



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the seventh Forum Bellevue
“The European Union – what is at stake”
in Schloss Bellevue on 14 May 2019**

Even asking the question “what is at stake?” leaves no doubt about what is involved, namely hard work and an important goal, so I am particularly pleased that so many of you have come here today. The high turnout shows that you too see this question as important and urgent. I would like to welcome you all to a Forum Bellevue, part of a series of events on the future of democracy, which will deal with Europe.

Much is certainly at stake in the forthcoming European elections, including our prosperity, the economy, jobs, our social model in global competition, joint responses to climate change, digital transformation and migration, and last but not least our fundamental rights, namely liberty and equality as the legacy of the European Enlightenment. After all, the European Union stands for the model of liberal democracy that is closely linked to the history of Europe.

We recall that Europeans had good reasons for uniting in a community after two devastating wars on the continent and for enlarging this union. Eastern enlargement of the EU, which actually reunited Europe, was one of the finest hours of European integration.

The European Union has always wanted to be a mutually beneficial alliance that strengthens its members. It aims to be a community of nations in agreement on relinquishing part of their national sovereignty in the interests of common European sovereignty and on creating new institutions to achieve this. That was the founding idea of the European Union and its predecessors. And this idea remains as valid and as excellent as ever!

In the spirit of this moment, 21 Heads of State from the European Union agreed on a joint call, which most of you will have received last week, or so I hope. It is an appeal to the electorate in the European Union to preserve this moment of unity, to take part in the

election and to strengthen Europe. I am proud that with this call, we succeeded in building a bridge between Eastern and Western Europe and between North and South. No, we do not agree on everything, but we do agree that we want to preserve the European Union.

However, we would not need to be asking about the future of the EU today if we did not recognise its weaknesses and find ourselves faced with its possible failure because of fault lines and the fact that many members of the public no longer trust it.

In order to see what is behind this, that is, why the idea of European unity no longer enjoys the level of support and enthusiasm it used to, I think we need to take a critical look at the crisis management conducted by the EU and its Member States. In economic terms, the effects of the financial market crisis of 2008 have been largely overcome – but its political reverberations continue to resound. And we cannot ignore the fact that the discrepancy between increasing wages and pensions in Germany and decreasing incomes in other EU countries goes against the original notion of the European Union, whereby everyone benefits and is united in their good fortune. If this inequality between people's opportunities and lives becomes a permanent state of affairs, the founding idea of the European Union will also become less credible. Freedom of movement can only be upheld in the long run if it does not end up as a mass exodus of a young and well-educated generation from many countries to Germany.

We should also remember that the Brexit referendum was not the first time an anti-EU referendum succeeded. As far back as 2005 – and thus before the economic and financial crisis – referendum voters in France and the Netherlands rejected the Treaty on establishing a European Constitution. Many members of the public apparently do not trust the idea of European integration. They are suspicious of the institutions and political processes. This mistrust goes beyond the structure of the EU and can also be observed far beyond Europe's borders.

The European project will be at risk if the number of sceptics and opponents continues to rise, pressure from the outside increases, and democracy and the rule of law are called into question even within the Union itself. However, indifference also poses a threat to it, as does the mistaken belief that all of the European Union's benefits and achievements are permanently guaranteed. The danger is real. This afternoon's panellists agree on that. And that is certainly one reason why you too agree that we need to ask questions about the European Union's weaknesses, not to anticipate its end, but on the contrary to find the right answers in order to preserve our political union and strengthen it for the future.

If we want to undermine the populists' strategies, the question we need to ask is not "are you for or against Europe?" but rather "what

policies do we want in and for the EU?" And this can – and indeed must – be a topic of impassioned debate.

That is why I am delighted that you accepted our invitation to discuss the future of the European Union frankly and critically.

Asking what is at stake always means that a crisis situation is involved. And it is true that the European Union has experienced many, many crises in the last two decades. Starting with the financial market crisis in 2008, which our panellist Adam Tooze has described as the first truly global economic and financial crisis, followed by the Greek and euro crisis, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine, the refugee crisis of summer 2015 and the vote in favour of Brexit by a small majority of UK voters, we have experienced a veritable obstacle course of crises.

I think the remaining 27 EU Member States would be wise to admit that the UK's decision to leave the Union has hit them hard. This decision has shaken the EU, but Brexit has not posed a threat to the survival of the Union. The European Union may have looked into the abyss, but it did not jump.

Not only has no other Member State followed in the UK's footsteps, even staunch opponents of the EU have become less vocal, at least on this issue. I have the impression that demands to leave the EU are not popular even with populists these days.

And not only did the withdrawal negotiations strengthen cohesion among the remaining 27 EU countries, they also enabled this Union's greatest strengths to come to the fore as crisis loomed, namely its ability to demonstrate solidarity, that is, to see that you can benefit when others benefit, and its realisation that one simply cannot act in one's own interest without looking at what is in the interests of others.

However, do we – and that includes us Germans – always manage to achieve this? I am certain that our panellists will tell us honestly how they see Germany's policy on Europe from the outside – what they see as its strengths, but also as its grand delusions. We Germans like to think of ourselves as the best Europeans. We tell ourselves that we are particularly generous towards our partners and that we do our utmost to take their interests into account. We also like to believe that we have learned the lessons of European history more thoroughly than anyone else, possibly even that we are top of the class in this subject.

But others often see us very differently. Do we really always behave in the way our speeches on "Europe, a community with a common destiny" would suggest? For example, is this how we behave in security and defence policy or in the economic and monetary union? In many issues, we see ourselves differently to how others see us. Germany often believes that it is being helpful and demonstrating

solidarity, while others reproach us for merely pursuing our national interests. And don't we often tend to overlook the role played by others, for example as regards taking in refugees?

There is a real risk that Germany will become isolated in Europe – even if it allegedly has the best intentions. That has become abundantly clear in recent years, as the momentum of the crisis means that the national public in the various Member States has become a European public. The mutual dependence between all sides has become apparent to everyone in the EU. People can read all about it on the front pages of their daily newspapers and they also perceive the differences and conflicts between the Member States.

However, if you want to convince a national public of a common cause, you will also need to take note of resistance in other Member States and to discuss the best path to take. That is another topic I would like to discuss with my guests today.

In the run-up to the European elections, I have spoken about Europe with many people, in particular young people, here in Germany, but also in Slovenia, Slovakia, Croatia, Austria, France and Bulgaria. I learned about exciting initiatives that young people are using in wonderfully creative ways to foster enthusiasm for Europe and the European elections. I am delighted that some of these young people are here with us today. You are very welcome!

During my talks with you, one thing became particularly clear to me once again, namely that using the experience of the past as the only *raison d'être* for the European Union will not convince a 20-year-old. If you want to persuade young people about the importance of Europe, you need to do so in the present with policies for the future. It is right to repeatedly emphasise that it is no longer possible for any one country to deal with the great tasks of the future on its own. It is right – but it is not enough. We also need to provide concrete proof that we are truly *willing* and indeed *able* to overcome these challenges together in Europe – in climate policy, migration issues, digital transformation and protection against the negative effects of globalisation. Joint strategic approaches to China, common answers to the concentration of power in the hands of the internet giants – all of this must be achieved by a European policy aimed at empowering people for the future.

So, all in all, our panellists have plenty to get their teeth into! Allow me to conclude now by briefly introducing our guests.

A warm welcome to Daniela Schwarzer, Director of the German Council on Foreign Relations, who can answer our questions on the role and responsibility that France and Germany will have in the European Union after Brexit. Daniela Schwarzer works on German and European foreign policy, Franco-German and transatlantic relations, and

European institutions. And I can already tell you that she firmly believes strong Franco-German leadership is needed more than ever today so that Europe can assert itself.

I would also like to welcome Ivan Krastev, Chair of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia and a co-founder of the European Council on Foreign Relations, which recently conducted a survey on the European elections that dispelled some myths and revealed both encouraging and less encouraging information. I am certain that we will discuss all that. Ivan Krastev's last book, "After Europe", was very well received. We will shortly have an opportunity to ask him why he sees a European decline – "Europadämmerung" is the term used in the German translation of his book – and what he thinks of the developments in Central and Eastern Europe. And if you will forgive the spoiler, I am happy that he ends his book, interestingly in a similar vein to Luuk van Middelaar, by saying that when it comes to the EU, the art of survival lies in the art of improvisation. So there is still hope for the European Union.

In his book, "The Passage to Europe", Luuk van Middelaar developed a whole range of ideas on how the European Union should be rethought. I am very much looking forward to our discussion. A warm welcome to Luuk van Middelaar.

And finally, I would like to introduce Adam Tooze, a British economic historian who has close ties to Germany and is both fascinated by and fascinating on German and European history. His last book, "Crashed", deals with the financial crisis of 2008 and tells us that it is far from over. We will have an opportunity to ask him how the crisis affected Europe, particularly as the trigger for populist movements, and how it continues to affect us. A warm welcome to Adam Tooze.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for listening. I would now like to ask our guests to join me on the podium.