Bundeskanzler Helmut Schmidt Stiftung

Helmut Schmidt Lecture 2021

Welcoming speech by Mr. Peer Steinbrück, chair of the board of trusties of the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung

Museum for Communication, Berlin, November 10, 2021

Dear Madame Tsikhanouskaya,
Excellencies, Esteemed Members of Parliament,
Dear guests, partners, and friends,

On behalf of the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to our inaugural Helmut Schmidt Lecture 2021.

Six years ago, exactly on this day, former Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt died at the age of 96 – some of us in the room had the great honour of knowing him, working with him, and learning from him. For the Helmut Schmidt foundation established in his name, this day therefore provides a fitting opportunity to honour his services to our democracy in Germany and Europe and his strong commitment to international cooperation with our new *Helmut Schmidt Lecture.*

For many of us, today is the first time that we meet in person in almost two years. And what years they have been! I am not only thinking of the pandemic, which has fundamentally changed our lives beyond recognition.

I am also thinking about the state of democracy in the world.

When Helmut Schmidt died on November 10, 2015, the businessman Donald Trump had just finished producing another season of the reality television series The Apprentice. He had only months earlier announced he would run for presidential office, which was not being taken seriously by many seasoned political analysts. When Helmut Schmidt died, citizens in India had gone to the polls only a year earlier in what organisations such as Freedom House considered an open and fair electoral

process. And when Helmut Schmidt died, the Law and Justice or “PiS” party had just assumed power in Poland. It had also only started to enact measures that observers said were increasing political influence over state institutions and threatening to reverse Poland’s democratic progress.

What were we thinking about the state of democracy in the world back then – and what are we thinking about it now? In the past two years, we have witnessed how governments in countries such as India, Turkey, or Venezuela have restricted core democratic values, such as the freedom of the press or the independence of the judiciary. These attacks have often not taken place overnight and with a big bang, but have happened insidiously and step by step.

And these attacks on democracy have happened and are still happening where we long considered democracies to be most stable: in the member states of the European Union, such as in Poland or Hungary, as well as in the US. These established democracies suddenly face issues which are often strikingly similar to those troubling “young democracies”. As the eminent democracy scholar Thomas Carothers wrote in an article in the last year of the Trump presidency: “For decades, courageous democratic activists and struggling democratic governments looked to the White House for solidarity and support, but today it is more common for illiberal politicians and authoritarian regimes to do so.”

This crisis of democracy is not a product of the pandemic, but the pandemic has certainly exacerbated it. There are many reasons why. One is that at the beginning of the pandemic, autocracies such as China seemingly demonstrated a quick and successful crisis management that did not need to show much concern for democratic rights. This happened for instance when it came to enacting strict curfews or contact tracing. Helmut Schmidt once famously said: “The snail’s pace is the normal pace of any democracy”. Is it perhaps this snail’s pace that has given democracy a bad name?

Personally, I think that it is undeniable that the state of democracy is a topic that is both timely, decisive, and a grave challenge we ought to shoulder together.

But at the same time, I think we can also be hopeful and optimistic: There is also good news for democracy!

One thing that makes me optimistic is that we know how resilient democracies are. Autocracies may sometimes act faster in crises, but we know that democracies tend to emerge more resiliently from these crises. They do so, because people are more willing to obey rules when they trust their government. They do so, because the sometimes long and protracted decision-making processes in democracies ultimately ensure that there is broader political and societal consensus. And they do so, because core democratic values such as the freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, or free and fair elections, allow democracies to correct “errors in their system” and enable peaceful transfers of power.

Another thing that makes me optimistic is that, despite all the bleakness regarding the state of democracy in the world, the pressures democracy faces have also given a real boost to thinking about and mobilising for democracy. We have seen courageous people rising up all over the world to hold governments responsible.

Which brings me to one of the most impressive example of pro-democracy activism of our time. In Belarus, protests and other creative forms of dissent are continuing, despite heavy repression and unprecedented levels of violence since the fraudulent presidential election in August 2020. The regime has arrested scores of journalists, bloggers, or activists. Dozens more have been forced to flee their home and the country. Still, people in Belarus have shown us what it means to really “live democracy”.

We at the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung could thus not be prouder to have one of the most inspiring global voices for democracy as inaugural speaker of our Helmut Schmidt Lecture: Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya, leader of Belarusian democratic forces. She stepped into the presidential race after her husband was arrested for his own presidential aspirations. Since then, she has become a symbol of peaceful struggle for democracy and female leadership. She has inspired unprecedented peaceful protests around Belarus. And she has, from her exile in Lithuania, visited scores of countries gathering support for a free and democratic Belarus.

I know that you all want to hear from her. But before I hand over, let me say a few words of thanks. I would like to thank the outstanding team at the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung, who have not only put together this event tonight, but also an accompanying political programme for Madame Tsikhanouskaya at high-ranking level as well as a timely new journal called “Living Democracy!”, which brings together voices on democracy from all over the world and will be distributed tonight. I know that everyone at the foundation went above and beyond the call of duty to put this programme together. This event would not have been possible without them and their commitment to this project.

Let me also thank our cooperation partner for this inaugural Helmut Schmidt Lecture, the Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute. Thank you for supporting this idea and being such a perfect partner – I think we can already be proud of the impact we achieved together.

Of course, we are also very grateful that Matthias Naß, Chief International Correspondent of Die ZEIT and member of our board of trustees, will chair the following discussion.

And now, it is my great honor and joy to welcome the leader of the Belarus opposition, Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya, to deliver the first Helmut Schmidt Lecture. We are all looking forward to your words and sharing this evening with you.

Thank you!