

Arkhangelsk, 29 March 2017
The International Arctic Forum:
Arctic: Territory of Dialogue

Address

by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland,

H.E. Mr. Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson

Mr. Deputy Prime Minister, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to be here with you this morning to discuss the Arctic as a territory of dialogue, a highly appropriate description because it underlines the significance of cooperation and inclusiveness in our Arctic stewardship.

Arkhangelsk has, as it happens, not always been so peaceful. According to the Icelandic historian and poet Snorri Sturluson, more than thousand years ago, the Vikings raided this area, which then was called Bjarmaland or the Land of Glow. Later, Arkhangelsk played a crucial role as a destination of the Arctic Convoys, assisting the Russian people to survive two World Wars. So, this is truly a historic place.

In recent years, the Arctic has received ever-increasing attention in the international arena. More states, agencies and organisations have turned their attention to the North, adopting strategies or working on policy in the area from the point of view of their own interests. Most of the larger states in the northern hemisphere, in addition to the Arctic states themselves, have defined their interests and set out strategies on Arctic issues. In addition, the ever-growing number of observers in the Arctic Council, clearly demonstrates increased international interest in the region. The cold Arctic has become one of the hottest spots on earth!

As a result of global warming, we have witnessed considerable changes in the Arctic, and these changes have been much more rapid than anticipated. Moreover, they affect our societies in many different ways. All around the world we witness the consequences of climate change, but its impact is particularly revealing and drastic in the Arctic.

In Iceland, the Arctic has become a key foreign policy priority. Iceland's interests in the Arctic are manifold. They pertain to protection of the region's vulnerable environment, sustainable economic development and utilisation of the natural resources. Further, we place strong emphasis on security and safety, infrastructure and, of course, cooperation with all involved stakeholders, including the indigenous peoples of the Arctic.

For Iceland, ocean affairs are crucial and I am confident that they will be high on the Arctic agenda in coming years. For example, Russia and Iceland, along with our neighbouring countries, share valuable living marine resources in the Atlantic Ocean. We have therefore a common interest and responsibility in safeguarding the marine environment through cooperation.

The Arctic Council is the most significant forum for international cooperation on Arctic issues. Iceland takes over the chairmanship of the Council in 2019 and we will endeavour to lead this important forum in a cooperative and forward-looking fashion.

It is also encouraging to witness the vast number of Arctic-related conferences and meetings, which offer an excellent opportunity to network, exchange views, provide information, and in general to cooperate on an immensely important topic. The Arctic Circle Assembly, initiated by Iceland's former President and held annually in Reykjavik, and the current International Arctic Forum here in Russia, are cases in point.

It is often said that "what happens in the Arctic does not stay in the Arctic", and reversely we can also say that "what happens outside the Arctic will have an impact on the conditions of the Arctic". In other words, the Arctic is interlinked with other regions. We are immensely dependent on close collaboration across boundaries, because the Arctic has moved from being peripheral to becoming central to our future.

Ladies and gentlemen.

Unfortunately, we have in recent years seen unfavourable developments in many regions of the world. But in spite of tension and divergence in international politics, this high-level event clearly demonstrates that the Arctic actually offers an opportunity for the states concerned to cooperate actively in a constructive manner. The Arctic region can still be seen as a venue for the Arctic states to set an example how responsible actors on the international stage should interact.

That is our obligation towards generations to come and I am confident that we in the Arctic will rise to the occasion.

Many thanks to our Russian hosts for initiating this conference, and thank you for your attention.