

Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in Reykjavík, 20 May 2021

Statement by Iceland

**delivered by Mr. Guðmundur Ingi Guðbrandsson
Minister for the Environment and Natural Resources**

Thank you, Mr. Chair,

Dear Ministers, Heads of Delegations of the Permanent Participants, ladies, and gentlemen.

It is an honor to join all of you here in Reykjavík to mark the successful completion of Iceland's two-year Chairmanship and welcome the start of the Russian Chairmanship, as we approach the 25th Anniversary of the Arctic Council.

Over the past two years, the excellent cooperation with representatives of all the Arctic States and Permanent Participants has been truly rewarding. The Covid-19 pandemic undeniably had an impact on our work; however, the Council has persevered and we have been able to deliver on our mandate.

“Together towards a Sustainable Arctic” was the overarching theme of the Icelandic Chairmanship, resting on the three pillars of sustainable development: environmental protection, social development, and economic development.

The Chair has given us an overview of the four priority areas of the Icelandic Chairmanship program. As Minister for the Environment and Natural Resources, I wish to focus on our emphasis on Climate and Green Energy Solutions.

Climate issues are at the heart of Arctic Council activities. The Arctic has over the last 50 years warmed three times faster than the global average. This demonstration of the climate crisis in our part of world should serve as impetus to intensify regional and global cooperation on climate change mitigation and adaptation. Without action, we will overstep a dangerous turning point, and the Arctic as we know it will be all but vanished before the end of this Century. Green energy solutions will serve us well at the local level while having a positive impact globally. We should take pride in leading by example and I applaud the Council’s work in this regard.

Moving to the second Chairmanship priority, the Arctic Marine Environment, I wish to highlight our work to address plastic pollution in the Arctic. The Regional Action Plan on Marine litter is a key deliverable and I hope that we can follow up on the International Symposium on Plastics that Iceland successfully hosted this spring in cooperation with the Nordic Council of Ministers and others. Arctic research and Arctic voices have been a catalyst for global action in the past; I am hopeful that this will be the case here, as we need truly global efforts to stem the tide of plastic pollution. I have been an advocate for an international treaty to tackle plastic pollution and I will continue to work towards that goal.

The third Chairmanship priority was People and Communities of the Arctic. Here, I want to emphasize the *Gender Equality in the Arctic* project, which has concluded its third phase with a milestone report that highlights emerging issues, priorities and concrete strategies that support gender balance and diversity. Furthermore, I note that Iceland emphasizes the rights of LGBTI people.

Last, but not least, let me mention our efforts to continue to build a Stronger Arctic Council. We have seen practical steps relating to organizational issues, including updating finance and staff rules, enhanced cooperation with the Arctic Economic Council and Arctic Coast Guard Forum, as well as more active engagement with Observers. However, the most significant accomplishment will be our adoption of the first Strategic Plan for the Arctic Council, providing long-term strategic guidance to its work. I believe that the adoption of the Strategic Plan is an excellent way of marking the upcoming 25th Anniversary of the Arctic Council. I congratulate you, Mr. Chair, and all of us for this landmark achievement.

Mr. Chair,

As we wind down the Icelandic Chairmanship and welcome the incoming Russian Chairmanship, I wish to complement our Russian friends on the ambitions they have set for their term as well as their emphasis on continuity, sustainability, and cooperation.

We are all aware of the vital importance of our shared ambition for the Arctic to remain an area of low tension, characterized by fruitful cooperation and respect for international norms and laws. Nearly 35 years ago, two leaders of then adversarial superpowers met here in Reykjavík and bravely pushed against the tide of history that seemed to be sweeping the world ever closer to nuclear confrontation. I hope, Mr. Chair, that the spirit of Reykjavík will again today serve to remind us that for the greater good to prevail, peace must be in our hearts and in our actions. That has been the true spirit of Arctic cooperation for the last quarter of a century. May it so remain.

Thank you.