

**Speech**

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*„Rebuilding Democratic Consensus at Home and Abroad“.*

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Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, Madam President, Senhora Rectora, Excellencies, Frau Botschafterin, lieber Herr Gruber, dear students, distinguished guests,

First of all, I would like to thank you very much for the kind invitation to participate in this prestigious conference, and for the particular honor to conclude the speeches, panels, and debates of this year's procedures. My understanding of my job tonight, given the program, is that I am expected to fill the remaining minutes between thinking, eating, and dancing with some everlasting remarks on democracy. And as you can imagine, this is a rather inconvenient situation, because given the complexity of the conference's theme, „Rebuilding Democratic Consensus at Home and Abroad,“ the available time is very limited. So, I hope you will graciously follow my insufficient approach.

I would like to refer to the early 90s of the last century, when this political forum has been established – a few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall which was not just the destruction of an ugly structure, but it was the fall of an authoritarian regime. It initiated a series of falls of authoritarian regimes all over Middle and Eastern Europe which indeed has been identified as a turn of history. So it does make sense indeed to recall the situation a little over 30 years ago, because at that time, there was a widespread feeling of hope and expectation, not only in Germany, not even only in Europe, but far beyond Europe, that we were now approaching a period of democracy.

Some of you may remember a famous book that became a world bestseller for weeks with a simple title “The end of history” by Francis Fukuyama, by the way, an American observer, not a German or European one. He was not proclaiming the end of mankind, but the end of a long period of history, of the political history. His assumption was that one major question, which has been debated over centuries, could now be regarded as being solved: The only acceptable political system for an enlightened liberal society is democracy. That seemed to be clear during those weeks, months, and years.

Now, 30 years later, the number of serious democracies has not become bigger, but smaller than 30 years ago. According to the annual Democracy Index from the British Economist Intelligence Unit, there are now just two dozen fully fledged democracies among the nearly 200 existing states, representing less than 10% of the world's population. By the way, two dozen means that not even all member states of the European Union belong to this circle of excellent democracies. Unfortunately, and fortunately as well, there is no time to explain in detail what has

happened during these decades. But it is certainly a notable development that political systems are no longer collapsing, as they mostly have in the past, due to civil wars or military coup d'états, they collapse through elections, they collapse through the erosion of attitudes, of principles, of institutions. For several years now, we have been recognizing a worldwide triumph of populism rather than a triumph of democracy. More and more free elections lead to the election of populist leaders and groups. Legitimized by a free elections, they restrict either the freedom of the press or the independence of judiciary, or the freedom of science or the arts – and, if possible all of them, mostly without any formal change to the constitution. That is what we can observe in Europe, in North America, in South America, in Africa, in Asia. Thus, there can be no doubt that there is a strong need for rebuilding democratic principles, attitudes and institutions.

The most spectacular single event and development in this regard took place in the United States – the oldest constitutional democracy on this globe, where after nearly 50 peaceful changes of government an acting president successfully mobilized thousands of fanatic supporters to violently attack the Capitol Building, the seat of the U.S. Congress, in order to prevent the implementation of an election result. Is there anyone in the room who would have considered this a possible event? But it has taken place. And what has taken place obviously is possible, and could happen again.

So once again, there is a strong need for rebuilding democratic principles, attitudes and institutions. The historical lesson which is not completely new, but unfortunately has been illustrated over the last two decades is: democracy is not a self-sustaining political order. By the way, no political system is self-sustaining. Unfortunately, a democracy is even more vulnerable than an authoritarian system, because it provides the means for democratic structures to be overcome by the system itself. Which again makes it even more necessary to rebuild and to establish democratic attitudes. The stability of a democratic system does not rest on the paper of a well-written constitution, but on the determination of its citizens to take the validity of the constitution and its rules even more serious than the respective individual aims and interests. This is a strong expectation. No doubt. But it is a precondition for individual and social freedom and democracy to be possible.

Let me conclude with three quotes by three famous politicians or political scientists or historians. The first quote is from Barack Obama and it's from in his farewell address in Chicago a few days before he left his office for his legendary suc-

cessor. The sentence is as simple as central: "Our democracy is threatened whenever we take it for granted." We have all come to take it for granted. And as we behave like this, democracy is more and more at risk.

My second remark necessarily is from Konrad Adenauer, one of the founding fathers of the German constitution and the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, who in one of his first years in office, in 1952, told the German public and the German youth: "In the democratic-parliamentary governed state, each of us bears responsibility, some more, some less; but everyone has responsibility; we all bear it; and no one can take this responsibility from us." A few years later in 1964, he said: "Democracy must be lived. In democracy, each individual citizen must have the feeling and the awareness that he or she is a co-sponsor of the state. In parliamentary democracy, each individual citizen must feel committed to his or her state. He or she must recognize and know that there is a common interest that must be taken into account, and this is done in his or her own best interest."

And my last quote is from Alexis de Tocqueville who already in his famous early studies on American democracy wrote the simple sentence: "Among democratic nations each new generation is a new people." He is obviously right. You cannot take it for granted that a once established democracy will definitely overcome any economic, political, social turbulences, if a new generation does not take it as its own responsibility. And this is my message particularly to the young students and your future political life: Don't take it for granted, but please be aware this is your future, this is your country, your Europe, this is your democracy – and this is your responsibility, for any generation anew.

Thank you for your attention.

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