



Opening Address at the 5<sup>th</sup> UNAOC Global Forum

Vienna, 27 February 2013, 10:00 a.m.

by

His Excellency Vice-Chancellor and

Federal Minister for European and International Affairs,

Dr. Michael Spindelegger

Your Highness,

Your Eminencies,

Your Excellencies,

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honour to welcome you all on the occasion of the 5<sup>th</sup> UNAOC Global Forum in Vienna. As host country, Austria takes pride in being a firm and reliable supporter of the Alliance.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the Governments of Spain and Turkey, for the initiation of such an imperative initiative five years ago. We are honoured by the presence of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, which clearly underscores the timeliness and relevance of the Alliance in terms of the UN Agenda. I would also like to thank High Representative Jorge Sampaio for his firm commitment to build the

Alliance into a vital international political initiative. At the same time, I am delighted to welcome the incoming High Representative Nassir Al-Nasser and wish him all due success in his future endeavours.

Let me begin by emphasizing the significance of the Alliance and its untiring efforts to improve understanding and co-operation among nations and peoples across cultures and religions.

The Alliance complements and reinforces Austria's long standing tradition in advancing constructive dialogue. Deeply-rooted in Austrian foreign policy, dialogue constitutes the indispensable fiber that holds our pluralistic societies together and has to be recognized as prerequisite for the peaceful co-existence of different cultures and religions. Culture has an essential value for all human development and only by recognising this value can we start a real dialogue between civilisations.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Global Forum takes place at an important crossroad. New and ever-changing geo-political realities in combination with the growing significance of civil society provide a fertile environment to successfully translate diversity into an added-value for communities and society as such. However, this process must be strengthened through leadership I mean through really responsible leadership.

Consequently, this year's Forum will focus on the question of *Responsible Leadership in Diversity and Dialogue*. Allow me to touch upon the following four areas, to draw a complete picture of the

overarching themes discussed in sessions and workshops over the next two days:

My first point revolves around the question of freedom of religion. Living in a context of growing diversity and pluralism presents a multi-fold challenge for society. Striving to uphold the universal right to freedom of religion, thought, and conscience becomes necessary. However, in order to realize this fundamental right, we must promote a culture of tolerance, which in turn requires corresponding education and awareness-building.

Secondly, I shall turn to freedom of expression, which constitutes most certainly both a right and a responsibility. Realizing the potential of free flow of information is the order of the day, it needs however to be accompanied by adequate education and responsible leadership by governments and practitioners alike. Reshaping media discourses towards diversity can further the agenda of fostering understanding.

The issue of migration and integration constitutes my third point. We have to highlight the economic, social, and cultural benefits of migration and integration. There is a great need to de-politicise the subject of migration and to counterbalance negative perceptions by changing the approach to this issue. Thus for example I am proud that in Austria a state-secretary for integration – Mr. Sebastian Kurz - was installed upon my proposal. The experiences with this new state-secretariat can only be described positively. In a globalized world, the challenge of migration most certainly requires responsible and informed leadership at all levels of society, so as to foster integration and to make it to a benefit for all.

Fourthly, the Forum will explore different priority regions, where communities and governments have come to understand and live the concept of diversity through very different means. Let me draw your attention to a region of particular interest to Austria, namely that of the “Danube and Black Sea, South Caucasus and Central Asia”. This cluster of countries presents a unique example of growing cultural diversity. By building upon best practices, we can promote strong sub-regional cooperation, support regional integration and further develop the understanding of the benefits of diversity. Armenia marks one of UNAOC’s youngest members, further underlining the growing importance of the region.

We have gathered here today to mark the commencement of the 5<sup>th</sup> UNAOC Global Forum in Vienna that constitutes a continuation of the imperative work the Alliance has undertaken over the past years. Against this background, I hold great expectations in the outcomes of this year’s Forum. The adoption of the Vienna Declaration will capture and reflect the dedication of members towards the Alliance. The expansion of regional perspectives, alongside a refocus on thematic priorities will guide the strategic outlook of the UNAOC and its work into the future.

Already now, during the opening of the Forum, I can share a significant outcome of the Forum with you: I would like to direct your attention to the 150 participants of the Youth Event, who have convened yesterday to engage in fruitful discussions on the topics of the Forum. I want to share my admiration and respect for the level of dedication and

professionalism, you have brought to yesterday's Youth Event. Innovative ideas in combination with motivated personalities constitute promising leadership for a brighter future.

Let me conclude by reiterating Austria's continuous commitment to constructive dialogue between cultures and religions. In the coming two days, all of us have the unique opportunity to strengthen the Alliance's objectives, sharpen its priorities, and foster co-operation. With this in mind, I encourage all of you to actively engage in broad consultations and discussions, thus identifying sustainable solutions for arising challenges.

Thank you!