



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at a Symposium on the Forum Bellevue:  
“On the future of democracy –  
How do we strengthen the Republic?”  
on 11 March 2022  
at Schloss Bellevue**

We are all horrified by the images and reports coming out of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, Mariupol and many other cities in Ukraine. The brutal war of aggression that Russia’s President Putin has been waging for more than two weeks, the many lives this attack has cost, the suffering and destruction it has brought – all of this has shaken us to the very core.

At this very moment, countless Ukrainians are risking their lives to defend their republic against Russian troops. The struggle that people in Ukraine are engaged in against an aggressor with superior military might is not only courageous – it also sets an example. It has demonstrated to the world in a dramatic fashion that freedom and democracy are not guaranteed for all eternity, that they are under attack again today, not least because autocrats feel threatened by the openness of democracy.

For many people in our country, in Europe and in the world of liberal democracies, Putin’s war is a shock. However, this shock has not driven us apart or paralysed us. Rather, it has brought us together and led us to act with greater resolve.

We are currently seeing the liberal democracies in the European Union and in the Atlantic Alliance standing shoulder to shoulder to support Ukraine’s independence and to take action against a regime which has invaded another country with the aim of subjugating its citizens.

We are seeing hundreds of thousands of people, women and children from Ukraine seeking and finding refuge in the European Union. We are seeing millions of people all around Europe taking to the streets to demonstrate their desire for peace. We are witnessing many people showing solidarity for Russians who do not want this war, who are

suffering under its impact, who are courageously demonstrating their opposition to the dictatorial regime in Moscow and who are being threatened with imprisonment and worse for speaking the truth.

This war of aggression, which is ever more evidently also affecting the civilian population in Ukraine, poses a challenge for us. There must be a response to this injustice. The vast majority of people, including in Germany, are very clear about this.

The turning point marked by this war of aggression instigated by Putin will extract a price. Not only is our humanitarian solidarity, our readiness to take in people who have fled their homes, required once more. The necessary tough sanctions which isolate Russia will inevitably bring burdens, losses and uncertainties for us, too. And that is not the end of it. We are faced with the challenge of strengthening our own defence capability and that of the Alliance. The return of war to Europe teaches us that we have to be able to defend ourselves from attacks. In other words, democracies must be capable of defending themselves even when diplomatic avenues open up. For we can only negotiate successfully from a position of strength, not from a position of weakness. I am always keen to share the wonderful quote from John F. Kennedy's inauguration speech: "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate."

In the shadow of the war in Ukraine, we want to take stock of our forum on the future of democracy and look ahead: How can we strengthen the Republic? And what can we, what must we do now to make liberal democracy, the European Union and the transatlantic alliance fit for the future?

There are just under thirty men and women from academia, culture, media and politics around this table today, all of whom have taken part in one of the twelve events of the Forum Bellevue in recent years. They live or work in Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, the Netherlands, Italy, the UK or the United States. They view liberal democracy and of course its opponents from different angles. And they have standpoints which give us food for thought and, no doubt, provoke us into expressing our disagreement, too. They all represent a culture of argumentative debate on which our democracy thrives, from which it draws its very strength.

During the last year, most of you have reformulated, updated and further developed the ideas that you put forward at podiums in this room. This has resulted in a book, a powerful 432-page case for liberal democracy, a book which sets out paths towards a democratic future.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this Forum and this book "On the Future of Democracy – 36 Perspectives" as participants and authors. And I would also like to thank the Bertelsmann Stiftung and most particularly you, Ms Mohn. I know that this is a matter

very close to your heart! We are grateful for your support, without which we would not have been able to organise a Forum of this magnitude or a book project of this kind. Thank you very, very much to all of you! It is wonderful for us to see you gathered here today.

In my address to the Federal Convention on 13 February I said: Mr Putin, do not underestimate the strength of democracy! I had good reasons for this warning. And many of these reasons will come up again in the debate that we are about to hold.

It is a great honour for me, dear guests, to welcome the President of the Republic of Austria to our gathering today. Alexander Van der Bellen, we are always in touch, we have spoken on the phone during the last few days in particular, and I know how much you and your fellow Austrians are worried and alarmed by the war in Ukraine. The fact that you are here today to outline to us your view of the state of democracy and its future is not just a sign of friendship; it is also a demonstration of the cohesion within our European family.

Alexander, I am pleased that you are here to engage with us today and share your thoughts on the future of democracy. A very warm welcome to Bellevue and to Berlin!

What future does the West have? That was the question with which we opened the Forum Bellevue in September 2017. At that time – it seems so long ago – Donald Trump had just taken office as President of the United States, the government in London was initiating the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, disagreements on the hosting of millions of refugees from the war in Syria were rocking the European community, and in many democracies resentments and nationalist forces were attracting greater numbers of adherents, as a new fascination with authoritarianism seemed to gain ground.

The COVID-19 pandemic that broke out in the spring of 2020 deepened existing rifts in our society, opened up new ones and showed how fragile trust in democratic institutions is. This trust has faded at least among some members of our society. Meanwhile, the immense task of rapidly and resolutely changing course in politics, industry and society in order to stop global warming represents a new test for liberal democracy and for our cohesion.

Being confronted with obscurity and uncertainty, complexity and contingency, with the fact that in our life, in our world much is possible but nothing can be taken for granted – in my view, these experiences are not an argument against, but indeed a strong argument for liberal democracy!

Despite all of the challenges that I have discussed, I remain confident. Because liberal democracy is the only political order in which we face up to the realities of the world as political equals and free agents; in which we do not place our fate in the hands of others, but

develop confidence in our own abilities; in which we learn from mistakes and above all are capable of correcting course after we have set out and, perhaps precisely for this reason, of continually changing things for the better.

This makes for strenuous, painstaking work in day-to-day politics. Amid the daily toil of democracy, we do not always feel inspired by the lofty values of this societal order. And yet we are now seeing what we would lose if we gave up on them.

In a democracy, we take society as it comes, in all of its diversity, with its contrasts, with its contradictions. We recognise ourselves, amid all of our individual differences, to be citizens who enjoy the same freedom to actively contribute to political decision-making and who indeed should do so. Dictatorships, on the other hand, know only devotees and enemies, servants or outcasts. Difference is met with suspicion, contradiction seen as betrayal. Lively debate is increasingly supplanted by control, punishment, crippling fear and violence.

In a democracy, we recognise that “the people” only ever exist in the plural. The will of the people is neither unequivocal nor simply already there; we must constantly re-establish it and express it anew in open, imperfect processes, by using arguments to fight for what is hopefully the best solution, negotiating conflicts of values, balancing interests, forging compromises. Perhaps it is this that makes a liberal society so good at peace, both internally and externally. In any case, authoritarian nationalism spins a web of ethnonationalist lies in which the people become a historical myth to which collective traits and claims to ownership are ascribed. Groups that deviate from this are declared “enemies of the people” and threatened with destruction. This is what makes authoritarian nationalism so aggressive, both internally and externally.

When we give up on democracy because it is too strenuous, we therefore lose not only our freedom but ultimately also the possibility of living together peacefully in this world of cultural differences.

But strengthening democracy also means identifying its conditions and defending its foundations. The erosion of these conditions and foundations does not begin with naked violence. It begins before this, wherever lethargy and impatience, irritability and indifference gain the upper hand, and wherever the democratic mainstream loses its confidence.

For liberal democracy to succeed, it needs institutions for the building of political will in which decisions can be made and responsibility can be taken for them. It needs strong parliaments and sharp minds who do not shy away from taking public office. It needs freedom for art and independent media that differentiate between facts and fake news, uncover disinformation and conspiracy theories, allow many voices to be

heard and reach a wide audience. It needs education, not least historical and political education, because it is sustained by enlightened, critical, confident citizens who have the courage to avail themselves of their own powers of reason. Liberal democracy needs freedom for science and academia, because it cannot solve real problems unless it is guided by demonstrable facts and well-founded normative judgements. It needs the rule of law, in which political power is subject to the law and we are protected from arbitrary state action.

And not least, indeed first and foremost, liberal democracy needs the participation of the people! It needs people who see themselves not only as "customers of the state", but as citizens who play an active role, who care about more than just themselves.

In these times, we must recall the values and strengths of our democracy. And, above all, we must learn once again to fight for liberal democracy! We have the better arguments, better ones in any case than the enemies of open societies. Now in particular, we must make freedom, self-determination and human rights our common cause; now in particular, we must take the side of democracy!

After the peaceful revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, many of us hoped that we were now experiencing some form of historical progress, that we were now on the path to a future of democracy and worldwide cooperation. And we hoped that there was no going back to those old days. This hope was illusory, as we have discovered, but perhaps it was not entirely false when we took it as our lodestar. On the contrary, the confident belief in the strength of freedom and democracy is something that we need all the more today.

We have now understood, if we had not already, that peace and freedom cannot be taken for granted. They demand a price from us, they demand personal commitment. It falls to us, the citizens, to defend and strengthen liberal democracy. It falls to us to ensure that subsequent generations, too, will be able to live well, to shape their own future on this planet.

What we can do, want to do, must do together, that is what we are about to discuss. But first I will give the floor and the microphone to my friend and colleague Alexander Van der Bellen.

Thank you very much.