



# UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

History teaches us... Lessons of the past for our present turbulent times.

Lecture in connection with the solemn session for the opening of the judicial year of the  
Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia. Rīga, 7 February 2025.

President of Latvia, Edgars Rinkēvičs,  
President of the Constitutional Court of Latvia, Irēna Kucina,  
esteemed judges, excellencies,  
dear friends!

I am both honoured and pleased to be with you on this solemn occasion here in Rīga. I wish you all great success in your important work for your state and your nation. Fair laws are the foundation of a sound society but only if they are followed and implemented judiciously.

From time immemorial we can find examples and quotations that support this truth which we must find self-evident. I will give you two examples from Iceland, my home country – a country with solid connections and a history of friendship towards the people of Latvia.

*Með lögum skal land byggja* – With laws shall land be built. This is the ancient motto or maxim of the Icelandic police force. It is Nordic in origin, originating somewhere in the lands we now know together as Scandinavia. You can also see these words of wisdom above the entrance of the Copenhagen Court House in Denmark. Furthermore, they are in the coat of arms of the Shetland Islands, the cluster of islands to the north of Scotland that came under Norwegian and Scandinavian rule until king Christian I pawned them to his royal Scottish colleague, king James III.

The other phrase I mention on the importance of law is exclusively Icelandic, proclaimed at Thingvellir, the site of Iceland's ancient parliament. It was founded in 930 or thereabouts, a gathering of chieftains and farmers where laws were made and judgements proclaimed. In the year 999, civil war seemed imminent, between those who wanted to stick to the old faith of Ódin,

Thór and other pagan gods, and those who advanced the new Christian faith. The head of the Althing, the lawspeaker, was given the task of finding a way to avert a bloody conflict.

Overnight he lay under his fur and then delivered his judgement: *Það mun verða satt, er vér slítum í sundur lögin, að vér munum slíta og friðinn* – It is true that if we tear the law asunder, we also tear our peace apart. He then proclaimed that Christianity was to be adopted and strife was averted.

These two sayings of wisdom – build the land with laws and without laws there is no peace – also demonstrate how we humans hold on to relics from the past to construct our present and future. A person who cannot remember suffers in life and the same goes for peoples and nations. I will not attempt to make myself an expert on Latvian history before this distinguished audience. Still, let me mention that surely there have been events and developments in the past which you Latvians have used to construct a common, national account – something that has been considered essential for everyone to know, so that people will know some basic details of their country's history.

In this connection, I am on more solid ground if we turn to Iceland for a bit. Allow me to give you a short – a very short – overview of Iceland's history from its settlement to the present day. This overview is traditional as well, even old-fashioned.

The island was settled well over a thousand years ago. A commonwealth was formed where free men ruled. Alas, in the thirteenth century civil strife broke out and ultimately the chieftains in the country decided that the people of Iceland should become subjects of the King of Norway. Later, the country came under Danish rule and such was the situation in the nineteenth century when the Icelanders called for increased independence from Denmark, in a campaign that has been called “a national awakening”.

The twentieth century was then mostly a series of victories and increased prosperity: Home rule in 1904, sovereignty in 1918 but royal union with Denmark remained until 1944 when full independence was declared and the Republic of Iceland was formed. Five years later, Iceland joined NATO. In the following decades, it gained full control of its vital fishing grounds, joined EFTA, the European Free Trade Association, and later the European Economic Area.

Unfortunately, almost constant progress was marred by the tremendous banking crisis in 2008 but we have recovered from that setback. Today, Iceland is one of the safest and most affluent countries in the world. You can take many criteria; infant mortality, life expectancy,

standard of living, gender equality, general level of happiness. You name it: Iceland is the best or among the best.

Of course it is not a perfect society. We can always do better but is this not a story about the benefits of independence and freedom? And the clear connection between independence and freedom on the one hand, and prosperity and wellbeing on the other?

These questions have been asked. Patriotic politicians will give you a resounding yes but the past can be complex, too complex for simple questions and simple answers. Still, I am tempted to compare milestones in the history of our two countries, Iceland and Latvia. Let's start with 1918: Sovereignty in Iceland with de facto independence in all important matters, declaration of independence here in Latvia. The interwar years were not a period of uninterrupted progress, with economic setbacks in Iceland and the failure of parliamentary democracy here in Latvia. Still, these two states existed on the world map, with their languages and culture on the rise.

And then our paths diverged completely. In 1940, the Stalinist regime in Moscow decided to annex Latvia, in accordance with the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop pact from the year before. In 1940, Iceland was occupied by Britain but it was a friendly occupation that brought economic progress, especially after the arrival of American forces as well. In the 1940s, conversely, Latvians were deported in large numbers to Siberia. Decades of tyranny, hardship and isolation ensued over here, but back home in Iceland the population prospered through trade with the outside world – including, it must be admitted, highly profitable barter agreements with the Soviet Union when Icelandic vessels sailed to “Soviet ports” in Latvia and the other Baltic republics.

It was only in 1991 that our paths began to converge again. And now we are here in 2025, facing an uncertain future. What can history teach us? How can history help us in turbulent times? *Can* history help us in turbulent times?

When I was running for president in the summer of 2016, there were some friendly advisers who said to me: Dear Gudni, you must stop talking about the past – people want to hear about the future. True, they said so half-jokingly but they wanted to emphasise that references to history should have a purpose – the purpose of instilling hope, strengthening unity and making people feel proud about who they are, where they come from and where they are heading.

After all, is it not the role of leaders to be positive, inspiring, unifying, to speak on behalf of the nation? Can you be a gloomy, negative leader, critical of your country's history? During

my presidential campaign eight years ago, I quickly discovered that if you want to become head of state, having been an academic historian is not necessarily the most favourable background you can ask for. I had written books and articles, arguing that Icelanders must avoid the temptation to create a false version of the past, especially for political purposes. Older colleagues had paved the way but we – eager young historians – wanted to revise fundamental aspects of Iceland's history. We questioned the traditional version, we found an exaggerated connection between independence and prosperity on the one hand, and outside rule and poverty on the other. We claimed that the role of some important individuals was exaggerated at the cost of general developments, and that stagnation was not necessarily the fault of foreign rulers but could just as well be blamed on a conservative elite of Icelandic farmers and officials.

Did we go too far? When I moved from being an academic historian to presidential candidate, there were critics who accused me of belittling the nation's achievements and history. Naturally I found this unfair and all this was partly campaign politics. Still, as a historian and presidential candidate I had to explain my point of view. On one occasion, I put it like this: "If elected, I don't want to undergo a complete transformation. ... and hope that nobody googles me. But I would want the nation to understand that we can present the past in all its variety without being accused of disparaging the achievements of those who were in the forefront."

And now, dear friends, I am back where I came from: A professor of history at the University of Iceland, after eight years of profound privilege and honour, of having served as the head of state of my country – my beautiful country, with its potential for a bright future, with its rich and varied past. The bank of memories is full of interesting events, including the one hundredth anniversary of Latvia's independence in 2018. On that honourable occasion, I sensed strongly a determination to protect the nation's freedom and human rights. I sensed a strong pride in many past achievements, a recognition of the sacrifices that previous generations made so that we may enjoy peace, prosperity and security.

Dear friends: In our globalized world supranational corporations and companies increase in influence and power every day. Technological advances minimize distances and differences. In this environment I believe it is imperative to maintain a healthy affection for your country, its history, its people and all its potential in the future. We need to combine the two, independence and interdependence, self-reliance on the one hand and solidarity on the other with like-minded friends.

Therefore, we need to remember the positive impact nationalism can have on our societies, how it can foster support and compassion, how it can enhance our love and care for our nature and environment, how it can connect our past, present and future; how nationalism can and should maintain separate cultures, languages and histories.

In other words, we need to praise a positive version of nationalism. Benedict Anderson, probably the best known scholar on that subject – the author of the phrase “imagined communities” – warned of the temptation to denounce nationalism in all its forms. Some fifty years ago he wrote:

In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals (particularly in Europe?) to insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love. The cultural products of nationalism – poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts – show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles.

Indeed, the artists themselves have provided a similar reminder. In her song, *Declare Independence*, Icelandic singer Björk famously salutes national sovereignty:

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

And *defend* independence. Together, we Icelanders and Latvians and other like-minded nations must praise the people of Ukraine in their fight against Russia’s invading forces. We must help them to the best of our abilities, if only because their fight is also our fight in the long run.

I did say before that Iceland is not a perfect society and the same could certainly be said about Ukraine before the invasion. But the bloody battles in Ukraine are about life and death, about the future of a sovereign state, the future of democracy and freedom, the future of hope.

And they are also about the past. For years now, we have heard Vladimir Putin's version of Russian and Ukrainian history, the near-rejection of a separate Ukrainian language, culture and heritage. Moreover, Putin uses and misuses the past to prove his contention that the history of Russia is mainly about the need for strong leadership and national unity against foreign foes who are always determined to destroy the Russian people. Some of you may recall his interview or monologue with Tucker Carlson almost a year ago to today. Putin said he would need 30 seconds to mention essential aspects of Russia's history and some 30 minutes later Carlson could only utter "1654?" That was how far Putin had gone in his historical justifications for current aggressions and he still had a lot of ground to cover.

Another pertinent example on how history can be used as a tool in contemporary debates can be found in the United States today. A little over a week ago, President Donald Trump issued an executive order to end "radical indoctrination" in American schools. In his previous presidential term, Trump often lamented that for years, even decades, children in America had been subjected to left-wing ideologies and given a distorted version of history where the nation's achievements were downplayed or ignored. Therefore, the aim of the new executive order is to instil in all pupils, "a patriotic admiration for our incredible Nation and the values for which we stand".

Dear listeners: We can only praise the virtues of nationalism if we are at the same time ready and willing to admit to its potential dangers, so visible in our past and present. We must never forget the evils of excessive nationalism, the danger of xenophobia, racism and intolerance based on the alleged need to defend the purity, honour and integrity of the nation. And we must admit to mistakes or dark chapters in our own history; in Russia or the United States, in Latvia or Iceland, in all societies now as before.

All over the world, even in the most progressive societies, negative nationalism rears its ugly head when people are told that they cannot belong in society because they are somehow different from the majority, not like "us". All people who want to live in peace with others should be able to call themselves part of the community, part of society, part of the nation, regardless of their skin colour or faith, regardless of other beliefs, regardless of how well they speak a language or know a country's history, regardless of all other factors and labels that can be used to sow mistrust, fear and even hatred.

These are, I believe, important lessons of the past for our present turbulent times. Of course, we can find other events and developments that we need to highlight, remember and

learn from. For instance, while King Christian I could pawn a cluster of islands and the people living on them to King James III in the late Middle Ages, a similar measure should not work today. State leaders should not be able to buy and sell nations and peoples in the twenty-first century. Likewise, state leaders should not be able to invade and annex territories.

Indeed, history should be a warning against the admiration and adulation of “the strong leader”. A great society does not depend on a great leader. Yes, it might benefit from such a person but primarily a great society needs great principles, great foundations, and great structures that can withstand the whims and desires of individuals. Also, we need strong law, not the law of the strong, and therefore I wish you all every success in your valuable work for your country and its people. Thank you.