



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
opening the fifth Forum Bellevue
“Rifts and Resentments –
On the Fragmentation and Emotionalisation of Politics and
Society”
Schloss Bellevue, 4 October 2018**

Today, the day after the Day of German Unity, I do not know whether anyone will remember, but at last year’s ceremony in Mainz, I spoke of new walls that had gone up in our country, new walls that stood in the way of our shared sense of “us”; walls that had arisen due to alienation, disappointment and anger – walls that in some cases have grown so entrenched that no arguments can penetrate them.

Yesterday we celebrated German unity once again here in Berlin and across Germany. And the concerns –and I think this is your impression, too – have certainly not lessened over the past twelve months.

Indeed, there are indications that these rifts have grown deeper and that the atmosphere of the public debate has in fact become even more heated over the past year. Many people – particularly in the past few weeks – have pointed the finger at the strife in the coalition government. But that is not enough. For the same forces that are driving society apart are at work in the parties, too; the same mistrust that is unsettling our society is reflected in party politics. And I believe we really do need to talk about the reasons for this.

One ought to assume that strong feelings have reasons behind them. So what has changed? Why do people in our country feel disregarded? Why do they feel that they are no longer noticed or recognised? More so than they did ten, twenty or thirty years ago? What are the causes of deep mistrust or even, as is also manifest, scorn towards democracy, democratic institutions and their representatives?

Too often, I find, we are experiencing a diffuse hatred of the so-called "establishment", but at the same time also of minorities and those whose opinions are different. But we should not merely bemoan this hatred and express our shock at it; rather, we should unflinchingly talk about, illuminate and at least try to explain its root causes. I have invited you here today to do just that. This is an invitation not to be outraged, but rather to decipher the resentments that I am convinced threaten our cohesion.

We are observing how political camps are entrenching themselves, how the language is becoming rougher and more inconsiderate, how people with differing views scarcely speak with one another. The walls seem to have grown so high that we think all we can do is holler over them. Populists' staged taboo-breaking is often followed by moral reprimands as a reaction – and both of these contribute to further polarisation.

I would like to encourage you to break this vicious circle – not just here and now, but in other circumstances too – and certainly at least for the duration of our debate today. In other words, we want to use this pause on the playing field to try to work out the competitors' positioning and plays. We should insist on this space of reflection, here at least.

And there is one thing, I think, that we will be able to determine with some certainty: that our democracy is not on the verge of meltdown. Rather, as I have said on other occasions, the problem is that far too many people regard it as self-evident, as being forever guaranteed.

The surveys are misleading in one way, because you find different justifications for different views. If you ask people whether they are happy with their personal situation, 80 percent say yes. If you ask those same people whether they have fears about the future, a similarly high percentage will say that such fears are justified.

Objectively – we will be debating and talking about whether this is objective in a little while – objectively, probably no generation in Germany has had it better than this one. After all, we are living in peace; our economy has been growing – for six years, I think; unemployment is falling; companies – talking about the future – are desperate for young people; and, despite all the animosities, the rule of law functions in our country.

But perhaps we need to do more than just "coolly" observe this. When you look at it in the context of a lengthy historical process, liberal democracy is a kind of beacon for people around the world. It is a unique historical achievement, and we can stand up for it with our own republican passion. And while we are talking about emotions in

politics, I at any rate would like to see more democratic patriotism in these times!

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests, in this spirit – with a cool head, but hopefully not too coldly, rather with a passion for the cause of democracy – I welcome you all to the fifth Forum Bellevue on the Future of Democracy. A very warm welcome to you all.

It is not entirely new to say that politics is not an exclusively rational business, but that it is of course also driven and shaped by emotions.

Feelings have always motivated people to take action. They have always either facilitated or impeded understanding, and they have always played a role in deciding matters of war and peace. And political forces have always sought to tame or stir up emotions, depending on what they thought best in order to achieve their political goals.

Today we are seeing how a perhaps new generation of populists is trying quite rationally to use feelings of anxiety and insecurity to stoke resentments and, I believe, to undermine liberal democracy as a whole. At the peak of the refugee crisis, however, we also witnessed exactly the opposite: we saw many people throughout Germany demonstrate compassion and solidarity, and many who were prepared to provide active help.

We know that emotions can be confusing, not just during puberty, and that is why today I am pleased to be able to welcome a historian who has long dealt with the relationship between rationality and emotionality in societies. Ute Frevert is the director of the Research Center “History of Emotions” at the Max Planck Institute here in Berlin, and we will be discussing the emotional temperature of our country with her shortly. Welcome!

When it comes to describing the rifts in our society, we are quick to reach for crude labels: “the people” who supposedly stand against “the elites”, “the native population” against “the foreigners”, “the democrats” against “the populists”.

Every day we see how these sorts of labels are instrumentalised politically and morally, how they fuel feelings of superiority and inferiority. Yet we know, or we should know, that templates like these or other forms of black-and-white thinking are not suited to grasping our multi-faceted reality adequately, and that often they even obscure our view of genuine conflicts. And undoubtedly there is always more than one explanation for the developments I outlined a few moments ago.

That is why I am glad that our second guest today is introducing a perspective from the social sciences. Cornelia Koppetsch is a professor at the Technische Universität Darmstadt, and in her view it is

not only economic conflicts, but, as she will be explaining in more detail, also cultural conflicts that have helped and are helping to make populist positions, the politics of simple answers, attractive to a large number of people in Germany. Welcome!

Ms Koppetsch sees a “main axis of division” in our society between an academically educated urban middle class, which is gradually developing into a cosmopolitan upper class in our country, and a middle and lower class located in regions and small towns which is still embedded in a national economic space, and which sees its worldview and place in society as being under threat.

What can we do to counter such divisions? Are there certain concerns in our country that are being neglected by politics? More than before, at least? And how should politicians and society deal with anger and protest? We want to talk to her about this in a moment.

I personally am very concerned about the shift in the climate of communication in our society.

We are seeing how digital and networked media lower the barriers to every form of hate speech. Many people shut themselves off in their peer group. They surround themselves with affirmations of their perceived truths and develop closed-off worldviews. And I believe that this is part of the reason why some groups no longer can – or perhaps I should say no longer want to – communicate publicly – and that is why democracy’s real strength, the ability to balance interests in a society, is mutating into a weakness, at least in many people’s eyes, with compromise being discredited in some circles as a sign of incapacity and powerlessness.

But today we are also witnessing how information of every kind, both relevant and absurd, including propaganda lies and conspiracy theories, spreads instantly and is shared millions of times over. In the age of digital networks, it seems to be the case that a day without a scandal is time lost.

Our third guest, the media scholar Bernhard Pörksen, regards Germany as having already arrived in a “state of permanent agitation and great irritability”. In his latest book, “Die grosse Gereiztheit”, he writes: “Everything that happens that reaches the nerves of other people somewhere in the world, that moves them, unsettles them, frightens them, is able to reach and unsettle us too. [...] Everyone who posts and comments, who shares news and stories, who posts a mobile phone video online, [...] plays a part in permanently dissolving the boundaries between the areas of excitation in the networked world.” Bernhard Pörksen, welcome!

We want to discuss with Mr Pörksen what paths lead out of this “collective excitation”, this permanent state of indignation, and what we all can do to help revive and bolster a halfway reasonable public

discourse – as well as when and how outrage can also provide impetus for creating greater transparency and remedying grievances.

However, we want to speak not only about the big questions in the academic sense, but also about what we can specifically do in our everyday lives to combat resentments and overcome divisions.

This is an issue very familiar to the many mayors of our cities and towns who do not shirk from problems, but rather face heated debates, who approach and listen to those who are angry and who have to deal with hostility, hatred and violence. Some of them are here with us today, and to my mind we cannot thank them enough for what they do day in, day out for the cohesion of our society. Thank you very much!

One of them will soon be taking a seat here on our podium. Welcome, Andreas Hollstein, mayor of Altena. As you will know, Altena is a small town in North Rhine-Westphalia. In 2015, Mr Hollstein worked to get his town to take in 100 more refugees than it had to.

And many citizens in Altena are volunteering with the refugees and helping them find paths into our society. However, the town has also experienced an arson attack on a refugee residence, and last November, as some of you may know, Andreas Hollstein was injured in a knife attack.

This has not deterred him from his path, though. On the contrary: he believes that politicians have to endure hostility and continue talking to all sides. He calls for equanimity and fact-based arguments. "Many people," he says, "have unjustified fears – and you can only confront these if you project a certain calm yourself." And that he does.

Mr Hollstein, we already met once in Altena in March, and I am glad that we will be able to continue our conversation here today.

Finally, I would like to recall an idea of Christoph Möllers, who was a guest here on this podium at one of the previous events. I would like to quote him because I believe he said something in which we can all see a bit of our situation, each of us to a different extent, but still: "Much of the resentment against democracy arises from a sense of grievance that we are neither the only ones in the world nor more important than the others. We want to get our own way, but in democracy that is something we get only rarely."

There may be some truth to that. But recognising this is difficult, and requires as much trust as sense: trust in democratic, rule-of-law institutions, and the sense not to regard one's own interest as the common interest, not to regard different opinions, positions and interests as unreasonable or even unacceptable as a matter of principle.

And perhaps that is why liberal democracy is considered a rather cool form of government. Some people criticise it for this, and others see precisely this as its virtue.

Ralf Dahrendorf, for example, said: "democracy and the market economy" were "desirable precisely because they are cold projects which do not stake any claims" – that's the key phrase – "which do not stake any claims to people's hearts and souls". But I think he had reservations even when he said and wrote this as to whether that would suffice, because he went on to say that abstract ideals alone are not enough to hold societies together. And he is right. Even if democracy neither prescribes its citizens' way of life nor constricts their minds, it is nonetheless dependent on their inner belief in this polity and – above all – on their willingness to engage.

I believe that the willingness to engage, which thank goodness is present in our country millions of times over, does not spring solely from cool-headed reason, but rather in the vast majority of cases, irrespective of motivation, from the bottom of people's hearts. I believe we can – and indeed must – build on this. In my view, what I described at the beginning of this talk as the patriotism of democrats feeds on all this in the best possible sense. And we need it – especially in this country, in these times.

And so I am looking forward to our conversation, first up here on the platform and then with all of you. Thank you for coming. Welcome!