

Mr. Speaker, distinguished audience.

It is with great humility that I receive your warm words of welcome, and your sincere words of gratitude to my fellow compatriots.

In my heart, I really believe, as most Icelanders do, that the independence you achieved 20 years ago, was your own work, achieved by your own strong will, your courage and resilience in face of adversity, and your admirable determination to claim your natural right to be a free nation.

If Iceland played a part in your deliverance by lending a friendly hand and her voice in support to you at a time that was crucial in your history, it was only because as a small nation, having ourselves been under a foreign rule for seven century, we understood that the fundamental right of every nation is the right to determine her own fate, and future.

1991 was the year I entered Althingi, the Parliament of Iceland. I feel very humble to stand here in the Seimas today, 20 years later, as the Foreign Minister of my nation, and be able to congratulate you on all that you have achieved since your renewed independence.

Your achievement in these 20 years has been tremendous.

When I look at your position - as an outsider with a dash of inside knowledge - I am full of admiration of how Lithuania has negotiated a complex geopolitical situation, and ensured the future security and stability of her people with the best protection possible.

In only 20 years you not only achieved your freedom and independence, but you also successfully used a very special window of opportunity to embed your renewed independence by entering two of the strongest alliances of the world, the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union.

From my point of view, as an Icelandic politician, the Lithuanian example is the story of how a small, but a united nation with a strong sense of her own capabilities, with a leadership that rose to the occasion, could right the wrongs of the past and construct a safe harbour in treacherous waters of realpolitik.

Today, you may be worried about the present economic crisis, but as we know in Iceland, a tough and determined nation can negotiate a financial crisis. Despite present difficulties your story is a story of success, a great success indeed.

I have come to tell you – from five degrees below zero in Reykjavik to fifteen degrees below in Vilnius last night– that Lithuania has a very special place in the hearts of the Icelandic people. We are very proud of having played a small part in your courageous struggle for freedom and independence.

We are proud of how well you have played your cards in the world, and we are proud of being counted among your best friends. It is a friendship we value deeply, and will never forget.

* * *

My short visit today is a celebration of the fact, that precisely today, 20 years ago, Althingi unanimously adopted the resolution supporting Lithuania's independence and stated Iceland's intention to open up diplomatic relations with Lithuania.

I remember vividly the consensus inside and outside Parliament in 1990 and 91 on providing political support to the democratic struggle of the Lithuanian people. The whole nation quickly grasped the intensity and enormity of the events taking place in the Baltic states, not least the sheer determination of the people of Lithuania. Your struggle was a part of our everyday news, of our own political debate and even the kids recognized the face of Vytautas Landsbergis on our TV-screens.

It is with pride that I recall the strong effort the Icelandic leaders put into furthering your cause. I was very proud of the leader of my party, Foreign Minister, Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, who was a courageous and charismatic leader who spoke out consistently and strongly for the Baltic cause.

He, as well as other Icelandic parliamentarians, used every opportunity and every platform, be it the UN, Nato, or the Council for Europe, to relentlessly rally friends and neighbours for the support of the Baltic states.

It was said at the time that that it would be a folly for a small country like Iceland to recognize the independence of Lithuania, which you already had declared in March the year before. Experienced politicians in some of the bigger countries maintained, at least privately, that nobody would follow the example of Iceland. Some offered nice words, others showed understanding, but the great majority of the international community was hesitant.

Some countries voiced their fear that support for the Lithuanian cause risked undermining President Gorbachev and bringing hardliners back to power in Moscow. These voices were also heard in Iceland.

The Soviets were not happy and protested strongly at the declared intentions of Iceland. They maintained our policy was incompatible with the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act. At precisely the same time we were as well engaged in re-negotiations on trade-agreements with the Soviet Union, that were important for a small nation. We faced a difficult choice.

At the same time as the Soviets strengthened their grip on Lithuania and the other Baltic states, most of your neighbours in Central and Eastern European States had firmly embarked on the road to independence, democracy and freedom. It seemed almost as if the Baltic states were to

be sacrificed in the great game of real-politics for the second time in less than a century.

President Landsbergis had been in close contact with Icelandic politicians and since his younger days had personal contacts into the circle of Foreign Minister Hannibalsson. In October 1990 he came on an official visit to Iceland. He used all his considerable powers of persuasion to encourage Iceland to act - and even played the piano to key ministers.

We were fortunate that at the time we had a Government and a Foreign Minister that lived up to the maxim that “Difficulty is the excuse history never accepts.”

A few months later, in the middle of the night during the darkest days of January, President Landsbergis called Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson and said: “If you mean anything of what you have said, you have to come to Vilnius and see for yourself what is going on.”

Two days later the Soviets attacked the TV tower and 14 innocent people lost their lives. Their tragic deaths caused deep grief and great anger but their blood wasn't shed in vain. The tragedy became an inspiration for many and it became clear that the Lithuanians would not give up.

Foreign Minister Hannibalsson stepped up his efforts. As a Foreign Minister from a NATO member country, he – as you all know - symbolically travelled to the Baltic states, walked among the protesters, and declared the unwavering support of the Icelandic people.

Upon his return to Iceland the Government issued a statement of support and on this day in 1991 Althingi passed the resolution where Iceland's recognition of Lithuania's independence from 1922 was re-affirmed and stated loud and clear that Iceland intended to open up diplomatic relations with Lithuania as soon as possible.

I was, as a young politician, the leader of the parliamentary group of one of the two coalition partners of the Government at the time, to whom it befell to fulfil that promise. The rest we all know. Your liberation is now a part of our common history, of Europe's history, and stands as a testament to what courage, solidarity and determination can achieve in testing times.

* * *

Today, our countries are allies in NATO and Iceland aspires to join you within the European Union. You haven't forgotten your friend. When the Icelandic parliament voted in favor of applying for EU membership, the Seimas strongly resolved in our support. Your Foreign Minister, at the time, visited Iceland to formally declare your support for our application. You also gave us your moral support within the EU and the IMF when Iceland was in dire straits in the aftermath of the financial crisis, and friends were few. That was an important gesture.

For this I want to thank you on behalf of Iceland.

You have repaid with your support and deep and sincere friendship.

I wish Lithuania all the best in the future, and may the friendship of our two nations prosper in times forever.