

**Address by H.E. Mr. Össur Skarphéðinsson
Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland
at the Opening Ceremony of Iceland Square
Riga 22 August 2011**

Foreign Minister Kristovskis, dear friends,

I am deeply moved by your warm welcome. I am touched by your embrace of my country, so vividly shown by your graceful decision to commemorate the 20th anniversary of your regained independence by naming this place where we now stand – as *Iceland square*.

It is a gesture that Iceland receives with great humility. We feel very honoured by Latvia. Iceland is indeed very grateful for this extraordinary show of friendship by you to her people.

In Iceland we shall always be proud of having been able to lend you and our Baltic friends a hand in your hour of need. But when Iceland stood up to be counted on behalf of the Latvian people, we only did what every small nation should always be ready to for other small nations. But it was you, the Latvian people that rose to the occasion.

What we, Iceland, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania demonstrated together 20 years ago is the fact, that small nations can make a difference. When they stick together, they can make a big difference.

We, as small nations, must always be ready to stand on the principle of democracy.

That is one of the lessons to be learned from the events 20 years ago.

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Twenty years ago, we in Iceland watched our televisions as they showed images of brave Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians aspiring to achieve freedom from the unjust Soviet occupation.

We all admired your resilience.

The whole world was inspired by the Baltic peoples as they joined hands to form the *Baltic Chain of Freedom*, and when you took to the streets in Riga to form barricades to stop Soviet tanks. It is unforgettable.

And we all remember with sadness – but also with pride – the tragic deaths of non-violent protesters who gave their lives for Baltic independence during this long and difficult struggle. Their sacrifice will never be forgotten.

It was in late January 1991 that the Icelandic Government announced numerous political measures in support of the Baltic States. I was very proud of the leader of my party - my Foreign Minister and fellow social democrat Mr. Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson - who took the lead in consistently speaking out for the Baltics in the international fora. It was his greatest moment.

And for me, as a young politician and a newly elected leader of Hannibalsson's Parliamentary Group, the Socialdemocrats, it was a historic day 20 years ago when Iceland's declaration on the sovereignty of the Baltic States was signed in the presence of the leaders of all three states, and in the same house in Reykjavik where Reagan and Gorbachev had their historic meeting five years earlier, that indicated the first sign of an end to the Cold War.

The famous British statesman Lord Palmerston said in 1848 that nations do not have eternal friends or enemies, only eternal interests. In every bad school of

political science it has since been a mantra that only interests decide the attitude of nations to the rest of the world.

Well, not in case of Iceland and the Baltic states.

In 1991 Iceland was renegotiating with the Soviet Union an important trade agreement on oil and fish. We had nothing to gain, but a lot to lose by antagonizing your powerful neighbour.

But Mr. Hannibalsson and other Icelandic leaders didn't only talk the talk. Iceland walked the walk.

It was done out of compassion, out of respect for the principles that are vitally important for small nations, the unflappable right to choose your own destiny, to carve out your own future, the right of small nations to be independent.

That is a lesson we must not forget, but always respect and cherish.

I remember that as a young man, I looked with sadness on the plight of Latvia, and the other Baltic States, that had been so badly treated by history, and so badly treated by fate. But I was also full of admiration for the fact that you never lost your spirit for freedom, never lost your identity as a nation, never lost your language and culture, and - to your eternal credit - you never lost your guts.

For this you were rewarded. When history created an opening you rose to the occasion. Today, you perhaps don't realize how far you have gone, and how well you have done.

In Iceland we shall be forever grateful for being able to assist you, to break the ice for you, and be rewarded with your eternal friendship. We are proud to be your friends.

My dear Latvian friends, allow me – here in the new Iceland Square – to use this historic occasion to congratulate you from the bottom of an Icelandic heart on the 20th anniversary of regaining the independence of your country.

May you long prosper.