



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 14 January 2020, Zeremoniensaal/Hofburg**

Check against delivery!

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The New Year reception for the Diplomatic Corps is a wonderful tradition.

I think this reception, which brings together you, as ambassadors of your respective countries, and all of us, demonstrates that in spite of our sometimes divergent interests, we are willing to engage in a peaceful and diplomatic exchange.

Some of you have already become regulars at this reception – others are here for the first time.

I would like to extend a very warm welcome to each and everyone of you!

I would like to especially welcome the doyen of the Diplomatic Corps, the new Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Pedro López Quintana.

And also, Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg, who is attending this event for the first time in this capacity!

A warm welcome to your significant others as well!

Domestic Affairs

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Surely, you have been following the political events in Austria over the past year. This was an unusual, turbulent year.

After the distressing videos from Ibiza came to light, there was a change in government, and a few days later, for the first time in the history of the Second Republic, a successful motion of no confidence against the entire cabinet.

As a consequence, the Bierlein government came into office and pacified the somewhat heated atmosphere. Subsequently, the snap election took place in September.

Last week, this process came to a close.

I appointed a new government. A coalition between the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Greens.

For Austria, without a doubt, this coalition is something new, and it will be monitored with curiosity and attention across Europe.

I am confident that the new cabinet will tackle the major issues of our time with courage and determination.

Climate Crisis

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This past year, a worldwide movement of young people has pushed an issue, which has been close to my heart for many decades, to the top of our agenda, and rightly so.

You know what I am talking about: the climate crisis! "Fridays for Future", Greta Thunberg.

Last year, I had the opportunity to attend two climate summits at the UN in New York, and COP25 in Madrid. As a measure of support for the UN's effort, I launched the "Initiative for More Climate Ambition".

So far, it was signed by 36 Heads of State and Government from a variety of regions.

I would like to thank everybody who supports this initiative.

As I engaged with young people who rallied for climate protection worldwide, I witnessed how seriously they are taking this fight for their future. Their commitment, their passion should be an inspiration to all of us.

Unfortunately, however, the climate conference in Madrid was a missed opportunity, and young people are right to be disappointed. We are all disappointed!

Nevertheless, we must keep doing everything we can to prevent the climate catastrophe looming over us. This is a significant challenge.

The EU is ready to take the climate issue forward. The European Green Deal aims at making Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050.

But we only know too well that no individual country, and not even the EU, can meet this global challenge alone. The worldwide transition towards clean energy sources and energy efficiency improvements are only possible through cooperation between nations.

The United Nations, and especially Secretary-General António Guterres, has taken up this goal. I am very happy and thankful for that.

UN

The UN is indispensable. In the fight against the climate crisis, as well as for peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

This is what we should have in mind when, this year, in 2020, we celebrate the UN's 75th anniversary. The UN is the forum for and symbol of international cooperation.

For these days, some are increasingly questioning the benefits of international cooperation and common rules for all stakeholders.

Today's world is more interconnected than ever before. A nation's interests can no longer be imagined without taking into account the interests of other nations.

We need common rules, we need cooperation in order to prevent confrontation, hostility and war. To achieve this, we should not reinvent the wheel, and instead, use existing international cooperation forums to the best of their possibilities.

As you all know, multilateralism has been the cornerstone of Austria's foreign policy for many years now. And in this respect, we are proud and thankful for hosting one of the UN's four headquarters worldwide here, in Vienna.

I was pleased to learn that UN Secretary-General António Guterres recently appointed Ghada Fathi Waly as the new Director-General of the UN Office at Vienna. We will do our best to support the new Director-General when she enters into office in February!

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Yuri Fedotov for his unrelenting commitment throughout these years.

As Federal President, I am glad to see that Austria's ambassador Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger has been elected President of the UN Human Rights Council for this year.

We welcome this as the acknowledgement of her dedication and expertise and of Austria's long-standing commitment to the protection of human rights.

Middle East and 75th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This past year, I went on an official visit to Israel and Palestine, a very moving journey.

I hope that this year, Palestinians and Israelis resume negotiations to achieve the long-lasting peace both peoples deserve and have been waiting for for so long.

In a few days, I will be travelling to Israel again.

As Federal President and personally, I feel deeply compelled to attend the commemorative events in remembrance of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, both in Yad Vashem and in Auschwitz.

Tens of thousands of Austrians were victims of the National Socialist extermination machinery. But many Austrians were also perpetrators.

75th Anniversary of the End of World War II

This year will also be dedicated to the commemoration of the end of World War II, 75 years ago.

In Europe, we will be commemorating the end of the war as friends. United as democratic countries on an equal footing, in our common Europe.

We owe this to a generation of visionary men and women who put an end to centuries of conflict in Europe. Today, the European Union is a unique peace project!

End of the Iron Curtain, EU Accession, EU Enlargement

After the end of World War II, Austria became a country at the margins. We were the easternmost Western country, at the border which divided Europe, right by the Iron Curtain.

But 1989 saw the fall of the Iron Curtain.

When I look back, I remember how fascinated, astonished and spellbound we all were when following these events with the utmost sympathy and joy.

Hundreds of thousands of people fought peacefully for freedom, peace, human rights, rule of law and liberal democracy. For the values which are the foundation of the European Union.

This past year, we remembered these great and decisive times in our history through many inspiring commemorative events.

Shortly thereafter, on 1 January 1995, that is, 25 years ago, our country joined the EU. Together with Sweden and Finland.

With the EU enlargement in 2004, the Union opened up to the East. Austria was no longer at the margins: it was in the heart of Europe.

Future of the EU

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The general election in the United Kingdom this December has brought clear results.

Regardless of our opinion of Brexit, this clarity is decisive for the United Kingdom and for the European Union. Now, we have to define our future relationship in a mutually beneficial way.

It is essential that the European Union leave the issue of Brexit behind once and for all in order to focus on the issues which are of paramount importance for the future of our continent and for our citizens:

In its strategic agenda, the EU has highlighted a number of challenges: the climate crisis, digitalisation, solidarity within the EU, migration, as well as the EU's capacity to play a role in shaping global affairs.

We must find answers to these challenges!

I am convinced that the world needs a strong Europe, a strong European Union. The European Union is a global model for a peaceful union of nations which, together, decisively represent the interests of their citizens.

Middle East

2020 has started with significant international tension in the Gulf region, raising grave concerns over peace in the region.

It is important not to let the situation escalate any further. Therefore, a political solution must be found. Austria is willing and able to contribute to this process, for instance, by hosting possible negotiations.

Now, dialogue and diplomacy are of the essence.

And with that, I would like to return to all of you gathered here.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I said in my introduction, in my view, this reception, which brings together you, as ambassadors of your respective countries, and all of us, demonstrates that in spite of our sometimes divergent interests, we are willing to engage in a peaceful and diplomatic exchange.

I am looking forward to our cooperation during this coming year.

Together, we bear a crucial part of responsibility for global peaceful coexistence. Let us treat this world, let us treat this Earth with respect and dignity!

With this in mind, from the bottom of my heart, I would like to wish you, your entire staff and your families a very happy New Year 2020!

Thank you!

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