



**Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the ceremony on the Occasion of the
25th Anniversary of German Unity
in Frankfurt/Main
on 3 October 2015**

The Day of German Unity. For 25 years, this date has been full of recollections for our nation, an occasion for remembering with gratitude courageous people. People whose desire for freedom shook dictatorships in Gdansk, Prague, and Budapest. And the people in Leipzig, Plauen, and so many other places in the GDR whose Peaceful Revolution made the unification of both German states conceivable in the first place. It is with special pleasure that I greet those among us who were present at the time. We would not be here today if you had not stood up then!

On 3 October, many of us think of the sound of the Liberty Bells, the tears of joy shed, not only in front of the Reichstag, and the atmosphere of renewal – yes, of great happiness.

But this year, something is different. Some are asking, Why look back? Does Germany not have more urgent issues to deal with at the moment than this anniversary? What is there to celebrate at a time when hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children are seeking shelter in our country? At a time when we are faced with enormous challenges for our society?

My answer is: We do have reason to celebrate. Unity grew from the Peaceful Revolution. This was a great gift from East Germans to West Germans and to the nation as a whole. They had overcome their fears and defeated their oppressors in a strong movement of the people. They won freedom. For the first time in German national history, the uprising of the oppressed was crowned with success. The Peaceful Revolution shows: We Germans can do freedom.

And so we celebrate the courage and the self-confidence of that time. Let us use these memories as a bridge. They are our connection to the experiences that can make us strong now. Let us be clear about one thing: Inner unity develops where we really want it and make an

effort to achieve it. Inner unity develops if we concentrate on what is possible instead of giving way to doubts or fantastical notions. And inner unity thrives if we continue to talk about what does and shall unite us.

In 1990, too, the valid question was raised: Can we meet these challenges? Back then, there was no historic example for us to go by, either. And still, millions of people rose to the great national challenge of unification and made Germany a country that became more than the sum of its parts.

There is no question for me that the balance after 25 years of German unity is positive. Even if there were disappointments, if the economy and wages did not grow as fast as most East Germans had hoped, and if financial support is necessary longer than most West Germans wished, one thing is certain:

The vast majority of Germans, no matter where they are from, feel that they have arrived in this unified country and feel at home here. The differences have grown smaller and have all but disappeared among the younger generation. Germany has reached unity in freedom – political unity, social unity, economic unity, too, if slower, and, with understandable delay, also mental unity.

What belonged together has grown back together – Willy Brandt has been proven right. However, the process of unification has turned out to be considerably more difficult than most Germans believed amid the euphoria of 1989 and 1990. For a long time, the only impressions both sides had of each other were gained from a distance. When we were finally able to observe each other up close, many were surprised and sometimes even shocked. "Everything is run down", said one side. "Everything is only for show", the others found.

One thing is true, of course: The East has not yet reached the economic level of the West. Nonetheless, the image of the dilapidated East is a thing of the past. External change can be demonstrated clearly in before-and-after pictures: hundreds of thousands of home owners, modernised streets, villages and cities, protected buildings and cultural sites of historical importance, clean rivers and lakes. All these remoulded landscapes are a reason to rejoice. They are testimony to the great joint efforts and prove that West Germans, too, accepted unity as a responsibility for Germany as a whole, and they have demonstrated solidarity with those from whom they had been separated for decades. I cannot and do not want to take this for granted on this special day, but to acknowledge it, explicitly and thankfully.

We should also keep in mind the fact that West Germans gave East Germans a gift: the Basic Law, our constitution that puts human dignity at the centre, safeguards fundamental rights; a functioning

democracy; an independent judiciary; and a social system that protects the vulnerable.

Unity, however, did not ask much of most West Germans in their daily lives; East Germans, on the other hand, were faced with enormous pressure to change. New life in the East brought with it not only full shelves in the supermarket, fast cars, and colourful travel brochures. It also brought the mass liquidation of state-owned enterprises, mass unemployment, and mass emigration. Empty factory premises, empty pre-fab buildings, empty school rooms – all of this left its mark on people's souls. Even those who were very young back then, those who call themselves today *Wendekinder* – children born around the time of the political sea change that led to reunification – have been influenced by these memories.

For 16 million people, practically everything changed in a very short period of time. And some things – measured against the great hopes they had – did not happen fast enough. Gradually, it became evident that the harmonization of living standards and mentalities in East and West was going to be a responsibility, a process for generations – yes: plural!

It was painful for people in the East to realise that, in 1989/90, they were able to win democracy overnight, but could not learn how it works overnight. Subject yesterday, citizen today – what a mistake! Feelings of powerlessness took hold of many. Powerlessness after decades of totalitarian rule in which people's fundamental rights were curtailed and their initiative was paralysed, in which free elections remained a distant dream. That is how the possibly greatest challenge for East Germans in the unified country can be explained. They had to overcome decades of self-alienation, in fast time, if possible. It was necessary to do all that had been undesirable before – to think and act independently. To not only dream of freedom, but to actually shape that freedom in freedom.

In spite of all these difficulties, millions of East Germans took the courage to manage this new beginning, on new assumptions, in new jobs, or in new places. Millions have turned their fractured biographies into a future, have founded companies and democratised administrations, have introduced free teaching and research at universities, have founded clubs, where government was responsible for everything before. Millions of people have opened themselves up to a fundamental insight: New freedom offers new possibilities, but it also requires taking on new responsibilities, even for oneself. East Germans had to make an enormous effort to change. It still has an impact today.

I want to use this occasion to thank those who tackled what they hadn't learned to do – as voluntary or full-time mayor, parliamentarian, secretary of a free union, as a member of a

democratic party, as minister, minister-president, even as Chancellor – none of them had ever expected to do what they then did. Let us remember all of them today and say, “thank you.”

Some of our guests today are also among those I just mentioned. Seated in the third row is someone from our Polish neighbourhood, Bogdan Borusewicz, President of the Senate of the Republic of Poland. Back in those days I just mentioned, however, when we were all somewhere entirely different, he was just another man in the street who got moving earlier than us and with more courage, thus inspiring us, together with his compatriots, to dare to make a difference as well. Thank you!

Germany’s inner unity was able to grow, above all, because we felt a connection and because we wanted to live in respect of the same political values. Now that many refugees are driven to Europe and Germany because of wars, authoritarian regimes, and failed states, we are once again faced with this task of achieving inner unity. We sense this: We must preserve cohesion between those who are here, but also develop it with those who are coming. It is up to us to fight for unity once again and anew.

Nobody could have foreseen this development 25 years ago. At the time, after the collapse of the Communist regimes and the end of the East-West conflict, we were very optimistic about the future. We even thought we were at the beginning of a new era. The superiority of democracy seemed to be beyond any doubt, its world-wide triumph only a question of time. The American political scientist, Francis Fukuyama, announced the “end of history.” And many – including me – believed with him in a more just, more peaceful, and more democratic future.

But the hope for this change in the world has vanished. Instead of further victory for freedom and democracy, we are seeing the advance of authoritarian regimes and Islamist fundamentalists in many places. Instead of more peace, we are confronted with terrorism, civil wars, imperial land seizure, and a renaissance of geopolitical manoeuvring. And the unity of Europeans that began to bring Eastern and Western Europe together 25 years ago is undergoing a crucial test reflected in debates about saving the euro, occasional discussions about leaving the EU and, above all, meeting the challenges of migration.

But what does it mean, exactly, to time and again win internal unity anew if the make-up of populations changes significantly in a short period of time? How can states, how can societies create an internal bond between those who have lived in a country since birth and those who have just arrived? And how can the European Union achieve agreement if attitudes towards refugees differ so much?

The pressure has not yet brought the European states together. But the most recent EU decisions show a growing understanding that there can be no solution to the refugee question that is not European. We will not be able to contain the influx of refugees unless we increase our joint efforts to support refugees in crisis regions and, above all, to combat the causes of migration. And we will not be able to maintain our current openness unless we make a joint decision in favour of better protection of the outer borders of the EU.

The understanding that these are common responsibilities does not automatically cancel out the differences between the member states. The different positions that manifest themselves in the current debates come from different historic experiences. We can see that within Germany, too. West Germany has managed to become an immigration country over several decades, and that was difficult enough: a country with guest workers who then became immigrants, with political and civil war refugees, with ethnic German re-settlers. It was different for the people in the East. Until 1990, many of them had almost no contact with immigrants. Our experience is that changing attitudes towards refugees and immigrants can only be the result of long and conflict-prone learning processes. This insight should make it easier for us to respect the experiences of other nations.

If we Germans think back to the "the boat is full" discussions of twenty years ago, we recognize how much the thinking of most citizens has changed. The reception of the refugees in the summer was and is a strong signal against xenophobia, resentment, hate-mongering, and violence. And I am especially happy that a new and wonderful network has developed between volunteers and full-time workers, between civil society and government. Many among those who were once strangers in Germany themselves or who are from immigrant families have also become involved. Extraordinary efforts are being made on a local, state, and federal level. This is something this nation can rightfully be proud of and happy about. I say: Thank you Germany!

And yet, almost everyone can probably feel how worry is overshadowing this joy, how the human urge to help the afflicted is accompanied by fear given the enormity of the task. This is our dilemma: We want to help. Our hearts are wide. But our capabilities are finite.

The fact is: We are doing much, very much, to overcome the current plight. But we will have to continue to discuss: What will happen in the future? How do we want to manage the influx of refugees and other forms of immigration next year, in two, three, ten years? How do we want to improve the integration of the newly arrived into our society?

As in 1990, we are faced with a challenge that will occupy generations. But unlike then, now something is supposed to grow

together that has not belonged together before now. East and West Germans spoke the same language, shared the same national culture and history. Even when the Wall was still standing, East and West Germans were in direct contact with each other through church communities, relatives or friends, and they knew about each other through the media. Compared to that, how much greater are the distances that need to be overcome in a country that has become an immigration country. People of different origin, religion, with different skin colours and cultures are part of this country today – people who immigrated decades ago and, increasingly, also those who are coming now and will come in future to live here with the prospect of staying.

As was the case with immigration in the 1960s, but to a much larger extent, we will experience that it takes time for locals to get used to a country in which what has been familiar can sometimes be lost. It takes time for the newly arrived to get used to a social order that might frequently cause a conflict with their traditional norms. And it takes time for old and new citizens to take responsibility in a state that everyone considers their own.

We find ourselves taken up now in the grand process of understanding the goal and the scope of this new challenge of integration. In democracies, this can also take place in a controversial manner, and that is normal. But my urgent appeal to all those who join the debate is: Do not allow controversies to turn into hostilities. Everyone should notice that our debates are held with the goal of cohesion, of togetherness, which we also want in the future.

And we can take something from our recent history that we should never give up: confidence. We did not only dream about leading self-determined lives, we actually did it! We are the ones who have confidence in ourselves.

In this spirit, we ask ourselves now:

What is that internal bond that holds an immigration country together? What is it that will and should tie us together?

In an open society, it is not important whether a society is ethnically homogeneous, but whether it has a common foundation of values. It is not important where someone comes from, but where they want to go, which political order they identify with.

Precisely because Germany is home to different cultures, religions, and life-styles, precisely because Germany is increasingly becoming a diverse country, it needs the commitment of all to incontrovertible values. A codex that is accepted as valid by all.

I remember well the appeal that Western values had for us in the GDR and in other former Soviet Bloc states. We yearned for freedom and human rights, the rule of law and democracy. Although these values developed in the West, they have brought hope to the

oppressed and disadvantaged of all continents. Although democracy did not start its global triumphal march in 1990, its values are present worldwide, and increasingly, they are not considered and called Western, but universal.

But not always are they able to convince everyone everywhere, including here in our country. We know that even in the West, our own values have been and are being violated. But that does not discredit the values as such, but those who betray them.

Our values are not up for discussion! They are what will and should tie us together here in this country. Here, the dignity of humankind is inviolable. Here, religious affiliations and traditions do not keep people from abiding by the laws of a secular state. Here, achievements like equal rights for men and women or for homosexuals are not questioned, and the inalienable rights of the individual are not curtailed by collective norms – not by those of families, not by those of ethnic groups, and not by those of religious communities. There will be no tolerance for intolerance here. In addition, our country has made some basic political decisions that are irrevocable. Among them are the decisive rejection of any form of anti-Semitism and our commitment to Israel's right to exist.

We know no social order other than democracy that affords an individual so many freedoms, so many opportunities to develop their full potential, and so many rights. While it may be imperfect, we know no other social order that is able to self-correct to such an extent when dealing with conflicting life-styles, opinions, and interests. We also know no other social order that can adapt to new conditions and reform as rapidly because – as the philosopher Karl Popper once said – it relies on the kind of person “for whom it is more important to learn than to be proved right.”

It is for those values and this social order that the Federal Republic of Germany stands. This is also what we want to promote among the newly arrived – not self-complacently, but self-confidently, because we are convinced: This understanding, enshrined in our constitution, is and remains the best prerequisite for the kind of life that the very people who are fleeing aspire to. A life – as our national anthem says – in unity, justice, and freedom.