

Speech by Ankie Broekers-Knol, President of the Eerste Kamer (Senate) of the States General of the Netherlands, on the occasion of the National Day (Nationalfeiertag) of Austria (26th of October)

The Hague, 25th of October 2018

Sehr verehrte Frau Botschafterin,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Het is een grote eer voor mij te mogen spreken tijdens deze viering van de Nationalfeiertag van de Bondsrepubliek Oostenrijk.

Es ist eine grosse Ehre für mich heute anlässlich des Nationalfeiertages der Bundesrepublik Oesterreich eine Rede halten zu können.

Ich habe mich überlegt meine Rede auf Deutsch oder auf Holländisch zu halten, aber wegen die viele ausländische Gäste scheint es mir besser für meine Rede die Englische Sprache zu benützen.

Tomorrow, the 26th of October, it will be 63 years ago that the declaration of everlasting neutrality was made by Austria. This very day – 63 years ago – on the 25th of October, the last allied troops, Americans, English, French, Sovjets, left the country. This was agreed upon in the State-treaty the allied countries and the Austrian government contracted a few months earlier in May. Thus a difficult period in the history of Austria came to an end.

I still remember that moment well. My parents, their friends and acquaintances were relieved. It was strongly felt that Austria had returned to the Western world. Or, as a Dutch newspaper wrote about the State-treaty: “The people of Austria regained their independence”.

The iron curtain formed a threat to a free society. An Austria without allied troops, an Austria that no longer would be part of ‘containment’, a phrase coined by George Kennan, an Austria with an everlasting guaranteed neutrality was a ray of hope in the political constellation at the time.

One of Austria’s greatest writers, Stefan Zweig, wrote in his posthumously published book ‘Die Welt von Gestern’: “Nur wer Helles und Dunkles, Krieg und Frieden, Aufstieg und Niedergang erfahren, nur der hat wahrhaft gelebt.” (“Only the one who has experienced light and dark, war and peace, rise and fall, only that person has truly lived.”)

Austria not only celebrates Nationalfeiertag on the 26th of October but also the fact that 100 years ago the Republic of Austria was founded. These 100 years have been quite turbulent (troublesome, eventful). Like in several other countries in Europe the end of the first World War marked the beginning of a new order, the beginning of an independent, free, democratic state.

On the 12th of November 1918 the 'Gründung der Republik Oesterreich' was proclaimed in parliament and shortly thereafter made public to 100.000 people gathered in front of the parliament building. Because of what happened during the 30's and the 40's of the last century it took until 1955 for Austria to truly become a free and democratic nation.

And forty years after signing the State-treaty, Austria became a member of the then 15 member European Union in 1995. From July until January 2018 Austria presides over the 27 member European Union while one member, number 28, is unfortunately on the way out. During the Austrian presidency a number of important issues are on the agenda, the oncoming Brexit posing the hardest task to reach an agreement on.

In view of the new balance in the European Union with the approaching departure of the United Kingdom but also considering the enhanced cooperation between the Visegrád countries, it is paramount that the geographical position and the neutrality of Austria are of greater importance than ever. Because of its history Austria has an enormous knowledge of and longstanding contacts with these Central European countries. Austria knows these countries.

The same goes for the countries of the Western Balkans. In the current political climate it is important that the countries of the Western Balkans feel, know, perceive that they belong to Europe, that they are European countries, even though the perspective of a membership is far away. Especially Austria can play an important role in this. The position of Austria as a liaison between the Western part of Europe and the Central and South-eastern part is invaluable.

Because of its neutrality Austria also plays an important role on the world stage. In Vienna various international organisations have their seats. Amongst others OCSE, the International Atomic Energy Agency, UNIDO, OPEC. By the way, after a long debate in the Senate- there even was a change of cabinet in the meantime - the Dutch government finally decided

to remain in UNIDO contrary to what the initial intention of the Dutch government was before the change of cabinet.

The relationship between our two countries, Austria and the Netherlands, is excellent for many reasons. I once again realised this during my visit to Vienna in May of this year. And your Kanzler, comparable in age to a growing number of party leaders in our Tweede Kamer, the Second Chamber, has a good relationship with our prime minister Rutte. On many topics and issues Austria and the Netherlands share the same opinions.

In three weeks' time we will receive Bundespräsident Van der Bellen at the States General. This visit will also underline the further strengthening of relations between our two countries and our parliaments. Our relations go back to 1477 when the Burgundian empire and the Habsburg empire became linked as a result of the marriage between emperor Maximilian I of Austria and Maria of Burgundy.

Maybe you already knew, but the Keizersgracht in Amsterdam is named after emperor Maximilian. In 1489 he bestowed on the city of Amsterdam the privilege to mount the coat of arms of the city with the imperial crown. The bond between the provinces of the Netherlands and the Habsburg empire became even stronger under the rule of emperor Charles V, grandson to Maximilian. Charles V abdicated – quite out of the ordinary in those days – on the 25th of October 1555. During his abdication speech he was supported by William of Orange, the founding father of the Netherlands.

More trivial, but nonetheless slightly relevant: the residence of the ambassador of the Netherlands to Austria used to be the house of Richard Strauss. The street where the villa is located is one of the few streets in Vienna named after a Dutchman: the born in Leiden botanist Nicolaus Joseph von Jacquin.

Another fact not many people are aware of is that in 1884 and 1885 Kaiserin Elisabeth spent the summer in Zandvoort incognito under the name of Gräfin von Hohenembs. There still is a bust of Sissi on the boulevard in Zandvoort in commemoration of her visits. For their part many Dutchmen – including the royal family – for many decades spend their holidays, especially the winter sports, in Austria. No wonder so many ski instructors speak Dutch!

Sehr verehrte Frau Botschafterin, sehr verehrte Frau Gürer,

In May this year I had the honour to receive the Grosses Goldenes Ehrenzeichen am Bande der Republik Oesterreich. On that very special – private - occasion I had the opportunity to thank the Bundespräsident and you for the honour bestowed on me. In my speech I quoted part of the Austrian anthem and I gladly do it again today:

“Mutig in die neuen Zeiten
Frei und glaubig sieh uns schreiten
Arbeitsfroh und hoffnungsreich
(.....) Vielgeliebtes Oesterreich”

Laura von Preradovic wrote the lyrics in 1946, shortly after the second World War. In those days Austria – and the whole of Europe – was cautiously starting the post-war reconstruction: courageous in the new times. On the 26th of October 1955 those free, new times finally became a reality for Austria.

I congratulate Austria and all Austrians with this Nationalfeiertag. Especially in this particular year of the 100 year celebration of the foundation of the Republic of Austria and Austria holding the six month presidency of the European Union. In the Netherlands we cherish the excellent bond between Austria and the Netherlands, both bilaterally and within the European Union. We do hope and trust that this bond will remain tight for many years to come.

It is an honour to celebrate this important day with you.

Herzlichen Glückwunsch.