



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the ninth Forum Bellevue
“Coronavirus as a test case – how is our democracy
faring?”
at Schloss Bellevue
on 29 June 2020**

A forum is a public space, a place where a wide range of people, usually with a wide range of views, come together to meet and to exchange ideas. It took that form even back in ancient Greece and Rome, and this morning’s forum is thus somewhat unusual. For as you can see, we do not have a large audience – indeed, there are few people here in this room. It is a pity that more people cannot be here to take part in the discussion. However, we want to continue to keep our distance from one another in order to help contain the virus.

Although this is a special forum, it is most certainly not football without fans. My guests are far too lively for that, and they have strong views. I am delighted to have them here today: the author Herta Müller, the philosopher Rainer Forst and the political scientist Daniel Ziblatt, with whom I want to start a panel discussion in a moment. And in the first and only row we have the virologist Marylyn Addo, the sociologist Heinz Bude, the jurist Anna-Bettina Kaiser, the journalist Elisabeth von Thadden and Elke Büdenbender, my wife, who – as patron of the German Children and Youth Foundation – will focus on children and education in our discussion today.

I would also like to welcome the small group of journalists present – and, of course, everyone watching us online, wherever you may be. I bid you a warm welcome to the “Forum Bellevue on the Future of Democracy”!

The pandemic is putting both democracies and authoritarian regimes around the world to the test. Today we want to talk about how our democracy has fared so far in the fight against the virus, how it is coping with the restrictions on liberties and what challenges it now

faces. Before we start our discussion, let me talk about just a few aspects of particular importance to me. Allow me to set the scene:

busy places which are suddenly completely empty; barrier tapes at playgrounds; parliaments with ample space between the seats – those are the images of a crisis which have had a powerful impact on us. Even though there were good reasons to impose temporary restrictions on our freedom of movement and assembly; even though it was discussed and examined by the public and the courts; even though a large majority were in favour of restrictions in order to protect health and lives: the corona crisis has made it clear to us just how vitally important the public space is to our democracy.

Democracy needs spaces open to everyone in which we can move and meet freely and where we can exchange views on equal terms. It needs spaces where the hopes, fears and conflicts of our diverse society become visible, where dissatisfaction and protest can be expressed, provided that it is peaceful and the state's monopoly on the use of force is respected. Squares, parks, cafés; vocational training schools and universities; the shops around the corner, theatres and cinemas; clubs, parties and civic councils – these are all places where we see each other, where we talk and discuss with one another, thus putting democracy into practice.

At the current time, as we gradually recapture the public space, we are rediscovering what it means to us. I hope that we will protect and look after it, that we will keep it vibrant and accessible to everyone –both in the city and in rural areas. In the light of recent events, it is important to me to reiterate that police officers play a key role in protecting peace and order in our streets and squares – especially when there is a danger that conflicts over the use of this public space will emerge. All those who risk their health and their lives in difficult situations deserve respect, not hate or vile insults directed against an entire profession.

During the lockdown, we also realised that – both in the private and public domain – we are reliant on the digital space. We should therefore fight all the more resolutely to ensure that it is not poisoned by hate and insults. Our democracy also needs a digital public space in which respect, tolerance and common sense prevail.

You know that the pandemic is not over and that we will be dealing with it for a long time to come. At present, we can see how fragile the successes in the fight against the virus are and how quickly the infection rate can shoot up again. What is more, we have not got to grips with the social and economic impact of the pandemic, nor is it at all possible at this point in time to predict its full magnitude. However, following the first weeks we can now say: thanks to a major effort, our society has managed to flatten the infection curve and to support those who have been hit hardest by the crisis. We did not

undertake this effort because an authoritarian state forced us to do it. Rather, we did it because we wanted to, out of a sense of solidarity and responsibility. I hope that is true and I am certain we will take a look at this in our discussion.

Some things became evident, indeed we were even able to quantify some of them: at a time of troubling uncertainty, we have seen that many people in our country trust our democratic institutions. And we have seen that trust in politicians at all levels managing the current situation has even grown during the weeks of crisis management, if the opinion polls are accurate.

We know that trust cannot be imposed from above. Trust in democracy encompasses the trust which citizens have in themselves. It is not a blind trust. Rather, it is partly based on scepticism but, above all else, on an individual's own judgement. It can only grow if political action is comprehensible. And that is exactly what we have witnessed during this crisis. Seldom have we experienced politics as being so immediate, so tangible and so effective as during the last few weeks.

We have, so to speak, been able to look on in real time as politicians tackled the crisis. We have watched parliamentarians and government ministers at national level and in the federal states having to assume responsibility and make decisions despite all the uncertainty. We have seen how important it is for them to explain what motivated their actions and not to gloss over conflicts of interest or injustices; that they be clear about whom they turn to for advice and that they speak openly about their own uncertainty and fallibility.

I believe that the public and politicians really have moved a bit closer to each other during the corona crisis, despite all the social distancing rules. Whether this trust continues after the crisis will partly depend on how open and how transparent the political space remains. I hope that having seen politics in action, more people will be motivated to work for the common good both inside and outside our democratic institutions. For many of us have seen during this crisis that politicians can make a difference and that ultimately each and every one of us has a part to play.

The last few weeks have shown that believing in reason and having faith in science are particular sources of strength in our democracy.

Hundreds of thousands of people have looked on as researchers quite literally went into the unknown to gradually expand their knowledge, continuously reconsidered and revised their statements and methods, and run up against the limits of what they know. Keeping up with these developments requires great patience, because of course we all want to quickly vanquish the virus, we want to see progress made at frequent intervals. But witnessing this is also

fascinating. It shows that science is a constant learning process. It thrives on rational debate – and that is precisely how it is linked to democracy.

I am glad that most of our politicians and the general public have taken their bearings from scientific findings and that it is also clear that science can and should not replace democratic debates and decisions. Rather, it should provide a solid foundation for political decisions. I am equally glad that politics in the crisis is judged by what it contributes to resolving the situation and that when it comes to the crunch, seriousness and objectivity are what count in political discourse.

Yet this crisis is also showing us how fragile faith in reason and discourse has become in some sections of society. Where scientists are met with hostility and receive threats, findings are denied, conspiracy theories spread, and tin foil hats are praised as a cure – everywhere this happens, we must speak out. The corona crisis in particular has given us the best arguments for promoting science and democracy!

In this crisis we see how much our democracy thrives on diversity of opinion. The hunger for credible information and the need for a fair debate have seldom been as great as they have been during the last few weeks. And seldom have so many voices from so many different sections of society been heard.

After the crisis, we should not forget how important critical, reliable, diverse and well-informed media are for a vibrant public space and trust in politics. Nor should we forget how important it is to debate matters in public.

It must even be possible to make irritating or irrational comments in our democracy. That may be trying, but democrats should also take to heart the standards of rational criticism when they engage with those celebrating irrationality. However, even democratic tolerance ends wherever hate and violence rear their ugly heads, wherever human rights are violated, wherever the openness of democracy itself is attacked.

We have to take a stand against those who act completely unreasonably for political motives, using people's uncertainty to sow doubts about the democratic process or about democracy as a whole. We have to take a stand against those who instrumentalise concerns and fears to incite hostility against the "system", the purported power cartel of politicians, the media and scientists, against the real, the true people. Also during the corona crisis and afterwards, we have to remain vigilant. Let us work together to prevent viruses which fuel hostility to democracy from spreading further! Professor Forst would say that our task today is to form democratic anti-bodies!

The coronavirus has brought home to us how fragile what we call our "normal life" is. The virus can affect anyone but that certainly does

not mean that everyone is affected in the same way. Not for the first time, we see that the crisis is not the great equaliser. This crisis has made inequalities even more pronounced. In particular, many young people are once more concerned about their future. We heard this recently in conversations here outside with young people – with pupils and trainees.

At the same time, countless people in our country have demonstrated solidarity in a totally new way. They have protected those at particular risk and helped those in need. And many want to live in a state which reinforces this spirit of solidarity, not in a repressive or high-handed way, but in a supportive and encouraging manner. I would like to thank all those who help and look out for others. They have all strengthened the cohesion in our society, a cohesion which we not only need during the crisis but also afterwards when we have to make a fresh start.

We have also seen these past weeks that solidarity can by no means be taken for granted. Those who act irresponsibly and endanger others – whether out of impatience, selfishness or ignorance – are jeopardising everything we have achieved together over the last few weeks. The corona crisis has again brought home to us very forcefully how much we in the world of politics and in society depend on one another. We can only live together in harmony if we look out for others and not just ourselves.

Trust, reason, diversity of opinion and solidarity – these are the strengths of our democracy which have become apparent in our joint response to the virus. I believe we should say this with self-confidence, especially to those who doubt or disparage democracy. I have often spoken here, in many fora preceding today's event, of the fascination with authoritarianism, something which we have been witnessing in many, in too many, parts of the world, including parts of Europe. We have not yet put this danger behind us. However, we could be so bold as to say that authoritarianism has lost some of its fascination during the corona crisis!

Yet, the fact remains that neither snappy slogans nor swaggering, neither demagoguery nor over-confidence can help us beat the pandemic. It will not help the fight against the virus if figures are falsified or not even collated in order to make a regime look better. Elected governments which use the fight against the virus to eliminate liberties permanently and to try and cement their own power are acting unscrupulously.

The past few weeks have shown that our democracy can react to existential threats and it can do so swiftly, resolutely and forcefully. Together we can change track at short notice, abandon our customary course of action, make decisions even in the midst of uncertainty and, if necessary to admit and rectify mistakes. And large sections of

society were able to demonstrate solidarity when it was called for! I believe that this experience can inspire us with courage and confidence when it comes to tackling other challenges which also require us to adopt a fundamentally different way of thinking and a policy of change.

During the last few weeks, the development of the infection rate and the fear of a deep recession have held us in suspense day after day. That is why the fundamental debate on our society's future that has already begun has hardly been noticed. The question is: where should we go from here? Many people in our country are asking this question now. I believe that the corona crisis has shown that we require one thing in particular in order to find the right answers: the will to change course.

It is unclear at present whether this will remain after the crisis or whether widespread crisis fatigue will set in. Unlike the pandemic, disasters such as climate change unfold at a snail's pace and almost unnoticed for some people. And many of us know the longing to return to the "old normality" only too well. Yes, it is unclear whether democracies will be prepared to change course after the corona crisis.

However, I firmly believe that we need this will to change course. We need it if we want to pursue a climate policy which actually reaches the targets it has set itself, which safeguards jobs with a future and leaves behind a planet worth living in for our children and grandchildren. We need it if we want to make the European Union fit for the future, and I believe that this is already evident in the bold European plans for recovery. And we need this will to change course, not least if we want to protect health and peace and create a fairer world together with neighbours in Europe and around the globe.

In the fight against the pandemic, in which states have tended to turn inward and have closed their borders, we have become particularly aware once more of how much we need an exchange of knowledge and cross-border cooperation, especially if we want to tackle global crises. We can all see that cutting ourselves off, putting up barriers and adopting a go-it-alone approach do not lead to a better future.

It is unclear as yet what the world will be like after the crisis. We have to debate and decide in our democracy what it should be like – on an equal and free basis. On that note, I want to open our discussion. I think we have enough questions to discuss. Once again, I would like to bid you all a very warm welcome to the "Forum Bellevue on the Future of Democracy"!