

Ávarp við opnun Arctic Circle 13. október kl. 13:00

Chairman of Arctic Circle Assembly, Mr. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, former President of Iceland.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

Welcome to Iceland all of you – great to be back at the Arctic Circle and as usual our former president – Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, has organized a very impressive event.

Allow me also to acknowledge the presence of the Crown Prince of Norway, Canada's Governor General, President of Estonia, and the Prime Minister of Greenland. You are most welcome to Iceland, as are all of you, distinguished guests, travelling from near and far.

The Arctic continues to develop at a tremendous pace.

On the positive side, we see expanding scientific networks, greater knowledge with both the public and businesses and growing skills, there is more investment in green technology, and we are witnessing various green solutions emerging.

All of this is a testament to the broad political determination to both protect the Arctic and make use of the opportunities that lie ahead.

The challenges, however, are greater than ever.

The Arctic may become unrecognizable in a few decades if we do not act sufficiently today. Everything is changing - we see more extreme weathers around the globe - only in the last two weeks we saw hundreds of trees here in Iceland being ripped up by their roots because of extreme storms in the eastern part of the country. We see glaciers receding, permafrost is melting, heat records are beaten and forests are burning. And all this is happening much faster in the Arctic – where the ecosystem is sensitive and the resources are great.

And this combination is not easy to tackle. We see big business and big countries showing more and more interest in the Arctic – not least because of its rich resources which should not all be harnessed. I applaud the decision of the government of Greenland not to drill for oil – my government has also declared that we will not issue licenses for oil exploration in Iceland’s exclusive economic zone and this will be put into legislation.

Once again I want to underline that what happens in the arctic is a concern for all of us, not just those of us who live around the Arctic. Because the effects are global and will have consequences for all human beings. . But we also need to remember that there are people living here – around the Arctic. And their livelihood depends on this fragile ecosystem – and a sustainable economy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Just as the shadow of the Covid pandemic was lifting Russia invaded Ukraine.

This illegal and unprovoked war is the biggest threat to European security since the second World War. At stake is international law and the rules-based international order as we know it, and the fundamental principles upon which all states, in particular small states, base their very existence.

Our region is directly affected as the aggressor is an important player in the Arctic with legitimate interests. But Russia’s illegitimate actions made it impossible for us not to respond and they were rightly excluded from the Arctic Council.

From day one Iceland has condemned Russia’s aggression in the strongest possible way. Iceland has solidly supported Ukraine, and we will continue to do so, together with our Nordic, European, US and Canadian friends.

Next month, Iceland will be taking the chair of the Council of Europe. We assume chairmanship in testing times as the war in Ukraine is challenging the very foundations of the Council of Europe; the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. This adds to other

concerning trends such as democratic backsliding and the alarming backlash in the fight for gender equality. Ensuring accountability for the atrocities committed in Ukraine will also be a prominent part of the agenda during Iceland's chairmanship.

Next year is also Iceland's turn to chair the Nordic Council of Ministers. There, we intend to continue to further "Vision 2030" of the Nordic region as the most sustainable and integrated in the world, and emphasize the crucial importance of peace for all societal progress.

Under Iceland's chairmanship our focus will obviously move toward north-west, where cooperation with our neighbors and friends in the Faroe Islands and in Greenland remains key.

Cooperation in "VestNorden" is steadfastly growing. Earlier this year I went on a successful state visit to Greenland and I am happy to inform that today, I and Prime Minister Múte B. Egede, signed a declaration of cooperation between Greenland and Iceland, charting the way for even closer collaboration between our countries in many important fields.

Dear friends,

in all these turbulence, Iceland's Arctic policy remains clear. We advocate peaceful, sustainable development for the benefit of the people of the Arctic. We do not want a re-militarization of the Arctic or an Arctic arms race.

We are also fully aware of the need for robust situational awareness in our region, and the need to counter hybrid threats that can hit without notice.

The recent serious attacks on the NordStream pipelines in the Baltic Sea remind us that infrastructure, on the ground and in the sea, needs constant common safeguarding. Same is true for our cyber security, and democratic resilience.

Here, I would like to acknowledge the new US arctic strategy. I also appreciate the intention to appoint a US Arctic Ambassador and look forward to meeting and greeting them here in Iceland.

Clear and transparent policies, together with strong international structures, are central to well-functioning Arctic diplomacy.

Last year I announced the Icelandic government's plans to support the establishment of the private non-profit foundation – the Grimsson Centre, creating a permanent home for the Arctic Circle and cementing Iceland's commitment to offer leadership on Arctic issues, sustainability and climate change. There is no doubt that the Centre will prove to be of great value to international cooperation, innovation and research on the Arctic.

Dear friends,

allow me to conclude by saying how highly I appreciate your work, our wide-ranging cooperation, and the numerous ideas and initiatives that originate during Arctic Circle for the benefit of the Arctic Region.

We are going through a multi-crisis, triggered by the war in Ukraine, causing serious energy shortages, strong inflationary pressures, the risk of global economic slow-down, and an imminent food crisis affecting tens of millions around the world, mostly the poorest of the poor. Inequalities and uncertainties are causing political instability, sometimes strengthening autocratic tendencies.

All of this affects the Arctic region as well.

We have truly come a long way in the nine years, since the Arctic Circle first started (if I may use that as a reference point). We have shown, that we truly can monitor and mitigate climate change, and together we can find the right balance between the much-needed protection of fragile Arctic environment and the desirable sustainable development to the benefit of our people.

And finally, together we can maintain peace and stability in the Arctic which is the foundation to everything else.

This room is full of hope and concerns for the future of the Arctic. We represent different interests, different politics, different ideas. But we should all be united in the will to protect the Arctic and provide a sustainable future for the local populations in the area, as well as for our ecosystems. The task is massive, but the solutions exist, it is ours to get the job done.

I wish you productive days in Reykjavik and thank you for your attention.

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