

**Speech by Federal President Dr. Alexander Van der Bellen before the
Federal Assembly on the Occasion of his Inauguration on 26 January 2017**

Madam Speaker of the National Assembly,
Madam Speaker of the Federal Council,
Distinguished Federal Assembly,
Honorary guests,
Fellow Austrians,
Non-Austrian residents of our country,
Viewers watching via internet and television,

I stand here feeling a bit unreal. Not because of the long election campaign – for the most part, it was quite enjoyable.

And I stand here today with great joy and confidence!

You are looking at a refugee child. Born in Vienna, I fled with my parents to the Kaunertal in Tyrol. And now I stand before you as your Federal President. This is a particular honour and pleasure for me.

Austria is a country with excellent opportunities! One could almost say “a land of unlimited possibilities”. We should remember this and not let it be diminished.

I stand here before you today also because hundreds of thousands of people brought me here by their united efforts of willpower and vigour. I am very grateful for that.

Doris, we reached this goal together. It wouldn't have worked without you.

But in general, I would like to thank the millions of fellow citizens who went to the polls. Contrary to all cries of the naysayers, voter participation even increased.

I would also like to express my respect to my contender, the Third Speaker of the National Assembly, Norbert Hofer, despite all of our political differences. It was a remarkable achievement.

One more expression of gratitude is very important to me.

Former Federal President, dear Heinz,

You dedicated your life to the service of the Republic of Austria – for decades in high and even the highest offices – most recently serving successfully as the Federal President for the last 12 years.

I think I speak on behalf of everyone here when I extend my most heartfelt thanks to you.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am indeed very much aware of the fact that as of today at the latest I also represent all those who did not support me. For whichever reasons.

I will seek to include you to the best of my knowledge and conscience.

Because Austria is all of us. Austria is the sum total of all its inhabitants, no matter where they come from.

Whether they are from Vienna, Graz, Salzburg, the Kaunertal, Pinkafeld or another corner of our beautiful homeland.

It also doesn't matter whom they love. Whether they love women or men, be they a woman or a man. It doesn't matter whether they love the city or the mountains or the countryside; or their smartphone, or all of it together.

It doesn't matter whether their whole life still lies ahead of them, or whether they can already look back on a hopefully fulfilling life. It doesn't matter whether their family has been living here for generations or perhaps not.

It doesn't matter.

Because all Austrians are equal – equal in rights and responsibilities.

Austria is all of us. We belong to one another; we are interdependent and complement one another.

We are as strong as our cohesion. Especially in the difficult times we are approaching.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are living in a time of change.

A time where proven certainties and recipes no longer seem to be as effective as they were in the past, and where the new still has to be found and formed. A time between times.

There is change wherever we look:

Change through humanity's increasing interconnectedness that has been accelerating exponentially. Through the impact of automation on our labour market.

Through the challenges that flight and migration pose for our social systems, but also for our value systems. Through the challenges that scientific progress brings about, raising entirely new questions for our sense of ethics and morality.

All this is taking place in a Europe struggling for its acceptance, even its existence, in the face of nationalism and short-sighted single-country approaches. A Europe that is shaken by despicable acts of international terror, which endanger our cohesion.

And it is taking place against the backdrop of climate change, which unfortunately has already turned into an everyday reality. With related consequences for us in the Alps as well.

There is something about change. It is necessary, but it also causes fear.

As an 11-year-old boy at the indoor swimming pool, standing on the three-metre diving board for the first time did not make me happy. But children standing there for the first time know they have to jump if they want to make progress. They know they have to jump.

But they don't know what this jump will feel like and what exactly will happen after the jump.

And yet, in most cases, they dare to take this step forward. I also did it back then. And I also jumped off the five-metre diving board

Why?

Because confidence is stronger than doubt.

Doubt and confidence – in times like these, both of these forces are engaged in a momentous struggle with each other.

Both are legitimate: Doubt helps us question outdated solutions and replace them. And confidence is so important in everyday life in order to be able to believe that things can improve. Confidence enables us to take a step forward.

Today I call upon your confidence!

In our national anthem, it says “assiduous and full of hope”; these are not empty words.

I experienced that myself. I have witnessed what we can achieve when we stick together. The Austrian State Treaty, the economic miracle or our accession to the European Union are just some of the stations along this route. At any time they were sustained by the confidence that it can and will get better.

The beauty of confidence is that it is easy to create: by deciding to be confident. We Austrians already made this decision often in the past.

If each and every one of us makes this decision today and tomorrow, confidence will enable us to achieve things that doubt would have never allowed to happen.

Allow me to be poetic for a moment:

Where doubt sees the darkness of the night sky, confidence sees the stars in the sky.

What else matters in times of change? Focusing our view on that which doesn't change – on our fundamental principles.

They constitute the foundation and key beliefs of our Republic.

That human freedom and dignity are universal and indivisible. That all human beings are born free and equal in rights. That these human rights apply without restriction. That those who are privileged may have the wisdom to help those who are weaker and to not abuse their position of power. That we share the responsibility for our fellow humans. That healthy common sense should also be accompanied by an empathetic human heart. That it is our duty as human beings to help people in need, no matter whether they are nationals or foreigners. But whoever seeks our assistance here of course must abide by our fundamental values of the rule of law.

Those are non-negotiable!

In other words, and I quote 1789: Let us believe in freedom, let us believe in equality

and let us believe in solidarity.

Let us believe in Austria and its capabilities. Let us believe in that which made this Austria and Europe strong.

This is a foundation of values we can build upon.

Then, there are the challenges which lie ahead for Austria and which we want to meet together.

Consensus on wanting to maintain our welfare state, the pension and health system, and that this is only feasible with joint efforts.

Consensus on the need for a motivated workforce and innovative entrepreneurs to preserve and expand our prosperity.

Consensus on Austria being in the heart of Europe, and that it should continue to stay there – and I don't mean that in a geographical sense.

We should agree that education, research and science are the key to many questions regarding the future.

We do agree on equal rights and opportunities for men and women, as well as the need to work on also making this a reality in the workplace and in daily life.

What is essential is that policy-making succeeds in creating framework conditions in such a way that all people can lead their vision of a happy life. This is the mandate of real policy-making, its meaning and its purpose.

Real policy-making must also yield real results. Policy-making is also a craft.

It is about presenting a work in the end which is visible, tangible and effective. No good master builder can be satisfied with preparing and setting up the construction site.

I mention this also because a series of interesting ideas and suggestions were presented and discussed in recent weeks. I think that's a good thing.

In the coming months, Austrians already expect to see decisions and results that will improve their lives. I wish you all the best for that.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Tomorrow is a special day. Tomorrow is International Holocaust Remembrance Day commemorating the greatest crime in human history.

The Holocaust is also part of our history. Millions of people were murdered during the time of National Socialism. Austrians were among both the perpetrators and the victims. Those people who barely managed to escape were deprived of their homeland. Only few of those who fled were invited to return. Many of those who did come back were not welcome upon their return.

I consider this to be the darkest side of our Austrian history. The darkest side, which we will never forget.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

After World War II, Europe's politicians finally decided to reconcile and find common ground. This gave rise to the project of the European Union. This project is not finished.

Since then, the European Union has been a space for peace, freedom and prosperity. The EU states and their peoples have forever banned violence from their relations. One cannot say that about many regions of the world.

Yet Europe – our Europe – is incomplete and vulnerable.

When 28 highly developed democracies write the script for their coexistence, it cannot be easy, nor can every detail be uncontested.

I see the greatest danger in people letting themselves be seduced by allegedly simple answers while tipping towards nationalism and sectionalism. This cannot be in Austria's interest.

Let us not be misled. Let us not stray from working towards a common Europe. Preserving this peace project is worth all efforts.

Allow me to say a few words on my understanding of the Presidency.

I will make every effort to be a Federal President above party lines, a Federal President for all people living in Austria.

I will speak out when fundamental questions of our society are being negotiated or are even at stake.

Producing daily headlines is not appropriate for this office.

The fine tradition of cooperation with all political institutions and the constitutional bodies is important to me, as well as the cooperation with the social partners, the stakeholders of civil society with their numerous volunteers, and the religious communities so that together we continue to ensure the renewal of societal cohesion.

Of course, it is of great importance to me to represent Austria honourably abroad.

Austria has been and still is a bridge builder. Our neutrality constitutes the foundation for building these bridges.

It is our foreign-policy tradition in Europe and the entire world that we need to maintain into the future.

One more word on a topic on which some people have differing opinions:

The Federal President also serves as the Commander-in-Chief of the Austrian Federal Armed Forces, which are committed, in particular, to values such as the protection of democracy, the respect of human rights, as well as peace and solidarity.

I will take this function very seriously, and consider myself a patron and supporter of our Federal Armed Forces.

Therefore, I am also very pleased that reputation and standing of the Austrian Federal Armed Forces are on the rise.

This positive trend is based on the high degree of professionalism and personal commitment demonstrated time and again by our soldiers in international missions abroad and the immediate support of the population in the wake of natural disasters.

In six years, all people in Austria, if possible, should be able to say:

Yes, things have changed. But they have changed for the better. This is only possible if we believe in Austria together. And if we all help to achieve this.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to close with a word directed at the youngest generations.

You who are now at the beginning of your path. You who are now attending kindergarten. You who are starting school, who are learning a profession, who are enrolling at the university.

It is you who will build this world anew.

And we need you. We need your passion. We need your ideas. Your courage to think in new ways. Your respect. Your diligence. We certainly need your opposition. Your talents. And last but not least your confidence. We count on that. We need you.

Therefore – bravely towards the new ages! Long live our peaceful European future! Long live our homeland, the Republic of Austria!