



Dear Presidency of the Youth Parliament,
My dear friend, Ms. Blanka Bartol,
Dear Mayor Fištravec,
Dear Mr Headmaster Lorenčič,
Dear Teachers, young parliamentarians, colleagues and friends.

Welcome to the 13th meeting of the Youth Parliament to the Alpine Convention in Maribor!

Dobrodošli na trinajstem srečanju Mladinskega parlamenta Alpske konvencije v Mariboru!

Bienvenue à la 13e réunion du Parlement des Jeunes de la Convention alpine à Maribor !

Benvenuti alla tredicesima riunione del Parlamento dei Giovani della Convenzione delle Alpi a Maribor!

Willkommen bei der 13. Sitzung des Jugendparlaments der Alpenkonvention in Maribor!

In the midst of the US civil war, a feverish and frail-looking Abraham Lincoln stood at the center of a graveyard that some time before had been the location of a fierce and unrelenting battle in the war between the North and the South. Lincoln was not even the featured speaker at the event. Some then well-known professor was, who spoke for more than two hours using several thousand words – words that nobody remembers today. Then Lincoln stood up, took the floor and talked for not even three minutes using not more than 271 words. 271 words, however, that made history and became known as the Gettysburg address. At the time American democracy was literally under fire from forces within. And democracy it was that Lincoln needed to defend, he needed to make sure that – in his own words – it would not perish. Most famously Abraham Lincoln described democracy as “**the government of the people by the people and for the people**”.

Well, that’s an excellent quote, isn’t it?? Yes, it is intriguing and it is, indeed, a fascinating quote. However, a quote that raises more questions than it answers:

Who are these *people* that should govern and be allowed to vote? Do they have to fulfill certain criteria, like age, gender color or race or religion or hair color? Do they have to be landowners or at least own a nice car? Or would just everyone be eligible to vote? Should you have a minimum IQ to vote? Or a minimum amount of taxes that you pay? Or does the term “people” refer to all citizens? Or all people present in a given territory?

How should they govern? How would these “people” – whoever they are – reach their conclusions? Should they make unanimous decisions? Or two-third majority votes? Or 73 out of a hundred? Or a simple majority? How would they vote: secretly in a voting booth or under the direction of a superior? Or by waving with their hands? Would they elect a leader who would make decisions for them? If so, how would they vote for him? Which majority? Would all the votes have the same weight? Or would yours be more valuable than mine? Or would you have 20 votes each and I 19?

And once you have decided to appoint a specific person as a leader, or president, or prime-minister or king or queen – how could you get rid of this person?

And then: who are the people that should actually be governed? Should it be the same group of people that actually votes and governs? Or should it be only the citizens? Or everybody who is physically present in a territory? And talking about territory: if we decide which and how people would govern and which and how people would be governed, how would we know, where they would govern?

I admit, seen together, these questions seem rather odd, maybe even a bit strange. But the answer to each and every one of these questions is of crucial importance for the functioning of democracies. Each of these elements – and many more – can decide on the value, the validity and the credibility of a democracy.

It is clear by now that democracy is a pretty complex system of closely inter-related elements, rules and regulations. And the reality is that the change of just one single element, may have consequences for the entire system; it may even put the whole institution in question and hence in jeopardy.

Paradoxically, this is what makes democracy strong and weak at the same time. And it shows that democracy is not an invincible institution, but sometimes rather vulnerable and in need of constant care and dedication.

Democracy needs people just as people need democracy.

Democracy is not a gift that we get for free or can order cheaply online. It is a benefit that we need to earn ourselves to deserve it. In other words, it requires hard work. And this is where today’s populism comes in – with its “simple answers” and “easy solutions” usually combined with an exaggerated sense of self-esteem and superiority vis-à-vis other, weaker members of society.

The populist mechanism at place usually works as follows:

First, find a problem, better still call it a crises, to make sure it sounds big and scary,

Second, on this basis create fear of losing something, a status, a privilege, for sure money,

Third, blame it on a weak group, a group in any case of which you know that they have no means to fight back and

Fourth, tell everyone that by treating this weaker group badly, the problems will go away.

In the end, however, the problem will still be there, you will not improve the situation of the people who voted for you. You will just treat another group badly or at least worse than before. So, the only thing you will have succeeded in is, weakening the weak. And by this, you will have managed to make the society as a whole weaker than before and you will have contributed to the erosion of democracy.

Dear colleagues and friends,

And then: You are here! The fact that you are here at the Youth Parliament of the Alpine Convention makes me believe that this is NOT what you want to achieve.

I assume that you are here, because you are willing to make a difference, to contribute that as societies we try to improve and not to deteriorate. And let me congratulate you on this wholeheartedly. Especially at times like this, where the so-called populism is trying to gain ground in all our democracies, we need people like you, people who are willing to engage, people who are willing to find workable solutions for issues at hand, people who are willing to sit down, learn a thing or two, try to understand what is going on and then – to the best of their ability – analyze the situation and, hence, try to argue their case and engage with others, or even argue with others. For, oddly enough, as Christopher Hitchens says, “time spent arguing is almost never wasted.”

By now, I have already spent more than three and a half times as many words, as Abraham Lincoln has done in Gettysburg, and I would still like to add some more.

The topic of soil that you have chosen as the core theme for this year’s YPAC session is again a crucial topic for our region. Soil and space are very limited resources. And the limitations are particularly significant and visible in the Alps. Just bear in mind two figures:

First, only 12% of the Alpine territory is suitable for human settlement, the rest is either too high, too steep or too exposed to natural dangers.

And secondly, never before in history have so many people lived in the Alps; almost 14.5 million people. Just one hundred years ago, there were only 8.5 million living in our region.

The soil and space of our region has thus become an arena for dealing with conflicting interests: the interests of farming, nature protection, transport, economy, housing for the people, tourism, climate change, the protection from natural risks, etc. etc.

So, we do need smart answers and good ideas, how to handle these conflicting interests in the future. So we do need YOUR smart answers and YOUR good ideas. I am keenly looking forward to learn from you, to listen and to read your postulations and also to engage with you even after the end of this YPAC week.

As always, I would like to thank your teachers who brought you here and are there for you with an admirable level of engagement and enthusiasm and I would like to ask you for a big round of applause for them.

I would also like to thank our hosts here in Maribor – the gymnasium and the city – who worked tirelessly to make this YPAC meeting happen. Also for them: an especially loud round of applause.

And I would like to thank the ministry for environment and spatial planning for their support to YPAC. Please join me for another round of applause.

Finally, it is up to you now. I wish to the Youth Parliament that it is guided by a wise and effective presidency. To the delegates of the Youth Parliament I wish many good ideas: Be tough in your arguments, but listen to your opponents. Be constructive and try to find the common ground. Work it out and make it happen! And to the presidency of the YPAC I hope that you will have the patience that sometimes is required when democracy is at work.

So after having talked 5.7 times as long as Abraham Lincoln, I wish:

Good luck to you all and thank you for your attention.