



Bundespräsident
Alexander Van der Bellen

**Address by Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen
to the Diplomatic Corps on the Occasion of the
Virtual New Year's Reception 2021**

19 January 2021

Check against delivery!

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Diplomacy does not take a break during the COVID-19 pandemic. That is why, in these trying times, it is even more important to have you here in Vienna and to count on your active involvement in good bilateral relations between Austria and each of your home countries.

For this reason, it was important to me that I convey my thanks and my best wishes for this new year, at least in this particular format.

Thank you very much, Most Reverend Apostolic Nuncio, for the kind wishes for the new year that you have extended on behalf of the Diplomatic Corps.

Last year, the pandemic turned our lives upside down.

Just like all of you, I, too, had to adapt my everyday life. In spite of everything, we still managed to receive quite a number of in-person visitors in Austria, for instance, at the Austrian World Summit climate conference in September.

However, most of my foreign affairs activity moved to phone calls and video conferences. And I can assure you: it is not the same – I greatly miss personal contact, private one-on-one meetings, real-world handshakes.

The pandemic is a challenge of the century, and it is not behind us yet. Although vaccination has started in many countries, the social and economic consequences of the pandemic will surely remain with us for a while.

No country has been spared by the virus. But this virus is also a challenge for multilateral systems. 2020 showed us clearly how important international cooperation is.

And so, after a short phase of unilateral national measures at first, soon came encouraging signs of solidarity, such as coordinated repatriation efforts and patients being admitted to intensive care units of other countries.

And with every day that passed, the realisation became clearer that isolation leads nowhere. No country can eradicate the virus on its own. We need a 180-degree shift: only together will we be able to get through this, and overcome it.

The European Union has successfully demonstrated cohesion – in researching, producing and jointly procuring vaccines. And we did this even though, actually, health is a matter of national jurisdiction.

We proved that when it really matters, we do not let questions of national jurisdiction stop us.

On the international stage, there is a clear commitment to cooperate in the fight against the pandemic: vaccines must be generally available, in all countries.

With the Team Europe Initiative [38 billion euros], the EU is helping countries from the Western Balkans to Africa, Latin America and Asia mitigate the far-reaching impact of the pandemic. After all, the pandemic has hit the world's poorest and most vulnerable particularly hard.

What the EU and Germany's Council Presidency have achieved over the past few months is remarkable: a historic decision was taken to dedicate up to 750 billion euros to post-COVID-19 recovery, a new rule-of-law mechanism and a new, ambitious climate target for 2030.

The lack of an agreement on the next step in the pre-accession process for North Macedonia and Albania has been a disappointment. Our work on this process will have to continue apace in this new year.

And then, of course, there is Brexit. After years of uncertainty, at least, we have clarity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Be it Austria or the EU, we have all ! got an important partner back with respect to several major issues: Even though, for a long time, President Trump refused to accept the result of a free and fair election, and in spite of the attack on the Capitol in Washington, D.C., which he incited, Joe Biden will take office as President of the United States tomorrow. And the new President has already announced his will to strengthen international cooperation again and to rejoin the Paris Agreement.

Last year, because of the pandemic, the climate crisis has slipped from the headlines. But this does not mean it went away – quite the opposite!

Since the Paris Agreement was signed five years ago, too little has been done. The Earth is heating up.

And in addition, there are wildfires, icebergs breaking off from the polar caps, severe tropical storms and damage from adverse weather events, entire areas destroyed, devastating droughts, millions in losses for our farmers, heat in the cities, and on and on.

We are facing humanity's greatest challenge in this millennium. A challenge greater than the pandemic. And there will be no vaccine against the climate crisis. All of us individually need to take action.

It is going to be a race against time. But we can win. We have to win, if we want to keep this planet liveable for us humans.

The Fridays for Future youth movement will continue to play a role in keeping us on course. Now, there is also a Parents for Future movement, things are happening, in spite of the persistent hesitations by some policymakers.

What makes me optimistic is this: the business sector is now on board as well, and in some cases, business is even more proactive than politicians, and is leading the way. Nowadays, large investment funds are feeling a strong push from their clients worldwide to invest their money sustainably. Five years ago, this would have been unthinkable.

For all countries, as we rebuild our economies in the wake of the pandemic, coping with the climate crisis must be our number-one goal, and sustainable investments must follow accordingly. In this respect, the EU's 750-billion-euro package is a good start.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are at the start of a new year. Which experiences from the time of the pandemic can we take with us for when it is behind us?

This past year has shown that when it matters, we, as humankind, are capable of much more than we might have ever imagined. A vaccine was developed in a very short time span.

Now is the time when we should reflect on how we can make our world a better place. For ourselves, for our children, and for our grandchildren.

This is true for the pandemic, but also applies to the climate crisis, and to our coexistence – within our societies, between our countries, or to the way we treat refugees and migrants. Can we break this trend of irreconcilability and aggression? Through dialogue and cooperation, be it internal, bilateral or multilateral, can we learn from each other and grow together?

This dialogue – a truly effective one – is what we hope to witness in Belarus. Such a dialogue is necessary to improve the situation in eastern Ukraine. To ease tensions in the eastern Mediterranean. In Syria, Libya, Yemen. In Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Venezuela.

And such a dialogue is necessary to re-enter the nuclear agreement with Iran. Although every situation is different, more dialogue would be helpful everywhere.

In the Middle East, the resumption of diplomatic relations between Israel and a number of Arab states, and also between several Gulf states is a step in the right direction, but there is also an urgent need for such a step in the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians.

And finally, disarmament is a thematic area of multilateralism to which, traditionally, Austria has been and remains particularly committed. In this respect, human security and preventing endless suffering caused by particularly inhumane types of weapons are of paramount importance.

With the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 75 years after nuclear weapons were used for the first time in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we have achieved a historic milestone. The Treaty's entry into force in a few days is a success for Austria and the world.

Allow me to conclude with an appeal to our sense of humanity: this year, we will be celebrating the 70th anniversary of the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR and the Geneva Refugee Convention.

We must do more to implement this convention meaningfully.

The images of children living in the cold, wet mud of the refugee camp on Lesbos, and of the people facing the winter in Bosnia and Herzegovina unprotected, are deeply disgraceful. Such a thing should never happen in Europe.

Against that backdrop, I hope that this year, the EU is finally able to adopt a new agreement on asylum and migration. Here, too, we should think bigger. And our sense of humanity must be front and centre.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To overcome the challenges before us, what we need, more than ever, is diplomacy – or, in other words, you. Personal exchanges cannot be replaced by virtual interaction.

I am confident that we will soon be able to return to our normal way of engaging.

Let us all seize this opportunity to talk to each other, and listen to each other. Let us make our world a whole lot better!

I wish you and your families a happy new year, good luck and good health, and I look forward to seeing you again soon!