



## **ICELAND AND LATVIA: 30 YEARS OF FRIENDLY RELATIONS**

**Article by  
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In the mid-1990s, I met a number of young Latvians in Iceland. I was a history student, working on my master's thesis on Iceland's support for Baltic independence a few years before. I admired my friends' determination to take part in the revitalization of their newly independent country.

In 2018, I had the honour of visiting Latvia as president of my country and its representative when Latvians celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of the declaration of independence in 1918. In Riga, I took in the richness of Latvia's varied past, its rich Nordic connections, and I enjoyed displays of the country's culture and heritage.

For the larger part of the twentieth century, the people of Latvia suffered great trials and tribulations. Your fate was far worse than ours. In 1991, independence was finally reclaimed. Today, on the thirtieth anniversary of resumed diplomatic relations between our two countries, I extend my heartfelt congratulations to the people of Latvia. It was your victory but we Icelanders are pleased and proud that in your time of need, we were able to offer some help. Our government showed real and symbolic support, and our representatives put pressure on statespersons in the international arena. This action was initiated and led by then Foreign Minister Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson who visited Riga during the fateful days of January 1991 when Soviet units attacked and killed five civilians. And on 26 August that year, the foreign minister, along with prime minister Davíð Oddsson and others, received the foreign ministers of the three Baltic countries in Reykjavík where declarations on diplomatic relations were signed.

History and memory are complex features of human societies. Nations should not be ashamed to celebrate and strengthen ties that bind them together. Nations

should remember achievements and milestones in their history. In this sense, nationalism can be a positive factor in today's world, an impetus for progress and prosperity.

At the same time, we must defend history from those who aim to use it to promote hatred, bigotry and intolerance. History is multifaceted and open to various interpretations, depending on experiences and viewpoints. And we must be honest about mistakes and misdemeanours. We should not only recount that which puts us in a positive light in the contemporary world. The international arena is not a perfect place. Idealism alone cannot guide all actions of small countries. Conversely, neither must Realpolitik alone rule the world. That must be one of the lessons of history and of the momentous year of 1991 when the people of Latvia finally regained their freedom and independence.

Now three decades have passed. Lessons have been learned, experience gathered. A state is not free if people cannot express themselves freely, if people do not enjoy the freedom of religion, the freedom of love, the freedom from bigotry and racism, from sexual harassment and other violent conduct. A nation is not healthy if many citizens suffer from poor mental or physical health, lacking access to professional care. A country will not fare well if its nature is polluted and overexploited.

Together we must therefore advance universal human rights. Together, we must also defeat Covid-19 and other global pandemics. And together we must combat the serious effects of human-influenced climate change.

As always, the future awaits, with all its challenges and opportunities. In Iceland, the affection for Latvia will remain strong. Since the reclamation of independence, we have enjoyed strengthened ties between our two countries in the fields of trade and tourism, culture and education. Many Latvians have moved to Iceland to work, some of them settling permanently and enriching our society.

I wish all citizens of Latvia prosperity and happiness.

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