



Address
by the President of Iceland
Olafur Ragnar Grimsson
at a gala dinner in honour of
the President of Latvia
His Excellency Guntis Ulmanis and Madame Aina Ulmane
at Bessastadir
April 19, 1999

Your Excellency the President of Latvia
Guntis Ulmanis and Madame Aina Ulmane
Honoured Guests

Tonight we celebrate together a unique event in the thousand-year history of Bessastadir. His Excellency Guntis Ulmanis, President of Latvia, is the first head of state from the newly independent Baltic countries to visit Iceland, sealing thereby the friendship and solidarity between our nations in a new way.

The Icelanders nurtured deep in their hearts warm wishes for the independence of Latvia and its neighbours, and at a propitious moment we tried to make our small contribution to your fight for national liberty and independence.

The signing of diplomatic relations in Hofdi House – the little white building overlooking the sea, which you visited today – was not only the opening note in the anthem of triumph which since then has made your nation an active participant in the creation of a new Europe. The ceremony in Hofdi on August 25, 1991 was also a confirmation that small nations can play a decisive role in the evolution of world history. Our nations demonstrated then in practice to the world that the Cold War was really over, that a new era of democracy, human rights and independence had dawned in Europe.

When my wife Gudrun Katrin and I visited Latvia just under a year ago we were profoundly moved to discover, wherever we went, how genuine a sense of gratitude the Latvians feel towards the Icelanders. The tears of joy, hugs and warm handshakes were acts of thanksgiving by the people we greeted in the cities and the countryside. Those moments were a truer testimony to sincere friendship than numerous speeches and formal treaties.

When we went to the Baltic States in June, it was the last state visit that Gudrun Katrin and I would make together. A few days after we returned here to Bessastaðir we were told that her illness had returned. During the difficult times that followed, the memories of our wonderful sunny days in your country helped to lighten our hearts and ease our burden.

Our visit to the Baltic States will therefore always shine in my soul with a special glow and I offer you and Madame Ulmane and all your nation my thanks, tinged with melancholy, for joyful days which have proved more precious to me than anyone then could have imagined.

On our visit to Latvia we witnessed everywhere the energy and determination that characterize the nation's movement towards progress and fully fledged participation in the organizations which are decisive for the course of events in the continent.

Ever since the dialogue on the enlargement of NATO began, Iceland has expressed its support for the Baltic States' requests for membership and will continue to do so at the Alliance's milestone summit which will be held in Washington later this week.

We consider it important that all the Baltic States should be admitted into the European Union so that our economic co-operation can be strengthened even further in the future within the framework of the European Economic Area.

In the next few months Iceland will assume the Presidency of the Council of Europe, an organization which was established in the wake of the tragedies of the world war and whose purpose is to strengthen and preserve democracy and human rights in Europe. We look forward to close co-operation with Latvia in the Council, because there is still a long way to go before satisfactory results are achieved.

In recent weeks we, and the whole global community, have woken up uncomfortably to the fact that the tragedy and terror which we thought

were only memories from times gone by have now become a deep wound in the very heart of Europe, that at the end of this century we are hearing once again the cries of pain and suffering which long ago resounded over much of the continent.

We must humbly face the bitter truth that despite all the progress and technological revolutions, new alliances and increased human rights, there is now a bleeding wound in the centre of Europe, and no one knows whether or how the necessary remedy can be secured.

The events of the past weeks demonstrate how urgent it is to establish solidarity about a new order which will genuinely ensure security and peace for all nations and communities in the continent.

In the huge task of reconstruction which is now being embarked upon, it is vital for the smaller nations of the continent to make their voices heard. The growing solidarity between the Nordic countries and Baltic States compels us to show special responsibility and initiative in this respect.

Together, our eight countries have shown through the evolution of new organizations and co-operation in Northern Europe how it is possible to respond to new times for the benefit of all nations.

Within the new Northern regional organizations we have brought Russia, the USA and the EU into new co-operation in the cause of peace, security and progress. This common experience of ours, young as it is, can offer guidance and encouragement for truly creating in the new century a Europe which lives up to our ideals of democracy, human rights and wellbeing.

I hope, Your Excellency and Madame Ulmane, that your visit to Iceland will show you how a poor nation of farmers and fishermen living on a harsh island in the midst of a rough ocean has managed, through solidarity and resolve, to become a technologically and culturally advanced society which grants all its citizens living standards that are among the highest found anywhere in the world. Witnessing this is hopefully an encouraging example of what can be achieved.

We Icelanders sincerely hope that in the new century our nations can celebrate new milestones of economic, cultural and political co-operation. We are convinced that the world needs a powerful precedent from the Nordic countries and Baltic States working in unison.

In the old Icelandic Sagas, which were written down around 700 years ago and describe events in the far north when humankind was entering the millennium which is now drawing to a close, we find many accounts of journeys by our forefathers to your part of the world. The masterpieces of this ancient literature, Egil's Saga, Njal's Saga and Heimskringla, contain thorough proof that we share a history whose roots lie deep in the memory of the centuries, centuries that will soon add up to a whole millennium.

That legacy is an encouragement to us to make the new century and the new millennium into a new era of flourishing co-operation and solidarity which could yield precious benefits for our nations and the whole continent.

I ask you all to rise from your seats and pay tribute to the President of Latvia, Guntis Ulmanis, and Madame Aina Ulmane, and to the solid friendship between the Latvians and the Icelanders.