



BUNDESPRÄSIDENTIALAMT

The speech online:
www.bundespraesident.de

page 1 to 8

**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the Forum Bellevue
a series of panel discussions on the future of democracy
“What future does the West have?”
at Schloss Bellevue
on 19 September 2017**

Dear Professor Winkler,

It seems like only yesterday, but – and I looked this up – two and half years have passed since you invited me to present the fourth and final volume of your *Geschichte des Westens*, or *A History of the West*. I recall the discussion, and I know that we jointly came to the conclusion that this country in its own particular way has arrived in the West, after many delays and detours. It has been accepted by the transatlantic world with all rights and obligations.

Not much time has passed since then, and yet everything seems different today. Back then, neither of us would have entertained the idea that you would soon be prompted to pen a new book, with a fearful title that your readers would probably have least expected from you: *Zerbricht der Westen?*, or *Is the West falling apart?*

In a few minutes, you will have the first opportunity to weigh in on this question. But before that, allow me to offer you all a very warm welcome. Let me especially welcome – along with Professor Winkler – our guests and fellow panel members Susan Neiman and Parag Khanna. Together with you, we intend to open the Forum Bellevue on the Future of Democracy this evening, and I would like to offer all of you a very warm welcome to this event.

It is the first in a series of panel discussions that is very close to my heart, considering that, these days, more and more things we long believed with certainty are being lost. This series will extend over roughly the next two years. It will not focus primarily on everyday political issues – even though in the course of our discussions I’m sure we won’t ignore these altogether. Instead, we will look into a question that is being asked by policy-makers everywhere: How can we

ADDRESS	Bundespräsidialamt 11010 Berlin
TEL	+49 30 2000-2021
FAX	+49 30 1810200-2870
E-MAIL	presse@bpra.bund.de
INTERNET	www.bundespraesident.de

preserve the fundamental elements of our open society? How can we keep in place what is needed to ensure the success of liberal democracy?

We all know that the watershed events of 1989 and 1990 did not mark the end of history – even though this was predicted, even hoped for, by some. I recently reread the wonderful speech that Richard von Weizsäcker delivered at the official state celebration of the Day of German Unity on 3 October 1990. When reading this speech today, you sense the great euphoria that was felt by everyone at the time. The German people’s joy about finally obtaining unity and being able to live their lives in peace and freedom was closely linked to the hope that freedom and democracy would spread from this epicentre throughout the world.

“Wherever the urge for political freedom, or a system marked by efficiency, social justice and respect for human rights breaks through – even into the heart of Peking,” Weizsäcker said back then, “the values and rules of the Western democracies are everyone’s yardstick.”

I don’t know to what extent present-day China would choose to compare itself with the United States, or with today’s Europe.

At any rate, merely 27 years after these euphoric words were spoken, they sound like a message from a distant world. These days, we get daily, and at times also painful, reminders of how freedom, the rule of law and human rights can by no means be taken for granted – not even in places where they seemed well established. We are realising that historic achievements can be lost when their foundations begin to crumble. What fills us with concern these days is not the end of history, but the open-endedness and uncertainty of history. That will be the focus of our discussion this evening.

In recent times, we’ve been witnessing the calling into doubt of the idea of open societies and liberal democracies. Occasionally, they are even mocked or challenged. This is happening far to the west and to the east of Europe’s borders. But it’s also happening – truth be told – right here in Europe. Some societies appear to have been infected by the fever of authoritarianism. Nationalist and populist movements are in vogue, fuelling hatred and spreading prejudice. Democratic countries are being deformed. These days, those who represent “authoritarian” or “illiberal” democracies – and who thereby stand in stark contrast to the model of liberal democracy – are putting their power on full display. Intellectuals who cast doubt on the very idea of democracy – and here the American philosopher Jason Brennan and his book *Against Democracy* come to mind – are also on our own country’s best seller lists.

In Germany, there's no reason to be alarmist. Our democracy is stable. However, these days, we do see that politicians are loudly booed and insulted, or get things thrown at them.

Let me be quite clear: Free campaigning by political parties ahead of Bundestag elections is part and parcel of the people's right to vote for whom they choose. Heated debates are permitted. And considering the decisions that need to be taken, they are even necessary. We need competition between opinions and political parties and movements. Those with different views must be able to engage in debate, especially without intimidation or becoming the target of violence. This is an achievement of our political culture, one in which we can take great pride. In democratic discourse, throwing tomatoes and blowing whistles is no way to obtain greater insight, just like aching ears do not prove that controversial arguments have been exchanged.

People who go to public rallies merely to prevent others from speaking are attacking the very open debate they are calling for. People who seek to intimidate journalists with threats are clearly not interested in substance. Precisely those who are furious and who have a different view should speak up – not try to silence others. Some will have you believe otherwise, but when it comes to political debate in Germany, there are no taboos or bans on speaking – as long as one does not cross the line to slander, or incite hatred or violence.

Everyone has the right to speak his or her mind in public. No one must fear being put in prison for critical opinions. But I do want to make one point. There is no harm in listening to people who offer good – or not so good – arguments and put forward a different view. It is a valuable part of political culture in Germany that, despite our many different opinions and conflicting interests, we have never questioned the legitimacy of political competition. This is because, at least until now, no party has ever claimed to represent, or to speak for, the entirety of the German people.

Still, we need to ask ourselves where the anger that we see in some places is coming from. In Germany, too, populists are taking advantage of disappointment and uncertainty. Some people do not feel represented, or fundamentally doubt whether our state can solve today's truly urgent issues. Some have lost all faith in democratic processes and institutions, as well as in the media. Others openly display contempt and hatred for parties and politicians, not only during election campaigns. Then there are those who have "simply started to believe in a world without politics," as Christoph Möllers poignantly described a while ago in Merkur magazine. I'd say, not everyone who loses interest is an enemy of democracy. But democracy is weakened in the process.

Last but not least, we're experiencing how democratic discourse is changing, most importantly due to the internet and social media. In an age of information bubbles and echo chambers, it appears that fewer and fewer citizens are actually focused on the same subjects. Hate speech and malicious comments serve to further polarise public opinion. The spread of fake news has left some under the impression that everything is a lie, anyway. Others confuse politics with a slapstick show and think what's most important is sending out a very original tweet. Or being as off the wall, loud or disrespectful as possible.

That's all I want to say to describe the state of affairs. And yet, if some simply shrug their shoulders and casually say "everything's going down the drain anyway," I do not at all agree with them. This doesn't mean that we who believe in democracy should think we're on safe ground and can confidently get back to business as usual, in good faith that everything will turn out all right in the end. We'd be ill advised to be all too complacent. Yes, politics must find deficiencies and fix them. It must not simply retreat into its shell when urgent answers are truly needed. But it has to be said that we, the citizens, must set about with resolve to take care of democracy. This also means we must once again learn to fight for it.

Those who are disappointed by democracy at some point actually expected it to deliver. Many people may simply be disappointed because their expectations are high – in some cases too high. This is how I see it: Democracy doesn't promise to provide all the answers, and what it does deliver is never final. Democracy endows temporary power and provides temporary solutions. It's about always asking questions, critical self-awareness and also about self-correction. Indeed, I think it may be the only political system in the world that includes the latter. Democracy is a process of political learning. Especially in times of rapid change, that's what makes it so strong. Precisely because democracy is never complete and always open-ended, it is able to find answers to new questions that arise due to the radical changes we are experiencing.

Many social, cultural and technological changes are having an impact on the very roots of our society. Digitalisation is ushering in autonomous systems that replace human workers and control ever larger parts of our daily life, so that we ourselves no longer need to make conscious decisions. Artificial intelligence and biotechnology are forcing a reappraisal of the Enlightenment's image of humanity. Although the world's overall wealth is increasing, most societies are currently seeing a rise in inequality. Social disparities have not disappeared. The prosperity gap is a major cause of migration – we witnessed this over the past three years. Migration, in turn, is changing our society. A singular cultural identity can no longer be maintained for ever. Cultural pluralism is a characteristic of global modernity. While it certainly brings benefits, it also poses challenges.

Instead of looking only at the surface, we who believe in democracy must also closely examine the tectonic shifts that are currently taking place. This is a bold undertaking. Because often, we don't yet have good answers to the many questions we will encounter. But that should not keep us from asking them. We must be courageous enough to let irritation, doubt and uncertainty be expressed. We have every reason to allow ourselves to be irritated.

That is why we need places where we can engage in the necessary debates – with passion and clarity, hopefully guided by reason and sincerity. That's why you're here, because the Forum Bellevue is meant to be just such a place.

A forum is where we convene in uncertain times and circumstances. It is not a seminar, where participants are presented cut and dried solutions and ideas. What we are opening here today is a space in which we can discuss unfinished thoughts and things that appear doubtful. A space in which we can test unusual arguments and perspectives. In a nutshell, Forum Bellevue is intended to be a forum for democracy.

Over the coming months, we will examine fundamental issues of our day and age:

In November, we will be joined by Salman Rushdie and other guests, with whom we will discuss the power of literature to educate, as well as how the freedoms of opinion, art and science can be defended against fanaticism and anti-intellectual resentment.

Early next year, we plan to meet with German and foreign journalists to discuss how the democratic process is being changed by the internet and social media.

Of course, we need to talk about strengths and weaknesses, and about the acceptance, of representative democracy. Just like we need to talk about the responsibility of religions when it comes to reining in intolerance and violence. Then, there's also the question I addressed during my inaugural speech in the German Bundestag: How much inequality can democracy handle?

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Bertelsmann Stiftung for its support. Without you, and especially without your personal commitment, dear Ms Mohn, this series of panel discussions would certainly not have covered the breadth of topics I have just described.

To kick off the series, the plan for today is to see where we stand. We have chosen a more or less overarching topic. We will debate nothing less than the future of the West. Of course, we first need to clarify what exactly we mean when we speak of the "West": Is it a geographic term? Does it refer to a normative project? Is it a

system of military and political alliances? Or possibly all these things combined?

For us Germans, "the West" most importantly points to our political identity. A "belated nation", our country has travelled The Long Road West, as Heinrich August Winkler has described at length in his eponymous book. Today, Germany has found its permanent place in the community of values of liberal democracies. The Federal Republic would not even have existed post 1945 if it had not been firmly anchored in democracy. To this very day, this foundation remains a large part of our political identity, and it must be preserved.

It is with growing concern that we are observing how, in some countries that are members of both the EU and NATO, certain firm tenets are apparently being undermined. Of course, our main focus since February has been on the United States, but the truth of the matter is that in some European countries, too, principles are coming under fire that at least until now were essential to Western identity. They include the rule of law, the separation of powers, civil and human rights, and in my opinion also critical reason, respect for the sciences and the heritage of the Enlightenment.

In this situation, profound questions need to be asked: Does the West have a future – as a political model, as an alliance of liberal democracies? What are its prospects as a normative project? Can something that is historically rooted in Europe and the United States be liberated from its geographic and even geopolitical context – and can it be universally applied? How convincing can this normative concept of the West be, and what effect can it have, in today's multi-polar world?

There's one thing that I think is particularly important: We should differentiate between the history of the West and the validity of its normative principles. We must not turn a blind eye to the fact that the West is Janus-faced and has accumulated a long list of sins. Even Thomas Jefferson was a man of contradictions. The man who wrote the words "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" was at the same time a slave owner. The West's list of sins includes war and violence, colonialism, poverty, exploitation and marginalisation. It will therefore do us good to take an outside look at the West, from the perspective of Latin America, Africa and Asia. We also want this perspective to play a role in this evening's debate.

"The West" has always held great promise for countless people who were in search of prosperity and self-determination. It has also always been a political rallying cry, one that defines who "we" are and differentiates this "we" from others. Also after the end of the Cold War, there is still a risk that, instead of uniting people, the term may cause division. It may even be obstructive when attempting to forge new alliances or address new threats that pose a danger not only to the West – such as terrorism.

So will shining light on one's own deficiencies, mistakes and contradictions be enough to regain credibility for this normative project of the West? Or should we rather – and there are some, not including myself, who propose this – stop using the term "the West" completely? Others hope that, the more the fundamental values of the West attain universal acceptance and recognition, spreading in all four cardinal directions, the less need we'll have for this term named after a single cardinal point.

Ladies and gentlemen, our guests are here this evening to help us, with their judgement and experience, answer questions like these.

Dear Mr Winkler, in your new book, you describe how in recent years the "normative project of the West" has been forced to defend itself. Against this background, you call on liberal democrats to work together even more closely, not only in the European Union.

Our second guest is someone I am not looking to for the first time for advice. You also provided a radically different perspective on the world and forced us to think long and hard during my time at the Federal Foreign Office. Dear Mr Khanna, you are an Indian and an American citizen, you live in Singapore, and this gives you a completely different perspective on the "West". In your most recent book, you strongly criticise Western forms of government, particularly that of the United States, which you do not believe is well suited to tackling the challenges of the future. Instead, you call for something that sounds odd to us Germans and that meets with considerable objection, namely a "direct technocracy" that is less designed around the democratic legitimacy of decisions and more focused on results and how they can be obtained through suitable processes.

It was only a few months ago, at the German Protestant Kirchentag, that I had the pleasure to be in a discussion with our third guest, where we addressed the question "Can we save reason?" Ms Neimann, surprisingly enough, some 5,000 people were interested in that question. That surprised both of us. In the end, it was the audience that was surprised to hear how both of us responded "yes" to the question of whether or not reason can be saved. Dear Ms Neiman, I imagine you will want to say something about this in a minute, also from your point of view as an American. That alone would be enough reason to invite you. But we are also very interested in learning about your position of "moral clarity", which you derive from the concept of reason. We particularly want to hear what this implies for the universal validity of human rights.

In your most recent book, you write that "growing up is a matter of acknowledging the uncertainties that weave through our lives." That sounds like it could almost be a heading for this series of discussions. We are in the process of finding answers to these questions – answers that we at this time do not yet have.

I look forward to the discussion, and I wish everyone an insightful evening.

Thank you – and welcome to the Forum Bellevue!