Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the presentation of the
International Charlemagne Prize
to the President of the European Parliament
on 14 May 2015
in Aachen

What a beautiful day, what a beautiful ambience. What an amazing prize winner, what illustrious guests. Despite all of this, I feel I must begin my address on a dark note.

"For the first time in post-war history, the failure of the European Union has become a realistic scenario." This sentence hits us like a bombshell. It is by the man whom we are here to honour today, this year's winner of the International Charlemagne Prize. Martin Schulz puts it right at the beginning of his book on Europe.

It does credit to the Board of Directors that selects the winner of the Charlemagne Prize that they have honoured Martin Schulz, the President of the European Parliament – a fighter for the idea of European democracy and someone who says how things really are and who does not belittle problems – even now, at a time when the future of the European Union is being called into question and many Europeans are expressing doubts about the European project.

When the idea that was the Charlemagne Prize began to take shape in 1949 and Aachen and the rest of the country still lay in ruins, visionary power was required to endow a prize in order to promote "Europe as a project of peace", as people called it back then. War had been the woeful order of the day in Europe for centuries. The continent had been ravaged variously by the Seven Years' War, Thirty Years' War and the One Hundred Years' War. These conflicts sought to establish rules on succession, bring about a revolution or achieve emancipation; they were waged in the name of an ideology or ruler, a religion or fatherland – in short, there was always a reason to take up arms in Europe.

At the same time, yearning for peace – peace through law – grew. We owe Immanuel Kant a debt of gratitude for his lasting insight

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that it is not just any states that come together to form a permanent alliance against war, but democratic states so that internal freedom and an enduring will to live in peace are achieved. Even back then, Kant's thoughts centred on the idea of a community of shared values in which states share their sovereignty in order to preserve peace. The continent was to experience a series of bloody excesses, fuelled above all by political nationalism, before this idea would become the core of the European integration project 150 years later.

We are currently witnessing how this important insight is facing new competition from a return to national responses, which are sought and preferred in some places. However, I do not want to experience or have to tell the story of a return to a Europe of competing nationalisms. Let us therefore be watchful and keep the trials and tribulations of our continent in mind when talking about the future of Europe.

For ten years, above all since the failure of the European Constitutional Treaty in referendums in France and the Netherlands, we have complained about a crisis of democracy and of the institutions in the European Union. Debt problems and competitive weaknesses have since been added to the mix. At the core, it seems to me that what we are experiencing is a crisis of trust – of trust in the European project as it has existed to date.

Willingness to continue to accept a common future is on the wane in some member states. For some, standing alone and being thrown back to the nation state is somehow no longer the terrifying scenario that it once was. While we should not rush to equate all criticism of the complex process of reaching compromises in Brussels with basic Euroscepticism, the rising tide of criticism in many European countries is alarming. The populists are mainly successful precisely because they have declared European integration and the common institutions, especially the common currency – and also openness and the freedom of movement – to be their sworn enemy. But we – and we should not delude ourselves here – also sense a stronger desire to pursue national paths and separate foreign policies in the traditional spectrum of political parties and in a number of governments of the European Union.

Let us beware of false conclusions, however. The populism critical of integration on the right and left alike is not only a consequence of the recent economic and financial crisis, but is actually older and appears to have deeper roots. Even though growth is an important remedy, it is not enough to hope that the wind of the next economic upswing alone will blow away this populism as ghosts are banished by the coming dawn. The core of this unease is and remains the question as to what extent the populations of the various countries want and are able to commit also to a European identity.

From history, we know how difficult it is for inhabitants of smaller states to become accustomed to thinking of themselves henceforth as citizens of a greater, common whole. The situation in Europe today is perhaps similar. Feelings of alienation have now taken root in places, while some sense a breakdown of boundaries as a result of globalisation. This explains the return to nationalist modes of thinking, even though we thought that we had long since learned that we as Europeans can only remain effective and become competitive on the international stage as a greater community.

You are doubtlessly wondering what we can do about this now. Let me first dwell for a moment on what has already been done, which truly amounts to a great deal. Reforms – far-reaching reforms – have long since been introduced. The Union is becoming more democratic as the rights of the European Parliament are being strengthened along with its citizens' right of initiative. A number of member states are reorganising their budgets and modernising their economies and administrations. The eurozone is preparing itself for future financial and debt crises with new rules and the economy is recovering across Europe. In the face of the Russian land grab in Ukraine, we have seen that when our Union is challenged, it acts with solidarity and determination. Coordinating foreign policy is a laborious process, but the result is what counts. Listing all these things does not constitute a zero sum game, but is rather about reminding ourselves that stabilisation and successes are possible also in difficult times.

Let us also not forget that we Germans at the heart of Europe will remain what we have wanted to be since the very outset: a reliable advocate of the European integration process. Looking back at history, there may once have been good reasons to contain and control the nascent Federal Republic by inviting and therefore also obliging it to join the common European purpose. However, 25 years after reunification, it is clear as day that Germany has never been as European as it is today. It has become a reliable anchor of stability.

And Europe is part of us, and we are part of Europe. Without the Union, we would not be as stable, secure and free as we are today. I can therefore only reiterate that Germany will continue, unwaveringly and intensively, to help to build the Union – in close coordination with its neighbours and as a member state with equal rights and obligations.

Despite solid foundations and despite an impressive willingness to reform, the necessary trust that I mentioned earlier has yet to be restored. Europe must prove anew that it is capable of making up for old weaknesses and mastering new challenges – in line with its basic ideals.

For the first time, it will not be possible to overcome a crisis in the European integration process with the determination of political

elites alone. For the first time, all citizens of the Union are being called on to argue and fight for a common Europe as ballot papers display shrill alternative ways ahead. European integration is not an eternal project as nothing that is wrought by human hands is irreversible – unless we Europeans, both young and old, generation for generation, renew and reaffirm the Union in its essence. And this opportunity has now arisen in the face of this crisis.

The structural problem of having a common currency on the one hand, but decisions taken on financial policy primarily at national level on the other, remains unsolved to this day.

It is uncertain, especially after the recent elections in the United Kingdom, whether and how the unity of the member states of the Union can be ensured in the future.

And it is still not entirely clear how Europe should react in the face of new threats and fresh violations of international law.

Until recently, a peaceful belt surrounded the European Union. Now we are witnessing the language of power in the south and the east, and not the power of language. Weapons are speaking the language of war on the doorstep of our Union – in Libya, Iraq, Syria and Ukraine. It is often ideologues, nationalists, fanatics and terrorists who threaten peace and the freedom of peoples.

Nothing less than the principles of our peaceful order are at stake. Our basic values and attitudes and our security are under threat. And whenever we have to face fundamental tasks, it is vital that we stand shoulder to shoulder as Europeans. The European Union must prove itself able to act and defend itself against threats, especially threats such as terrorism, which often comes from within and without at the same time.

The question as to the role of the nation and its relationship to the Union remains nevertheless. We all know that concerns that the nation state will disappear like a puff of smoke in a future Europe have no basis in reality. The nation state will remain an important point of reference for identity and identification. And as long as the citizens of Europe shy away from surrendering more national sovereignty, the nation states will be all the more obliged to defend the European idea together with Brussels and to breathe life into it in the face of new challenges.

And as long as Europe is unable to put forward a mutually acceptable solution to help refugees in search of safety, national governments will have to become all the more active. This is about saving lives and about shaping a worthwhile future for Europe and Africa.

Allow me to return to the problem of the nation and the European integration process. I recently stumbled across a wonderful quote that

I agree with on a personal level. It is by the Romanian author Mircea Cărtărescu, who received this year's Leipzig Book Fair Prize and had the following to say about the nations of Europe in his acceptance speech: "I have always considered the national identities on the continent to be local variations of an underlying Europeanism." I wish that each and every patriot would consider themselves to be Europeans in this vein today.

An acquaintance of mine recently told me about how he and his family travelled through Luxembourg and the neighbouring regions of Germany and France. Suddenly he heard a voice, and it was his little son, who asked: "What's a border, daddy?" The person who told me this story comes from northeastern Germany, from the part of the country that was long deprived of freedom. He cannot imagine that a question like this even exists.

How many wars have we fought and how many treaties have we hammered out so that, in the end, a young person would someday ask such a big question in such complete innocence? Those who hear this boy can fathom what this failure of European integration would mean that the Charlemagne Prize winner Martin Schulz fears and seeks to avoid at all costs.

Martin Schulz was born in Würselen, barely ten kilometres from here, at the intersection of three countries. He still remembers what borders mean. Yes, Martin Schulz's and my own generation – I am also from northeastern Germany – certainly still recall what borders mean as they were ubiquitous in both Martin Schulz's and my own youth. This is why he knows from his own experience what benefits European integration promise – for us all. Martin Schulz calls the European Union a "positive sum game".

French, Greek, Spanish and German citizens have, in reality, long been both citizens of their respective countries and citizens of Europe. We feel comfortable with our dual identity, but still identify strongly with our nation state from a political point of view. The threat of resurgent nationalism and therefore the failure of Europe as a political idea will be banished if we – in Martin Schulz's words – put our trust in the European Union as a political actor and as a political "addendum". Winning this trust with constructive new answers is the task at hand for our generation today.