Speech
by Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the commemorative event
“A European Century”
at Schloss Bellevue on 27 June 2014
(afternoon)

Welcome back to the second part of our event.

Let me start with Der Blaue Reiter. Or to be more precise, with Franz Marc, whose wonderful, enigmatic equine images provided the name for this circle of artists. Marc came from Munich. He was an Expressionist, and was deeply influenced by the great French painters of the turn of the century. He was a close friend of the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky. He was a creative, cosmopolitan man in a world viewed by many as highly civilised and international, graced by scientific progress, a rational and enlightened place. Until this world view was shattered and their world came tumbling down practically overnight, one hundred years ago.

I don’t want to repeat now what we heard this morning about the causes of the First World War or what we have read in the shrewd new books released during the past few months. Instead, I would like to examine the following questions: What have we learned from this “seminal catastrophe” and the disasters it led to? And are these lessons relevant to the challenges of our day and age?

When war broke out, Franz Marc voluntarily enlisted for active service. As did many other artists in that militarised society. And like so many others, Marc felt his national ardour die when confronted with the mechanised mass killing of the war. Franz Marc was the first to call World War I a “European civil war”. It was prophetic. And just as prophetic was the conclusion he drew in 1914, a little more than a year before he fell near Verdun. A conclusion that, a hundred years later, we can quote as a central lesson from this war: “Love of all good things German must today go hand in hand with the love of all good

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things European. Only with this love and through it will Germany have the century it yearns for. The borders should not be redrawn, but overcome."

In the short term, this hope was not realised. In 1918, after 17 million lives had been lost and immeasurable suffering inflicted, the borders were by no means "overcome". They were "redrawn". The victors demanded territorial concessions from the defeated powers. And so from the ruins of the multinational states – Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman and Russian Empires – emerged a myriad of new or reconstituted nation states. Their peoples realised their dream of self-determination.

The political model guiding this territorial reorganisation of Europe was that of the nation state, the republican roots of which could be traced back to the French revolution. The people of these new nation states chose new structures, favouring a system based on the rights and duties of equal citizens over the feudal systems of the fallen empires. Such states were considered to be more modern and democratic than absorption in a multi-ethnic state ruled by the divine right of kings.

The downside of this concept was the conflation of nationhood with ethnicity. The overemphasis on blood and lineage, on language and culture. The inability to integrate minorities – and to tolerate their differences. And so the scene was set for immediate border disputes and a desire for revenge, for conflicts with minorities, for forced assimilation and expulsions – for what euphemistically became known 80 years later as "ethnic cleansing". Where someone was sufficiently power-hungry and unscrupulous, such conflicts could even lead to annexation – as in the case of Hitler's expansionist aims in the Sudetenland in 1938.

However, World War I did not only alter the borders of Europe and the ethnic composition of the individual countries. It also altered the continent's philosophical coordinates. In my analysis, there were three major conflicting movements at the time. They determined the history of the first German republic – and prepared its downfall.

The first of these movements embraced western democracy and with it an open society based on individual dignity and freedom, and a state built on the rule of law. Many people additionally yearned for peace and reconciliation. They did not want to think of themselves simply as Germans, Frenchmen or Poles, but as Europeans. Back in the early 1920s, the Austrian politician Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi campaigned for Pan-European unity. Soldiers and irregulars were still fighting over the boundaries of the new nation states when he called for a united states of Europe, a political and economic community, designed to prevent another war. At this time too the League of

Nations was founded with the aim of fostering international understanding and the peaceful settlement of conflicts.

Opposed to this trend were two political movements, which should rather be called redemptive ideologies – communism and ethnic nationalism. Both contained the promise of salvation – the dissolution of social and political divides and the emergence of a mythologised ideal community, referred to in the former as “class”, in the latter as “race”. Both also had expansionist aims.

And both, in spite of their huge differences, stood in sharp contrast to freedom and democracy. Communism and ethnic nationalism both benefited greatly from World War I and the social tensions of the post-war era. It was the War that did much to pave the way for the triumph of Leninist communism and the creation of the Soviet Union. And it was the disgruntlement felt by many Germans with respect to the defeat and the Peace of Versailles, as well as the hardships of the interwar years, that fostered the rise of the National Socialists. Their assumption of power ushered in a brutal dictatorship, which dragged the world into another war and put into practice an unprecedented policy of genocide.

It was only after this second war was over, and Germany had been defeated anew, that democracy was given another chance. Only then could the idea of international understanding and European unity take root on our continent. In the shadow of the Cold War, both democracy and European integration initially only applied to the West – to West Germany and Western Europe. The Federal Republic of Germany became a stable parliamentary democracy. And the European Community of six, then nine, then ten and then twelve countries became an area of peace, freedom and prosperity.

But European unity did not approach its completion until the courageous citizens of Central and Eastern Europe, and the GDR, won their freedom from their Communist rulers in 1989. The desire to cooperate also encompassed countries like Russia, with whom separate agreements were concluded.

The hope that dialogue and cooperation would replace rivalry and distrust in the long term seemed well-founded. Those who believed and hoped that Western concepts of democracy, human rights and international cooperation had become the leitmotif for global development were far from being alone. I, too, hoped and believed this was the case. But now, a quarter of a century later, we have seen that history does not run smoothly in one direction. Neither nationalism nor ideologies promising salvation have simply disappeared.

In the 1990s, we were shocked and appalled by the Balkan wars. To this day, Islamist terrorism confronts us with a world view that is fundamentally opposed to our ideas of humanity and non-violence. And

in countries such as China, we have seen the rise of new, authoritarian forms of capitalism, which put in question our European belief in a trinity of peace, democracy and human rights.

Many of us no doubt originally thought that these challenges were one-offs, or didn't really affect us, or were simply far away. But then, recently, we were rudely disabused of those notions.

Russia's opposition to Ukraine forging closer ties with the European Union has brought us up against attitudes and behavioural patterns we thought had disappeared from our continent long ago. What we are encountering today is old-fashioned reasoning based on power and spheres of influence – and, at its dictates, the destabilisation of third states and the annexation of foreign territories. Are we to revert to a policy of confrontation and violence?

The United Nations Charter of 1945 obliges its signatories to settle international disputes by peaceful means. It prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. A secession connected with the unlawful use of force cannot be legal. So how can we Europeans manage to ensure that international law is respected and to preserve peace on our continent, when these basic beliefs are no longer shared by all partners?

The German Government has played a consistently principled and simultaneously calming role in this conflict from early on, and it is not letting up in its efforts. Here is a demonstration of what we are debating right now, namely Germany's assumption of the responsibilities that it has by dint of being an important member of the European Union and an advocate of a norm-based world order.

Germany and the European Union hence face a huge, unexpected challenge. We most certainly do not want to return to a policy of confrontation, but nor can we tolerate a breach of law and the casting of doubt on the basic beliefs we share in Europe. Tolerating that would amount to abandoning our principles.

This new external challenge finds the European Union itself in the midst of a crisis. For within the EU, ever more people are calling for more powers at national level at the price of less European integration. It seems paradoxical. While the European promise of peace, freedom and prosperity remains attractive to those who are not yet members, within the EU, populist and anti-European forces are gaining strength.

There may be good reason to criticise the EU. Reasons that can also be easily exploited. Frustration about what some choose to call the democratic deficit and Brussels' obsession with regulation. The complaint that the global financial sector has emerged largely unscathed from the crisis, while millions of private citizens are slipping into poverty. And what a chance to give vent to the indignation about new immigrants and refugees, an influx which many people believe is

uncontrolled. Underneath all this smoulders the fear of globalisation, which seems to involve the removal of ever more boundaries, sowing confusion, causing people to feel that they are losing their homeland, their security, their place of refuge, and their identity.

But the nation state is no longer the safe haven some people imagine it to be.

It is true that the nation state was and remains the basic unit of democracy in Europe. This was the case 25 years ago, when the Soviet empire collapsed and the desire for national self-determination was such a powerful force. For it was combined with a feeling of historical legitimacy, with cultural identity and the yearning for freedom. And even so, the people to the east of Europe's old divide chose to transfer part of their newly-won national sovereignty to European institutions. This they did in the knowledge that Europe was their shield and their means of gaining a new, global radius of activity. They knew that each European country on its own was too small to play a meaningful role on the world stage of the future. Too small, even, to retain its own scope for action and to live in security. The nation state has thus long been unable to fulfil key state functions on its own, without friends or allies.

A return to the nation state in its classical form therefore cannot be the answer Europe is seeking to globalisation and the confusion it brings. We cannot solve our present problems by withdrawal or voluntary isolation.

So where do we stand, 100 years on from the start of World War I? Are the lessons from then relevant to the challenges we face today?

Like my country's peace-loving citizens, I too find it inconceivable that, back then, intellectuals thought war could bring salvation and purification. That an allied country such as Belgium could be sacrificed without scruple. And that the barbarisation of war, for example the use of poison gas and submarine attacks on civilians, could be considered patriotic. In my opinion, the lessons to be drawn from this seminal catastrophe and the disasters it led to are clear. It is as vital as ever for us to uphold the values of the enlightenment and to maintain the cohesion of the Western democracies. We must defend these achievements against challenges from outside, and win over doubters inside.

Our Europe's shared foundations lie in our respect for human rights and an unqualified regard for the rule of law. Our Europe is squarely based on human dignity and respect for others. It builds on understanding and compassion, dialogue and de-escalation – both within individual countries and vis-à-vis our neighbours. Our Europe fosters cooperation. Our Europe provides a homeland to all its inhabitants, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, gender or

nationality. And nobody has to distance themselves from their nation, just because they are committed to these universal values, which are more comprehensive than allegiance to a nation could ever be.

So let us accept this Europe as our shared home, now and in the future. Let us consider, objectively and with goodwill, where its construction could be improved. Let us stand up with self-confidence for all that unites us.

100 years ago, Franz Marc identified excessive nationalism as – in his own words – an “invisible enemy of the European spirit”. His answer to this inner enemy was the love of all things European. Each and every challenge to the European idea over the past 100 years has underscored just how vital this idea is.

Franz Marc saw the alternatives. We know them too.