

Opening address by Icelandic Foreign
Minister Össur Skarphéðinsson at the
inaugural meeting of the Joint Consultative
Committee between the Committee of the
Regions and Icelandic local authorities in
Reykjavík, Iceland, 4 March 2013.



MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

It is a pleasure and a privilege to welcome you all to this inaugural meeting of the EU-Iceland Joint Consultative Committee of the Regions, and indeed, to welcome you to Iceland.

Our Mayor, Jón Gnarr, has expounded on his theory that it was lack of Latin knowledge that led Irish monks to misread maps and instead of Ireland read Iceland, and put it to Iceland. I beg to differ. I have another theory. Sure, Iceland is a warm country, at least in the sense that you will find you very welcome wherever you go. My theory on the name however is that as we always suspected, that our beloved foremothers and –fathers that settled Iceland a millennium ago choose her name not to describe her coldness, but rather to deter others from coming in their wake so as to be able to enjoy her riches alone in peace. It was a kind of an inverse salesmanship, aimed at keeping Iceland as the domain of the first settlers, without further influx of immigrants from the viking colonies in North Europe.

Apart from that, if you have any spare time you will also find that Reykjavik is a very welcoming city, quite cosmopolitan, indeed the smallest cosmopolitan capital in the world, with a lot of interesting sites, restaurants, open door swimming pools everywhere, and if you, like me, are too fond of Irish pubs you´ll find them as well.

Reykjavik is also unique in the sense, that it is the only geothermal capital in the world, and the warmth within our homes, in here, and the lights, as well as the swimming pools, of course, all derives from the volcanic nature of her surroundings. You will find many similar towns in Iceland if you have time to travel a bit.

I have to add, since I´m speaking to regional politicians, that one of the remarkable things about Reykjavik is her magnificent Mayor,

Jón Gnarr. He is, unfortunately, not of my political ilk, but nevertheless one of my favourite politicians, a real genius of comic arts, and has even had the courage to done a pink suit. I have always wanted that, but never dared to.

Ladies and gentleman,

I am convinced this forum we are starting today will prove to be an important platform for dialogue between the CoR and the local authorities in Iceland. It will enable us to draw from the wealth of experience the EU has amassed in regional matters.

I had the good fortune as a young man to be able to experience first-hand as a consultant to a fledgling industry how participation in the EU and especially the Structural funds really transformed, first the rural policy, and subsequently the strength of the rural areas in countries as different as Portugal and Ireland. The way I saw it, and enlivened, it was a success, at least in some of the remote and marginal areas,

I remember the changes in some western parts of Ireland, in Galway, where economic benefits were obvious in a variety of fields of employment and industries, - and, where the Gaelic speakers told me that they felt the EU had actually saved their language.

So, I have for a long time been convinced, that membership of the European Union would be very beneficial to Iceland and her rural areas, and perhaps could put throw a lifeline to some of the most marginal ones.

Some have argued, that it would be difficult for small municipalities to deal with the mighty power of a very distant Brussels. Having the benefits of a long experience of Icelandic politics, I tend, however, to agree with the Mayor of a small municipality up in the Icelandic Westfjords, that recently stated his

firm belief, that it would be easier to discuss Regional policy with Brussels than Reykjavik.

Of course, the EU bureaucracy sometimes moves at a snail's pace, but as we have seen it and felt from afar, when it decides upon a policy, it is very decisive in implementing it. It appears to me that the EU's regional policies in many ways are a much more effective tool to support, consolidate and strengthen the remote areas, than we have been able to develop in my own country.

This is a feeling that is shared by many. This is clearly reflected by the overwhelming interest for IPA funding of projects relevant for regional policy in Iceland. It has received huge interest from all parts of the country. To judge from that I am very confident that we have the capacity to do great things and implement the EU Regional policy in an effective manner with huge benefit for our remote areas.

It is, however, not only the question of financing but also of new, solid methods that follow the funds. This was the clear experience of others, such as our friends in Finland, Poland and other Member States, with whom we have consulted widely, and this is also our own experience so far.

More financial support to regional policy is of course always welcome, always important, but increased funding can be quite ineffective if it doesn't go hand-in-hand with solid structures and institutions, clear and concise long-term policy, and modern working methods.

This, therefore, is what we see as the major opportunity and advantage of Iceland participating in EU regional policy. We need new and different policy, and different funding, and in that respect, we look forward to having the benefit of your experience.

I want to use this opportunity to express my gratitude to the representatives of our local municipalities, with which we have enjoyed a very good cooperation, and who have participated enthusiastically and actively in the preparations for the Structural funds.

Indeed, our cooperation is a text book example of how we should approach the EU question, without prejudice, with open mind, where the issues are carefully judged, and the pros and cons of membership are examined in a balanced way, and how it could serve our long-term needs and interests.

So, my compliments to all of you on your important work and your valuable input so far in the negotiations.

Finally, dear friends, allow me to say a few words on the state of play in the accession talks.

Negotiations on Regional Policy have now commenced – we opened the chapter last December.

We are cautiously optimistic that we will find common ground for pragmatic solutions where account will be taken of the unique circumstances in Iceland. The reason is quite simple: Iceland has a strong case, due to its special characteristics which fit perfectly within the parameters of EU regional policy.

We are in fact not asking for any special treatment as the EU legislation already recognises similar specificities - only appropriate solutions similar to those granted to others.

Every country in the EU is unique. Iceland is in many ways different from most parts of Europe where in our case special attention is needed to meet the challenges that relate to our unique situation as a small island state in the Arctic.

The sparse population causes difficulties in transport between our towns and villages in Iceland and the provision of services is expensive. Our geographical distance from other Member States is considerable, as those of you who flew in yesterday know. Sometimes, as I have already broached, we are even honoured by mother nature with the occasional volcanic eruptions and the ensuing ash-clouds.

Finally, dear friends, I wish you all the best in your work in this important platform for cooperation between local authorities in EU and Iceland.

In my opinion, we are already witnessing a quiet revolution in regional affairs in Iceland as the accession process moves forward, as our experts, officials and local leaders are embracing EU best practices and preparing for the future.

So, I hope you have a successful meeting, enjoy Iceland and let's keep up the good work!