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**Remarks on receiving the Grand Decoration of Honour in Gold with Star
for Services to the Republic of Austria**

Edited transcript of the remarks by Michael O'Flaherty
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

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What can I say, dear Ambassador, Excellencies, so many friends, colleagues in this room. I want to thank you very much. I want to thank you for the great honour that you have done me.

I accept the honour, but I accept it, and I'm very clear on this, not just for myself, but for all those who work at the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, and for all those who work standing up for human rights everywhere, including my current colleagues at the Council of Europe.

I am particularly pleased to receive this honour from Austria. That is very special for me.

Jan and I have had eight remarkable years in the country, and we have been so greatly enriched by the experience. I have to say that when I first went to Austria, my knowledge of the country was pretty basic.

I am ashamed to say that, like many Irish people of my age, my primary source of knowledge was the film *The Sound of Music*. It is a good movie. But what it certainly did was to impress upon me the great beauty of the country, the passion for music, again demonstrated to us tonight, and the importance of the schnitzel in the national cuisine!

It was only when I came to Vienna in 2015 that I had a deep and immersive experience of this modern, thriving, and important country. It is not by accident that Vienna is voted as the best city in the world to live in every year, and we can attest to that. I think you have to live somewhere during the COVID period to get to know the true colours of a country and of a city. We have felt very safe and very well looked after in Austria during these two extraordinary years.

But, of course, what I want to talk about tonight is Austria's role as a leader in human rights. I suspect that not many people in this room are aware of the extraordinary initiative that Austria took 31 years ago to convene a World Conference on Human Rights.

There has not been one since. People were afraid to go near it for fear that it would not turn out well. Austria took up the challenge, Austria delivered remarkable results, and it is relevant today, because year after year since then, Austria has taken the lead in securing the implementation of the commitments made at the World Conference.

If it wasn't for the Vienna World Conference, we wouldn't have a Human Rights Commission here in Ireland and an EU Fundamental Rights Agency in Vienna.

What is more, one of the provisions in the outcome of the Vienna World Conference was the establishment of an office of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. That was delivered in record time, and it is such a pleasure to have a wonderful Austrian in that role, Volker Turk, a dear friend, and I am so impressed by what he is achieving.

But of course, it is also part of that passion for human rights that lay behind how Austria fought so hard to have the EU Fundamental Rights Agency based in its capital, and you have taken very good care of the Agency ever since. You have been a good host to the Agency. You have been an enabling and an empowering host in terms of all of those achievements that Jim has just talked about, and indeed, you yourself, Ambassador.

One way of exemplifying the commitment of the host country to the Agency is the strong personal commitment of your Heads of State to the work of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency.

First President Fischer, we only overlapped for a short time, and then President Van der Bellen, and he has been a very good friend, a patron of repeated events that we have organised, including the periodic Fundamental Rights Forums that have taken place every two years. But what I particularly remember about President Van der Bellen was a speech he gave in 2017, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary event of the Fundamental Rights Agency. It was his first speech on human rights since being elected as President, and it was a tour de force.

It was a strong, powerful statement of personal commitments to human rights, as inherent in his mandate as President, as essential to the work of government in his country, and everywhere. I have never forgotten those very words. I think Austria is very fortunate indeed to have President Van der Bellen as leader, as Head of State in these very challenging times for human rights in Europe.

These are indeed challenging times everywhere, not just in any one country. This is arguably the most challenging, the most difficult time to stand up for human rights in a couple of generations.

It is about human rights abuses on a scale that is dreadful, but it has always been about human rights abuses on a scale that is dreadful. What is different today is the repudiation of human rights.

There is an increasing willingness, even in respectable political spaces, to say, if that human right gets in my way, I will ignore it. If I do not like this treaty, we will pull away from it. It has even become fashionable in polite society to debate whether human rights have reached their sell-by date.

This is very shocking because there is no Plan B. There is no other universally agreed roadmap for standing up for human dignity. So, no matter how dire the situation is, we have to keep going.

Personally, I am hopeful. I believe that we can achieve a better future. And I remember what Václav Havel said about hope. He said hope is not a sentiment, it is a duty. And so, if all else fails, I rely on that.

But let the last words today, if you will allow me, be those of President Van der Bellen. I would like to quote him from that remarkable speech in 2017. Ambassador, friends, with renewed thanks and deepest appreciation, allow me to conclude, and as I said, with not my words, but those of President Van der Bellen: "I am confident that in the end, European solidarity will prevail over nationalist tendencies, that our deeply rooted common values as human beings will overcome polarisation, and that standing up for the other will win out over indifference".

Thank you very much.