



Speech by
the President of Iceland
Dr. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson at the
Gala dinner held by the President of Latvia
Guntis Ulmanis
June 11, 1998

Your Excellency Mr. President of Latvia
Guntis Ulmanis and Mrs. Ulmanis
Ladies and Gentlemen

With deep emotions and reverence we have come from Iceland to pay homage to your country, our heads bowed in respect for the struggle paved with the sacrifices which ultimately brought Latvia independence and a democratic way of life.

Both Latvia and Iceland have had the good fortune to be participants in the great democratic revolution of this century. At its dawn Iceland, which then was a poor nation of farmers and fishermen, won home rule and later full independence. As the century draws to a close, Latvia celebrates having regained its national sovereignty and enjoys the fruits of the freedom which during decades of oppression remained alive within the people's hearts.

The awareness of the course we ourselves had travelled, our good fortune in reaching full independence, encouraged Iceland to support, at their moment of destiny, the Baltic nations' demands for freedom.

The recognition of independence which Iceland's parliament confirmed on February 11 1991 and the signature of diplomatic relations on August 26 in Reykjavík were events that we will never forget, a triumphal celebration of democratic victories by small nations.

I recall your representatives' words at the signature ceremony in Höfði House, and no less their gleaming eyes and expressions, as they stood there at the crossroads in a struggle which they and your nation had waged for a very

long time – often, regrettably, earning little understanding from the powers-that-be around the world.

The success of our nations' campaigns for independence is proof that the will of the people is the ultimate tribunal, that small nations without military and financial strength can often serve as models for a new world order.

Iceland sincerely wants the bonds of friendship, which we tied with Latvia and other Baltic nations at those momentous times, to form the basis for close cooperation between us in the new century.

My visit now is both a confirmation of this desire and a policy declaration for the future. For decades, there has been a tradition among the five Nordic nations that a new head of state makes his first state visits to the other four. On being elected President of Iceland I decided to honour that custom, but resolved at the same time that a state visit to our newly independent friends in the Baltic would follow immediately afterwards. In this way, Nordic tradition would be combined with our bonds of friendship with Latvia and your neighbours in the Baltic, creating a precedent for priorities which would be honoured in the future.

Iceland is determined to continue to offer you our assistance, and help you to gain even more influence in the evolution of democracy, security and progress in Europe.

I recall with pleasure my cooperation with parliamentarians from Latvia at the Council of Europe before I was elected President of Iceland. There, the democratically elected representatives of your nation were in a position where they could influence and contribute towards making that institution, which the democratic nations of the continent had built upon the ruins of world war, into a powerful champion of human rights and democracy in a new age.

A year ago I stated that “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 smaller nations to security, peace and democracy,” and then I followed up this statement in my talks in Washington with the US President. I reiterate these views here tonight.

During the buildup to the NATO Summit in Madrid, at the Summit itself and afterwards, Iceland's government has firmly emphasized the right of the Baltic States to full participation in NATO's enlargement process and in the development of a new order for European security.

Europe's evolution towards economic progress and improved living standards takes various forms. Some nations have chosen to throw in their lot with the European Union.

Iceland, Norway and Switzerland are instructive examples of countries that have reached the forefront of economic progress without membership of the EU, an experience which certainly goes to prove that Europe is not a single building where we all have to take the same elevator in order to go upwards, but rather a community with many colourful houses where one can prosper.

In Iceland, we sometimes point out that we have achieved greater success in economic management, measured by the convergence criteria of the Maastricht Treaty itself, than almost all of the EU countries that signed it. That reality testifies to the fact that every nation is the master of its own fate in the creation of prosperity and progress, and cannot shift the burden of responsibility to others.

We are ready now and in the future to share with the people of Latvia our experience and the lessons we have learned, to cooperate in providing a guide for other small nations about how they can improve their living standards, gain security, reinforce democracy and at the same time enjoy peace and progress.

It is gratifying to see how the network of cooperation between our nations has been strengthening in recent years. We will devote ourselves to promoting our languages and cultures, show how the interaction of national heritage and international movements spawn creative innovation in the arts. Recently the Icelandic Ballet brought you a selection of the vital forces at work in Icelandic culture today, and we hope to be able to enjoy the work of your outstanding artists to a greater extent in Iceland.

A leading figure from Iceland's music scene is now the principal conductor of the Latvian Philharmonia Orchestra here in Riga and tomorrow we will enjoy the fruits of cooperation among musicians from our countries.

We would like to see greater contact between our scientists and students, and lay the foundation for growing trade. It is important that two of Iceland's largest companies have already established themselves in the Latvian business community, one in the timber trade and the other in marine transportation.

Iceland's experience of cooperation among the five Nordic nations has been exceptionally important in recent decades and we genuinely hope that this framework can be increasingly applied to cooperation between the Nordic countries and the Baltic States in as many fields as possible.

The new regional organizations – the Baltic Council, the Barents Region Council and the Arctic Council – are important forums for demonstrating how the Nordic nations and the Baltic States can attract powerful neighbours and the world's superpowers to cooperate on projects that will strengthen adaptation towards democratic relations, environmental conservation, greater security and economic prosperity.

There are many indications that these new regional organizations, which extend from the Baltic and through the Barents Sea region across to North America, can become influential forums for fruitful cooperation between Russia, the United States and the European Union: forums where the Nordic countries and the Baltic States, with our traditions and close-knit communities, contribute a new style, a more relaxed atmosphere and the right tempo.

The role of these regional organizations has already aroused increasing interest from the United States, and Russia is also taking a cooperative approach. It is therefore vital for the Nordic countries and the Baltic States to present tangible proof that we are collectively prepared to provide the desired leadership.

Many factors urge us to form a closer association in the new millennium: not only our shared heritage from the struggle for democratic government and national independence, but also the need for active contributions towards shaping the new world order.

As I offer my thanks to the President of Latvia and the Latvian people for their warm reception and great friendship, I ask you to rise from your seats and drink a toast to the President of Latvia, Guntis Ulmanis, and his wife, and to the everlasting friendship between Latvia and Iceland.