



Sagas contain tales of Viking travels to eastern lands, to Novgorod and Kiev and other sites. In a more recent past, developments in this part of the world have of course influenced our society. In Iceland, people fondly remember how the rulers in Moscow sided with us in disputes about fishing limits in the mid-twentieth century. Later, when we extended the line even further, there were objections from the Soviet side, it is true. But the general history of fishing disputes and the development of the law of the sea demonstrates how international disagreements and conflicts can and should be solved through dialogue and negotiations.

Thus, the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention has already proven its worth. Yet, there is still work to be done. Throughout the 20th century fisheries were the backbone of Iceland's economy. Although we have diversified our economy and enjoy a boom in the tourist industry, we still depend on marine resources. The ocean is vitally important to us. In fact, it is vitally important to all humankind.

Therefore, I want to draw your attention to some risks and opportunities in this field. For centuries, humans have used the ocean as a rubbish dump. A few weeks ago, a man who used to work at the president's residence in Iceland told me how they used to clean the garbage there in the old days: "We would put it all in a container which we then took to the shore and emptied into the sea. Problem solved!"

Fortunately, such methods are no longer used in Iceland – but bigger issues confront us. Today, more than 8 million tons of plastics are dumped into the ocean each year, and the volume is fast increasing. Unless we act, by 2050 there might be more plastic waste than fish in the sea. And, dear friends, we will not survive on plastic fish, no matter how we will advance and progress in the future.

The plastic threat is clear and present. Ocean acidification is another problem facing us. It is invisible but equally worrying. The most immediate harm is done to animals such as snails and crabs. Other animals, including marine mammals, will also be hard hit. In the Kiruna Declaration of 2013, the eighth Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council highlighted this concern. Since then, the situation has only deteriorated.

The third issue we need to address concerns increased sea traffic in the Arctic Ocean. Oil and nuclear energy driven vessels always carry with them the risk of serious pollution. Cruisers carry tourists who will need search and rescue facilities if danger strikes. Yes, we do have the 2013 agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response. But we must continue to be on our guard, be prepared for all eventualities.

Finally, let me mention the changing behaviour of pelagic fish stocks such as mackerel and herring. They swim where they want to, they do not respect borders. Therefore, we believe that it is of fundamental importance for the Arctic nations to reach agreements on how to share these migratory fish stocks. And such agreements need to be based on scientific foundations regarding the stock sizes and yield of each species.

In this regard, we welcome the ongoing discussions on how to manage future fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean. Never before have international negotiations on fisheries taken place before the fish were actually there. We are proud to participate in this undertaking, a good example of how to conduct business in the Arctic.

Dear friends, I now move from the ocean to dry land. This conference will highlight the many opportunities and challenges that confront people in the Arctic region. It is easy to be spellbound by the stunning beauty in the north, and the ways of life that have changed relatively little throughout the centuries. Still, nature is not only beautiful here; it is also harsh. We need to work together to improve the living conditions of people in the countries of the high north. Last week, President Putin addressed the International Forum and 8th Congress of Small Indigenous Peoples of Siberia and the Russian Far East, making the following observation: “It is essential to develop a constructive and mutually beneficial dialogue with the local authorities and influential public organisations, take into account people’s opinions and act in their interests.”

Let this be the guiding light in our mutual efforts. Economic activities must not only be sustainable and harmless to the ecosystem, they should also benefit the local populations, with improved infrastructure, health care, school system, communications and other aspects of modern society. And here in the north, as elsewhere, social problems should be faced, not ignored. We need to combat such ills as substance misuse. Here, as elsewhere, young and old, male and female, should have the right to security in their homes and to be protected from all kinds of violence.

Dear conference guests: Iceland’s Arctic policy is based on a Parliamentary Resolution, approved unanimously in March 2011, six years ago. Its aim is to secure Icelandic interests with regard to the effects of climate change, environmental issues, natural resources, navigation and social development as well as strengthening relations and cooperation with other states and stakeholders on the issues facing the region. The Resolution refers to the importance of international law, especially the

need to resolve any differences on Arctic issues on the basis of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Dear listeners, President Putin and President Niinistö. In a few weeks, Finland will take over the chairmanship of the Arctic Council. In two years' time, Iceland assumes that role and then Russia will follow from 2021 to 2023. We should work closely together, ensure good continuity and common long term objectives in the Council's work. The Arctic region is changing fast. We face environmental changes and changes in people's living conditions. Let our impact be positive. Let our Arctic dialogue deliver results.