



**Address**  
**by the President of Iceland**  
**Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson**  
**at a banquet given by the President of Greece**  
**September 18, 2001**

Your Excellency the President of Greece, Constantinos Stephanopoulos.  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Greece and Iceland are not only two outposts of Europe to the south and the north. Our countries also preserve relics of ancient cultures, cornerstones of Western democratic tradition.

It was in the city state of Athens more than two thousand years ago that philosophers and intellectuals, political thinkers and visionary citizens shaped the ideal of a free society based on the right of individuals to govern themselves. For centuries, Greek culture and history guided Europe in the continent's quest for a system of government that embodied genuine democracy, active public participation in policy-making and political practice.

In this quest, many people have also looked towards the Althing, Iceland's ancient parliament which was founded at an outdoor site more than a thousand years ago and was the essence of democratic government in Iceland, based on the rule of law when the majority of Europe lived under the autocracy and violence of the Dark Ages.

Both our nations, in ancient times, have given the world insights into man's capacity for creating ennobling cultures and democratic societies which are still cited as models in looking to the roots of the system of government that most nations of the world now seek to consolidate.

It is important for Europe, precisely now that the continent is advancing under the banners of closer cooperation and comprehensive institutionalisation, to bear in mind the democratic traditions that the histories of Greece and Iceland entail. In fact it is a remarkable point which deserves to be carefully pondered, just how small the populations of these ancient Greek and Icelandic states were; their lack of size was no obstacle to them. On the contrary, within their smallness, ideas and

experience evolved which are among the most precious treasures of the European democratic heritage. This lesson merits close scrutiny, now that such intense efforts are being devoted to enlargement and the far-reaching organizational mechanisms for the future European order.

I am honoured to be the first President of Iceland to make a state visit to Greece and I thank you, Your Excellency the President, for your generous invitation and your words of praise about my country and people.

Certainly Greece and Iceland share many tasks in the new century. We Icelanders are eager to show in practice how much we appreciate cooperation with the southern European countries and we consider it vital for mutual understanding to prevail about the interests of the northern and southern nations. Only in this way can the continent enjoy credibility as a single entity.

Conditions are now favourable for strengthening our trade and business cooperation, with the development of the European Economic Area which the European Union and EFTA countries established almost a decade ago. Iceland has also become a signatory to the EU's Schengen Treaty which guarantees people complete freedom of movement between member countries.

Our nations have also participated actively in the work of the Council of Europe, cooperation which is dedicated to the strengthening of democracy and human rights and where I originally witnessed how powerfully the Greek representatives advocated their causes at its meetings.

All too much emphasis is sometimes given to interpreting European cooperation primarily in terms of economic and financial issues, thereby forgetting that the Council of Europe is in fact the oldest forum for European cooperation, and without the ideals on which it is founded the continent's evolution would be greatly impoverished. It is a worthy task for both Iceland and Greece to champion the democratic notions that the countries of this continent enshrined in the Council of Europe's founding charter after the tragedy of the Second World War, ideals which are deeply rooted in our countries' ancient cultures.

We have also enjoyed productive cooperation within NATO and taken part in consolidating an order that grants each nation within the Alliance the right to make decisions and proposals. We Icelanders firmly emphasize that NATO should preserve this fundamental structure. Even though the EU countries want to step up their cooperation on security issues, such a structural reform must not weaken the Alliance's cardinal

benefits as a forum for cooperation among independent states. We consider that the enlargement of NATO could prove a major contribution to enhanced peace and security in the continent and we have consistently underlined the need for the Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – all to be admitted to the Alliance.

We value highly Greece's contribution to peace and reconciliation in the Balkans and in our own way have sought to contribute to peacekeeping work and reinforce the pillars of democracy and self-determination in this region. We know that your close presence and initiative have provided you with invaluable experience in this field and we are grateful for having the opportunity here on this visit to discuss in depth the evolution of peace and security in Europe and how the enlargement of both NATO and the EU can benefit its nations.

I found out more than fifteen years how bold the Greeks are in taking the leadership on difficult issues, becoming spokesmen for new ideas, showing resolution and courage when new approaches need to be found.

Along with other young parliamentarians from several countries in the Parliamentarians for Global Action, I was involved in the process which saw the Prime Minister of Greece at that time, together with five other prime ministers and presidents from different continents, become pioneers in the forging of a new world order. The peace initiative created by these six countries in many ways prefigured the warmer relations that the historic summit between Reagan and Gorbachov in Reykjavik subsequently spawned. The proposals that were put forward by Andreas Papandreou, Rajiv Gandhi, Olav Palme, Julius Nyerere, Miguel de la Madrid and Raul Alfonsin, and then discussed at a consultative meeting of prominent personalities from many parts of the world here in Athens in January 1985, constituted an appeal for new attitudes and reforms which the end of the Cold War would later bring true.

It is with respect and gratitude that I recall here Greece's contribution to this remarkable initiative for reform at a time when the world was still in the deadly grasp of a world view built upon hatred and fear. It was invaluable for me to have the chance earlier today to reflect upon my visits to Athens during those years for consultations with representatives of the Greek nation.

Thus it is a special pleasure for me to be able, by this visit, to help to put relations between our nations on an even firmer footing in the new century and lay the foundation for a deeper understanding of each other's circumstances and interests.

Iceland desires closer cooperation with you in the fields of art and culture and to this end have brought an exhibition here dedicated to our Nobel laureate, the writer Halldór Kiljan Laxness.

We want to strengthen trade and business between our countries even further and now have a welcome opportunity to underline the quality of seafood from Iceland and promote greater consumption of fish here in Greece, by introducing you to delicious fish from the northernmost reaches of the Atlantic which is brought perfection by Mediterranean culinary skills.

We would like to see Greek artists take part in our festivals in Iceland and want to acquaint ourselves more closely with the literature, music and culture that nourish the Greek spirit.

It is with such desires in mind that we have come here, and I thank you, Your Excellency the President, for the sincere gestures of friendship you have shown towards us.

Hopefully I shall soon have the opportunity to repay your hospitality by welcoming you on a state visit to Iceland, a visit that will confirm once again the willingness of Greece and Iceland to strengthen European cooperation from north to south and south to north – and at the same time show that we are determined, in the new century, to champion the ideals of democracy and human rights which are rooted in the ancient histories of our nations, in their remarkable contributions to European culture.

With these words I repeat my thanks and ask the distinguished guests to stand and raise your glasses in honour of the President of Greece, Constantinos Stephanopoulos, and the Greek nation.