and the media, in academic establishments and art centres, in village councils no less than national parliaments. Civilization 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.

It is illustrative of the democratic revolution in Europe that a young student today who would join a research project focusing on smaller European democracies, as I did thirty years ago, would soon discover that not only have these nations multiplied in number, but some of them, with the Baltic States in the vanguard, have also been pioneers in changing the world order.

When the large blocks and the powerful countries in Europe are highlighted and 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 dissuaders 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.

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 group – also have an outstanding record in terms of welfare, living standards and economic prosperity.

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 not be organized 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.

The proof that real changes and progress are taking place is found in the rich contribution that small nations are able to make in leaving their imprint on this process of evolution. Let us consider three areas of European organizations, connected with democracy, security and economic growth.

Firstly, the Council of Europe, founded on the ruins left by the Second World War, aimed at safeguarding human rights and democratic government, to prevent the continent from regularly becoming a bloody battlefield; the Council of Europe, located in Strasbourg, which for centuries was the symbol of military conflict between France and Germany but is now a centre for hope, consecrated to new times.

For almost half a century, parliamentarians from member states have assembled there, formulating policies that are incorporated into laws and regulations – in fact the first example in the history of mankind of a successful cooperation between national assemblies, firmly supported with rulings of the European Court of Human Rights and strengthened by extensive cooperation among local government authorities and youth organizations.

Parliamentarians from the small and medium-size European nations have for decades played an active and influential role in all this work. With the democratic revolution at the beginning of the present decade, the Council of Europe became the first collective forum to welcome new parliamentarians from the Baltic and other newly independent states, Europe's formal recognition of fundamental changes in each country.

In the difficult task of consolidating Russia's adaptation to western systems of government and its loyalty to democracy and human rights, it is worth remembering that when Russia applied for and was granted membership of the Council of Europe, the small democratic European nations, their parliamentarians and judges, were also being granted the right to intervene and impose restraint through Council of Europe institutions to safeguard democratic mechanisms in modern Russia as well as in all the other new member states, enhancing the respect at the highest governmental levels for human rights and the fundamental principles of peaceful coexistence.

Secondly, NATO. Admittedly it is a complex analysis to draw lessons from its progress and power, although it is clear that without the participation of the three Benelux nations and three of the Nordic nations – Iceland, Norway and Denmark – NATO would have lacked moral strength. If the Alliance had only hinged upon cooperation among military forces led by three nuclear powers, its policy-making forums would have had a different character. Although the veto is not applied, the principle of consent by all NATO members in major and minor decisions implies that the smaller nations are granted a significant degree of power.

This influence was clearly demonstrated last year during the dialogue on expanding the Alliance, in particular at the Madrid Summit. It is no secret that during the buildup to that decision and at the Madrid meeting, the more influential member states from continental Europe gave overwhelming priority to membership for five nations which are their own close neighbours, and opposed formal recognition of possible membership by the Baltic States.

As early as May last year, at the Sintra meeting of the NATO foreign ministers, Iceland's foreign minister rejected this policy by the leading European Union members of NATO; in fact he was the only one to do so apart from the US Secretary of State, both of them favouring the

admission of three nations in the first round in order to keep open the possibility of membership for the Baltic States at later stages.

In my discussions with the President of Italy during his state visit to Iceland at this time, I firmly underlined the right of the Baltic States to NATO membership. I quote from my speech on that occasion:

“The right of the newly independent nations in Europe is a test of the permanence and moral strength of the new security order that the founding members of NATO have now taken the lead in formulating; at such a crossroads Iceland continues to ask about the position of the Baltic States and underlines once again the right of those smaller nations to security, peace and democracy.”

Subsequently, cooperation by the three Nordic NATO members at the Madrid Summit itself, with the US and Britain, secured the formal recognition of the Baltic States’ right to membership in the future. In Washington a few weeks later, I reinforced the Icelandic position in the following terms:

“NATO is now engaged in a dialogue with other nations which until now have been outside the Alliance, on how to create a new security structure for Europe and the Atlantic community. As a founding member of NATO, Iceland is deeply involved in this process. We therefore emphasize once again the right of the small, newly independent states, especially our friends the Baltic States, not to be excluded from such reforms.

“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.”

Thirdly, we should consider the institutions and alliances engaged in economic cooperation in Europe: the European Union, EFTA and the European Economic Area. Judgements differ as to where in this respect it is most favourable for small nations to align themselves. Take the Nordic

nations for example. Three of them – Denmark, Sweden and Finland – have opted to belong to the European Union, while the other two – Iceland and Norway – remain outside it. Nonetheless, Iceland and Norway have clearly, with due respect for our cousins in the other three countries, produced a more favourable record of economic success, growth, stability, welfare, employment and living standards.

Interestingly enough, according to the criteria for economic excellence which the European Union states have themselves agreed upon in the Maastricht Treaty and which form the foundation for the new European Monetary Union, the three Western European nations that have decided to remain outside the community – namely Iceland, Norway and Switzerland – outperform almost all of the member countries of the EU itself when one measures economic performance.

Experience therefore shows how smaller nations in Europe can unquestionably achieve major economic progress, irrespective of whether they are part of the European Union or remain outside it. The crucial factor is how each nation manages on its own its fiscal policy, investment strategy, monetary decisions and the relations between workers and employers.

A broad look at these three European institutional areas – democracy and human rights through the Council of Europe, security through links with NATO and economic affairs within or outside the European Union – shows that small nations have been, are and will be in a much stronger position to exert an influence, and in many more ways too, than is indicated by proportional measurements of size alone.

The progress of the Nordic nations in recent decades also sheds clear light on the potential for smaller nations to exert influence. At the same time as we have maintained our traditional, close cooperation, we have effectively concentrated our efforts in different directions regarding our relations with the continent's two main alliances. Iceland, Norway and Denmark are in NATO, while Sweden and Finland remain outside it. The latter two nations, however, are members of the European Union together with Denmark, while Norway and Iceland remain outside, but are closely associated with it through the European Economic Area.

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 new century, on solving various tasks 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. Personally, 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 and in the joint quest by the USA 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 helping 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 centre 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.

Whether it is admitted or not, the fact remains that during this decade of upheavals in Europe, the United States has been the most influential factor in the continent's affairs and will remain so for a long while into the future. The complexities of the Balkan conflicts, the relations with Russia, the evolution of European security, the Northern Ireland peace process – all these issues and many more testify to the United States' key role. The partnership agreement between the Baltic States and the USA which was recently signed in Washington also confirms America's importance in European affairs and should be particularly welcomed.

The growing US interest in the evolution of the new northern European regional organizations opens up a range of opportunities for the eight friendly Nordic and Baltic nations to exert a joint influence towards a positive evolution in the new century.

Iceland welcomes the chance to join in these tasks and to take advantage of these opportunities in cooperation with the people of Estonia and our other Baltic friends.

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 Icelanders 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.