



Bundespräsident
Alexander Van der Bellen

Address by Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen on the Occasion of
the New Year's Reception for the Diplomatic Corps

On 8 January 2019, Zeremoniensaal/Wiener Hofburg

Welcome

Ambassador Kothbauer-Liechtenstein of the Principality of Liechtenstein,
Federal Minister Kneissl, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to this New Year's Reception today.

Thank you very much, Madam Ambassador, for the kind wishes for the new year that you have extended on behalf of the Diplomatic Corps.

Presidency of the EU Council

2018 was a year of complex geopolitical developments and of tensions within the EU. Amid such a setting, the Presidency of the Council of the EU represented a great challenge for Austria.

The Austrian Presidency faced two especially demanding issues: concluding the Brexit negotiations, and the negotiations for the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework for the 2021–2027 period.

On these and a great many other complex matters, the Austrian Presidency made every effort to serve as a neutral mediator, and to advance the negotiations as far as possible.

We did our best to leave the house in good order for the new Presidency trio: Romania, Finland and Croatia.

I wish Romania all the best in this highly responsible role.

European Union

2019 will be an important year for the European Union. Six weeks after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, the EU heads of state or government will gather in Sibiu, Romania. There they will deliberate on a new strategic agenda that will set the course for the European Union's work in the next five years.

The elections for the European Parliament will come shortly after, from 23 to 26 May.

That will be followed by the start of the next European legislative period and the formation of the new EU Commission.

The latest surveys conducted in the EU and Austria indicate a clear shift in public opinion. Confidence in the EU and optimism rose significantly throughout Europe last year. We must not disappoint that trust.

EP elections

The elections to the European Parliament this May will help decide whether the EU will lean in the direction of nationalism, and thus be weakened; or whether it will move towards what Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, has called “Weltpolitikfähigkeit” – the capacity to play a role, as a Union, in shaping global affairs. This is urgently needed.

Western Balkans

A major priority of our Presidency was our advocacy for the Southeastern European candidates for accession to the EU.

Austria has close ties to this region – historically, economically and culturally. We are convinced that the European family will not be complete until the Western Balkan states are fully included.

EU enlargement is a tool of the European policy for peace, and an important motor to drive reform in the region.

Both bilaterally and within the EU, Austria views itself as an active partner of all six applicants for accession. In 2019 we will continue to urge keeping the enlargement perspective accessible for the states of Southeastern Europe.

Eastern neighbours – Ukraine

Another important concern of Austria's is our relations with the eastern neighbours of the European Union. In Ukraine, important policy choices are ahead in 2019, with the presidential and parliamentary elections.

At the same time, continuing the process of reform will have to remain a priority, so as to reinforce the country's ability to withstand external threats, strengthen its security and stability, and further advance its growing prosperity.

Unfortunately, we must assume that the crisis in which the Ukraine has been involved for nearly five years now will still be a matter of concern in 2019. In this respect, the suffering of the civilian population is especially regrettable.

So I would like to call on all parties to the conflict to work seriously, within the existing formats, to achieve a peaceful, honourable resolution of the conflict, and to refrain from any provocation on either side.

Austria is firmly committed to the dual approach that EU policy has taken towards Russia.

In parallel, however, a constructive dialogue with Russia is still important. A number of regional and global problems can be resolved only with Russian participation.

Southern Neighbourhood

Stabilising the Southern Neighbourhood, which is joined to Europe by way of the Mediterranean, is a foreign-policy challenge of great importance to the EU.

For that reason, I have been very pleased at the advances in our relations and other positive developments, for example in Tunisia, or also in Lebanon, which I recently visited.

I hope that after a very troubled year for Libya, this coming spring the National Conference will be able to define a pathway for the country's future towards a peaceful settlement, a new constitution, and elections.

Syria

There must be hope for Syria as well, including that the announced withdrawal of US forces will not result in new instability, not to mention further military clashes.

There is some small reason for hope to be found in the progress of the UN-led process for forming a constitutional committee.

Israel/Palestine

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I will soon be visiting Israel and Palestine to get my own impression of the situation there. This is a visit that means a great deal to me personally, not just because our relations with that region date back for centuries, but of course especially because of our country's past.

Iran

Concerning Iran, I would like to note that it is extremely important to uphold the JCPOA nuclear agreement.

This is a matter of compliance with international standards, and of nuclear disarmament. The JCPOA is an achievement of a dialogue conducted as equals. And more than a dozen inspections have shown that Iran is fulfilling its commitments.

Yemen

The conflict in Yemen, a humanitarian catastrophe of the utmost severity, cannot be resolved by force of arms.

The key to ending this terrible bloodshed is to develop a joint solution with the participation of all parties to the conflict.

Asia

To take due account of current geopolitical changes, Austria has been giving greater foreign-policy attention to Asia for some time now.

I myself enjoyed a successful visit to China in 2018, accompanied by Federal Chancellor Kurz and four members of the government, as well as a large delegation of representatives from business, science and culture.

The EU's new connectivity strategy is an excellent basis for imbuing relations between Austria and Asia with a new dynamism.

Africa

Both bilaterally and as a Member State of the EU, Austria plays an active part in relations with Africa.

Current problems, such as humanitarian crises and questions of development cooperation, climate protection and migration, call for multilateral answers. Africa and Europe are partners in this respect.

The new Africa-Europe Alliance formed last year is intended to promote large-scale, sustainable investment, and to create urgently needed jobs for young people in Africa.

One important Austrian contribution to this new Alliance was the High-Level Forum Africa-Europe held in Vienna at the invitation of Federal Chancellor Kurz and Rwandan President Paul Kagame on 18 December 2018.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Austria also further strengthened its relations with Latin American and Caribbean states in 2018.

That was especially the case thanks to visits to Vienna by dignitaries from Columbia, Panama, Honduras and Costa Rica, as well as numerous discussions on the sidelines of international conferences.

For example, at the beginning of the Austrian Presidency the meeting between the EU and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States CELAC was held under the slogan “Building bridges and strengthening our partnership to face global challenges”.

USA

In 2018 we celebrated 180 years of diplomatic relations with the United States. And last year once again featured another extensive list of official visits: Speaker Sobotka of the National Assembly and several members of the government travelled to Washington, for example.

We will continue working vigorously to develop our cooperation further in the coming year.

Multilateralism

I am very concerned that the multilateral edifice, with the United Nations at its centre, is coming under increasing pressure.

Nationalism, unilateralism, turning away from universal legal norms and exiting from multilateral agreements, combined with the simultaneous slow financial starvation of international institutions, are making life very hard for the multilateral system.

Yet it is precisely this system to which we owe a great portion of our peace and prosperity.

Human rights

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Austria's consistent advocacy of human rights is especially evident in the Human Rights Council of the United Nations, where we have been a member as from this year.

This permits us to maintain our long-standing foreign-policy emphases in human rights, such as combating the death penalty and protecting threatened individuals and minorities. It also gives us a way to further promote structures of the rule of law.

Jointly with the International Criminal Court, Austria is acting to ensure that serious violations of human rights and humanitarian international law will not go unpunished.

Disarmament initiatives

Humanitarian motivations have also long been the driving force behind Austrian initiatives for disarmament. Nuclear weapons represent a threat to the survival of every state, because there are no boundaries to their catastrophic humanitarian consequences.

I am proud that Austria has actively worked towards the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which now also bans the final category of weapons of mass destruction, and is an essential step towards a world free from nuclear arms.

Climate change

Finally, let me mention a topic I care about very deeply: global warming.

Science is unanimous. Unless we can achieve an immediate turnaround, climate change will advance.

For that reason, in advance of the Climate Change Conference in Katowice, I launched a climate initiative that has now been joined by almost 20 European heads of state or government.

The Climate Change Conference in Katowice then took an important first step in implementing the Paris Agreement.

But this is no time to rest.

UN Secretary General António Guterres was quite correct to say we have a duty to do more. And that is precisely what we must do in 2019: we must step up our efforts.

Every person on earth, whether in Austria, Brazil or the United States, lives in, and breathes, the same atmosphere.

Emissions that damage the climate do not stop at national frontiers. That means we can only resolve the climate crisis together. National answers to the climate question fall much too short.

Every country on earth must sharpen its national goals for climate protection. That also goes for Europe, and it goes for Austria.

This is the only way that we will still be able to limit global warming and keep our earth liveable.

The Austrian World Summit, which will be held once again in Vienna this coming May, is intended to help towards that goal.

Conclusion

Foreign Minister Kneissl, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude with this call for responsible action. I hope that 2019 will prove to be a good year in this sense as well.

I wish all of you, your families, and the countries you represent, a prosperous and peaceful 2019!

Thank you.



Bundespräsident
Alexander Van der Bellen

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