

We Need Authenticity and Confidence

Interview with
Wolfgang Schüssel,
former Austrian chancellor

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“Democracy
needs to be efficient;
it needs to deliver.”

The former Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel reflects on Europe's evolving role in a shifting global order, the challenges facing democracy, and why authenticity, leadership, and renewed confidence are essential to securing the future.

Cengiz Günay: It's been 25 years since you became Austrian Chancellor—how have Europe and the world changed ever since?

Wolfgang Schüssel: Yes, I started under difficult circumstances. Fourteen of the European Union member states imposed sanctions against our coalition government with the Freedom Party. At that time, the majority of member states was ruled by social democratic governments. This played a role. It had no legal bases, because it was de facto a kind of a pre-emptive strike to block and change the government. The European institutions such as the Commission were much more relaxed than these member states. Today we have many more problematic governments in Europe—not to say that our government was problematic—but considering their concerns, and now we have legal procedures to deal with it. Hence, this is a big difference. I truly believe that the Austrian example was a good lesson for the Union. The member states have learned to live with varying interpretations, different political structures, and realities. Internally we were quite under pressure, but under pressure you have to deliver, and you have to be very effective, and we were effective with our ambitious reforms program.

Globally, there have always been crises and dramatic situations. In the Cold War for instance, we had two or three times the real danger of a nuclear conflict, but these crises could be prevented. We had wars in Europe—take, for example, the Yugoslavia wars where 250,000 people were

killed and 100,000 fled to countries of the European Union. Then we had the Iraq war. Crises are not new.

Today, the situation is different as we now have for the first time in decades a big power confrontation and competition between China and the United States and in Europe, Russia as a spoiler. The Global South has become more self-confident. We have moved into a multipolar world.

Cengiz Günay: And what about the European Union?

Wolfgang Schüssel: The EU is challenged on all levels: militarily, in our security, politically, and economically. But it is also an enormous opportunity for the EU to embrace European values and its way of life. Europe has something to offer. We can offer political and economic partnership, investment opportunities, and the European way of life which is based on values such as freedom, solidarity, and coherence. I believe these are important assets in today's world. The world is changing, also for us Europeans. It is a challenge, but it also provides some opportunities.

Cengiz Günay: There is also a growing feeling of insecurity among many people. Why do you think that is the case?

Wolfgang Schüssel: That's a good question, not easy to answer. There are different answers and different perceptions in different parts of the world. But in the 80 years since the end of the Cold War we see enormous developments in all areas. There have been great achievements in life expectancy, growth in wealth, the fight against poverty, education opportunities, science—not only in Europe, but globally. People now have better perspectives to determine their own lives. But many,

particularly in Europe feel that this development cannot last forever.

When I was young, I was born in 1945, I had a single mother and we were very poor, but we had everything ahead of us. It was a bright future. There was only one direction: upwards. Today, with all what we have already achieved, it is not so easy to think the same for my son and daughter, or my granddaughter of 8 years. It is difficult to believe that things will develop in the same linear perspective.

And we see many tensions across the world; Gaza, Ukraine–Russian conflict, Sudan, etc. There have always been tensions, but now the risk to be drawn into a global conflict or a confrontation is bigger than ever. At least bigger than over the last 20 – 25 years. I think this is the difference. There are also so many things to deal with and there are so many negative things reported in the media, in TV, in the newspapers. There is acceleration everywhere. This causes stress not everyone can withstand. Certainly, social media and different opinion bubbles also play a role. We thought that social media and digitization will support information transparency and create de facto a more transparent and participative democratic system, but it turned out to be wrong. People with different opinions do not cooperate and communicate anymore.

Cengiz Günay: Is democracy at risk?

Wolfgang Schüssel: I think the answer is yes and no. A vast majority of people in Europe—around 80–85%—see democracy as the best political system. But at the same time, there is a growing feeling that democracies, democratic governments, are too slow, that they are too bureaucratic. I think there's a lot of disappointment. Democracy needs to be efficient; it needs to



deliver. You have to prove that democracy is a very effective system—better than other systems. But we must also fight against external threats.

Cengiz Günay: What are the external threats? And what was different back then?

Wolfgang Schäussel: The geopolitical challenges in the year 2000 when I became Chancellor were very different. Terrorism was the biggest problem. 9/11 was really a tough challenge for America, but also for European democracies. There were terror attacks everywhere: in France, Spain, Germany. Democracies had to stand up and had to fight against it. On the global level, there were geopolitical challenges, but China was much weaker back then and the Chinese government was very reform oriented. Also, Russia was very different. I remember that Vladimir Putin was very pro-European in his first years. We should not forget that he delivered a speech at the German Bundestag where he received standing ovations from all parties. He certainly had a European perspective. There was a much better understanding between global leaders. This is different today.

Cengiz Günay: Can we say that the global system was more cooperative back then?

Wolfgang Schäussel: Absolutely. Today you have a number of leaders who are less interested in solutions, but rather interested in conflicts. You could

say they benefit from conflict. In my generation, we were more thinking in terms of win-win opportunities and win-win developments. Today you get the impression that we are going back to previous centuries. It's about one side winning and the other side losing—win or lose. And this creates a very conflictual and a very competitive situation, which is not good. And it's a weakness on all levels, especially the international organizations. The question is whether we can return to a spirit of cooperation?

Cengiz Günay: On Putin, with whom you had several personal encounters, how can a person change the personality?

Wolfgang Schäussel: I recently found some notes in my office which I took from a private conversation with Vladimir Putin on May 24th 2006. At that time, I was President of the European Council and in this capacity, we had a meeting in Sochi, Russia. After the normal talks and dinner, we had a private meeting where we discussed international issues. There he said something interesting: "Don't push us to the East. Europe is and will remain for us the most important partner [...]" Of course, I (Putin), have the duty to keep Russia together. But don't push us to the East." He also said, "I'm absolutely against military missions, military violence, also when it comes from the United States." It seems as if he had a completely different character. And I think he underwent some change. There were big demonstrations in Russia: the Orange Revolution in Ukraine,

also the Bucharest summit, where the Americans tried to offer Ukraine and Georgia NATO membership, which was de facto blocked by Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy. The impression for Russia was that it is just postponed, but still on the table. But the invasion of Ukraine was an international war crime and can never be justified.

Cengiz Günay: Was Europe not geopolitical enough? Because there's now a lot of discussion that it was naive to think that one can approximate Russia through cooperation.

Wolfgang Schäussel: You cannot tell a mystery story from the end. You cannot know everything from the beginning. I think we need to remember that personalities can change, in a good or bad way. The EU has always been interested in geopolitics. We invested a lot of time, energy and money to build relations with Russia. But unfortunately, it didn't work out.

Cengiz Günay: How do you see transatlantic relations in a changing world?

Wolfgang Schäussel: Relations with America are undergoing change. America has always been a partner. When I was young, America was the country of our dreams, the land of the hope, the home of the brave. For a very long time, the relationship between the U.S. and Europe was one that can be compared to Batman and Robin, senior and junior. But, interestingly America's perspective of



Europe has changed. With the establishment of the EU single market and the introduction of the Euro, suddenly, Europe became a real competitor. The EU single market is larger than the American domestic market. The Euro is the second most important currency in the world and in day-to-day trading it is close to the Dollar. This made us into competitors. This is one of the reasons why Trump says that the European Union was founded to exploit America—which of course is ridiculous. The interesting thing is how they see us. As an economically powerful actor. We should react prudent, we should not over-react, and we should be self-confident and self-conscious.

Cengiz Günay: You said we need to fight for democracy because there are many threats. How should we fight for democracy?

Wolfgang Schüssel: We need to defend ourselves against threats from outside and inside. Nobody will protect us. We have to do it ourselves. You know, first you have to deliver. You need to deliver what you promised. I mean democratic parties should not over-promise and under-deliver. They should rather under-promise and over-deliver. And, democracy needs drama. In German it's called Wahlkampf, the literal translation is "fight" for election. It means you have to fight for being elected. You need to be seen as fighting for something and against something or somebody. Of course, I am more in favor of fighting for something than fighting against somebody. In European political campaigns you often get the impression that it is more about image, and about the polls. As a politician you need to be respected but not always loved. I love my wife, and my wife hopefully loves me. But as a politician it should not be the goal to be loved by everybody. As a politician I need to be respected as a person. You need to be perceived as someone who can

be trusted and who has been seen standing for something. I think it is also important to remember in the fight against populists that they promise everything and fight against everything. But they hardly have solutions. I think the center parties—left and right—need to better define what they are standing for. And of course, it depends also on the personality. We need personalities that are trustworthy and professional.

Cengiz Günay: But I think it has also become much more about communication and it has become tougher. I sometimes wonder if these great personalities would stand a chance if they would run today.

Wolfgang Schüssel: Charisma is not new, and rhetoric and communication are neither. We need authenticity. There should be more tolerance for rhetorical accidents in interviews, or some stumbling. We see many politicians who cannot deliver a speech without teleprompters. They are often so cautious to not say anything wrong that they actually say nothing of value.

Cengiz Günay: I think the balancing act is that you need to be authentic and at the same time not move beyond the script.

Wolfgang Schüssel: I think that we have to return to a new form of authenticity. Also, with the risk that you sometimes say something that makes some people angry, there should be some room for that. In European systems you win the majority with around 30 percent or one-third of the voters. This is why it is not always necessary to try to appeal to the remaining 70 percent. You can have a very precise and clear message for your electorate, maybe one-third will be in favor, and some others might not.

Cengiz Günay: You just wrote a book titled Zuversicht—confidence. What makes you confident in the future?

Wolfgang Schüssel: I'm an old guy, I am nearly 80 years old. When you reach this age you see the past, the present, and the future in a much more positive way. You see all the ups and downs. There will always be ups and downs. It was never a purely linear development. All in all, it's a good world, a better world than in any moment in our human history. And I think it is our duty to create the preconditions for a positive future. In German there is a saying: "A Pessimist is der einzige Mist, auf dem nichts wächst". A pessimist cannot create anything constructive. A pure optimist does not see challenges. Therefore, I think we need possibilists, persons who try to make a better future possible, and who work for that.



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Wolfgang Schüssel was born on June 7, 1945, in Vienna and is a former Austrian politician of the ÖVP. After studying law, he served as secretary of the ÖVP parliamentary group from 1968 to 1975 and then as secretary general of the Austrian Business Federation. He was a member of the National Council from 1979 to 1989 and again from 2006 to 2011. In 1989, he became Minister for Economic Affairs. In 1995, he took over the leadership of the ÖVP, became Vice Chancellor and Foreign Minister. From 2000 to 2007, he was Federal Chancellor and implemented reforms in pensions, administration, and asylum law. After retiring from active politics, he became involved in international organizations and business, including serving as a supervisory board member of the energy company RWE.