



Federal President
Alexander Van der Bellen

Speech by

Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen

at the symposium

“On the Future of Democracy – How do we strengthen the Republic?”

at Schloss Bellevue in Berlin

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Federal President – dear Frank-Walter,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before speaking in detail about the topic of this symposium, I, too, would like to pause for a moment, to think of all of the people in Ukraine who at this time are fighting for their country, for their democracy and for their lives. It is heart-wrenching to think of all of the innocent children, as well as their mothers and fathers – people who simply wanted to live in peace and for days now have been forced to take cover in basements, air-raid shelters and subway stations. People who have fled their homes. People whose lives are in danger. It is awful. It is despicable, and we must all now show solidarity and stand up for what we believe in.

How did we get to this point?

Ladies and gentlemen, dear Federal President – dear Frank-Walter,

Thank you very much for inviting me to join you here, for this opportunity to jointly think about and discuss democracy.

Only a few weeks ago, no one could have imagined that today we would be experiencing a war of aggression in Europe. Much of what we thought to be iron-clad certainty is being called into question. As you said in your speech, dear Frank-Walter, the things we need now are reason, resoluteness, defense of liberal democracy, an appreciation of what we have, and measured words, combined with a willingness to speak and negotiate.

You mentioned a good and famous quote by John F. Kennedy:

“Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.”

Kennedy knew what he was talking about.

You also said – and I quote: “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 have confidence in our ability to resolve problems together; in which we learn from mistakes, correct our course time and again and, precisely for these reasons, can change things for the better.”

For this, we need a common understanding of the problems we actually face – meaning that we need an understanding of reality.

Twenty years ago, I would not have believed that one day we would be in a situation in which scientific findings, and plain and simple facts, are not only questioned but flat out denied. And that this is being done not only by some eccentric individuals, but by a significant number of people, including some political figures, with the result that our entire social order and system of values are being called into question: For every fact there is suddenly a so-called “alternative fact”. What a horrible term that maligns all intelligent thinking.

Only thirty years ago, there was much talk about the “End of History”; today, one must acknowledge that we live in an age of multiple, contradictory and alternative histories. It is a time of stories and so-called narratives. In retrospect, we can say that it was not the end of history, but rather the beginning of little stories.

Little stories that appear to exist in parallel and on a par with each other, with us being free to choose amongst them, like consumer items in any ordinary supermarket. Little stories some of which are so outrageous it is incomprehensible how anyone could believe them. These little stories, nicely packaged and polished, with various degrees of credibility, form the fabric of what many of us consider to be our everyday life and, quite simply, our reality.

They are assembled and constructed not by our selective awareness, but by algorithms. Algorithms that are the driving force behind what has meanwhile become the culturally dominant form of how we get information – “social media”.

I will be the last one to fundamentally condemn social media. I do not think I would have won the 2016 Austrian presidential election without them. That must be clearly said.

Yet there is also another side to them. They have become a digital veil, so to speak, a veil that many of us have wrapped ourselves in, separating us from reality. It is a veil that filters and changes how we view the real world. One that continuously offers us information that, while it is not necessarily true, is capable of triggering a maximum degree of emotions. Because these emotions keep users glued to their social media feeds. And the longer users stay engaged, the more profit the owner generates from the platform.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is simply not in keeping with the principles of a liberal democracy for these algorithms to have a massive, formative influence on our everyday thinking while their design remains a mystery to us. We see only the effects. And these suggest that – and there is no other way for me to say this – here, lies are fuelling profits. Here, the truth and facts are being relativised. Here, emotions are being harnessed to build an illusory reality.

Maybe I am exaggerating. I will be happy if you can prove me wrong. Quite possibly, this – let us call it ignorance – is merely partial, meaning that a person has outlandish views on only one issue, due to his or her consumption of social media and the influence of the respective algorithms. That this person’s views may diverge on only this one issue; in all other respects, he or she may be a normal, intelligent, trustworthy and capable individual – and I know people who fit this description.

So the question is: am I making a mountain out of a molehill, or does this actually pose a threat to our democracy in the long term? If so, we should use much clearer language and not resort to appeasement so often. We should again make more frequent use of the categories “truth” and “lie”. Because they play a significant role, not only in the present. In Russia, the authorities have forbidden naming the current events a “war”. But what else could it be?

And there are still people who refuse to use the word “climate crisis”, who simply deny that the climate crisis is anthropogenic, or man made. This, however, is not amusing “fake news” – it is a flat-out, insolent lie that can potentially be fatal for all of humanity. And it should be clearly named thus.

The enemies of democracy distort the truth. They gain influence by relativising and falsifying things that cannot be relativised. Maybe we have become negligent, with misplaced tolerance.

It is not only policy-makers who have a responsibility here. I would actually go a step further, because so-called “fake news” is comprised of stories that people simply pass on. We ignore the responsibility of the person who spreads them. It is not only the medium. It is the people who use the medium and pass on unfiltered content. Behind each of these campaigns there are vested interests. And everyone who spreads “fake news” becomes a transmitter. They therefore share in the responsibility.

This personal responsibility of every individual has a lot to do with our democracy. Because each and every person shares in the responsibility for the success of democracy. It is not something we are simply born into and can count on it to keep functioning. Rather, it is how we act, what we decide and how we speak that will determine whether or not democracy is possible.

As Federal President, I must choose my words carefully and remain neutral. I must to the greatest extent possible remain objective. However, sometimes that is very hard to do. At home, in Austria, like in other countries, there were demonstrations during the pandemic. That is a fundamental right. We do not call into question the freedom of assembly. But what about those who deliberately and systematically try to convince people that they live in a dictatorship? I vividly recall those demonstrations: “freedom”, “dictatorship”. Freedom, it is claimed, is ignoring the pandemic; and dictatorship is what politicians are trying to do to keep the healthcare system from collapsing.

These days, in Ukraine, people are taking to the streets. They are blocking Putin’s tanks because they do not want to live in a dictatorship. We must not let terms like “dictatorship” be relativised. We must return to making a clear distinction between what is the truth and what is a lie. We must do a better job of calling out lies. It is the only way for us to see and recognise reality for what it is – the foundation of a life in freedom and independence. Democracy must not be tolerant of those who relativise and lie.

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Those, you will recall, are the words of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Fundamental rights, liberal freedoms, human rights and minority rights form the bedrock of a liberal democracy. And evidently, during the past two years, it has been hard to make it clear to many people that conflicts can arise between certain fundamental rights. During a pandemic, there is a conflict between the right to freedom and the right to health. There is a continuous conflict of values between freedom and equality – and it is the job of policy-makers to maintain the proper balance between the two. There is simply no way that, when policy-makers try to strike a balance between fundamental rights, this makes the system a dictatorship. Indeed, on this point, the majority must not always be right. That is correct: the majority is not always right. And that is why we need not only minority rights, but also the rule of law, which allows matters to be taken to the Constitutional Court. This recourse was actually taken in a number of cases. At times the court ruled in favour of the plaintiffs, and other times it did not.

Again – if I am getting too hung up on this, please tell me.

Finally, I would like to underscore that we need to talk to each other, even though discussions take time. Again and again, there are objections that democracy is too slow. That it involves too many disputes. I am sick and tired of hearing this. What is being implied is that, in our system, it would be smarter for there to be a lone man or woman at the top.

But at least, in our system, it is impossible for a Head of State to act against the interests of his or her fellow citizens, for people to be imprisoned for expressing their opinions and for a war to be launched against the will of one's fellow citizens. Were this not the case, Russia would not need to impose any censorship.

The Austrian-British philosopher Sir Karl Popper once said: “You can choose whatever name you like for the two types of government. I personally call the type of government which can be removed without violence ‘democracy’ and the other ‘tyranny’.”

And yes, democracy can be tough, as it requires hard work.

It requires that you listen to each other and debate with each other. It requires compromise – honest compromise! And that is exactly why we should not denounce compromise. Jointly solving problems: this is the true strength of democracy. And when a supposed strongman makes lonely decisions, with no democratic safety net, no rule of law and no checks and balances – though these may indeed be complicated – then, right now, what can happen is on full display.

Let me repeat: democracy is strength. Talking is strength. It is discourse, speaking with one another, that makes us strong. And for us to speak with one another, we must be in agreement on what constitutes reality.

Thank you very much.



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