

Speech by the Federal President of the Republic of Austria

Dr. Heinz Fischer

at the opening of the

5th UNAOC Global Forums in Vienna's Hofburg

Heads of State,
Secretary General of the UN,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen!

Let me start by extending a very warm welcome to all of you!

Austria, thanks to a long history of diversity, is pluralistic in culture, religion, tradition and language and can therefore serve as an example of a heterogeneous society which is at the same time united in values.

Fourteen churches and religious communities are legally recognized in Austria today. The basis for legal recognition goes back to a constitutional law of 21 December 1867, which - among other things - granted certain fundamental rights to any recognized church or religious community in the then Monarchy. The legal recognition of Islam in Austria dates back to 15 July 1912. We celebrated the 100-year anniversary of the recognition last year. Our diversity is also demonstrated by the Office of the Austrian President: "Office of the Federal President" is written at the entrance gates - not only in German, but also in Hungarian, Slovenian, Croatian, Czech, Slovak and Romani, the languages of the six legally recognized ethnic groups in Austria.

In the recent past a great number of citizens from neighboring countries found a new home in Austria when their countries were struck by crisis: Hungarians after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Czechoslovakians after the suppressed Prague spring of 1968 and people from the Western Balkans after the collapse of Yugoslavia, followed by war in the 1990ies.

Despite representing a melting pot from an ethnic and cultural point of view, Austria's society is united and stable – due to a set of common values such as democracy rule of law, human rights, freedom, tolerance and a solid economic performance. Against this background, I firmly believe that it will be possible to build a common future based on respect and understanding and a peaceful co-existence also on a larger scale.

Distinguished guests!

One of the very important steps in that direction is our active participation in the *UN Alliance of Civilizations*.

Hosting the 5th Global Forum of the Alliance proves Austria's determination to promote mutual respect in an international environment.

The Forum serves very successful as a platform for exchange and dialogue to representatives of governments, civil society and the private sector, to religious leaders, media professionals and academics.

Evidently all those present here today are interested in the topic of our meeting. But how can we engage other parts of society? How can we achieve the multiplier effect through engaging leadership at all levels of our society?

Excellences, there is a saying that words are dwarfs and examples are giants.

All of us present here today will play an important role in reaching this goal - serving as opinion leaders and good examples. Responsible leadership is essential for success.

I am confident that the forum will encourage and inspire all of us and that we will succeed in leading our societies towards tangible results and a better future.

I do not want to close without praising the tireless efforts of High Representative Jorge Sampaio and I wish every success.

I thank you for your participation and wish you every success.