

## **So much in common**

Whenever I have an opportunity to meet with Icelanders, I am asked two recurring questions: why should we be joining the EU in crisis? And what benefits are there really for both sides if Iceland joins?

These questions, going to the heart of our relationship which I believe is built on common and unshakeable foundations, merit a clear and honest reply.

To start with, we share the same values: our societies are based on the same principles of democracy and freedom. The fact that the Althingi is considered to be the oldest existing parliament testifies to this. I focus on values because they shape the way we see the world and how we respond to global challenges. And as these challenges are increasingly common for Iceland and the EU, so are the solutions. Let me put it this way: we are like neighbours who live next door to each other. We may have occasional disagreements, but when it comes to key issues we will always agree.

We have not only common values, interests and challenges but also, already, common solutions. Our economies are closely linked: the EU is by far Iceland's largest trading partner, with three quarters of your exports going to EU countries. We have shared interests in sustainable fisheries and the ever increasing strategic importance of the Arctic region. Through Schengen membership, Icelanders can enjoy travelling without a passport to most EU countries. Iceland is one of the strongest and most active partners in EU-funded research. More than 2100 Icelandic students have benefited from the Erasmus exchange programme since 2007. Last but not least, thanks to Iceland's membership of the European Economic Area, we already have many common laws.

There's no denying of course that the EU is in crisis, but I have no doubt that the EU will make it. Crises – economic, political, natural – are a fact of life. There is no need to convince you who have lived through and recovered from both economic and natural calamities in the recent past. Both Iceland and the EU will still have to cope with other crises in the future. And *cope* is indeed a key word. In the past the EU showed a remarkable ability to adapt to and cope with crises, even to come out stronger as a result. This is something we are witnessing now: the measures taken to tackle the current situation are starting to shape a new, enhanced, more integrated and stronger Europe. In the future, Iceland and the EU will face new global challenges. I believe Iceland will tackle them better together with us and we will tackle them better with Iceland. You will be in a position to shape the policies of the world's leading trading block and a global political player. And the EU will also benefit from Icelandic entrepreneurship and capacity to face obstacles.

When debating your future choices, I therefore strongly encourage you to look at what we have in common, especially as the negotiations enter into a decisive phase. I welcome the open dialogue I have witnessed so far and encourage all Icelandic citizens to take part in this debate. I am confident that at the end of the negotiations we will be able to present a package which takes Iceland's specificities into account and safeguards the principles and *acquis* of the EU. This will then allow you, the Icelandic people, to decide.

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