Speech by
Federal President Joachim Gauck
on the occasion of the conferral of an honorary doctorate
by the National University of Ireland Galway
on 15 July 2015 in Galway, Ireland

What a great pleasure it is to be here in beautiful Galway. I know this city is regarded by many as the "most Irish" of all because the Irish language is heard more often in its streets than in almost any other. Whenever I travel around Europe, I notice time and again how very precious our continent's cultural diversity is. Galway – and its university – is a wonderful example of European diversity. It is to this wealth of diversity that Europe owes its strength.

Another source of strength is the values which we share on our continent, most especially within the European Union: above all, respect for the individual and his or her rights. Only if people enjoy inalienable rights can they fully develop their creative energies. How fitting it is, therefore, that research into human rights is being carried out here at the National University of Ireland Galway. This is valuable work which deserves great recognition. And it is pleasing to me as a European citizen and as President of the Federal Republic of Germany.

"Human rights" and "Europe" – I have thus already addressed the theme of my speech today. However, before I look at this subject in greater detail, I would first of all like to address a few words to you, Dr Browne. I am grateful, indeed very grateful, that you are conferring such a great honour on me today! It truly is an honour for me.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the East-West conflict, we in Europe cherished a dream – the dream of a continent of free and equal democracies. And we began to turn this political vision into reality. The states participating in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe – including the Soviet Union – signed the Charter of Paris for a new Europe in November 1990. They undertook "to build, consolidate and strengthen democracy as the only system of government of our nations" and thus to usher in "a new era of democracy, peace and unity in Europe".

Europe's governments remain committed to this goal. However, the hope back then that the liberal, Western concept of democracy would gain acceptance in ever more places around the world has not

been fulfilled, or has not yet been fulfilled. Just a few years ago, we Europeans looked full of hope across the Mediterranean towards the south where an Arab spring seemed to be unfolding and creating new democracies. As we have all seen, however, the European Union's southern neighbourhood is today marked by crises and instability instead of prosperity and democracy. Unfortunately, the same applies to the European Union's eastern periphery. Around the world, acceptance of democracy as a form of government has not been this low since 1989.

How did that happen?

We know that the international order which evolved after 1990 has come under pressure. This trend has been evident for a long time and unfortunately it has become more pronounced recently. However, it has been joined by something new, a phenomenon which – in my view – is one of the most important aspects of the crises which have hit us: those forms of government which have little to do with democracy have gained ground. The autocracies which for a long time were on the defensive are now very much on the offensive and extolling their strengths to a domestic audience. In some cases it is the promise of efficiency which makes them appear so attractive, in others patriotic sentiments are satisfied. And the self-confidence of these opponents of liberal democracy grows with these apparent successes. They attack the supposed double standards of the West, which they accuse of demanding that human rights be respected when, in reality, they are only concerned about their own interests. What they all have in common is that they oppose the vision which took shape in Paris all those years ago.

Occasionally, some idea or gesture from these parallel worlds even finds support in European countries. Often it is merely the resolve of the new authoritarian leaders which impresses others. Sometimes they inspire admiration because they seem to create scope for the desire for national autonomy. Undoubtedly, this support is also an expression of anti-Western reflexes.

In some places, it has become all too popular to draw a distorted picture of the European Union: untransparent, unjust, undemocratic – in short, a depiction of Brussels as the enemy.

The successes of populist forces on the left and right fringes of the political spectrum in numerous European states are a manifestation of this scepticism. The influence of such movements and parties is increasing even in the more prosperous societies within the Union which are regarded as very open. And this is particularly worrying when we remember which continent we are talking about: according to the current Global Peace Index, fifteen of the twenty most peaceful countries in the world are in Europe. The old Europe with its long history as a slaughterhouse in which devastating wars were waged has

become a continent of peace and freedom where individual citizens can explore their potential. The European Union stands – and this is what links it to its transatlantic partners – on a sound basis of shared values. These values are: inalienable human rights and the rule of law, the separation of powers, representative democracy and popular sovereignty.

Let us look back: the establishment of the European Community was preceded by existential moments and experiences full of violence, pain and suffering. The founding fathers of this community were pioneers. They took Europe on an unprecedented journey.

The European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012 for this service to humanity. Yes, our European Union brought peace. It made possible dialogue and reconciliation – not least between Ireland and Britain. It is based on the idea that democracies freely opt to come together to form a united Europe. With its decision, the Nobel Committee made us all aware once more that European integration was such a success because it found ways to overcome old enmities and to develop a concept of cooperation and solidarity.

We would therefore do well, also in the current crisis, to be frank and make our views known while maintaining our solidarity: we must not allow those who are seeking to revert to the politics of national egoism rather than to foster a balance of interests and cooperation within Europe to define the challenges ahead. We have to confidently counter the populists' simple solutions by putting forward the challenging approaches which this spirit of cooperation engenders. We should also stress the encouraging signs and the successes: many key reforms have been introduced.

Although many Europeans may nowadays take their freedom for granted, there are still people all over the world who are endeavouring to attain this freedom, which has been denied to them. Year after year and in most regions of the world, it is increasingly difficult for freedom to prevail. This is something we must never forget. Yet the longing for democracy and freedom is a basic human desire, one reason why it is universal. And that is why this longing cannot be stilled on a durable basis by replacing civil liberties with material goods or social status.

This view from the outside in itself highlights what the European Union has done for us.

The "recognition of inherent dignity and of equal and inalienable rights", as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, is one of the lessons learned from the horrific experiences of the Second World War.

Human rights are not negotiable, even though we know that the road to their universal respect is long, and that in many parts of the world they only exist on paper. However, European – especially

German – history points very clearly to one conclusion: human rights must not be sacrificed for power-political interests, nor for the supposed claims of cultural tradition. Udo di Fabio, a German former judge at the Federal Constitutional Court, described the thoughts and also the dignity of each individual as an innate attribute – in every state, in every political community.

However, human rights need people to breathe life into them. Human rights need people to defend them. Human rights need states based on them. Human rights must not be the lip service which I experienced in the GDR and know of in other totalitarian or authoritarian states. It is because I know what I missed for many years that I say today: working to defend inalienable human rights must remain one of the highest aims for us Europeans. We are all called upon to act to defend the inalienable rights of the individual wherever nationalistic feelings of superiority are on the rise today, wherever anti-Semitism or Islamophobia or other forms of xenophobia emerge today.

What we now call the European community of shared values evolved over a long, long time. The Irish played an important role in this. We must not forget – particularly in this historic place – that knowledge and learning from antiquity found their way into the Middle Ages and on to the European continent thanks to Iro-Scottish monks. The German medievalist Arno Borst wrote that the journey undertaken by Irish monks moulded the European continent into one spiritual entity for the first time since the Völkerwanderung.

Reformation and Enlightenment, Renaissance and Humanism, the republican ideas of the revolutions of 1789 and 1848 – all of this is a shared European legacy from which, ultimately, the commitment to inalienable human rights was formed. That is the essence of our common bond. The stronger Europe's inner cohesion is, the more convincingly and strongly Europe can work for and promote human rights and democracy in the world.

How credible the European Union is in human rights issues depends in the current situation on how we in Europe treat those who seek refuge with us. We should not forget that countless Irish and Germans once set off across the Atlantic to escape hardship and a lack of freedom in their own countries or to embark on a new life. The history of our countries is in fact such that we ought to have understanding for those who flee.

For our countries, human rights issues are an essential part of our foreign policy. For the first time, Germany has assumed the Presidency of the UN Human Rights Council – in the year of the 70th anniversary of the United Nations. Ireland is currently also a member of the Council and is working there, just like Germany, to strengthen civil society around the world. We Germans and we Europeans would

be hard placed to find a more reliable partner in human rights policy than Ireland.

The Irish constitution drawn up back in 1937 highlights comprehensive fundamental rights. The protection of human rights defenders is of special importance to the Irish Government.

I have met many of these extraordinary and dedicated people and so I feel compelled to say that anyone who works peacefully to promote human rights deserves our protection, Europe's protection.

Supporting human rights and human rights defenders around the world will remain a challenge for each and every one of us. Together we want to continue to grow from this task rather than doubt it.

Amnesty International's highest award was inspired by the verses of a great Irish poet – Seamus Heaney's From the Republic of Conscience. Heaney describes this republic of conscience as a still and sparse place where people turn inward, examine themselves and find an enduring task. I close with this legacy as we make this commitment today. People in all parts of the world can become ambassadors of conscience and uprightness, indeed we all can, if we only believe we can do it and find our own language. This is what I hope, for the benefit of our countries, our European Union and our rights as human beings.