



**Speech by  
Federal President Joachim Gauck  
at the Bellevue Forum on  
Refugees – a Challenge for Europe  
in Schloss Bellevue  
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Many parts of Europe are represented in this room. We call these gatherings the "Bellevue Forum", and when they focus on Europe, then I imagine them as a type of European agora. This is an idea that has been close to my heart for a long time – but overall it is not put into practice often enough. Please regard our gathering as a small part of this type of European agora. I am particularly glad to see you here today, ladies and gentlemen – and especially those of you who will play an active role in our event – because Europe is currently overshadowed by clouds.

Before you stands not only a President who is very keen to learn more and take part in discussions, but also a concerned host. If I think back to when I first became an active European, then I would have to say it was in 1990, the year of German reunification. I cannot recall a time in the past 26 years when an intensive European dialogue was more urgently needed than it is today.

Of course, we also experienced crises in the European Union in the past – we only need to think of the failed European Constitution, the national debt and financial crisis, or the looming exit of some Member States from the Union. However, many people have the feeling that the European Union is currently being tested in a new, that is, in a particularly profound way because the crises within and on the periphery of the Union are overlapping and coming thicker and faster than ever. At the same time, the current crisis – the refugee crisis – requires wide-ranging responses.

People seek protection in Europe from war and persecution or come here in the hope of a better life. More than 856,000 men, women and children made their way across the Mediterranean to Greece last year. Many of them lost their lives in the attempt to get there. And no

one can say with certainty how many people will ask for admission in 2016. This development causes concern and polarises entire societies. There is no consensus in Germany on the approach our country should take – and nor are the Member States of the European Union in agreement on this issue.

For decades, we experienced the Union as a great success story. Europe – a place of peace, freedom and the rule of law; a promise of prosperity; a continent without border controls all the way from the West far into the East. This is also the reason why many migrants continue to pin their hopes on Europe today.

And now? Let us look around. So far, Germany has found hardly any allies for a joint European solution to the refugee issue. Some governments do not want to support solutions to which they did not explicitly sign up. Moreover, the refugee crisis is lending additional impetus to xenophobic and illiberal parties and movements all over Europe. Increasingly, countries are doing their own thing. We are also seeing more regional agreements. Fundamental achievements such as the abolition of border controls in the Schengen area are being called into question. The refugee crisis thus poses a greater threat to the stability of Europe's foundations than previous tensions did. This is now truly a disturbing development.

That is why I invited you to this Bellevue Forum on Refugees – a Challenge for Europe. Here with us today are people from various European countries, people with different backgrounds and views. And I would like to bid a very warm welcome to you all, our speakers who come from nine different countries – from all four corners of our continent! My hope is that we will have a frank discussion in which we explore how others, our neighbours, our European partners and our friends think. I also hope that this discussion will enable us to see why we in Europe have such different views on an issue of such huge importance.

I am also interested in the reasons for these differences. The newspapers are currently full of reports on where these differences of opinion have led. They write that Germany is disappointed about insufficient or non-existent solidarity, while other countries are angry about what they regard as Germany's moral imperative policy. But what we read far less frequently are ideas and possible compromises. In light of the developments in recent months, one thing has become clear to me – namely that the refugee crisis necessitates new discussions and a new way of thinking. Above all, it necessitates a way of thinking that should go beyond national borders. If we are to prevent national interests and a lack of understanding from prolonging and worsening this crisis, then we Europeans need to know more about each other, to talk more to each other and to make a greater effort than we have done so far to reach new consensus.

Let that be exactly the spirit of our discussions here today! We can look forward to two lead-in presentations and two panel discussions – opportunities to learn from one another and to understand each other better. Headlines and images from almost every Member State appear in the newspapers and television programmes of their neighbouring countries. However, we rarely conduct a genuine European discourse. We enquire even more rarely about the deeper motives and know hardly anything about our neighbours' complex domestic problems and national backgrounds and positions.

For example, why are the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, which breathed so much life into the European idea post-1989, now so reserved towards Brussels? Why is it so difficult for the German Government to find support for its position these days? And why exactly are we not able to protect the external borders more effectively? Why are we putting freedom of movement in the Schengen area at risk? If there is no all-encompassing political and mental basis in the refugee issue, which solutions can be developed?

These are questions that I hope we will discuss today. In our discussions, we should not hesitate to name our dilemmas, too. After all, we have known for a long time that efforts to help as many people as possible do not necessarily mean helping everyone. How many refugees and migrants a country thinks it can cope with and what that means for our co-existence in the Union are questions that I am sure will be keenly debated on our podium. It is a matter of the right level, which every country must of course struggle to define for itself.

But at the same time, there are common principles. And this should not be completely forgotten or ignored in the national discourses either. In the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, all European countries have undertaken to protect refugees. People, movements, parties and governments that exploit the refugee situation to stoke xenophobia – no matter in which European country – do not reflect the humanistic and legal basis of our European community.

We have very different historical experiences in Europe as regards dealing with minorities and people of foreign origin. Over the course of decades, both Western Europe and West Germany were able to accomplish a process of cultural change towards diversity. East Germany and Eastern Europe were denied such experiences and lifeworlds. Yes, this is one example of the differences that could explain the different levels of willingness to take refugees in.

However, it does not mean that governments can now simply take the fears and propaganda on board. And it means one thing above all for the people who are protesting against what they see as being overrun by foreigners – and after the latest incidents, I want to spell this out here in no uncertain terms to some of my fellow Germans: do not turn your dissatisfaction and rage against those who

are far weaker and far more vulnerable than you are! Isolate the rabble-rousers, arsonists and hooligans! If you want to protest, then respect the rules!

As far as I am concerned, you can shout at your mayors, members of parliament or ministers – but then listen to what they have to tell you. And above all, those who count on being protected by the law and supported by solidarity when they are in need may not break the law or revoke solidarity with others.

Resolving the refugee crisis is by no means the only thing at stake. We understand that beneath the controversies and debates lie a fear and ill-defined anxieties arising from a fear in many countries of losing everything that is familiar, from a fear of learning a new role. The refugee crisis and its resolution are not the only concern. At the heart of the problem lie the manifold tensions now coming to light within the European Union to a greater extent than ever before. We need to react to this. The dispute on distribution quotas, the willingness to take people in and securing the external borders is becoming tangled up with the dispute on the role of nation states and their relations with the European Union. As a result, relations between the Member States are also a concern. To put it simply, the genuine will to pull together is weak at the moment. And as a result, the European Union is weak.

But do we really want to allow the refugee crisis to drive the European Union apart? Rather than making a concerted effort to face the challenges of the globalised world, do we want to withdraw to the seclusion of the nation state? Is that what we want? Should we steal away from responsibility for what we can, after all, only achieve together? A Europe that does not pool its resources will not be able to support refugees on the European continent or closer to their homes in the way they need – in the way we could indeed actually support them. And a Europe that does not unite its political strength will not be able to play a part in tackling the reasons why people flee and combating those who cause people to flee.

Allow me to conclude with a further observation. At the moment, we in Germany are concerned because some countries have agreed on a regional strategy, that is, to close themselves off, in order to protect their interests. One can criticise or reject this. But it is not inconceivable that European and regional solutions can complement each other.

Perhaps this will lead to a compromise, which may seem unsatisfactory to us and to some other Europeans – but at least we would stay together.

It is thus my fervent hope that we will honestly and constructively explore here today how we can meet the current

challenges together. It cannot be the case that the European Union dismantles itself and that the integration achieved over the course of decades collapses because of the refugee issue. No, we must not allow this to happen.