

Nordic Interests and the Future of the North

Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, President of Iceland

A speech synopsis based on rapporteurs' notes

The President of Iceland, Dr. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, began his presentation by announcing his intention to address the subject of his presentation from a broad perspective.

The first issue which the President mentioned dealt with the context of the Oslo seminar, the Northern Research Forum (NRF), particularly its origin and main aim. Almost ten years ago, President Grímsson initiated the establishment of an international forum called the Northern Research Forum. His celebratory speech in September 1998 at the Opening Ceremony of the 20th Academic Year of the University of Lapland, Finland, sparked interest among people in both Iceland and Finland to take up these challenges which consequently became the core of the NRF. The aim was to generate more interest in international cooperation in the circumpolar North *per se* – a region which was rapidly increasing in importance – and, in particular, to place more emphasis on international scientific cooperation within the region. Since the time of the President's speech in Rovaniemi, the strategic importance of the North and the activities of the NRF have significantly increased.

President Grímsson identified five main reasons for why the Arctic and the Northern regions are important:

- 1) Energy is a fundamental issue of the 21st century and the Arctic is rich in unharnessed energy.
- 2) Northern Sea Routes, both existing ones and those that are either under planning or only a vision, might lead to a revolution in global transportation and trade. Iceland and Norway can play a large part in these matters.
- 3) The legacy of the Cold War concerning strategic issues.
- 4) Rights of Indigenous Peoples and their land claims. In modern democratic states, the interests of the Indigenous Peoples are important.

- 5) The Arctic as a Parameter of Climate Change. The ACIA report showed that the knowledge it produced is valuable, both internationally and inside the Arctic. But the report was not adequately noticed. Climate warming is three times faster in the North than was previously thought. A report like the ACIA can be beneficial for regions outside the Arctic, e.g. in the Himalayas. Glacier meltdown is also a problem there and thousands of glaciers might disappear over the next three or four decades.

According to President Grímsson there are important reasons why Iceland, Norway and other Nordic countries should be interested in the Arctic. They are located in the northernmost part of the globe and constructive and important role can be played in the international arena through the Arctic Council. The Northern Research Forum was established to deal with these matters.

The circumpolar North is our backyard, but also that of the USA and Russia. Consequently, the Arctic Council is an international organization of which Russia is a member together with the other major power of the Northern Hemisphere, the USA, and the Nordic countries and Canada. The critical actor here is Russia; the Nordic countries are better able to engage Russia in this cooperation than other actors. It is not possible to deal adequately with northern issues without the constructive engagement with Russia.

Moreover, President Grímsson said that he does not know any other region where Iceland and Norway can play as fundamental a role as in the North.

An interesting new situation has been created after the US troops left Keflavik in the autumn of 2006. Now Iceland has become a militarily-free country. Ten years ago nobody would have believed that this could happen.

The Northern Research Forum should be utilised to prepare for changes and for moving forward on Northern issues. There is a need for a platform where all interested actors, whether heads of states, other policy-makers, NGO personnel, business leaders and scholars, are able to come together for open discussion and dialogue on these relevant issues. The Northern Research Forum and its Open Assemblies offer a suitable platform for such issues.