

**Rede des Herrn Bundespräsidenten  
Dr. Heinz Fischer  
Eröffnung des “Fundamental Rights Forum”  
20. Juni 2016**

Check against delivery!

Ladies and Gentlemen,

it is my pleasure to welcome you to Vienna to this year's Fundamental Rights Forum. The promotion and protection of human rights has been a personal priority throughout my political career. Human rights are a prominent topic in many of my meetings with foreign leaders. During these discussions, Europe is often described as a role model for human rights protection around the world. People say that in Europe you can speak your mind, you have access to a functioning justice system, and everyone has equal opportunities as well as access to social security.

As a European, I am proud of what the EU has achieved over the past 60 years in terms of peace, stability, and prosperity. The promotion and protection of human rights is an integral part of the European success story. A society cannot prosper if people are unable to realize their rights in human dignity and free from discrimination.

Few regions in the world have a human rights framework as elaborate as the European Union. We developed the European Convention of Human Rights, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and we created two very strong courts of justice that issue binding rulings for every government in the EU.

At the same time, looking at the ongoing refugee crisis and the related political discourse, I ask myself: is the European Union really a champion of human rights and solidarity? Are we protecting human rights only when it is convenient, and only for some? How do we deal, as a Union, with other pressing challenges – the economic crisis, massive youth

unemployment, and inequality – which are closely interlinked with human rights?

Of course, the European Union is not perfect, but I firmly believe that acting together is our only option. We need to focus on what Europe can achieve, not the many ways in which it can fail. If we make every effort to cooperate closely, Europe really can be a champion of human rights.

To reach that goal, the work of human rights activists and rights holders, as well as decision-makers in government at the national and EU-levels is of the utmost importance. The Fundamental Rights Forum connects people, initiatives and decision-makers to exchange ideas, best practices, and to network, and even more importantly to develop concrete strategies for action.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The major topics of the 2016 forum are most timely: refugee protection, inclusion and the fight against inequality, and the human rights challenges of the digital age. Let me briefly share my thoughts on these topics.

### 1. Refugee protection

Without a doubt, the ongoing refugee crisis is the biggest challenge for the European Union at the moment: thousands of people are fleeing from war zones; many of them lose their lives on their way to Europe. At the same time, European countries are closing their borders because they are simply overwhelmed by the numbers of people arriving. Austria accepted 90.000 asylum applications in 2015, roughly 1% of our population. Some fellow EU member states also surpassed their fair share, while others hardly shared the burden at all. The current policy of European countries is far from ideal, and we all know it.

However, in times like these, European cooperation is the only solution. Political decision-makers must be supported and also

pushed by civil society and experts to develop solutions which on the one hand safeguard the rights of persons fleeing from war and persecution, and on the other hand address the fears and concerns of many European citizens. The Fundamental Rights Forum has gathered all the actors and expertise we need. I encourage you to contribute to developing strategies on refugee protection that help to overcome the current stalemate and polarization.

## 2. Inclusion and Equality

The ongoing refugee crisis has also brought the discourse on inclusion and equality in European societies to the forefront. Populist parties present a return to ethnically homogenous societies of the past as a solution to the fears of globalization and diversity. It is dangerous to engage in such thinking, rather than to make every effort so that everyone living in Europe feels at home and is offered opportunities and life perspectives. Diversity enriches our democracies and facilitates our prosperity.

It is a fact that xenophobia and fears of “the other” are on the rise. But it is also true that we never had more awareness, as well as robust laws and policies to fight discrimination and inequality, and to prosecute hate crimes. We in Austria understand the need for inclusion much better today than during the previous migration waves of the 1960s and 70s. Integration and inclusion are a joint effort of the host country and the new residents. Active measures have to be employed to address fears, misunderstandings, and to be clear about rules and expectations. The reality in our countries proves that inclusion and equality requires continued efforts

### 3. Challenges of the digital age

In our age of rapidly advancing technologies, we lag behind in using our human-rights framework to prevent those new technical possibilities from being used to infringe on the right to privacy, for example. I am glad that European countries, including Austria, took the initiative to start a debate about the

right to privacy in the digital age at the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly. The European Union leads the way in this regard: our EU Fundamental Rights Charter expressly protects personal data, and our legal framework is more refined than existing international standards. However, much needs to be done to put those standards into practice, including in Europe. I encourage this Fundamental Rights Forum to advance the protection framework by developing concrete strategies and tools for its implementation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am extremely pleased that the Fundamental Rights Agency found its home in Vienna, and that the Fundamental Rights Forum is taking place here. It once again proves that Vienna is a hub for the protection of human rights.

I am convinced that this Fundamental Rights Forum – and the efforts of all of its participants in the coming days and beyond – will make a lasting impact on the full realization of human rights

in the European Union. Let us focus on what Europe is able to achieve, on the opportunities that unite us, rather than the challenges that separate us.

Thank you very much.