



**Speech by
the President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at a Gala Dinner hosted by
H.E. Kersti Kaljulaid
President of Estonia
and Mr. Georgi-Rene Maksimovski**

**Tallinn
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President of Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid,
Georgi-Rene Maksimovski,
Excellencies,
Dear guests:

On behalf of the people of Iceland, I send you, the people of Estonia, greetings as you celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of your declaration of independence. Waters may separate us, the Baltic, the North Sea and the North Atlantic, but we share the same ideals, the desire for freedom, peace and prosperity. And despite the distances between us, the paths of our peoples have crossed throughout the centuries.

The Icelandic sagas are our contribution to world literature, a true treasure, with tales of kings and queens and their fortunes, individual courage and conflict, family feuds, discoveries of new lands in the west and adventures in the east. I would like to share with you one story that connects Iceland and

Estonia. The Saga of the Norseman Ólafur Tryggvason recounts how Estonian villains kidnapped our hero Ólafur himself in the year 963, when he was but three years old and his father had already been slain. For six years, Ólafur was held captive here in Estonia, separated from his mother. Later in life, however, he became king of Norway, adopted the emerging Christian faith and was brutal in his mission to baptize the people of the north, including the inhabitants of Iceland, killing or maiming those who did not desire to adopt the new faith.

In the Saga of Ólafur Tryggvason, as in so many of the Icelandic sagas and tales, fate and free will interact. “Destiny cannot be evaded”; this is a constant theme throughout these stories of human happiness and sorrow, victories and defeats. At the same time, however, the story-writers valued honour and courage, decisions and choice.

If the history of the past hundred years can tell us anything, it is that the actions of others and our own free will are indeed the essence of our existence as individuals and nations. We are not always masters of our own destiny. But neither do we want to succumb passively to whatever may await us. Therefore, these past hundred years also tell us that we must oppose tyranny and despotism, and call out all hypocrisy and falsehood. Yes, there was a so-called people’s republic here in Estonia, but it was anything but that. One thousand years ago, it was not just to separate a child from its mother; nor is it just today. And Ólafur Tryggvason’s interpretation of Christianity certainly lacked the essential elements of compassion, empathy and kindness.

But dear friends, despite everything that went wrong in the past and still needs to be improved, we have every reason to be optimistic as we face our open future. For if we look back once more, we can see that when individuals are given equal opportunities to enrich and shape their lives – and when international law reigns and rights of independent nations are respected, in a spirit of cooperation and interdependence, then we enjoy peace and prosperity.

For just look at Estonia today! One hundred years after the declaration of independence, after freedom gained, freedom lost, and regained again, Estonia is a free state in the family of independent states, a member of international organizations, our partner and friend in the Nordic region. By law, Estonian citizens are secured fundamental human rights and in this globalized world of ours, the people of Estonia are admired for their forward thinking and innovative

skills, not to mention your cultural heritage, the tradition of folk songs and love for literature.

Of course, there is always room for more advances, always the need to continue to fight injustice and violence. Neither of our societies is perfect. As we come together to underline the strong bonds of friendship between Iceland and Estonia, and to mark the one hundredth anniversary of the Estonian Declaration of Independence, let us keep in mind the constant need to guard freedom – freedom of nations and peoples, individual and personal freedom. “Declare Independence”, our beloved Björk sings:

With a flag and a trumpet,
go to the top of your highest mountain.
And raise your flag (higher, higher)

...

Declare independence,
don't let them do that to you.
Declare independence,
don't let them do that to you.

Dear friends, ladies and gentlemen: On behalf of my wife Eliza and myself, I would like to thank you for the goodwill and hospitality we have enjoyed here in Estonia. In this country, we Icelanders are among friends. I ask you all to stand, and lift your glasses in honour of the people of Estonia and its President, Kersti Kaljulaid.