



**THE STRUGGLE
FOR A COMMON PAST AND FUTURE.
UNIVERSAL VALUES AND NATIONAL INTERESTS.**

**Lecture
by
President of Iceland
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Iceland's Minister for Education and Culture,
Director of ODIHR,
excellencies,
dear guests

It is a pleasure and honour to address you here at the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw. Ever since its inception in 1975, the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, has worked to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

This office – ODIHR – bears testimony to that purpose and principle. Its leaders and officials provide support, assistance and expertise to participating states and civil society to promote democracy, rule of law, human rights, tolerance and non-discrimination. ODIHR-representatives observe elections, review legislation and advise governments on how to develop and sustain democratic institutions.

ODIHR lives in the present, aiming to improve societies here and now and in the future. Yes, the aim is to promote universal values, enshrined in international treaties and conventions such as the United Nation Convention on Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.

At the same time, there must be respect for national interests, national independence. The international political order is based on sovereign states. These states vary in many respects. Today, the old empires of Europe are long gone, the old Communist dictatorships are gone. The independent nation-state is the general feature of this continent. Some states are more homogenous than others, some contain a number of nationalities, many have experienced considerable immigration. Most states are members of the European Union, but not all.

Still, unity must be sought on the fundamental foundations of civil society. This can be a tricky task. Independence and interdependence; rights and obligations; universal values and national interests: The connection between these factors can lead to conflicts and contradictions. And that, dear listeners, is why the work of ODIHR is so important, why ODIHR must continue to promote and work for an ever-improved future for Europe, the states of Europe and all its inhabitants.

So, we need to look ahead. But we also need to look at the past, look at history. It was not a precondition, but it is certainly of benefit in my humble opinion, that the current director of ODIHR is a historian by profession. Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir studied history in Iceland and Denmark and had begun to put her mark on history writing in my home country, gender history in particular, when she lapsed and entered the field of politics.

History is not only a useful tool, a roadmap for the future. History influences our view of the future. It should enhance our desire for peace, prosperity and cooperation. Individuals and nations need history, a perception of the past. From time immemorial, people have sought strength and support in the formation of a group, a unit with common identities, interests – and history.

This need leads to nationalism, for better or worse. History is littered with the potential evils of excessive nationalism, of xenophobia, racism and intolerance based on the alleged need to defend the purity, honour and integrity of the nation. Such misuse of history must be resisted on all fronts. Still, we will not succeed in our opposition to the extremist misuse of nationalism if we try to deny peoples' need for a joint heritage and its long-proven positive attributes.

We are in Poland. Positive aspects of the past can easily be found in this country. Many Poles like to portray the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a multi-ethnic state where people enjoyed relatively great freedom. The short-lived Constitution of 1791 deserves its place of pride in the history of Poland and Europe in general.

Furthermore, the heroic struggle of Polish soldiers in the Second World War is well-known and recognized. Last weekend, I posted a message on

Facebook about my journey to Poland and one Icelander commented that he once saw an interview with an old Norwegian warrior who had fought in the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the Korean War and other conflicts. “He admired Polish soldiers most,” this Icelandic man said, “they excelled in determination, daring and valour. I think this describes the nation well.”

During the Communist era, Polish people also demonstrated bravery in their quest for freedom and human rights, in 1956, 1970, 1980 and on all the other countless occasions. Indeed, this last Sunday Poles commemorated the National Cursed Soldiers Remembrance Day, in honour of those who resisted the Communist dictatorship. “There would have been no free Poland if not for their sacrifice,” the Minister of Justice stated, adding that “Our task is to ask about the truth, our task is to build and testify to the truth”.

If only that were always plain and simple. The past is not set in stone. We all know that accounts of days gone by can vary to a small or great degree. The more distant the events, the more likely it is that people can forgive and forget. In 2007, Irish media reported that the Cultural Minister of Denmark had stated his regret for the pillage and destruction which the marauding Vikings caused in Dublin and elsewhere on the island some thousand years ago.

Conflicts closer in time are more alive in peoples’ minds. Even so, it is often possible to realize that tales of disputes can differ, with participants and observers peacefully agreeing to disagree. Let me give you an example from the Cod Wars, the fishing disputes that rose after Iceland extended its fishing limits from the 1950s to the 1970s. Britain rejected each move but we ultimately had our way, securing a vital interest in conflicts at sea that immediately became an important feature of the nation’s collective memory.

What were the rights and wrongs of the two opposing sides? “He is, naturally enough, markedly partial to Icelandic viewpoints.” That is how one reviewer described the work of an Icelandic diplomat involved in the disputes, published in the early 1980s. And here time does not seem to have affected the state of affairs. Last year, a British student, interested in the Cod Wars, asserted – informally on Twitter, it must be admitted – that the situation had not changed: “It’s also worth noting that there is currently an Icelandic-bias in the writing, mainly because they’re the only ones writing on it in huge detail. Jóhannesson, the number one guy on the Cod Wars, is currently the President of Iceland, which should tell you a lot.”

Guilty as charged! I admit that in my previous career as an academic historian, I wrote extensively on the Cod Wars. Still, I must also emphasize that I always aimed to be impartial in my works, so much so in fact that some people criticized me back home for unpatriotic attitudes, dishonouring the deeds of our national heroes who drove out the British aggressors.

Notice also the words on interest and indifference. “They’re the only ones writing on it in huge detail,” the British student said. Understandably, this dampens the likelihood of acrimonious disputes on the history of the conflicts.

Such one-sidedness, however, is more of an exception. The rule would rather be that completely contradictory or slightly conflicting accounts exist, with each warring side offering their own version of the past. Countless examples can be mentioned, and countless cases as well where national leaders used and abused history to ignite ill will, sometimes with catastrophic consequences.

Is it perhaps better, then, to forget history? Sigurður Nordal, an Icelandic scholar, once quipped that Icelanders know too much history and understand too little of it. But this question is deadly serious. Allow me to quote two contemporary historians, writing about the connection between history, nationalism and politics. “Too much history can become a burden,” one of them asserted: “Territorial claims, bloodshed, and education of hatred are nearly always justified by referring to history and religion: the subordination of the two to politics is a disease of our time.” In similar vein, another historian concluded that history “might not in fact work in the direction of healing but rather in the direction of keeping historical wounds open”.

Yet we cannot forget history. We should not forget history. We must keep in mind the positive attributes of patriotism. But maybe we need to know and remember histories, in the plural, or in other words, history without a single unifying purpose, history with nuances, history with various viewpoints, history with understanding – yet certainly not history with apologies or justifications for atrocities.

In this sense, history can promote perception and tolerance. Yes, why not write common history, just like we strive for common values and visions for the present and the future? Why not look back together as well?

Or is it impossible? There was an innovative project called “Shared Histories”, an attempt to reconcile Israeli and Palestine versions of the past. Almost immediately, however, the participants realized that this looked impossible – and that was well before they had started discussing the twentieth century. In the midst of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, a group of historians decided to write teaching material for multi-ethnic classrooms in the region that would counter overly nationalistic textbooks. The effort has continued but the response has been mixed, to say the least, or as one of the participants recently remarked: “Reception of the workbooks among the public and state authorities ranged from constructive enthusiasm to outward hostility. ... conspiracy theories were invented to account for what was castigated as an attempt to rewrite

history, and contributors were targeted as instruments of unspecified global agencies seeking to destroy national identity.”

Outside the Balkan region and the Middle East, the goal to write a common history may not seem as far-fetched. Last month, French President Emmanuel Macron visited Poland and gave a lecture at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. “We will not build Europe by forgetting its history,” he said: “We cannot allow it to be falsified, no matter which party rules in a given country. We must build a common European memory.”

Yes, “a common European memory”. In 2006, a joint French-German history textbook was published, *Histoire/Geschichte*, with virtually the same text in the two languages on each page. This amalgamation worked, but partly because of what has been called – and I refer to my earlier point about forgetting history – “prescriptive forgetting”.

Multiple other projects of similar kind have been produced, often instigated or supported through the European Union and its various funds. Some involve what we can call the easy way out, avoiding as much as possible any mention of a conflictual past. Other adopt a rather utopian approach where the past is used to demonstrate the need for cooperation and avoidance of conflicts, a simplistic peace narrative as it were, a roadmap for a pleasant future.

The danger here is that we replace the overly nationalistic misuses of history with another purpose-filled narrative, admittedly with less risk of violent consequences but politically motivated, still. “We need to find a middle way.” And these, dear guests, are not only my words. I quote here a renowned expert on the history of Central Europe, Timothy Garton Ash: “We need to find a middle way which says: we come from very different places, with many conflicts, but we have somehow decided to travel forward together. In order to do so, we each need to understand where we are coming from. And there is nothing inevitable about us continuing to travel together.”

I am close to the conclusion of this talk on the struggle for a common past and future, universal values and national interests. Clearly, historians and other observers of history hold great responsibility. History is not a curiosum, it is a powerful tool, especially in the hands of those who can reach a large audience. As a historian and head of state, I have come to appreciate this aspect of the past quite well, in particular the need to promote a positive type of our patriotism.

Icelandic nationalism is – as is the case with so many nations – tied to culture and language, literature and poetry. A few years ago, the late poet and writer Sigurður Pálsson wrote about the vital distinction between chauvinism and patriotism, a dichotomy as clear as the difference between arrogance and healthy pride. In his poem, *Raddir í loftinu* (Voices in the air), he also gave us

this wonderful description of peace and justice, beauty and life – in Icelandic but here in my impromptu translation:

Whatever anyone says
peace must be based on justice

Whatever anyone says
beauty is not just for decoration
but the essence of life

Yes, give me a voice
give me a prophet's voice
to speak for beauty

Give me a voice
to speak for justice.

So, let us defend the positive aspects of nationalism and independence, the freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of love, freedom and duty of diversity, tolerance and open-mindedness, the freedom to seek inspiration from the past but also the duty to accept and learn from the more negative aspects of our national experience.