

141st IPU Assembly Belgrade
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***“Strengthening international law: Parliamentary roles and mechanisms
and the contribution of regional cooperation”***

**Statement by the President of the Austrian National Council
Mr. Wolfgang SOBOTKA**

Madam President,
Mr. Secretary General,
Fellow Speakers, Fellow Parliamentarians,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to our host, the Parliament of Serbia, for organizing this IPU conference in Belgrade.

The history Europe has been significantly shaped by its regions. Cross-border and regional cooperation are part of Europe’s DNA.

There is no doubt that the European integration process has played a key role since the 1950s ...

... in enhancing the international legal order,
... in contributing to peace and stability and
... in advancing good neighbourly relations on our continent.

Effective cooperation needs constant dialogue. Regional organizations can and do provide a reliable platform for such dialogue.

The role of Parliaments in diplomacy and foreign affairs is growing. Since the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 we have seen a rise in interparliamentary activities within the European Union.

In addition to this EU parliamentary dimension, Austria attaches great importance to regional parliamentary cooperation on different levels.

We recently hosted the Conference of Speakers of Parliaments of German speaking countries as well as a meeting of Speakers of Parliaments of the “Slavkov” format,

including the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria. Both formats are valuable for developing personal relationships and discussing issues of regional relevance.

Since we are meeting in Belgrade, let me also mention that the Austrian Parliament has engaged in a closer dialogue with the Parliaments in the Western Balkans. Our aim is to support the EU integration process of the countries in the region, including through a fellowship program for officials of parliamentary administrations.

It is my firm belief that the European project remains incomplete until all countries of the Western Balkans have joined the EU. Some of our EU partners are still reluctant with regard to the opening of EU accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. The decision on this important topic is imminent. I therefore appeal to my EU colleagues to honour the reform efforts that have been made and give the green light for negotiations with these two EU candidate countries.

Apart from international cooperation, it is fair to say that Parliaments occupy the central place of any political dialogue. By its nature, legislative bodies serve as the main forum of debate among political parties. In my view Parliament must be an open institution seeking to include citizens of all ages.

Such a place of encounters and exchange is needed – especially in our digital world. Virtual contacts cannot replace meetings and debates which are essential for practicing democracy and creating a mutual understanding. Parliaments therefore need to open up and provide space for a dialogue between politics and other fields of society, such as science and arts.

Parliament is the central institution of democracy. Yet, there is a growing gap between politics and citizens. Parliaments play a major role in ensuring full participation of all citizens in public decision-making and political life. We should therefore place more emphasis on efforts aimed at bringing Parliament closer to our populations, especially to young people who are calling for greater participation in public life.

Since 2007, the Austrian Parliament offers democracy workshops for young people between the ages of 8 and 15 years in six different interactive settings. Through these activities participants can familiarize themselves with the basic principles of democracy and parliamentary processes. They learn how democracy works and how laws are made.

I am sure that many other parliaments are engaged in similar educational programs. I therefore suggest that we share our experience and learn from each other. My suggestion is that we work together on an IPU collection of best practice in democracy education. I invite you all to join us in this effort in view of next year's IPU World Conference of Speakers of Parliament.

For the 2020 Conference in Vienna I would also like to suggest a discussion on violent extremism and hate speech.

We are facing increasing tendencies of radicalisation and antisemitism. The shooting at the synagogue in the German town of Halle is just the latest in a line of attacks directed against Jews or other groups of societies.

Such incidents are an attack on all of us and on our common democratic values. Parliaments should therefore take an active role in combating racism, intolerance and violent extremism. The Austrian Parliament recently started workshops on education against prejudice but more needs to be done.

In this context, I strongly support the implementation of the Memorandum signed in May 2019 by the IPU and two UN entities (UNODC and UNOCT) which outlines a comprehensive program of action against terrorism. Austrian Member of Parliament Reinhold Lopatka will contribute to this work in the framework of the IPU High-Level Advisory Group on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism.

Let me turn again to the 2020 World Conference of Speakers of Parliament.

Austria has served as a bridge-builder many times after World War II. This year, we are celebrating 40 years of the UN Vienna headquarters. This anniversary marks four decades of diplomacy and dialogue in the heart of Europe.

In addition, Austria has been hosting the annual Winter Meeting of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly for almost two decades with participants from 70 countries.

With this tradition in mind, I would like to warmly invite you, dear fellow Speakers, to the 5th IPU World Conference of Speakers of Parliament in August 2020. Your participation will be a strong signal that Parliaments provide answers to the global challenges for democracy.

Thank you for your attention.