

General Debate of the 143rd IPU Assembly
Statement by the Head of the Austrian Delegation Mr Reinhold Lopatka
Madrid, 26.-30.11.2021

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Dear Chairperson,
Fellow Parliamentarians,
Dear colleagues,

Thank you for your dedication and endurance! At the outset, let me thank our Spanish hosts for their great efforts made within very limited time, to set up the first in-person Assembly after two years of a global pandemic. I am pleased that the Austrian Parliament was able to provide the initial impetus by organising the 5th World Conference of Speakers of Parliament in Vienna in September this year with more than 100 speakers participating in person!

The virtual IPU assembly in May demonstrated how technology enables amazing new possibilities. However, face-to-face dialogue is indispensable to develop mutual understanding and trust, without which our democracies risk suffering from destabilization, polarization and – in the worst case – collapse.

Especially against the backdrop of the COVID pandemic, we witness polarization in society. This is the reason, Ladies and Gentlemen, why I deem the time most appropriate to discuss the issue of overcoming division and building community here today. In this context we demonstrated this unity yesterday when we unanimously supported the emergency item of our African colleagues. For me, this was the best moment of the 143rd Assembly!

Allow me to quote Martin Luther King: *"Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love"*. This quote reminds us that in our time words such as love or empathy are rarely heard in public discourse! But we need empathy! We need solidarity!

Two weeks ago, the World Food Program published a report that the number of people who starve had risen from 42 to 45 million. Even if we do not recognize the Taliban as legitimate rulers, we have to find ways to work with them to avoid the worst consequences of 23 million Afghans who face hunger.

We need to civilise public discourse and better connect with the citizens we are supposed to represent. Take a look at social media comment sections and you will see that many people are tired of politicians fighting dirty. Politicians always have a choice to decide against adding fuel to the fire. Furthermore, many studies point out that a crucial factor of polarisation is a disconnect between politicians and citizens themselves. When citizens feel they are not listened to or heard, not represented in institutions or by political parties, polarisation grows. Yet, the masses we have seen take to the streets and engage in debates online illustrate how much people do care about political affairs.

Currently, in many cases social media is poisoning democracy, and leaked documents prove that the companies themselves know that; The Internet and freedom of speech must not be

abused as carte blanche for intensifying polarisation, spreading fake-news or illegal content, and we are working hard in Austria to put appropriate measures in place.

Finally, it is up to each individual, regardless of whether or not they hold a political office, to choose dialogue over division. As friends, families, colleagues, journalists, voices on the internet: we all make an impact. Polarisation wins when we talk about each other instead of talking to one another; and when we talk past each other instead of truly listening to each other. If we resist the temptation to think of 'us versus them', to speak before we listen, to insinuate before we understand one another, we can beat polarisation.

We are all more than aware that cross-border problems require cross-border solutions. At the same time, there are no easy solutions which apply for each and every country the same way. Therefore, we parliamentarians carry a great responsibility in this respect, which I believe we can better meet through constant international exchange such as in the framework of the Interparliamentary Union!

Thank you for your attention.