



Address
by President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the
Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
Strasbourg
27 April 2023

Mr. President,
Madam Secretary General,
Madam Secretary General of the Assembly,
Distinguished Parliamentarians,
Distinguished Ambassadors.

I am honoured to address you all. I am honoured to represent my country, with representatives from other countries. I wish you all the best in your valuable work. I wish those of you who will travel to Iceland next month a safe journey and a pleasant stay. I don't know how good the weather will be but I know that you will be most welcome.

And, yes, I am here to represent my country. What does that mean? "My country, right or wrong." This old phrase can still be heard, or at least the sentiment that your country's interests always come first, no matter what. If not your own country's interest, whose interest, then?

But this can not be the only correct approach. We need to talk about independence and interdependence. We need to talk about nationalism, the need for nationalism and the dangers of nationalism. I believe that the Council of Europe is a perfect venue for such considerations. After all, it was founded by independent states in the wake of the Second World War, in order to safeguard and promote fundamental values and principles – the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law – principles of interdependence.

In this regard, I commend the Assembly for its swift response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We must continue to condemn this violation of

international law and norms. Therefore, let us all hope that the Reykjavík summit next month will deliver clear results: a renewed commitment to our common democratic values, strong support for Ukraine and solid means to ensure accountability for crimes committed in this horrendous war.

I refer here to remarks made by the Foreign Minister of Iceland in this hall two days ago, about a register of damages under the auspices of the Council of Europe, but with broad support of leading world nations. Iceland counts on your continued support for the Enlarged Partial Agreement.

Dear parliamentarians: Russian aggression in Ukraine highlights the evils of extreme nationalism and the abuse of the past for political purposes in the present. There was a time in recent years when influential policymakers and scholars suggested that we were entering what was called a post-nationalist world. The Soviet Union had collapsed, the map of Europe had changed, the process of European integration was deepening. As it happened, this thinking was fairly Euro- or West-centred and it was also short-sighted and misguided. Today, you will instead hear statespersons, politicians and others talk about the rise of nationalism, for better or worse.

Allow me to recount a personal and positive anecdote about its recurring strength. I am a historian by profession and a number of years ago, before I became president, the Association of Icelandic Historians – of which I was and remain a proud member – announced an evening symposium on the “end of nationalism?”, admittedly with a question mark. This promised to be an interesting event but when the scheduled day arrived, we all received an email saying that, unfortunately, the planned meeting on the end of nationalism had to be postponed until a later date. Why? Well, the thing was that Iceland’s national team had an important game that very evening and nobody wanted to miss that – not even to discuss the end of nationalism.

Nationalism is not nearing its end. But it must be a positive force. Positive patriotism can and should foster solidarity and support for each other in our societies. It should enhance our love and care for our nature and environment. It should connect our past, present and future. It should maintain and strengthen our diverse languages, cultures and customs.

At the same time, independence and interdependence must go hand in hand. We Icelanders, for instance, could never survive on our own on an island in the middle of the Atlantic. Independence is not about isolation. And together we must never forget the dark tales of extreme nationalism, the disaster that befalls on people when positive patriotism is replaced with distrust, racism and xenophobia, with fear and hatred towards others. This we have seen in the past, this we can see today.

Therefore, our patriotism must be tolerant and inclusive. In my country, for instance, all citizens who want to live in peace with others should be able to call themselves proud Icelanders, regardless of their skin colour or faith, regardless of other beliefs or whom they want to love, regardless of how well they speak the Icelandic language, regardless of all other factors and labels that can be used to divide people into “us” and “them”.

Esteemed parliamentarians: As I mentioned I am a historian by profession, and by passion, but I am also head of state. This combination can be problematic. It could be argued that as representatives of our respective countries, it is almost written in our job description to be positive and optimistic, to advance the interests of our own country.

I’m fine with that – but with a caveat. We should combine our positive and optimistic patriotism with constructive criticism, an honest look at ourselves. People with a healthy self-confidence do not brag, they do not belittle others in a mistaken effort to make themselves more grand. They do not shy away from admitting their own weaknesses and failings.

At the same time, people with a healthy self-confidence can talk about their achievements and aspirations, if only to spur others on. During this visit to Strasbourg, gender equality will be high on my agenda. Gender equality and the fight against gender based violence is one of the areas where CoE excels and will continue to do so in years to come. It is also at the heart of Iceland’s foreign policy.

Iceland and gender equality: This connection does not come out of the blue. We are a small island nation, a sovereign state of fewer than 400,000 people. Some things we do very well, others not so well. When it comes to increased gender equality, we Icelanders are doing fine, actually better than most other nations – or even, perhaps, better than all the others, to judge from studies and assessments in recent years. In this field, we are leaders.

It’s not because we’re inherently better than others. It’s more a case of proven results. The truth is, ladies and gentlemen, that gender equality is not only a matter of fairness. It is not only about human rights. Those are not the only reasons why gender equality is among the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, goal number five on that noble list. No, gender equality is also a matter of objective interests. Increased gender equality benefits everyone. When we all have the same opportunities and rights to show what we are capable of, society as a whole benefits.

So, if justice is not considered a good enough reason, then surely money is. People prosper better in their working lives when domestic responsibilities are shared. If one half of a population is undervalued and not given the opportunity to show their full potential, the whole community suffers. The more

gender equal a society is, the more happy and healthy its people are, and prosperous as well.

To be sure, there is still work to be done back home. There will always be work to be done. We still have to deal with domestic and sexual violence where the victims are predominantly women. Fortunately, we do have the Istanbul Convention and I am pleased to mention it here, among members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. It is now more than a decade since the Committee of Ministers adopted this landmark treaty to end violence against women. It is sad, however, to note a rise in mistaken objections to a convention about an end to violence. So I encourage all member states, and non-members, to sign and ratify the Convention, and I repeat what I just said, that there will always be work to be done.

With that in mind, the Icelandic Presidency of the Council of Europe has organised a conference later today on the role of men and boys in combating gender-based violence, and working in general for gender equality and human rights. I would like to invite you all to join us for this event.

Again, I am grateful for this opportunity to address you, distinguished parliamentarians. I take the opportunity also to thank the distinguished ambassadors present here, for your help in gathering support from your governments for the Reykjavik summit. Finally, I express my thanks to you, Madam Secretary General, to the secretariat of the Committee of Ministers, to the Assembly, and to you, Mr. Kox, and your secretariat for the excellent co-operation that we have enjoyed during our presidential term. I also use this opportunity to thank our own small but efficient team here in Strasbourg, and the whole team of officials and others who are working so hard ahead of the big summit in Reykjavík.

Yes, in only three weeks, European heads of state and government will gather in Iceland at the Council's fourth summit since its establishment. Let us hope that it will be a fruitful gathering, to the benefit of the peoples of Europe. What I know for certain is the established truth that while the Council of Europe may not be the centre of power on this continent, it can and should remain its conscience.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions. Kærar þakkir.