

Opening Speech: Democracy Needs All of Us

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10th International Partnership Meeting of the Danube Networkers

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Editorial note: This version was corrected and edited on the basis of an automatically generated transcript. Obvious recognition errors were reconstructed from context; technical interruptions, repetitions and purely organisational remarks were removed. The substance of the contributions has been preserved.

Good morning and a very warm welcome to all of you.

Why have we come together today? Europe is no longer the safe haven founded on democracy, freedom and peace that we believed it to be for so long. Russia's terrible war of aggression against Ukraine, which has now continued for more than four years, other international conflicts, anti-democratic movements, populism, disinformation and manipulation are causing people to lose trust in democracy and its institutions. These developments endanger democratic values and social cohesion.

Trust, a willingness to engage in dialogue and solidarity are declining. Yet crises cannot be overcome without them. In his 2019 Christmas address, Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said, "Democracy thrives on participation." We need democracy – but at this moment, democracy also needs all of us.

Today you are also witnessing an experiment. We are using artificial intelligence to translate the spoken contributions directly into several languages. This is the first time we have tried it. Many people are afraid that such technology may not work reliably. Our view is simple: unless we try something, we cannot learn whether and how it works. That is why we are taking this step today.

Freedom and democracy cannot be taken for granted. We need active people who become involved in everyday life – in their neighbourhoods, schools and universities, at work and wherever else they can make a difference. We need solidarity between generations, within our own countries and across national borders. Together, we want to strengthen awareness of a shared and caring Europe.

Today will be different from a conventional conference. Usually, participants sit in rows while one person after another delivers a speech from the front. Today, you are at the centre. You will speak, reflect and help shape the discussion. Democracy concerns all of us. Your opinions, experiences, wishes and visions matter.

There are 19 tables, each with six or seven participants. The youngest person is 15 and the oldest is 85, creating a broad bridge between generations. Many young people have joined us from Ukraine, Moldova, Romania and Germany. Different groups have been working together in Ulm since Wednesday. Today, we are bringing all these groups together.

Each table has a moderator. In the first round, every participant has up to two minutes to speak. There will be no questions or comments during this round; the purpose is to listen carefully to one another. In the second round, you will discuss what you have heard, identify shared questions and recognise different perspectives. The moderator will then explain how your reflections will be carried forward.

Our central aim is to help people meet, speak with one another and listen to one another. We hope these connections will continue after the event – online through our networks, but also directly between you. Make the most of this day.

We will discuss serious issues. At the same time, it is equally important to appreciate the special opportunity of meeting in person. Let us use this face-to-face gathering to learn from one another and build new relationships.

Democracy needs all of us. Today, it is up to us.