



Address
by Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
President of Iceland
at the official dinner offered by the President of Poland
Aleksander Kwaśniewski
Warsaw
March 12 1999

Your Excellency President of Poland and Madam Kwaśniewski,
Distinguished Guests.

I would like to convey my heartfelt thanks for your warm words about us Icelanders and for the friendship and hospitality that you and the Polish Government have shown to me, my daughter and the Icelandic delegation.

Although both our nations have deep roots in European history and culture, my visit now is the first time that an Icelandic president visits Poland. It is both an honour and a pleasure for me to pay tribute in this way to the evolution of democracy and welfare in your country, and I convey to the people of Poland the sincere admiration which the Icelanders feel.

Poland's leadership in the creation of a new community of freedom, human rights and peaceful coexistence in Europe will long be remembered. Our small island nation in the far north, which itself campaigned for a whole century for independence and sovereignty, joined in your rejoicing at that milestone event.

Poland and Iceland share the fate that our roots as nations lie deep within the thousand-year history of Northern Europe. Both our nations have striven to honour and preserve our origins.

Our states were established and became Christianized around the same time, and in the year 2000 we will both commemorate the millennium of Christianity.

We have been deeply moved by the fate of Europe, but in your case misery and human sacrifice have cost your nation unparalleled tribulations. You preserve the memory of the harshest acts of brutality and of the greatest deeds of heroism that this century has witnessed. You present the whole of humankind with a warning about the terrible consequences of bitter war and merciless tyranny, with resolutions that never again will our continent or the world itself have to bear such times.

We Icelanders are delighted to be able to enter the new century and the new millennium in close cooperation with the people of Poland. Indeed, during my visit here, Poland will become a formal ally of Iceland in NATO. This act seals our relationship in a new way. It obliges us to consult closely about how, in league with other NATO members, we can ensure security and peace on the continent during the new century.

The history of NATO demonstrates that participation by the smaller democratic states – Iceland, Denmark, Norway and the Benelux countries – has given the Alliance moral strength and justification beyond the military might of its larger members.

We Icelanders have great expectations for Poland's contribution to the democratic dialogue within NATO. Together, we need to grant our friends in the north access to the permanent framework for security in Europe. In this respect, we in Iceland have firmly underlined the rights of the Baltic States.

This year Iceland will have the Presidency of the Council of Europe and our Nordic cousins in Finland will have the Presidency of the European Union. Thus this century will come to a close with Nordic leadership in these key European institutions which are dedicated to the principles of democracy and economic progress.

Iceland greatly appreciates its cooperation with Poland under the aegis of the Council of Europe and we hope that, in the near future, Polish membership of the European Union will boost our economic ties through the European Economic Area.

Our nations have long been joined by firm bonds of trade. We Icelanders, who largely depend for our livelihood on the resources of the

ocean, have entrusted Poland with the task of constructing and upgrading our trawlers and fishing vessels. There is hardly any greater show of trust that fishermen can make.

In return, we have sold you a wide range of marine products. During my visit now we will be introducing you to the wholesome properties of cod liver oil, which has for more than a thousand years helped to maintain our nation's health in the far north of the Atlantic, and which it is now planned to supply to pharmacies throughout Poland.

In recent years a gratifying new dimension has been added to our fisheries cooperation, with the large number of Poles who have moved to Iceland to join us in processing fish products. In many Icelandic fishing villages there are now sizeable Polish communities whose members are both respected and popular.

In the little village in Iceland's West Fjords where I was brought up by my grandparents, Poles have become such active members of the local community that festivities are held both in Icelandic and Polish. When my wife Guðrún Katrín and I made our first official visit in Iceland after the presidential election, Polish songs and music were on the local programme of celebrations. Thus, our nations' formal links within international alliances and organizations are now strengthened with firm bonds which are part of daily life in Iceland.

Iceland has also benefited from Poland's rich cultural heritage through the participation of Polish artists in the evolution of modern Icelandic music. In this way, you have brought enrichment and depth to the development of contemporary arts in Iceland.

It is a special pleasure for me during this visit to pay tribute to the contribution which the respected Polish conductor Bohdan Wodiczko made to the development of Icelandic music. For many years he served as conductor of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra during its formative period, and had a profound influence on young Icelandic composers who are now among the country's leading creative talents. Bohdan Wodiczko bestowed on Iceland lavish gifts from Poland's unique musical heritage, and I give my cordial thanks for this remarkable contribution.

Iceland's Nobel laureate Halldór Kiljan Laxness has enjoyed widespread popularity among Polish readers. At the moment, a special exhibition in his honour is being staged here in Warsaw, and we are determined to boost once again the publication of his work in Polish.

In the complex reality of modern life it is vital for us and other European nations to share with each other the rich fountains of language and literature, music and visual arts, which are in fact the basis of all our work towards the evolution of democracy and progress.

At the dawn of the new century, providence has granted us, Poland and Iceland and our allies, unique opportunities to ensure peace and freedom, democracy and human rights, security and economic advances in our continent and throughout the whole world. It is vital for us now not to fail in this historic duty.

I welcome the new bonds of alliance and friendship between our nations and ask all present to rise from their seats and honour the President of Poland, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, and the Polish nation.