



**Federal President Joachim Gauck
at a luncheon on the occasion of the
8th German-Spanish Forum
at Schloss Bellevue
on 18 November 2015**

Until recently, some people might have considered an encounter of the sort taking place here already for the eighth time at the German-Spanish Forum to be a matter of routine – something that you do simply because it has already become a tradition, and nothing that arouses any particularly great expectations. Why indeed should European partners of many years' standing remind each other about their collaboration in the most varied of fields and reaffirm their desire to continue their excellent cooperation time and time again?

However, the past months have demonstrated a common fact of life that also applies to Europe and the European Union, which is that no achievements are permanent, and that all that is good must be proactively preserved and reinforced in order to prevent it from vanishing again into the ether. This is especially true in light of the barbaric attacks in Paris just a few days ago. These attacks, we also recall the 2004 attack in Madrid, target us all – the open European societies and the freedom they enshrine. This is why we need to reach a common understanding as to how we want to protect this future.

Especially in view of the major challenges of the present in Europe, we have come to realise that each cooperative project, discussion and exchange of views is important. Nothing that brings us together and allows us to look and move toward the future together is superfluous. We are in more urgent need than we perhaps recently thought of each and every credible sign of cooperation and each and every tangible step in a common direction. We were reminded of this last Friday at the very latest.

With this in mind, I can only embrace the eighth German-Spanish Forum as a highly welcome event and express my hope that the ties between our two countries will become even closer and that this will be to the benefit of European cooperation as a whole.

Strong relations have developed between our two nations. What is more, they are close and friendly, and are reflected in city twinning arrangements and in cooperative projects in the worlds of business, culture and science. Much of our relationship goes well beyond the political and diplomatic realm per se – and this is precisely what makes these relations so vibrant.

I am therefore most delighted to be able to welcome you here as members of an inter-societal and civil-society dialogue. Forums such as these are, to my mind, an important contribution to a pan-European agora, that is to say a European sphere of encounters encompassing people and ideas, dreams and concrete plans, as well as a commitment to and passion for the common European project.

Spain and Germany can count on each other as partners in Europe – the fact that we, if we pause for a moment to think about this more carefully, can take this as a given is infinitely precious. After all, we are currently witnessing the fact that we can only overcome crises when individual responsibility and mutual solidarity are two sides of the same coin. The economic and financial crisis reminded us of this just as the great challenge posed by the influx of refugees does. Each European country would, acting alone, be overwhelmed by the great number of refugees attempting to reach Europe. However, I am convinced that if we approach the refugee crisis together and overcome it together, a stronger Europe will emerge in the end.

We can only achieve great aims by also taking small steps. The united Europe also and especially grows together as a result of everyday encounters. This is why I am delighted that the dialogue between Spanish and German civil societies has become ever closer and more intensive in recent years, particularly among the younger generation. A glance at the Erasmus Programme, one of the most successful European initiatives ever, reveals that Spain has now become the most popular destination for single-semester exchanges abroad among Germans – a time that is of inestimable value for personal development.

Germany is promoting this exchange also in the area of vocational training, for example with the German vocational schools abroad in Madrid and Barcelona, which were founded over thirty years ago.

The dynamic that is engendered when young, creative people from different countries are given the opportunity to enter into a dialogue, share their experiences and everyday lives and develop new ideas should not be underestimated. The positive developments that this has encouraged here in Berlin, but also in many other places, is plain to see. A generation is growing up for which Europe has long since become a reality and which can no longer imagine any other European Union than the one that guarantees freedom of movement.

I know that people in Spain are concerned about the fact that many young people are leaving the country to go abroad. But isn't there an opportunity here for a vibrant exchange that all will benefit from at the end of the day? Won't many return and then stimulate the domestic economy with the knowledge and skills they have acquired, found new companies and create jobs in the process?

Education remains an important issue for the future of the people in Europe. It not only opens up paths to an independent life for individuals, but also responds to the challenges of a world of work that is constantly changing. Employability has therefore quite rightly been an important focus at this forum.

There is no doubt that, by global comparison, we are doing well – many of us very well – in Europe. If we want to preserve our prosperity and freedom in the long term, however, then it is also true here that we will regress if we stand still. We must prepare ourselves for fundamental changes – indeed, we must tackle them head on.

Of the many possible examples I could cite, I wish only to mention digitisation, a topic which you have discussed in detail at the forum and which is permeating all areas of our lives.

We can see the enormous potential that digitisation offers for opening up entirely new business sectors in the world of social networks, for example. But our long-established industrial value chains are also affected by developments such as Industry 4.0.

We need both "soft", social innovations that will change our social coexistence and "technical" innovations that will improve our production processes.

No matter in which field, the basis for any innovation are people – people who are open, creative, persistent and committed, and who are, moreover, prepared to assume responsibility and also to take risks and develop business models from ideas. And part of this is realising that people make mistakes. But sometimes it is precisely perceived errors that take us in new directions. One example of this is the European expedition led by Christopher Columbus, commissioned by Spain, which culminated in the discovery of America as a result of a fortunate misunderstanding.

This goes to show that those who just play it safe may end up getting nowhere.

With this in mind, I would like to invite you now to join me in toasting to the health of His Majesty King Felipe, to German-Spanish relations, and to our shared future in a Europe based on the principle of solidarity.