



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the opening of the 12th Forum Bellevue  
“Is the state up to it? Drawing lessons from the pandemic”  
in Schloss Bellevue  
on 15 November 2021**

For anyone speaking in a palace in Berlin about the state and about lessons, there is no way around Hegel. Looking at societies' ability to learn, the great Prussian philosopher's assessment was as gloomy as it was harsh: "What experience and history teach us is this – that nations and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted upon any lessons that might have been drawn from it."

As we have painfully experienced this autumn, the COVID-19 pandemic is not yet history. Indeed, it still dominates our present. However, if we want to show that Hegel's pessimism was misplaced and learn lessons from this crisis, then we have no time to lose. At this time when the fourth wave is hitting us with brutal severity, when thousands are once more fighting the virus in intensive care units, when children, young people, and above all many unvaccinated people have become infected, at this time we have to do more to break the circuit. But at this point in time we are also very aware that we have to start putting in place preventive measures for the future.

This morning we want, first and foremost, to talk about what our democracy can do and accomplish. Given the dramatic COVID-19 situation, however, I would like to take this opportunity to briefly address the citizens of this country directly.

The fourth wave is hitting our country harder than it had to. After all, we know what we have to do if we are to finally leave this pandemic behind us. We should all know. The vast majority of people in our country have got vaccinated to protect themselves and others. Those who have not been vaccinated are risking their own health and risking the health of others. It is mainly the unvaccinated who are catching the infection this autumn. It is mainly the unvaccinated who are fighting for their lives in intensive care units.

I am profoundly shocked when I hear that some people in hospital with this virus still deny that it exists. It is tragic and deeply worrying! Today I want to turn to those who are still hesitant about getting vaccinated and ask: what else has to happen to convince you? I appeal to you once more: please, go and get vaccinated! Your health is at stake. Our country's future is at stake.

Almost two years after the outbreak of the virus, in the face of the spiralling momentum of the fourth wave, at the start of a new legislative term, this is an especially apt time to draw the first conclusions and equip ourselves for future crises.

For we also know that Hegel was not completely wrong. Our memory of crises is short term; we quickly repress and forget bad experiences, are keen to return to our old lives, and public attention soon turns to the next issue and the one after that. We have to start asking ourselves now whether we – all of us, in politics and in civil society – really were prepared to learn enough from the second and third waves, whether the wish to finally banish any thought of the pandemic actually stood in the way of resolute efforts to avert the fourth wave.

It is therefore all the more important that we remember the profound experiences of these weeks and months in order to ensure that we do not neglect crisis preparedness in "normal times". Out of sight, out of mind – that would certainly be the most short-sighted attitude after this pandemic!

The catastrophic flooding in the Ahr valley this summer showed us how important it is that state institutions designed for normal times can respond quickly and adequately in the event of a crisis. In the age of global warming, our state must be prepared to deal with further environmental disasters. It must be prepared to deal with further pandemics. And it must, paradoxically, also be prepared to deal with crises whose nature and magnitude we cannot even predict. Particularly as we cannot know exactly what we will face in future, we have to try to anticipate risks and take precautionary measures by putting robust infrastructure in place.

Our state has been under almost constant pressure due to crises during the last few years. The financial market and debt crisis, the refugee and migration crisis, the climate crisis, the COVID-19 crisis – all of this has resulted in a general sense of crisis spreading among sections of our society. And it is this sense of crisis that has led some people to long for populist or even simply technocratic or expertocratic politics.

While some are hoping for authoritarian leadership to implement the supposedly uniform will of the people, which the Establishment – in the guise of politicians, the media and scientists – regularly ignores, others want to turn politics into a mere apparatus to execute a

supposedly unambiguous scientific truth in order to be able to take quick and uncompromising action.

Populists and technocrats, whom I see here as archetypes, are of course different in terms of their values, methods and goals. However, there are also undeniable similarities: both seem to regard the endeavours to find compromises and majorities in the institutions of a representative democracy as a weakness; and both justify their political ideas by claiming that existential dangers have to be averted.

For this reason, too, it is important that we in our democracy use the term crisis cautiously and do not talk constantly of government failings, thus ensuring that the mere rhetoric does not create the impression that the state of emergency is permanent and our democracy is systematically overwhelmed and unable to find solutions. Firstly, I do not believe that this is true. But secondly, it is nonetheless important that we learn from this pandemic and develop our democratic state further in such a way that it is equipped to respond even more forcefully to the great challenges of the future. This is especially crucial because it is designed to uphold freedom and equality, even in difficult times.

“Is the state up to it?” – that is our topic today here at the 12th Forum Bellevue on the Future of Democracy. I am delighted that we – either vaccinated or recovered and, what is more, tested – have been able to come together. And I am especially looking forward to my three guests: Alena Buyx, medical ethicist and Chair of the German Ethics Council, the legal and public administration expert Laura Münkler and Aminata Touré, Vice-President of the Parliament of Schleswig-Holstein. A very warm welcome to you! And I would like to extend an equally warm welcome to all of you here in this room and those who are watching us on screen.

The pandemic has presented our democracy, a social welfare state based on the rule of law, with tough new challenges. Following the outbreak of the virus, the Federal Government and the Länder had to act quickly in the face of great uncertainty in order to contain the spread of the pandemic and fulfil the state’s mandate to protect its citizens. At the same time, politicians had to – indeed, still have to – weigh up time and again whether and on what scale restrictions to basic liberties are necessary and yet still proportionate. They have to address inequalities and look after those particularly hard hit by contact restrictions, by closed schools, shops and cultural institutions. And they have to maintain social cohesion under the most difficult of conditions.

In our state, which – in contrast to the theory put forward by Thomas Hobbes – is no almighty Leviathan but, rather, a federal res publica, political decisions have to be democratically legitimised by governments and parliaments, the Federal Government and the Länder and, what is more, withstand independent legal scrutiny.

In the fight against the virus, not least the administration of the Federal Government, the Länder and municipalities are under constant stress. Whether it be health offices, school authorities or the Robert Koch Institute, whether it be the Federal Employment Service, students' unions or the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau – various state bodies were and still are responsible for developing COVID-19 guidelines, launching vaccine rollouts, making possible digital lessons, processing applications for state aid and much more.

Above all, the efficiency and performance of our state is the main focus of attention in this extraordinary situation. During the last few months, we have been able to gain a good insight into the workings of politics and into the engine rooms of administration: the jostling between the executive and the legislative branches, between the Federal Government and the Länder; the public dispute about restrictions and their easing; also glitches in testing and vaccination – all of this has tested trust in the state and democracy.

We have seen that the key to this trust is the image presented by our state in its entirety. Trust in democracy is not blind trust on the part of subjects but the critical trust of self-confident citizens, a trust based on scepticism and judgement, on the self-assurance of these citizens.

The pandemic has brought home to us what the state can do – thanks in part to its responsible and committed citizens, to its outstanding scientists, its economic strength, its political order, its health system. This is one side of the coin.

But, of course, the crisis has also ruthlessly laid bare weaknesses in our state, weaknesses which existed before the emergence of COVID-19. They have been revealed in sharp relief or "under a burning glass", an old metaphor in German which has made an astonishing comeback in the last few months. Shortcomings when it comes to precautionary measures and planning, deficits in the digital transformation, processes in interconnected institutions which are anything but smooth: all of this has contributed to missed opportunities, to a situation where it often takes too long before we can implement what we have already identified as being the right course of action.

COVID-19 has shown us what often leads us to leave our country weakened: sometimes it is our fear of anything new; sometimes it is our desire to regulate everything; sometimes it is the search for someone to blame rather than solutions and sometimes it is the shifting back and forward of responsibility between the various levels of government.

If we want to learn from the pandemic, then we have to take a good look at the structural weaknesses of our democratic state. And that is exactly what we are about to do together in this panel discussion this morning.

## I.

One topic that is particularly important to me in this regard is the relationship between science and politics, science and democratic politics. The pandemic has taught us that political decision makers are dependent on scientific advice, especially if they want to solve complex problems using appropriate means. However, it has also made us very aware that political decisions do not simply spring from scientific findings, that they cannot simply be derived from figures and graphs.

Politicians must be guided by scientific knowledge, but in a democracy they must do much more than that: they must weigh values, balance interests, facilitate compromises, persuade majorities, take decisions to the best of their ability and in line with their conscience, justify decisions to the public and, of course, assume responsibility for the consequences of each of their actions and decisions.

This process legitimises political power in a democracy. Democracy offers scope for dispute and differing beliefs. At present there are many who hope that democratic debate can be replaced by scientific knowledge. To be quite frank, I have my doubts about that! Moreover, I fear that the relationship between science and politics began back in the spring of 2020, well over a year ago, with a misunderstanding, a misunderstanding that has hardened into disappointment. Back then, many people clearly hoped that the polyphonic political dispute – about the correct measures, about tightening or easing restrictions – would at last give way to the unanimity and clarity of scientific recommendations. But science did precisely what we expect of it outside periods of crisis: it discussed the correct path, and the tentative nature of its assumptions, with various representatives and with increasing vehemence even in front of the cameras, for weeks and months, all this documented for a large audience in countless special television programmes.

Science, as COVID 19 has shown us very clearly, exists only in the plural when it comes to disciplines, questions and methods. It does not produce any absolute certainties, but rather specific, methodically garnered and thus reliable and verifiable knowledge that is always subject to one reservation – that we may perhaps have better knowledge tomorrow.

The “journey to truth” Karl Popper spoke about, this advance in knowledge, is possible only if science is understood as a never-ending learning process. That said, there are some things we know that have been firmly proven, that are either proven true again and again in experiments – no one in their right mind would doubt gravity – or that are based on data and can be verified over and over in model calculations, like climate change. Common sense demands that we accept this knowledge, even if it shakes our complacencies or necessitates a change in our behaviour. However, the fact that very

many scientific answers are plainly not eternal truths in no way diminishes their value, but rather points to the progressive nature of advancement. Only doubt and criticism, trial and error, the competition to establish theories and methods lead to new, sometimes joint, realisations.

This culture of rational debate is, I believe, something that science and democratic politics most certainly have in common. Despite this common factor, though, science and democratic politics are indeed based on different logics, and the pandemic has taught us that we must not only respect these differences, but also make them publicly visible, especially when scientists are advising politicians. We must not blur the boundaries between these two spheres, and, above all else, we must not play off against each other the scientific perspective and the demands of democratic policymaking.

Democratic politicians must seek advice from scientists; they must involve different disciplines – virologists and medical experts as well as philosophers, psychologists, economists, sociologists and lawyers; and they must defend their expertise even in the face of deniers, propagandists and populists. However, politicians must not overburden those they use as advisers; they must not veil the political nature of their decisions, because in the end they can only ever point to the scientific position that seems to them to be the most convincing and most well-founded – as Laura Münkler in particular recently reminded us.

During this pandemic we are seeing how important it is for politicians to reveal which experts they are consulting in the decision making process, what facts and value judgements they are taking into account, and what ambiguities and uncertainties there are.

And we are also seeing scientists shoulder a special responsibility for democracy. They in turn must be aware of their role and respect democratic processes. When they are advising politicians, they should not behave like activists; and when they intervene in the public debate, they should not give the impression that they are the better politicians. They should explain the state of scientific knowledge and its limitations, and respect the fact that other criteria in addition to the insights gained in their own sphere can or must feed into the political decision making process.

In other words, where politics hides behind science or, from another viewpoint, where science positions itself in the place of politics, where politicians and scientists use each other to push through their goals, we are weakening trust both in science and in democracy. If they acknowledge and make visible the separate logics of the two spheres, however, then we can in fact even strengthen this trust. And we need this trust in science and in democracy; indeed, we will need more of it, because we will be confronted by ever more complex challenges.

## II.

Today we also want to talk about the interplay between governments and parliaments, between the Federation and the Länder – occasionally also a topic of dispute during the pandemic. One of the questions we will be discussing is whether the executive really did ride roughshod over the rest at the start of the crisis, as has often been claimed. Another open question is whether a situation that allows Länder and municipalities to be guided by infection rates in their own region is a strength of our federal state, or whether giving different areas the scope to impose varying regulations simply gives rise to irritation and lessens acceptance of the measures introduced. This question, by the way, will become very pertinent again this week, when the Heads of Government of the Länder meet again to discuss joint steps to tackle the fourth wave of the pandemic.

## III.

Let me conclude. Our third major topic today is the modernisation of the state. The pandemic has shown even those who for a long time did not want to believe it that we urgently need to modernise our administration. The state must become more efficient, more flexible, more open to innovation. Above all, it must become more digital. Whether we are talking about tools, skills or working methods, the digital lag in authorities, schools and the health system is not only regrettable, but sometimes even shameful, and progress on correcting this backwardness is objectively too slow.

That is why we need a new move to modernise our state, and I am pleased that this issue is now right at the top of the political agenda, almost independent of parties and coalitions.

Unlike Hegel, I am convinced that our society has the strength to learn lessons from this crisis. And so I wish to end my speech today, here in this palace in Berlin, by quoting another contemporary of Hegel, namely Wilhelm von Humboldt, the Prussian scholar and statesman. His credo was “always keep researching”. That is, I think, an excellent motto for our Forum Bellevue on the Future of Democracy. Now I am looking forward to our discussions.