



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the Tenth Forum Bellevue on the Future
of Democracy „From the crisis into the future – how can
we work together to bring about transformation?“
at Schloss Bellevue
on 24 November 2020**

I would like to bid you all a very warm welcome, a very warm welcome to the tenth “Forum Bellevue on the Future of Democracy”! You can see from the arrangements here that COVID-19 still has us firmly in its grip. The number of infections is many times higher than at the height of the curve in the spring. The second wave is hitting us harder than the first.

Covering our mouth and nose, keeping our distance – whether when out shopping, in buses and trains or at work – for many of us this has almost become second nature. But still having to forego meeting up with friends and having family celebrations, going to restaurants and bars, to the theatre, concerts, swimming pools and gyms, all this takes it out of us and requires patience.

And of course people are arguing about and grappling with the measures I just briefly listed. When we were gathered for the last Forum Bellevue in June and asked how our democracy is coping in the pandemic, Herta Müller took the critics of the state measures in Germany very much to task. She said: “We do not obey state tyranny, we obey life. That is the freedom of responsibility for oneself and for others.” Yes, it remains true that you can argue about everything, but not about the existence of a life-threatening virus, a virus we need to deal with.

Today, we know more about the virus than we did in spring but we also know that it is not yet under control, the infection rates are too high. This autumn and winter, COVID-19 is and remains a major, deadly threat. We all need to keep taking this threat seriously, we need to take it very seriously. For the time being, prudence and

patience, consideration and caution are our most important resources to protect our health and to protect human lives.

Let's not let the virus divide our society! It is my hope that young and old, those at risk and those less at risk, stand together, during the crisis but also thereafter. And we have seen in recent months that we have been able to argue about the right course of action but then time and again to find a way forward which has brought us through the crisis relatively well – that is to say, compared to other countries. We have even seen that fighting COVID-19 can strengthen democracy and cohesion in our society.

And that is an experience that can encourage us and build hope for the coming weeks. And there is yet another glimmer of hope, a ray of light in this season of darkness. Major progress is being made on developing vaccines, one or even two German companies are making a key contribution to overcoming the pandemic. This is something very positive. Although we know this does not signal the end of the pandemic, it gives us hope we will soon be taking the first steps back towards normality. It is perhaps the long-awaited light at the end of the tunnel.

I remain confident. The restrictions we are experiencing currently to curb the rate of infection are not easy to stomach. But together we will get through the COVID-19 crisis. The virus will not steal our future. On the contrary, there are perhaps even lessons to learn from this time of trial which will stand us in good stead in the future. So it is important that we now also look forward and focus above all on the time after the pandemic. Especially now, in the middle of the crisis, we must not lose sight of the other major tasks facing humanity. We should ask ourselves what we need to change today to stride forth towards a brighter future.

And that is precisely what I want to do today with my guests at the tenth "Forum Bellevue on the Future of Democracy". "From the crisis into the future – how can we work together to bring about transformation?", that is the question we want to discuss in just a moment, at a distance and unfortunately, as you can see, without an audience here with us – you know why. I am delighted to be able to welcome four guests who all have different angles on transformation processes, as you will soon hear: here with me in Schloss Bellevue we have the economist Maja Göpel, the author Thea Dorn and the constitutional jurist Udo Di Fabio, while the political scientist Wolfgang Merkel is joining us from Vienna. A very warm welcome to you all! And I am of course delighted that you have joined us on screen, no matter where you might be. A very warm welcome to Forum Bellevue to you, too!

The fight against global warming is one of the biggest challenges of our time. If we bear in mind not just the immediate ecological

threats of climate change but also its social and economic impact on the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people, if we take account of the international conflicts which it will bring in its wake, there is only one conclusion we can draw: it is the biggest challenge of all. What is at stake is nothing less than the future of our children and our grandchildren, the survival of humankind on this planet.

The dramatic scenarios scientists have been warning us about for decades have already become reality in some parts of our world, in others the writing is on the wall: ice is melting at the poles, the sea level is rising; countries in Africa and Asia are being hit by droughts, storms and floods; millions of people have fled their homes because they can no longer live there. This year, we followed the reports on devastating forest fires in Australia and California. And here in Germany, we had our third summer drought in a row and are seeing in many places the toll this takes on nature and agriculture.

Activists never tire of reminding us that we have no more time to lose if we want to stop this trend. And it is not least thanks to their commitment that so much is happening in the wide field of climate policy. The countries of the European Union and other major industrial nations have set themselves the target of becoming climate neutral by the year 2050, China wants to produce no more net greenhouse gases by 2060. The target of a climate-neutral world has been agreed but is it really firmly anchored in our future? We know that differing perceptions and, of course, interests are currently at odds with one another. The major question is therefore how we can achieve this goal without endangering prosperity and cohesion, freedom and democracy, and above all without losing the people we need as we move towards this target.

I think that many people in our country have long been aware that we need to rethink, to change direction, perhaps even radically, to flatten the global warming curve, just like the curve of the pandemic, as we have learned. That is an experience that we also need to apply to dealing with global warming, not further down the road but as soon as possible, right now. In politics, business and society, there is a growing realisation that we need a fundamental change that embraces all areas of our lives: how we produce energy and dispose of our waste, how we conduct business and manufacturing, how we live and work, how we travel and feed ourselves.

A lot has happened in recent years – I'm thinking here of the energy transition, the launch of certificate trading or the shift towards electric mobility, of the many creative pioneers of change who show us the way to conduct business successfully and in an ecologically sound manner. But I am also thinking of the many people in our country who shoulder responsibility in their everyday lives by being climate-friendly when shopping, eating and travelling. Some things are going well,

others need to be improved, accelerated or have yet to be set in motion. To take up Reinhart Koselleck's analysis, we are living in a Sattelzeit, a period of transition.

It is a transition that, given its scope, is often compared to other sea changes in the history of humanity. Some go so far as to compare it to the Neolithic Revolution when people first built settlements, others draw comparisons with the Industrial Revolution, the transition to an industrialised society which sounded the death knell for artisanal trades, devalued well-established vocational qualifications and at the same time triggered migration to urban centres. History has taught us that such processes of change exert pressure on societies, that they can create deep rifts.

The great transformations of our time – globalisation, digitalisation and the transition to the post-fossil era –, these major shifts also put social and political systems to the test. Here at Forum Bellevue we have talked time and again since 2017 about rifts and resentments in Western societies, about the erosion of trust in the institutions of liberal democracy, about a new yearning for authoritarian solutions. Many of these phenomena are connected to the upheavals of our time – so you could say that today with the tenth event in this series we are hitting right at the heart of the topic.

After all, it is these upheavals which on the one hand get people moving yet on the other make them feel insecure, triggering concerns about the future and defence mechanisms. Those who fear losing their place in society, their job, their livelihood, those who sense a threat to their way of life or feel things are decided above their heads, will potentially turn their backs on democracy in disillusion. It is populist forces who then try to make political capital from this situation by promising either to halt the tide of change or to win back control at all cost – by pulling up the drawbridge in the nation-state, by excluding others, by enacting a supposedly uniform "will of the people" which has, they often claim, long been betrayed by the elite in politics, academia and the media.

But there are also the others, those for whom the transition cannot happen quickly enough. Above all many young people want to move to a world without coal, gas and oil not sometime down the line but right now. They call for scientific recommendations to be implemented without negotiation or compromise. Some of them often have little trust in the institutions and workings of representative democracy which they consider to be too slow, too indecisive, too heavily influenced by short-term interests to tackle the climate transition in time.

For Udo Di Fabio, their protest follows the imperatives of indisputable knowledge and judgment. The great passion this protest takes on certainly reminds us of other protest movements throughout

history, of the labour protest against exploitation in terrible conditions, of the peace protest against the nuclear arms race. Time and again, such movements have taken us forward and we should certainly not deny the climate movement this democratic potential to yield ecological progress. But this does not yet provide the answer as to how to feed the social and cultural needs of others into democratic decision-making and as to how shared solutions could shape up.

I firmly believe that we can only move towards a climate-neutral Germany if we as a society move together. How we want to achieve our climate targets, how we want to restructure industry, agriculture, energy supplies and transport, how we want to live together in the future, that is something we need to debate and negotiate in democratic fashion. Climate protection must be neither a technocratic project nor a policy in emergency mode, as Wolfgang Merkel rightly pointed out.

Only if we take account of different perspectives, balance out interests, negotiate solutions, seek compromises and convince the sceptics today will we be able to hold our society in transition together and uphold democracy and freedom for tomorrow.

What we need now is therefore a democratic climate policy in which the citizens participate; a just climate policy which distributes burdens fairly and provides opportunities for all; and a global climate policy focusing on the future of our planet on all continents. The question as to how such a dramatic transition can come to fruition in a shared policy of change is what we are going to discuss. Before we do, let me just outline a couple of points that are particularly important to me.

After several months of the COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis, I think that we have seen that our democracy, perhaps despite some scepticism, is definitely able to act quickly and resolutely. But we are also seeing that many people yearn for public debate, just as they yearn for parliaments to be more involved in political decisions. And particularly in the fight against climate change, which is infinitely more complicated than fighting the virus, we have to manage both: we need rapid and effective decisions and we need debate in society and discussions on the next steps. The pressure to act on the climate crisis does not make democratic agreement and involvement less important but more important.

A climate policy aiming to shape change and uphold cohesion needs representative procedures, a vibrant public, and constitutional control. Discussion and negotiation are not a weakness but a strength of democracy, particular in times of change. We have seen in recent years much controversy in society about landmark decisions on the future of climate policy ranging from the phasing out of nuclear energy and the launch of renewable energies to the compromise on coal. But it

was only through arduous negotiations that we ultimately managed to find solutions which the vast majority of people could support.

Today, we know that we and the generations before could have acted and even needed to act earlier. But we can't afford to turn that into an argument against democracy, especially not against representative democracy! The exchange of knowledge, ideas and arguments, the option of correcting decisions at any time where necessary in the light of new findings, all this is what makes it possible to make progress and solve problems in the first place. How, if not through public discussion and checks and balances, should we build trust in politics, acceptance for decisions, readiness to embrace change? And how, if not through representative involvement of others and the balancing out of interests, should we be able to uphold cohesion in our society as we move forward?

The COVID-19 crisis puts problems in sharper focus, but it is also showing us just how much solidarity is actually rooted in this society. And we can see that democracy needs proactive governance if it is to deal with the social and economic impact of the pandemic. As we stride forth towards a climate-neutral society, politics must not lose sight of those who lack the ability to keep pace with the process of change. Those who fear losing their job or their career need a perspective for the period of transition. And those who survive on a minuscule pension or now fear for their livelihood in the COVID-19 crisis need support and also understanding when it comes to the unavoidable costs of ecological restructuring, unless we want to give populists of whatever shade free rein.

Politics must not gloss over the grim realities triggered by processes of change. But it above all also has to highlight the inherent opportunities, to do so by saying that prosperity and competitiveness through ecological innovation, improved quality of life with clean air and less noise are also opportunities for an alternative future. What I mean is that we need a common idea of the future of this society and with it a positive image of the future in order to actually bring about this change and to get the majority of people on board as we go along this path. Merely warning that it is a matter of life and death, that it is far too late anyway, that in itself does not inspire the necessary courage. But it is courage we need if we want to rethink our world and stride forth towards a climate-neutral society!

Fighting the virus has also shown once more that we can only deal with major crises if we work together across borders. The foundations for global action to combat global warming have been laid; the Paris Agreement was a turning point. At the same time, it is a matter of concern that implementation is often still anything but smooth. And I am also concerned that more and more states are turning their backs on the idea of international cooperation. But that is

not all. There are other, positive signs. The European Union wants to cut its emissions more quickly than originally planned and after the presidential election in the United States, a new start on climate policy is in the air, and with it opportunities and the desire for cooperation with us Europeans and Germans.

In this year of the pandemic, we are seeing how much we can achieve if we act responsibly, reasonably and above all together. This is a very valuable experience which can hearten us. And I believe that we have every reason to be optimistic, even – still in the throes of the crisis – when we consider the huge mountain of challenges that lie ahead, not just in terms of climate policy.

Let us now therefore discuss shared paths to change with more gravity than is sometimes the case in public discourse. And here in Forum Bellevue we want to make a small contribution to ensuring that this debate is not confined to here but continues at as many other places in society as possible.

Allow me to convey my thanks to the guests. Thank you for being here, thanks also to Wolfgang Merkel in Vienna. I am looking forward to our discussion.