



**The 25th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference,
Riga, 28-30 August 2016**

Statement by

H.E. Mr. Gudmundur Arni Stefansson, Ambassador of Iceland,
Chairman, Committee of Senior Officials, Council of Baltic Sea States

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends,

The challenges that we face in the Baltic Sea region, and in Europe as whole, are serious, and need to be dealt with head on. These include security issues and terrorist threats, the stream of refugees, and the extremism gaining power in the continent. We need to act quickly but practice patience, be open-minded but firm and decisive at the same time.

Security in the region is severely affected by the developments in Ukraine. Underlying instability and persistent disagreements is reflected in the political discourse and mutually imposed sanctions.

Europe is also confronted with a huge influx of refugees who have no choice but to flee their home due to war and insecurity. The number of displaced people in the world hasn't been greater since WWII. We were not prepared for this. Our infrastructure and our governments were not prepared.

We need to take the risk of terrorism on our soil seriously, but we cannot let fear undermine our freedom and fuel our hatred. History shows that in challenging times extremists tend to gain power, feeding on fear and spreading hatred. That is happening in our continent.

The current situation calls for upholding our core values of free and democratic Europe; namely equality, freedom and democracy. An open dialogue is required for progress to be made.

The Baltic Sea cooperation rose from an atmosphere of freedom and optimism 25 years ago. It has since proven its worth, and will continue to hold an important place for our regional bond and our common vision.

This year, we also celebrate that 25 years have passed from the restoration of independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Iceland is proud to have a place in their history as the first country to recognize their restored independence. The wave of freedom that swept the entire continent was based on the democratic ideal. It did not only reach the Baltics but all of Europe, including Russia.

The Iceland took over the CBSS Presidency from Poland last July and will preside over the Council for one year. During Iceland's Presidency, the CBSS will reach the milestone of 25 years of cooperation. We hope to celebrate this milestone with a ministerial meeting or a summit, possibly during the actual anniversary of the Council in March 2017.

The CBSS and the BSPC have proven their worth. They provide a platform for democratic dialogue, while at the same time fostering mutual trust based on practical cooperation at the expert level. Successful regional cooperation has, time and again, proven its worth.

Iceland has a strong political and historical connection to the Baltic and despite the geographical distance, continued cooperation with the region is high on the foreign affairs agenda. We seek to strengthen the cooperation between the 11 member states and the EU, as well as the 10 observer states.

In our Presidency, Iceland will focus on **children, equality and democracy**, which will underpin the three CBSS long-term strategies for a stronger regional identity, a prosperous and sustainable region and a safe and secure region.

Democracy is a founding ideal of the Council which was established as a platform for the cooperation of old and newly established democracies in the region. A dialogue on the democratic ideal will highlight how democracy reshaped and made the Baltic Sea area stronger and more peaceful. We will also explore new ways of including people in the decision-making process, including youth participation.

Equality and respect for human rights remains a cornerstone of Icelandic foreign policy and is a shared vision of the CBSS Member States. From its initiation, the CBSS has had a role to play in promoting human rights in the region and its long-term priorities will only be achieved through further work in this field. Equal opportunity for all citizens, equal rights and the elimination of any kind of discrimination based on ethnicity, age, gender or other factors, is fundamental to the well-being of all our citizens.

In particular, Iceland will focus on gender equality and women's empowerment as an overarching theme under the long-term priorities of the Council. Over the last 25 years, the region has made progress on gender equality but further work is needed. During its presidency, Iceland will actively work to engage men and boys in the gender equality discussion, as only through the participation of all can we achieve our goals.

The rights of the child form one of the core pillars of the safety and security priority of the CBSS and will be at the heart of the Icelandic Presidency. Upholding children's rights is the obligation of all CBSS states and ensuring their safety and well-being will create a healthier and safer society in the future.

Through the CBSS, Iceland will continue to lead initiatives that focus on a holistic approach to protect children from all forms of violence, with particular emphasis on preventing sexual abuse and exploitation, including trafficking. The Icelandic *Barnahus* model is becoming established in the region as it promotes child-friendly and multidisciplinary mechanisms for the prevention and responses to child abuse and comprehensive services to child victims.

In light of the current state of affairs, asylum-seeking children and unaccompanied children deserve a special focus. Prioritizing the cooperation among different authorities and across sectors will be crucial in preventing abuse and trafficking of children.

Having outlined our priorities, I underline the importance of fostering a close link with civil society in order to make our work really count.

I encourage continued close cooperation between the CBSS and the BSPC. As a former parliamentarian, myself, I attended a few of the BSPC conferences. Both then, and now, as a diplomat, I sense the importance of parliamentarians in the region getting together and coming to a mutual understanding and conclusion on different matters.

I wish you all the best in your important work.

Thank you