



**Speech on democracy
by Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the ceremony to mark the 25th anniversary
of the peaceful revolution
on 9 October 2014
in Leipzig**

If it were not for you, if it were not for us, I would not be here today, and neither would my guests. That is the true essence of this ceremony.

I welcome you all most warmly to Leipzig, the city where, 25 years ago – on 9 October 1989 – the course was set for the demise of the SED dictatorship.

Tens of thousands gathered together after the prayers for peace to demonstrate for freedom and democracy. They knew that the regime had brutally crushed the protests in the preceding days. And they were not completely sure whether there would be a violent, a “Chinese”, solution. Yes, they were familiar with the arrogance of those in power and knew that an order to shoot was by no means out of the question. And they also saw the threatening array of military vehicles and security forces which the regime had assembled.

But they came all the same: tens of thousands of people overcame their fear of the oppressors because their longing for freedom was stronger than their fear.

That Monday, no one was humiliated, beaten or arrested – as had been the case only two days before in Berlin. No one now stood in the way of the popular protest. The vanquished oppressors laid down their arms in the face of the overwhelming masses. And the images of the peaceful march around Leipzig’s city centre ring road became an inspiration which encouraged more and more people in more and more towns and cities throughout the GDR every day to come out and protest in public.

That Monday in Leipzig shows us that the protest movement of the courageous few had become a mass movement which evolved inexorably into a peaceful revolution.

My guests and many participants in today's ceremony come from many different countries. They speak many different languages. And they have very different images in their minds when they remember 1989. President Komorowski, we recalled together the first semi-free elections in Poland, which broke the monopoly of the communist regime for the first time in a Central Eastern European country. And, President Áder, many Hungarians think of the state funeral of Imre Nagy, the national hero of the 1956 uprising, who was subsequently executed for alleged high treason. His rehabilitation in June 1989 became the symbol of the "silent revolution" in Hungary. Czechs and Slovaks remember Václav Havel and Aleksander Dubček and how they fell into each other's arms full of relief after the resignation of the politburo.

Yes, the paths we took towards democracy were different, as were the names we gave to these movements. As the singing, velvet, silent or peaceful revolution, they were indelibly etched in the memories of our peoples. Nevertheless, there was – and indeed still is – a strong bond which binds us together to this very day. It is our decades-long experience of injustice and oppression, our decades-long experience of the unbridled and seemingly boundless power of the few and the seemingly endless powerlessness of the many. It is the experience of the longing for freedom and the satisfaction at having gained it.

Whether here in Leipzig, in Warsaw, in Budapest, in Prague or in Bratislava: this year, we are celebrating together sweeping political change which became part of the European continent's history of freedom. For a quarter of a century now, the citizens of Central Eastern Europe have been able to tell people in the West how powerful the longing for freedom and democracy, for human and civil rights was.

So I bid Presidents Bronisław Komorowski, Miloš Zeman, Andrej Kiska and János Áder a very warm welcome!

The movement in Leipzig had a clear goal in mind: "Democracy, now or never!" People who had spent all their lives under the yoke of a dictatorship which had denied them their individuality and self-determination; people whose fundamental rights had been curtailed and whose thinking and actions had been under surveillance; people who had conformed often without any great conviction, who felt powerless or had retreated into niches – almost all of them overcame their fear, their reservations or their hesitation within a few weeks, indeed days. Whether in Dresden, Halle, Berlin or in the east or north of the country – the protest led to radical change.

What began as small opposition groups and circles swelled into a broad based democracy movement which reached into every last corner of the country. On 7 October, when the regime celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the GDR with Mikhail Gorbachev in Berlin, some people were still shouting "Gorbi, help us!" For their experience till that point was that change was only possible from the top. Not much later, however, often the same people were shouting: "We are the people!"

And with this slogan, the East Germans were following in a long tradition of democratic revolutions. They followed – whether they were aware of it or not – in the tradition of the revolutionaries in France who exactly 200 years previously enforced "liberté, égalité, fraternité" and those in the United States who rendered the people sovereign with the phrase "We the people". They were also following in the tradition of the German freedom movement of 1848 and the democracy movement of 1918. Today, we remember with deep gratitude that in the 20th century, during which our country's history was marked by so much injustice and failure as well as so many criminal acts, its people also demonstrated resistance, the desire for freedom and civic courage. We can be proud of this together, in both east and west.

All over our country in 1989, we witnessed courage, imagination and strength being used to create a democratic polity. We remember here today Bärbel Bohley and Jutta Seidel, who in September 1989 courageously registered the New Forum with the authorities as a political platform, thus calling into question the SED's right to rule. And just like the New Forum, the Democracy Now movement, the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights, as well as a new left sought public attention. The establishment of a political party was even on the agenda: an old party appeared under a new name – the SDP.

We also remember individuals who are not known throughout Germany, such as Günther Sattler, the young man from Arnstadt in the Thuringian Forest, who in the same month wrote an anonymous little flyer on a borrowed typewriter, set off on his bike and urged "all citizens" to take part in a "peaceful rally against the arbitrariness of the SED's policies" – and really did manage to trigger a protest movement in Arnstadt.

We remember the events in Plauen in the Vogtland region. On 7 October, almost 20,000 people came together there. Normally, there was a demonstration in support of the regime on the GDR's National Day. In this case, however, more than a quarter of the town's population demonstrated to call for the end of the regime. If reporters from the West had been present with their camera teams, the large-scale protest in Plauen would almost certainly have had a bigger impact. That is why we are so grateful to Siegbert Schefke and Aram Radomski. Their images of the mass demonstration here in Leipzig two

days later came via West German television back to us in the GDR – and it provided great encouragement for all protesters.

The seeds of the protest movement of autumn 1989 had been sown long before. The crackdown by the regime, the denial of fundamental rights, the militarisation of society, the decay of the cities and the destruction of the environment all provoked opposition. People came together in small and large groups to call for change. Today, we have to remind ourselves how risky their activities were at that time. After all, the GDR was a totalitarian state with no independent judiciary and certainly no constitutional court. It simply did not exist. What did exist were the arbitrary actions through which the country was governed. Conscientious objectors could expect prison sentences, while some young people were prevented from studying and were thus unable to determine their own future; anyone who strayed from the official line risked being banned from exercising their profession. Often simply speaking out was risky, as we know today from the Stasi files.

Many people conformed, gave in to the pressure or retreated into niches faced with this climate of fear and powerlessness. Others, however, resisted. Among the many civil rights activists and members of the opposition, who had been active in church and intellectual circles, in grassroots and environmental groups, I would like to single out:

Pastors Christoph Wonneberger and Christian Führer from Leipzig. Indeed, the extremely important role played by the churches and Christians – especially at that time – is not forgotten. And we remember Pastor Rainer Eppelmann from Berlin, who gave hope to the countless conscripts. Or Martin Böttger, who was in contact with members of the Polish and Czech opposition. Or Ulrike Poppe, who very early on established the group Women for Peace. Deaconess Marianne Birthler, who together with Gerd Poppe and many others, was active in the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights. We also remember the molecular biologist Jens Reich, who risked his career as a scientist when he publicly expressed his allegiance to the New Forum.

I could name so many. Those I have mentioned represent the many others.

Then we remember those who were expelled from the country. They often assisted us, the members of the opposition, from the outside. I would like to mention Wolf Biermann here, who supported us through his songs and poems. And we remember all those who fled the country or were forced to leave, whose texts, poems and songs gave us encouragement from the West: Reiner Kunze and Erich Loest were just two of many. I also want to mention Jürgen Fuchs and Roland Jahn, both from Jena, both expelled from the GDR, who provided us with printing presses and banned literature. Together with others

stripped of their GDR citizenship and Western correspondents, they played a major role in ensuring that news of the civil disobedience in the GDR reached West Germany and then returned to the GDR via the media despite the censorship.

Last, but most certainly not least, I would like to recall the refugees and those who applied to leave the GDR, whose desire for freedom many at that time – including myself – failed to appreciate. Their longing for self determination and for freedom was greater than the fear of having to leave their home country or lose family and friends. Yet, at the time those of us who stayed felt they had abandoned us. We countered their “We want out!” defiantly with our “We are staying here!” Only later did we understand what a crucial political role they played in denying the GDR its legitimacy.

However, those of us who stayed became the people, a powerful movement from below, without which democracy and freedom would not have been achieved in autumn 1989. We became the people that was no longer willing to be the pawns of the regime and now even dared to occupy the Stasi offices, the fortresses of the SED regime. We achieved something which seemed inconceivable: we forced the regime to stand down. This was a genuine revolution which stripped the rulers of their power, but in a truly peaceful fashion – without any acts of revenge or lynch justice.

At that time, candles became the symbol of non-violent transition. In our neighbouring countries to the east, dialogue and compromise took place in round tables, that was where a negotiated and peaceful revolution emerged. We in the GDR also needed the round table, a peacebuilding instrument, for the transition. And for the first time we experienced representatives of the regime who not only dictated to the people but were also willing to enter into dialogue.

Many of those who are here with us today were involved in this process. We all know that it was uplifting when we, who had longed for freedom our whole lives, took part in a demonstration for the first time – in our own town, with our fellow countrymen and countrywomen who had been so fearful for such a long time. The term “upright stance” was on everyone’s lips at the time. We regained self-respect and dignity. Subjects became citizens. And even today, after living in freedom for many years, we are able to remember exactly those moments when we brought such new and unfamiliar freedom to our streets and squares. I now feel that liberation is an even greater source of joy than freedom is. I can still see it as if it was only yesterday: it was both magical and absolutely real – countless dreams had come true. And for countless numbers of people, it simply meant one thing – happiness.

Of course, today we also know that this outcome was only possible because the Soviet Union refrained from using the Brezhnev

Doctrine. We were not aware of that at the time, but it was our hope. And that was what happened: Moscow did not send in troops once again when its satellite states went their own ways. This was thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev! And soon we, who were increasingly widening our world, were not only shouting, "We are the people!" Long-lost knowledge also returned, which we summed up with the slogan: "We are one people!"

At a cursory glance, we were thus pursuing a national objective at the time. But a closer look shows that all of the countries of Central Eastern Europe did not only become independent and democratic in the autumn of 1989. They also became part of a common Europe. Europe reunited in the same way as Germany reunited. The process that began with liberation from National Socialism in 1945 was given new impetus, new dimensions and new momentum in 1989. The peaceful revolutions and reunification were the first step on the path towards the Central Eastern European countries becoming part of the EU. I regard this step as akin to the second foundation of the European Union!

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 was to become the most important symbol of the new era, which had begun with the clearing of mines and the removal of fences at the Hungarian border in the spring of that year. The Berliners, we Germans, and the guests from all over the world have good reason to celebrate this occasion. However, I made a conscious decision to invite the presidents of our partner countries here to Leipzig. Once again, we say very clearly here today that there would have been no 9 November without 9 October. Freedom came before unity.

All of those who lived through the autumn of 1989 will remember it until their dying day. And even those born later are moved when they see the images of thousands, tens of thousands, indeed hundreds of thousands of people who did not allow the police to stop them from taking their protest to the streets. They are moved when they watch footage from the German Embassy in Prague, where thousands of people, who felt that fleeing their home country was their only hope for the future, spent weeks in extremely difficult conditions. And everyone is moved when they see how people fell into each other's arms, laughing and crying, when the barriers were suddenly raised in a place where the world seemed to end.

One good reason why we want to preserve this memory is to remind ourselves, time and again, of what we have achieved. People in many countries of the world still long for such achievements. The protest movement on the Maidan in Kyiv, a while ago, was one example of this.

Of course, many East Germans also experienced times during the past 25 years when happiness about the new-found freedom was

overshadowed by disappointment about changes in their lives, disruptions to their career paths or the deficits of democracy. It was also difficult for many people to find their way in a country where personal responsibility is required. We had to learn to take our lives into our own hands. It was difficult to have to find a new job, or even to be made redundant, to feel useless. And many, including other post-socialist societies, were shocked by how fiercely the discussion on the communist past was conducted.

Furthermore, East and West Germans were often dealing with completely different issues. Some East Germans struggled to cope with the change of elite, where this actually occurred, while others found it hard to come to terms with the lack of a complete change at the top. And not all West Germans were happy about providing financial support to the new Länder.

I am therefore all the more pleased that the vast majority of Germans now sees reunification in a positive light. In particular, the young generation in eastern Germany appreciates its fundamental rights, personal freedom, standard of living, and opportunities for educational and academic development.

This is good news. Tensions between eastern and western Germany have declined notably, while differences between the two parts of the country are now far less marked than they were in the past. And even if certain differences of mentality persist even today, living conditions and values are becoming increasingly similar in east and west. In other words, we did not only make history during the exceptional situation in 1989 – we were also successful as regards shaping our political system and policies in the following 25 years. Unity is working.

If we want to make ourselves aware of this today in Leipzig, we also want to look to the future. In doing so, we should be very aware of one thing: we would only half-understand – or perhaps even devalue – the old slogan “We are the people” if we believed that it only applied to the time of the peaceful revolution. Instead, the phrase “We are the people” sums up the fundamental principle of a democratic community. Anyone who shouts “We are the people!” is also saying “I am a citizen!” and is prepared to take on responsibility, regardless of whether he or she is a member of parliament, a minister, an elected council member, a mayor or simply a citizen and voter. We now know that the slogan of “an open country with free people” on a banner held high by Katrin Hattenhauer and Gesine Oltmanns in 1989 is not easy to put into practice, nor does it come about of its own accord.

Powerlessness – often a self-inflicted powerlessness – also occurs in a democracy when individuals do not join in discussions, get involved, vote, or accept responsibility even though decisions are being made about them and about their – our – society. I know that it is not

possible for everyone to play an active role in a political party. However, our society offers countless opportunities for people to get involved, for example in associations, churches, trade unions, community centres, non-governmental organisations, and not least the dedicated milieu of the online community. We must never forget that our democracy is not only threatened by extremists or fanatics and ideologists, but rather that it can be eroded and that it can decay if citizens do not fill it with life.

It is thus clear to us that it is up to all of us whether or not our democracy works and how well it works. It is up to all of us to decide whether or not we will defend democracy and how well we defend it. And if we look beyond Europe's borders to a topical example, we see that the young demonstrators in Hong Kong have understood this very well. We have much in common.

Fritz Stern, the Jewish-American historian from Wrocław, recently said that he suspected that fewer people than before are enthusiastic about the "ideal of a liberal order with all the achievements of the Enlightenment". Hence, we in Germany also need to ask ourselves seriously whether we are promoting our liberal democracy in a sufficiently convincing way – not because it is perfect, but simply because it is the best type of order the world has known so far. We need to ask ourselves whether we are doing enough to explain the value of a system founded on law; a system that is not based on "either/or" and the triumph of the strong, but rather on the notion of "both together", which takes different interests into account – a notion that is often so difficult. And we need to ask ourselves whether we are doing enough to truly bring all those who believe in democracy together, regardless of their religion, ethnic group or political orientation. Only in this way will intolerance, nationalist hubris, hatred and violence fail to find fertile ground; only in this way will everyone in our country be able to live a life of their own choosing, a life without fear.

Particularly at times when the old orders seem to be on shaky ground in some places and when the old certainties are disappearing for many people, we should remember what we experienced in 1989, namely that those who merely remain on the sidelines will become the oppressed, and that on the contrary, those who overcome their fear by empowering themselves will acquire options and a future. This holds true both for internal and external development.

In 1989/90, we believed that the end of the Cold War heralded a century of peace in Europe. Many people even regarded this moment as the end of history because democracy had conquered dictatorship. Instead, we are currently confronted by failed states, terrorism, fundamentalism, violence, anarchy and civil war. And on Europe's borders, the norms of international law are being disregarded and

military means are being used where peaceful coexistence would be possible.

We need to consider anew together, we have to determine, what responsibility Germany is willing to take on, along with its friends and partners. It is certainly never easy to practise the principle of responsibility not only in one's own life, but also in society, in an expanded European and global dimension. But was it ever simple to ensure that freedom and the law triumph?

However, that it is possible is what constitutes our shared Leipzig knowledge:

We do not want others to decide how we live, but rather to decide for ourselves. We do not want to be governed, but rather to govern.

We can do that if we believe in ourselves and in our values.

We can do that if we promise each other in the spirit of the Leipzig tradition: we shall remain what we were in 1989.