



**Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the opening of the 40th Intercultural Week
in Mainz
on 27 September 2015**

It is wonderful to be able to open the 40th Intercultural Week together with you today. Allow me to offer you my heartfelt congratulations on this anniversary and also for the remarkable idea that was made a reality by our major Christian churches in 1975. This event once bore the title "Woche des ausländischen Mitbürgers" or "week of our foreign fellow citizens", and the change of name alone betrays how far you and all of us have come since then. New partners have joined the fray, but the aim is still the same: together, you are committed to an open and tolerant society. Today, I would like to offer you my sincere gratitude for practising and setting an example of openness and tolerance, often over the course of many years, and also for creating a broad basis for these values and an appropriate attitude in your parishes.

Please permit me now to refrain this year from talking about integration and intercultural exchange in general terms – in the full knowledge that we can draw on many positive experiences, especially from your own initiative, that can help us to master the challenges of the present and future.

I would like instead to talk about the issue that has moved all of us in recent weeks, about taking in refugees, which is something that leaves no one cold and concerns us all – and I am sure that this includes you, the participants of the Intercultural Week.

We sense that the events of the past months are exceptional. What we see alarms many and challenges all of us. We sense this when we see the pictures from Hungary and the Balkans – from Greece, Italy and Turkey and from Syria. We sense that this is a epochal event, the magnitude and consequences of which we are still barely able to comprehend. We sense that flows of refugees, with Germany in particular as their desired destination, will change our country. How it will change it is up to us.

In this situation, in which there are no solutions in Europe or Germany that will make everyone happy, the urgency with which decisions must be taken is, at any rate, enormous. And the situation calls for us to act. Politicians must always act, even if they are actually still weighing up the options without knowing exactly what it is they aim to achieve. We saw recently how a very understandable, human decision taken by the Federal Government was greeted with enthusiastic support on the one hand, but also with clear reservations, indeed even rejection, on the other. A series of European countries, for example, have warned that legal standards risk being watered down by decisions taken from the heart. Closer to home, a lively debate has begun in Germany on which steps are required next and what it is that should actually guide our actions in the area of refugee policy.

Allow me first of all to say this: no matter who I talk to at the moment – whether citizens or officials, whether I visit refugee accommodation or political events – the people are, like myself, always deeply impressed by the willingness to help and the dedication shown by the many thousands of volunteers and full-time helpers, and also by the local authorities and the Länder. It is often the case that more people come who want to help than are needed. This is quite a new departure in view of this challenge. Something has changed in our society, and we can certainly afford to be glad about that.

But many people worry about how Germany can remain open to refugees in the future if thousands more come to join the many who are already here. Will the influx overwhelm us one day? they wonder. Will our prosperous and stable country be stretched one day to breaking point? I can't stop thinking about something that a representative of the local authorities of Land North Rhine-Westphalia said. Allow me to quote him: "The professionals and volunteers are at their wit's end. Our backs are against the wall." And he added that the local authorities will no longer be able to cope with as large an influx in 2016 as the one seen this year. And remember that this is the assessment of someone who helps, who plays an active role, and not the words of someone who just watches and complains.

We are now confident enough, and if we are not then we should dare to be so, to talk frankly about the fundamental dilemma of the present. We want to help. We are big-hearted. But our means are finite.

We are well aware of the legal framework. Our asylum and refugee law only seeks to establish for each individual whether the conditions for granting them protection are met. It is not a question of numbers. And yet we know that the number we can take in is limited, even if we have not yet worked out where the boundaries lie. To my mind, all of this leads to the conclusion that we need thorough analyses and a broad debate within society on how we can safeguard a

humane refugee policy and social acceptance in the future. To quote my predecessor Johannes Rau, we should not allow ourselves to be guided by “fear or illusions” in our response to the refugee crisis.

Migration – whether voluntary or involuntary – has always existed. It is part of the history of humanity and also part of the great dramas of mankind. After all, people not only seek a new home because they want to lead a better life. More often than not they are driven by the desperate wish to save their own lives. While we sorely wish it were otherwise, persecution, wars and civil wars are not a thing of the past; no, they are a thing of the present. They force people to flee their homes, and that is what we are witnessing right now. We are witnessing the fact that we must actually fight the causes of flight more intensively, but that we cannot always do this.

Asylum law has a vitally important role to play in the Federal Republic of Germany. This is essentially a lesson from the horrors of the National Socialist period when Jews and people suffering political persecution were forced to seek refuge in other countries. People such as Hannah Arendt, Willy Brandt, Fritz Bauer and Thomas Mann bear witness to what it means to be dependent on the acceptance of other countries. In its formative years, the Federal Republic took little interest in their experiences. Now, after long discussions and debates and painful learning processes, they are part and parcel of our country’s political DNA. This chapter of our history is etched into our collective memory and resonates when we offer refugees protection and grant those facing political persecution asylum today.

We can be glad that the country that hundreds of thousands of people were forced to flee a lifetime ago has now become a place of refuge. Right now, as a 75-year-old, I am reminded of the way I felt when I was a little bit younger, a man of 65 born during the war, as there was a sudden mass migration of Jews from the former Soviet Union to Germany – to Germany, of all places. The country that they all had to flee, which had persecuted countless numbers of people, had now become a haven for those who would go on to live precisely in this country. I was very happy about our country back then, and I am now even happier still. Almost everywhere, the hope that refugees place in this Germany is rewarded with compassion, warmth and openness. Scenes of joy, the likes of which we witnessed in Munich and elsewhere, will remain in our memory. While they will not be repeated *ad libitum*, they are nonetheless indelibly etched in our country’s collective conscience. They will remain part of our national identity and remind us that solidarity makes us glad – and forges friendships.

When hundreds of thousands of people come to us, from a faraway country with a foreign culture, often with all their worldly possessions in a plastic bag, then they also bring challenges with them – and indeed conflicts, too. This is wholly unavoidable.

First, we face enormous organisational tasks. In the recognition process alone, so many applications need to be processed in such a short time – and there is also the burden of having to reject applicants. Faced with this rapid influx, the state must promote the construction of homes, build schools, employ teachers and nursery teachers, make adjustments to the labour market and vocational training system and teach the German language and legal system. All of this in addition to the tasks it already faces. I can well imagine the kind of heated discussions that the debate about inclusion in our schools and among our teaching staff alone has triggered. All of these things need to be done at the same time. And, in short, a very large group of newcomers must be supplied with the absolute essentials and those who are allowed to stay must be given opportunities.

There is no model for this task - for the scale of the task we face. Much as we expect there to be a clear roadmap and firm plan of action and wish we had an overall concept, we are forced to accept that flexibility and imagination are also required in addition to order. Flexibility and imagination are not the hallmarks of failure, but qualities required of communities in the current crisis situation. Learning in a difficult situation does not mean easing a few iron regulations, however, but is rather a question of promoting a creative attitude that doesn't say why something is impossible but asks how to make it possible.

Even the greatest creativity and the greatest financial outlay will not be enough to ward off conflicts entirely, though. In the coming weeks and in the foreseeable future, it is likely that fewer homes will be completed than can accommodate the number of arrivals. Competition for housing, especially affordable housing, will surely be unavoidable. It is uncertain whether we will be able to offer sufficient places in kindergartens or schools everywhere immediately. Those responsible in cities and communities are doing their utmost, but we all know how stretched the budgets of many local authorities have been for some time. I have the greatest respect for the work that is being done right now in our cities and communities and would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank all those who are supporting these efforts. Let us turn our attention again to educational institutions and businesses. The tasks they face now are so very enormous. While employment is available in some areas for those who are permitted to work, it is often not the kind of work that is being looked for. Or those seeking employment lack the necessary qualifications or language skills. In the short term, social security schemes are faced with costs as the new beneficiaries will only begin paying into the system later on.

Some people will not like the consequences arising from the emergency accommodation currently being set aside for refugees. Gymnasiums are closed for school sports and parks and swimming

pools being converted into emergency housing. I can well understand some of these complaints.

There is only one solution to the predicament, however, and that is to act swiftly. The priority is to prevent tensions from arising between newcomers and those already living here as far as possible. And the best way to achieve this is to ensure that neither group is treated unfairly – or at least made to feel that they are being treated unfairly. In the course of its history, Germany has time and again shown that it is able to overcome bottlenecks and material challenges.

Just now, Minister President, you mentioned the reunification of Germany, for example. Looking at this from a financial perspective alone shows that we have already taken on and mastered incredible challenges. And that's not all. What we want, in all our decisions, is for this society to remain a society based on the spirit of trust – for everyone, the citizens who have always been here and those who will stay with us in the future. In order to make this a reality, the Federation and the Länder agreed to far-reaching measures last week. Of course, not everyone will be happy, but for me as a long-standing observer of the political arena, this decision is something that we can certainly welcome.

There are also challenges which, incidentally, cannot be overcome by budgetary contributions or investment programmes. Integration, in fact, is a long cultural process which calls for a team effort. Nobody is more aware of this than those of you gathered here, who have been working on this issue for so many years. Large new population groups will have to be integrated into a majority society. However, both sides have to be prepared to go down this path.

The Federal Republic can look back on decades of experience with immigration. The legal framework for it has evolved only gradually, and even today, although Germany is familiar with many regulations, it has no immigration act. Successes have been accompanied by many errors and failures. At this point I would like to make an exception and cite a politician currently in office – however, one who comes from an immigrant family. I'm referring to Cem Özdemir. He summed it up quite succinctly: "Good integration means avoiding past mistakes."

Our task is now to teach German more quickly and more intensively! To more quickly allow refugees who stay to gain qualifications, retrain and work! To involve them more quickly in our associations and organisations! To be quicker about helping them feel that they belong, that together, we are a community!

In the case of many, of most of those who come to us, we will learn that they cherish freedom and peace and want to seize the opportunities our country offers them. After all, the very reason that these people fled their homes is because, in the midst of oppression

and war, they themselves longed so much for a political order that offers each person the chance to explore their potential as well as peace, law and justice for all. These people will be quick to understand that this Republic's greatest treasure is its constitution, our Basic Law. The Basic Law, which protects the rights and the dignity of each individual, which safeguards popular sovereignty and the separation of powers and forms the foundation for tolerance and the openness which permits foreigners, too, to make their home here.

Then there will also be people who will feel like strangers in Germany for a long time. Who associate freedom only with a lack of restraint. Who criticise secularism and modernity and wish to cling to the traditions and laws of their regions of origin. We need to make an effort with these people, we need to win them over, thereby explaining the standards we uphold and living them out in practice. I believe this could be a task suited to those people who came to Germany some time ago. They in particular, and many of them are here today, could become bridge-builders for the new influx of immigrants. I encourage you to actively promote this idea in the areas in which you live, among your acquaintances and friends. I am looking forward to the impact this will have. I can see you here, Mr Mazyek. We see each other frequently, and I know this is also an issue close to your heart. We want to work together to generate momentum in this area.

Lastly, and I don't want to close my eyes to this, the people arriving here will also include those – a very small minority, I hope – who want to perpetuate the conflicts in their homelands on German soil. Fundamentalists, anti-Semites and other ideologists, who disregard our laws and fight against our free order. To those people I say that we do not want any religious fundamentalism in this country. So called holy warriors need to know that the rule of law will not tolerate violence. It will be rigorous in prosecuting perpetrators.

The same applies, of course, to those perpetrators of violence who call themselves asylum opponents and set fire to refugee accommodation. Extreme right wing arsonists and rabble rousers need to know that there are no legal vacuums in this country. You will be prosecuted and, incidentally, we, the advocates of solidarity, will win.

The challenges are considerable. Overcoming them will cost a lot of money, time, understanding, patience and a huge amount of effort, on a scale with which the Federal Republic has rarely had to cope. Unpopular decisions and uncomfortable steps will also be necessary. Yet we can succeed in fulfilling these tasks – with the help of an active civil society and a competent administration – and, we have to concede, if the influx of people seeking protection can be controlled more effectively.

The crucial dilemma in these days cannot simply be swept under the carpet or explained away. Ultimately, the human ideal of offering

boundless help always conflicts with the fact that our resources are limited.

And we are also well aware that two souls dwell in each one of us. On the one hand we have the experience of the past, our own view of ourselves and our respect for the universal values of the Enlightenment, which prompt us to say that there have to be states to which people can flee as long as war and persecution are rife. And our Germany has to be one of these states, now and in the future.

On the other hand, if that is to remain the case, individual countries, but also a confederation of states such as the European Union, have to protect their external borders. For this is the only way we can fulfil the core tasks of a state community: maintaining the internal order and consequently peace within our borders. They are the requirements for us to be able to take in large numbers of refugees in the first place.

By acknowledging this tension between what we would like to do and what we are able to do, we embrace the difficulties that lie ahead of us. In a conflict of values, it is vital that we make wise decisions. And because that is so difficult, all those who are trying to do so deserve our respect, at least those who are making a responsible contribution to the debate on this dilemma.

In view of this situation I have an urgent request: I urge both the concerned and the enthusiastic parties not to condemn and fight one another, but instead to engage in constructive dialogue.

Incidentally, the task before us, as we are entitled to remember in this situation, is not just a task for us as Germans. It is a challenge that we as Europeans are called to face together. Not by apportioning blame, but by joining forces in solidarity. The European decisions in the past week, for example on building registration centres in southern Europe, are a first step in the right direction.

In the past weeks we have learned a lot about German society. The calmness and creative activity with which the vast majority of people have responded to this crisis, as to other challenges in the past, testifies to the maturity of this society. We can therefore be confident that it will also survive future trials. Giving way to fear is not the answer.

We already knew that rationality and compassion are hallmarks of our country, and we are glad to have seen so many new and convincing examples of this in recent weeks. Anyone who thought that civil society would soon run out of enthusiasm is now being proved wrong. Where a need became evident, people came to help and are still coming – without delay, spontaneously, in some places more than required. A grassroots movement of humanity stepped in when the state was initially unable to respond fast enough. And it is good that

the helpers include many who are immigrants themselves or who come from immigrant families. I am especially happy about that. For they show how civil responsibility grows in a changing society on a basis of shared values. That is why I am grateful to the many volunteers – including those here in this room – for all their help and for every kind gesture. I am sure that in many places thought is already being given to what will have to be done in winter. The aim must be to ensure that the commitment and help continue once the initial euphoria has subsided.

I am pleased to see that everything possible is being done at all levels to get on top of the situation. Municipalities, Länder and the Federation are increasingly working hand in hand. A considerable amount has been achieved within a matter of a few weeks. I would certainly include in that financial contributions and necessary changes to laws, investment in infrastructure and education, even the periodic border controls and the efforts of foreign policy makers.

It will take time for the situation to become normal. However, when we have moved beyond emergency assistance, we will be able to discover a chance in what we are currently experiencing as a crisis. People are coming to us seeking protection, but also a better future for themselves and their families. The vast majority of them are bringing with them enthusiasm and ambition, and endurance – my goodness, what endurance – otherwise they would never have overcome the hardships of their journey. If they are able and willing to stay here, they will be able to put their skills to good use. Of course I realise that not everyone will become an expert in their field, but I would like to encourage each person to discover their own potential and explore it here.

And that is why, to conclude, I would like to address the people who will be staying with us, who will find a home here.

After your arduous travels, I want to assure you that you are safe here.

The greatest virtue you now have to develop is patience. It will take time for you to settle into your new life, to find accommodation and work. You will also encounter frustrations. The greatest of these will undoubtedly arise when you find that not all of your loved ones can reside in Germany.

I want to say quite frankly to all of you who will be staying that we Germans have hopes and expectations of you. After all, we know that we do not do people any harm by expecting something from them. For this reason, get involved, get properly involved in society, and hopefully before long in your place of work. Overcome the teething problems, learn the language and be open to your new neighbours and your new environment. And above all, remember one thing: we live

here in a country under the rule of law, a land of freedom, human rights and gender equality. It can also become your country.

The most important thing you will now acquire is the opportunity to live within the liberal order of this country. This order ensures that you can be welcomed and enables us to live together in a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect. You are entering a country that has repeatedly experienced change brought about by new arrivals. Yet amid all this it has always remained true to the values it has laboriously established through its painful history. It is a country of freedom and human rights. A country you wanted to come to because it was the place where your hopes could be realised.

And to close, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to say a word to us, the carers and worriers. When we mention problems and list difficulties, we must not, we must never allow it to weaken our compassion and harden our hearts. Instead, it should get our minds working and activate our political reasoning.

We will therefore continue to view the situation as it is, without glossing over or ignoring any problems.

We will continue to help as we are doing at the moment – without overestimating our capabilities.

By so doing we will continue to be what we have become: a country of optimism.