



Speech by
the President of Iceland
Dr. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening ceremony of the
University of Lapland
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**THE NORTHERN EUROPEAN STATES:
NEW PERSPECTIVES CALL FOR CREATIVE RESEARCH**

Honourable Rector, Governor, Mayor
Speaker of the Sami Parliament
Distinguished members of the faculty
and students of the University.

The opening of the academic year is indeed an occasion to celebrate the adventure of exploring the unknown, of discovering and charting new territories in science and the arts, of sharing in the spirit of discovery which over the centuries has enabled students and scholars to transform the universities into unique communities of learning and innovation.

Although the sites of teaching and research, together with the churches, are the oldest institutions in Europe and carry in their collective memory ages of darkness, cruelty and terror as well as times of progress, enlightenment and reforms, it is certain that never before have the universities faced such fundamental challenges, such urgent demands to provide understanding, directions and discoveries which provide us with guidance through the wilderness of ever-growing change.

The century which now is coming to an end has been the bloodiest in the entire history of Europe and the world. It has produced wars and terror, established regimes of torture and totalitarian cruelty.

But this century has also been an era which greeted great advances of democracy and human rights, of scientific and technological progress which

brought man into space and close to the core of the creation; a century which celebrates discoveries which give us life, health and longevity; a century which has brought the world together in such a splendid way that events are now immediately shared by everyone and institutions of learning, libraries and laboratories are opening their Internet doors to every citizen in our global village.

So overpowering and glorious are the collective fruits of these discoveries that man is now fast approaching the state which the Bible teaches was granted to God alone, approaching the very essence of the creation, the mastery of mankind's fate.

The forces of change have fundamentally altered the economic and political map of Europe and the world, and brought social transformation which affects every aspect of our daily lives, alters the family and the workplace, the schools and the seats of power, in the village and in the regions, in the nation state and in global institutions alike.

Northern Europe has indeed seen dramatic demonstrations of these changes. New states and regional organisations have been created. For the first time in our history there is now in existence an interlocked network of organisations embracing the entire area from Russia across the Baltic States and the Barents Sea through the Nordic countries, over the Atlantic Ocean and Greenland into Canada and the United States of America.

The three regional organisations – the Baltic Council, the Barents Region Council and the Arctic Council – all of them created in the present decade and all advancing in relevance and scope from each new year to the other, are a clear demonstration of the political transformation which has taken place in Northern Europe, not only bringing into being new states and new territorial bodies within states, but also creating for the first time exclusive forums for co-operation between the Northern European states and the two most important states of the twentieth century, the United States of America and Russia.

Although the Baltic, Barents and Arctic Councils are all different in composition and purpose, they constitute together a new structural reality in Northern Europe. They show how the end of the Cold War has fundamentally changed the political and economical landscape in Europe and brought the northern regions into key positions, influencing strongly the success of the new Europe and the stability of the Russian – American relationship.

The Northern European states have now been given new 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. It is therefore 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 into the new institutional frameworks created for northern European co-operation.

It is indeed strange to look back to my younger years when in the 1960's I became engaged in the pioneering project called "Smaller European Democracies", initiated by the distinguished scholars Stein Rokkan, the most prominent Nordic social scientist of his time, and Robert Dahl, one of the leading American political thinkers of this century.

Then the democratisation of Europe was still uncertain and restricted; fascist dictatorships dominated in the southern part of the continent; totalitarian regimes kept iron grips on central and eastern Europe. Now, over 40 democratic states have become members of the Council of Europe, which was founded on the ruins of the Second World War, primarily to keep France and Germany from initiating another war, but now effectively proving the advance of democracy and human rights.

Throughout this century the universities have always been highly influenced by the forces of political, economic and social change, both in their choices of research and areas of teaching, and in the formulation of conceptual frameworks and academic boundaries.

The Cold War dominated international and strategic studies. The emergence of new states from the wings of the colonial powers changed the scope of economics and research into development, customs and conflicts. The protest movements of the sixties and the seventies brought critical perspectives to the studies of the environment, of the role of the women, of the rights of different races and indigenous populations. Recent discoveries in science and technology have raised fundamental questions on the role of interdisciplinary research and teaching.

In fact it is quite natural to wonder how the universities will be able to continue their contributions to innovation, discovery and pioneering thought when the world is being transformed so fast and in so many interrelated ways. Has the pace of progress become so great as to prevent reflective knowledge and social comprehension?

It is especially urgent for us in Northern Europe to give priority to research and teaching dedicated to furthering the understanding of the

fundamental alterations taking place in our part of the world. The political, economical and social transformation in Northern Europe now challenges scholars, researchers and students to describe and interpret the multitude of change now affecting the future of the Northern European states, the potential of our nations and our communities.

Let us look briefly at some areas which urgently need more research and deeper understanding, areas where new questions need to be asked and new concepts and referential frameworks need to be formulated so our actions and decisions, views and conclusions can be directed by knowledge and wisdom.

First, the political innovation – we could even say the political creation – which in the last 10 years has dominated the evolution of Northern Europe. New states have gained independence; increased rights have been given to local and regional institutions. A network of regional organisations is bringing new dimensions to the relationship of the northern states to key partners in the future evolution of Europe and the western world. The decision-making structures are in a continuous flux and the classical academic and democratic question – Who governs, where and how? – now requires new answers, bringing into focus the nature of democratic accountability in the modern world. We could even say that Northern Europe has become a working laboratory of new political institutions and relationships: local, regional, national and global. A proper understanding of this dynamic reality can help to make the new Northern Europe a model which others could study and follow.

Second, the relationship between environmental protection and sustainable economic growth is a crucial element in the successful development of Northern Europe. How we treat this relationship is not only of fundamental importance to ourselves but will also greatly affect the global environmental situation. Northern Europe includes such a gallery of environmental problems and challenges that it almost defies the strongest of will-powers to hope for solutions to them.

Northern Europe is a host to some of the worst examples of military pollution, to threats from nuclear wastes and unstable nuclear installations. Furthermore, climatic change could affect the Barents region by increasing sea level rise and aggravating soil erosion, and thus affect living conditions in a dramatic way. It is also a sad reflection on the direction of modern scientific research that at present we lack international programmes focusing on the development and application of climate models for predicting future changes in the Arctic. Northern Europe harbours some of the most sensitive biosystems in the world; plants and species balance on the edge of

extinction. Our oceans and seas have been home to some of the most important fishing stocks in the world. Now, however, they could be threatened by the failure of our political systems to reach agreements on the management of ocean resources.

How the Northern European states deal with these daunting problems will not only have implications for the global environmental system but will also be a test of whether we can twin together political and economical reforms to secure our own sustainable future.

Third, the transformation of security structures and security arrangements following the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Here there is a tendency to hide the new reality by still using in part the old conceptual framework.

The expansion of NATO, the need to make Russia secure, stable and integrated into the western world, the failure of the European institutions to solve by themselves the civil war crisis in some parts of our continent – all of these developments have enhanced the role of the United States in European affairs, made America an even more crucial partner in the evolution of Europe.

Although Finland and Sweden remain outside NATO, both countries have entered into formal security arrangements with NATO through the Partnership for Peace Programme and through membership of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. Thus the distinction between the five Nordic states with respect to NATO and European security needs a fresh look by experts in international relations. It is now necessary for scholars and researchers to explore how these developments have changed the security concept, the notion of alliance and non-alliance; how new forms of security co-operation have affected the thinking, the training and the culture of the armed forces; how applicable or redundant the traditional security studies are to understanding these new realities in Northern Europe.

It was no coincidence that Iceland hosted last year the first NATO-sponsored exercise in which Russia participated, thus showing that the integration of Russia into the future security structures of Europe might be made easier through the avenues created by the Northern European states than by following the older routes of central Europe, which throughout the centuries have always been more explosive.

Fourth, economic growth and income distribution in the Northern European regions, the financial structures and the management of monetary issues together with the availability of national and international capital for

constructive investments – these are all issues of critical importance for the future of Northern Europe and for the growth of successful and stable political co-operation between states and territorial institutions. It is indeed an interesting question whether the successful model for balanced economic growth is the integrated, centrally-directed European Union model or the more decentralised American model where respective states and regions operate as independent actors in global markets, their success measured by the international trade of Texas, California, Utah, Tennessee and other states as separate entities.

We face the challenging question as to which of these two models is a better guide for the evolution of the Northern European territories and for dealing with the different regions of Russia. How is economic growth in northern Canada, Greenland, northern Norway, the Faroes and even Lapland to be achieved? We need an open examination of these alternative economic models, of how to combine different elements from each for our own advantage.

These four areas and indeed many others, as for example social disintegration, growing crime and narcotics trade, cultural transformation, education and human rights, would each be a sufficient challenge in itself. Taken together they constitute a qualitative transformation of the perspectives facing the universities and research institutions in Northern Europe.

Of course we have seen recognitions of these changes in many academic institutions in Northern Europe and the University of Lapland here in Rovaniemi is an outstanding example of pioneering in new territories of research and learning. There are also other signs that point in the same direction. In Akureyri, the centre of northern Iceland, the new university has during its first decade initiated programmes and forums inspired by these challenges. The decision to establish in Akureyri an institute dedicated to the memory the great Icelandic-Canadian explorer, Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, is yet another confirmation of our determination to advance in new directions and towards sustainable human-environmental relations.

But more is required. We need an inter-connected network of sustained co-operation and dialogue among the entire community of scholars from Northern Europe and those specialists from other parts of the world who are interested in sharing in our explorations.

In reflecting on how to create such an integrated community of Northern European scholars dealing with issues, projects and problems related to the future of our countries and regions, an academic network

which year by year would deepen and extend our understanding and provide Northern European institutions with sound substance for the democratic decision-making process, I visited again in my memory the pioneering role of the ECPR, the European Consortium of Political Research, which was established a quarter of a century ago by Jean Blondel, Stein Rokkan, Richard Rose, Hans Daalder and other farsighted and energetic professors and scholars in order to bring together the growing number of researchers interested in the social, political and economic problems associated with the emerging European integration and the changing political and social structures of our continent. The ECPR became not only an institution for pioneering research and studies, but it also brought into being a community of European scholars who otherwise would have been dispersed and even isolated.

The successful ECPR model might be applied to the challenging task now facing the universities and research institutions in Northern Europe. The creation of an annual or biennial forum which could be named the Northern Research Forum, NRF, would bring together in a systematic way the wealth of academic talent now existing in Northern Europe. The creation of the Northern Research Forum would provide regular opportunities for introducing research papers and holding workshops on the significant problems I have briefly outlined here today and others which will evolve in the future, enabling young researchers and scholars to present their findings to audiences of distinguished and learned experts. It would further co-operation between scholars from different parts of Northern Europe and integrate the new institutions of learning and research in Northern Europe into the more established world of traditional universities. The Northern Research Forum would bring scholars from the newly independent Baltic states into the established co-operation between Nordic scholars and thus contribute to the integration of academic research in the eight Nordic-Baltic states. The forum would facilitate participation by outstanding scholars from other parts of the world and allow American and Russian scholars in particular a convenient and regular entry into the academic world of the Northern European communities; thus furthering indirectly American-Russian academic co-operation and opening up avenues to American and European foundations which financially support research and academic co-operation.

I hope that the University of Lapland will in the light of your outstanding record and your pioneering initiatives in many fields take a lead in examining this proposal. I have discussed it briefly with the rectors of the University of Iceland in Reykjavík and the new Akureyri University in northern Iceland and they are indeed interested in exploring how such a sustained network of academic co-operation could be established.

I am looking forward to our discussions tomorrow in the seminar entitled: “New Perspectives for Global Northern Research and Education” and to reflecting on the views and conclusions presented by some of your distinguished scholars.

I am both deeply honoured and touched by the invitation to address you at the opening ceremony of the twentieth academic year of the University of Lapland.

It has given me the opportunity to share with you some thoughts and reflections on the future of research in Northern Europe and how this relates to some of the most urgent global issues of our times.

I thank you for the opportunity and the honour to participate in this distinguished ceremony.