



Bundespräsident  
Alexander Van der Bellen

Speech by Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen  
on Europe Day 2020 via social media  
on the occasion of the 25th return  
of Austria's accession to the European Union

"Tackling European reconstruction together"

Courtesy translation

Check against delivery

Ladies and gentlemen in front of the screens,

we may be physically separated from each other at the moment. But we are still united in the belief in our great, common European idea.

For 25 years, the Republic of Austria has been an active part of this idea, as a member of the Union. And yes: it is a success story. A success story that did not just happen to us. We, who are here today, know that the European Union is not just a stroke of luck but the result of bitter historical experience. Above all with a fascist nationalism, which, coupled with antisemitism and racism, led to World War II and the Holocaust. We have built this common Europe out of pure reason, in cooperation and in mutual respect.

**That is a unique cultural achievement.**

Austria too has clearly benefitted a great deal from the European Union: culturally, economically and socially. We have moved closer together in all areas, and I never tire of saying: If we did not have the European Union, we would have to invent it. More than ever: right now.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are facing one of the greatest challenges of the post war period. Yet, the pandemic teaches us several things. And they are all relevant to the European idea.

Firstly, we are more closely connected than we might have thought. Everything that any single one of us does or does not do has a direct impact on others. This applies not only within our countries, but also within the Union. We have seen this in the last couple of weeks, when across Europe people have stayed at home to protect the most vulnerable of our neighbours and fellow citizens. That was damned hard. But we did it because it was the right thing to do.

And that has shown us, secondly: how painful it is not to be free. Guaranteeing this freedom to all citizens is one of the core functions of the European Union. May it remain with us for a long, long time.

Thirdly, we have once again been reminded that the great challenges cannot be overcome within national borders. A pandemic knows no political borders. For it, and this time unfortunately in a bad sense, all people are equal.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Unfortunately, there was a lack of European spirit in some places at the beginning of the crisis. That cannot be denied. However, the project we all are now facing together, the reconstruction, can best be achieved by using our strengths and resources together, with and for each other.

Yes, I know, there are voices that say: No one for all, each one for himself. May the strongest survive. May the countries only look after themselves as best they can. But all those who think like that, let me remind you of a simple truth: We are only strong together. It would be an inexcusable mistake to fall back into small states mentality.

On the contrary: It follows from the shocking experience of this pandemic that we must grow together, support and help each other even more than we have done so far. If we throw overboard our greatest achievements in this crisis, we are like the walker who angrily throws away his umbrella in a storm because it cannot keep his feet dry.

We need and depend on each other. And if we do not have it yet, we must find a European way of thinking. If you like, a European mindset. We have to learn to think as Italians AND as Germans. As Dutch AND as Greek. As Austrians AND as Croats. We need a mindset of AND, not of OR. Not you OR me, no, you AND me. Only in this way can a European "we" evolve.

I am glad that this "we" is being filled with life. Take the first coronavirus aid package adopted recently by the European Union. It amounts to 540 billion Euro, and that is only the beginning. A second package, the "Recovery Fund", is currently being negotiated. We need solutions that are as ambitious as possible.

Because as countries, too, we are more closely connected than we might have thought. If VW or BMW do not produce cars, Austria's suppliers have no work to do either: and conversely, cars will not roll off the assembly line if transnational supply does not work.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The European Union also means to stick together, and not to divide. To move towards each other, and not to block each other. To be confident, and not to act out of fear. To act calmly, with competence and circumspection, especially in uncertain times.

And from a global perspective, it is obvious that only together can we achieve something like world relevance and global political capability. Each individual European state is too small to be able to defend its interests vis-à-vis major powers such as the U.S., China or Russia.

**That is why we need our Union. Especially now.**

With our unique mix of skills, temperaments and experience, we are virtually predestined to find the big answers to the big questions of our time. How do we get out of the high unemployment? How can we cope well with the looming social crisis? What kind of globalization do we want after

the pandemic? How do we prevent the climate crisis that can already be felt, and against which there will be no vaccination? We need common answers to these questions now, and these are best provided as European answers.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The European Union is not perfect. It is far from perfect. It will not always save us from getting our feet wet. But let us appreciate what we have in it. That demands more seriousness than simply condemning it. It is easier to cut down a tree than to make it grow. No, the European Union is not perfect. But we can make it a little better every day. It's up to us.

Far-sighted Austrian politicians have brought our country into the Union 25 years ago. Let us continue to work on this biggest project of peace, economy, learning, solidarity and hope that exists in this world.

**European unification is the best idea we have ever had.**

I thank you.



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