



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a panel discussion "can democracy survive in the 21st
century?" at the University of Fribourg
on 26 April 2018
in Fribourg, Switzerland**

Thank you very much for the warm welcome, Vice-Chancellor, and for inviting me to the University of Fribourg. Federal President, as you know, I love visiting your beautiful country and frequently come here. I was here particularly often during my term as Foreign Minister because Switzerland is an essential player in diplomacy and international affairs. And now I am here for the first time as President of the Federal Republic of Germany. My state visit stands for the close ties and friendship between our two countries. Thank you very much for inviting me, my dear Alain Berset!

I have been particularly looking forward to today's discussion. No, I am not just saying that to be polite. After all, when it comes to manners, we Germans will never be in the same league as the Swiss. I say it because today's topic is one that is very close to my heart as Federal President, not because that is what I want, but rather because I see a need for discussion. The question we are addressing today is "can democracy survive in the 21st century?" Imagine someone had suggested a panel discussion on this topic ten or twenty years ago or asked this question during the 1990s when, after the fall of the Wall, some people announced the end of history. Imagine this question being asked in 2011 when the first buds of the Arab Spring were enthusiastically welcomed by all and sundry on Facebook and Twitter. I suspect that most of you would have been rather perplexed and thought the person asking the question was overreacting. And then you would have turned your thoughts to more pressing issues.

But what about today? An event like today's now attracts a large audience and great interest. I believe this is justified. Everyone can see the challenges facing democracy. Some people openly ask whether democracy is viable. And these people are not only far away, in Russia or China, where the motto is "yes to growth and security, no to

freedom and democracy". On the contrary, the truth is that a new fascination with authoritarianism has already penetrated deep into the transatlantic West and Europe, where some people have now proudly declared the dawning of the age of "illiberal democracy". In a nutshell, we are in the midst of very challenging years for democracy.

As briefly as possible, I would like to suggest three topics for our discussion.

The first is the polarisation in society that is occupying us in similar ways in Germany and Switzerland. After the shock waves from the Brexit vote and the US presidential election in 2016, we Germans felt the cracks running through our society the following year, firstly in a general election campaign marked by some acrimonious outbreaks of rage and aggression, the likes of which I had never seen before, and then by the election results on 24 September.

I think it is important that as democrats we do not simply deplore polarisation, but instead take a close look at what causes it, at where life has become more difficult for many people, and at the day-to-day conflicts in our country, far away from grand global politics.

For example, we need to look at how big cities are booming and rents keep rising, but opportunities are disappearing in many rural areas and young people in particular are moving away. We need to look at how bonuses and salaries in the international financial markets are reaching dizzying heights, but many people, especially those who are not well educated, primarily see globalisation and technical advances as a threat to their jobs and fear the loss of status and income. And we need to look at how populists then use all of these fears against the so-called establishment, be it in politics, business or even academia, be it in Bern, Berlin or – a big favourite – Brussels. In such cases, opposing social forces increasingly undermine trust in the democratic system and in its representatives and institutions.

Polarisation brings me to my second topic – the spread of digital technology, which I do not think should be seen as the source of political evil. On the contrary, the Digital Revolution has brought untold liberties, allowed new business models to develop and connected people all around the world. But this revolution certainly has the potential to heighten the opposing forces in our societies even further, for example when the tone in social media becomes ever more abrupt and intransigent thanks to the cloak of anonymity, when the boundaries between what can and cannot be said are becoming increasingly blurred, when algorithms on YouTube and other sites are not programmed to provide responsible editing or objective information, but rather to obtain the greatest number of clicks and ensure user loyalty, or when a radical video is followed by an even more radical one in order to keep people on a site for as long as possible. Social media can even be used as a tool to manipulate voters

during election campaigns. Since Cambridge Analytica at the latest, we all know what that means. We definitely need rules for all of this. But what should these rules be and who should make them? That is also something I would like to discuss with you.

The Israeli academic Yuval Noah Harari recently said: "The greatest danger that now faces liberal democracy is that the revolution in information technology will make dictatorships more efficient than democracies." Now, this line of attack against democracy is not new. In the 1920s and 1930s, that was precisely where the fatal appeal of radical forces lay. And there is no doubt that democracy is a tiring system of government, as it is based on compromise and not all power is held by a "strong man". Democracy guarantees every citizen liberties, but also demands that they take on a certain amount of responsibility. That is why I call it a system of government for the brave-hearted.

However, what is new – and that is what Harari means – is how autocratic regimes can make "better" decisions for the system by using digital technologies. These decisions are "better" as regards the output they generate, be it in terms of prosperity, security, the environment or infrastructure. If autocracies that don't care about privacy or civil liberties make use of all available data and feed it into ever more powerful algorithms, won't they soon be able to control even the smallest social units and people's private lives? Won't they be able to counteract the dissatisfaction and revolt often found at the start of democratic movements at an even earlier stage? By the way, all of this has been reality for a long time. It is not just dystopian science fiction. A Social Credit System is currently being set up in China. Based on big data, it will reward good conduct and punish misconduct, with both naturally being defined by the state. And if we imagine how in the future – according to reports – 600 million cameras will monitor public spaces in China and artificial intelligence will make it possible to pick out a single face in a huge crowd, then we get an idea of the enormity of Harari's words of warning.

My third and final topic follows as a sort of mirror image of all this. As a reaction to the restlessness of our time, the spread of digital technology, artificial intelligence and other, ever faster waves of technological disruption, I sense something increasingly strongly in our societies, namely a new need for identity, orientation, deceleration, clear answers and something to hold on to.

Perhaps we shouldn't be at all surprised that the political forces who know how to exploit the digital future for their own benefit are those who hark back to a golden past. Populists are using the new channels to provide old answers to the question of identity and orientation. And these answers are isolation, marginalisation and nationalism.

In my opinion, we cannot and should not accept this! Our societies need a positive model for the digital future, one that takes the need for social and financial security seriously or, as I described it earlier, the need for functioning output. At the same time, this model must uphold freedom, diversity and openness. In short, we need something that makes people look forward to the future.

I know that there are many exciting approaches to this in Switzerland and I would like to learn about them. For example, I am interested in finding out how you have repeatedly managed to use digital communication tools in recent times to promote democracy, counter populism and clearly distinguish between facts and opinion. I am excited to hear about your experiences with these fields, so I look forward to listening to four clever and dedicated Swiss people here on the panel and to hearing the questions and comments from the audience. Merci beaucoup! Thank you very much!