



Bundespräsident
Alexander Van der Bellen

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

16 January 2024
Ceremonial Hall of the Vienna Hofburg

Most Reverend Apostolic Nuncio,
Federal Minister Schallenberg,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, let me thank you, esteemed Archbishop, for your kind and much appreciated New Year's wishes on behalf of the Diplomatic Corps!

What can we say when we look back at 2023, a year full of crises?

We saw heavy earthquakes for example in Türkiye and North-Syria or in Morocco, and just recently in Japan.

We saw the catastrophic impact of the climate emergency with disastrous floods in Libya, Germany, Greece, Italy, Slovenia among many many others.

And we saw people's lives affected by terrible wars. In the Middle East, living in peace has always been anything but a given. But 2023 opened a new dimension.

The events of 7th of October shook the world to the core. Unimaginable, unparalleled, despicable, cold-blooded acts of brutality by the terrorist group Hamas against Israel, against children, elderly people, mothers and fathers who were tortured, raped, killed - and abducted, among those an Austrian citizen who, as too many others, is still not free.

For us, it is also a bitter reminder of the darkest times in Austrian history. Whenever Israel's existence is threatened, Austria therefore stands in full solidarity with Israel.

Whenever Jews and Jewish life are being attacked just because of being Jewish, Austria will stand up and speak up against all forms of anti-Semitism. Here in Austria and abroad.

Israel's right to defend itself against Hamas must not be questioned.

Now, it is also true that the conflict that is raging since 7th October – caused and fuelled by Hamas' actions – has brought immense suffering upon civilians in Gaza.

Many thousands have perished. Many more are living in catastrophic humanitarian conditions, in constant danger and in a state of deprivation of food, water, medical care, shelter.

It is the innocent – again the children, elderly people, families – those who are least able to defend themselves, who are hit the hardest.

The answer to this unbearable suffering must be full respect for international humanitarian law, full protection of civilians and a fast and unhindered access of humanitarian aid to the population.

Austria contributes to the latter by providing 13 million EUR in humanitarian aid as a contribution to alleviate the disastrous situation in the Gaza strip and to support the civilian population in the region.

There is a serious risk of a spill-over of the conflict to other countries in the region. Let us hope that reason will prevail and more terrible suffering can be avoided.

We have to start thinking about "the day after".

Together with its partners in the EU, Austria will support efforts to open a way out of this spiral of violence and to trigger a process in which - rather than violence and hatred - mutual understanding prevails and that will eventually lead to life in peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Excellencies,

2024 will also be crucial for Ukraine, which is still confronted with Russia's heinous war of aggression.

It is difficult to comprehend that this war is still being waged by Russia, in the middle of Europe, almost two years on, unabated and with ever growing brutality – of which the horrific attacks against civilian infrastructure are a terrible proof.

In 2024, Ukraine needs our full support. Our Ukrainian friends are not only defending their country, they are ultimately defending our freedom, our way of life and our values.

Austria stands as steadfast as ever behind Ukraine, politically and via bilateral financial and humanitarian aid.

The geopolitical consequences of this war extend far beyond Europe. We are witnessing a geopolitical reorganization of the world order. We see negative effects on food or energy for all our countries across the globe.

As European Union, we have proven that we manage to respond to these challenges with one voice and we must continue to do so.

The decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine is a tremendous step forward and I congratulate my Ukrainian friends from the bottom of my heart.

Likewise, I congratulate Moldova and Georgia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina for seeing their efforts recognized and rewarded by the European Council last December.

The direction is clear: The European family is moving closer together. A very welcome and important political signal in terms of Europe's geostrategic orientation.

Excellencies,

2024 will also be a year marked by elections around the globe. More than 70 countries¹ with around four billion people will send their citizens to the polls: there will be elections in the United States, India, Mexico, South Africa, and elections to the European Parliament to name just a few.

With these elections come hopes but also fears what they will bring and how the newly elected leaders will steer our countries through the difficult times we find ourselves in.

¹ [The world goes to the ballot box \(ft.com\)](https://www.ft.com/content/2023/12/14/the-world-goes-to-the-ballot-box)

Regardless of what their outcome will be: It is my sincere hope that we will continue to cooperate, to respect our neighbour, to listen to each other and that, whenever we have to choose, we will choose the path of togetherness and dialogue.

This also holds true for Austria, which, as you know, is preparing for parliamentary elections in the fall. Even here, in our beautiful Austria, we are not immune to populism, agitation and even radicalization.

That is why I remind our political parties at every opportunity that it is not enough to just think about election day. We also have to think about the day *after* the election, when we will have to work together, join hands and join forces in our daily efforts to tackle our country's and our world's problems.

“We will know whether democracy lives or dies by the end of 2024.” This is how prominent journalist and Nobel laureate Maria Ressa² recently assessed her outlook at this year.

I remain confident and a firm believer that human reason, solidarity and our constitutional systems will pass this test.

As for myself, while my international activities, especially travel plans, will have to be reduced this year due to the national elections, I assure you that I will remain as committed as in my previous term to multilateral cooperation, cohesion in Europe, the protection of human rights and the fight against the climate emergency.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

2023 was a record year with the highest average temperatures in the world and tragic climate events around the globe. The destructive consequences of this have also reached Austria and have caused enormous damage in parts of our country.

Many of you have followed the debates at the COP28 in Dubai. It ended with an important, long overdue result: for the first time, Member States agreed to clearly

² Maria Ressa ist **philippinische** Journalistin und Autorin. Sie ist Mitgründerin, Geschäftsführerin und Chefredakteurin des Online-Nachrichtenportals Rappler und war fast 20 Jahre lang als leitende Investigativreporterin für CNN International in Südostasien tätig. Im Jahr 2021 wurde ihr der Friedensnobelpreis zuerkannt.

state that the climate crisis is a fossil fuel crisis and that a transition away from fossil fuels and speeding up the transition to renewable energies is essential.

COP28 has achieved progress. And this is an encouraging sign.

It shows that cooperation for the benefit of all is possible, thanks to the tireless efforts of hundreds of diplomats like you striving to make a difference.

Let us apply the same dedication, determination, focus and ambition when it comes to implementing the Dubai decisions. The COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan will show to which degree we manage to live up to the expectations our children and grandchildren are placing in us.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

the world in 2024 will continue to confront us with challenges. And I dare to say from experience, they might even grow in number and complexity.

I therefore encourage you to keep up this important work you are doing every day as ambassadors of your countries, as mediators, as negotiators.

Keep up the dialogue, continue to reach out to each other in the interest of mutual understanding.

And never lose sight of the vision to create a more peaceful and just world, and an intact planet for future generations.

I wish you and your families a happy and successful new year 2024!