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**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
on the occasion of the state visit to Belgium
on 8 March 2016,
in the Royal Palace of Laeken, Brussels**

I am delighted to be in Belgium and would like to thank you, Your Majesties, for inviting me. This is my third visit to your country as President of Germany, and I assure you I am not simply being polite when I say that I always find being in Belgium most relaxing and enjoyable. Anyone can tell that Europe's heart beats in Belgium and can easily see first hand that this is where influences from Spain, the Netherlands and France, from England and Italy and from the Rhineland all converge. Belgium's towns were always more than their marketplaces; they were centres for the exchange of ideas and cradles of art and culture.

The architecture, painting and music of your country have a proud place in Europe's cultural history. Franco-Flemish composers and musicians have retained their influence to this very day. And what child in Europe hasn't at some stage loved one Belgian comic figure or other? So many things that were invented and made here in Belgium have become part and parcel of our European culture.

And of course, as the town where the European Union and NATO have their headquarters, Brussels has become our European capital. All Europeans should feel at home here. As pervasive as the complaints about crises in Europe may be, here in Brussels Europe is a vibrant force; it is a tangible factor in everyday life. Nowhere are we closer to achieving the dream of political unity on our continent. This is due to a significant extent to Belgium and the Belgians, and their tolerance and way of life.

We Germans are particularly grateful for this. Your country, Your Majesty, has been a good neighbour to us since its creation. I wish I could say that Germany had always reciprocated in kind.

Two years ago this August, we met in Liège to commemorate the outbreak of the Great War, World War I, which began when Germany invaded neutral Belgium. Reich Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann

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Hollweg justified this action with the phrase, "Necessity knows no law." What malign words! This breach of international law led to the suspension of all civilised values, as manifested not only in the crimes committed by Germany, such as civilian massacres and the destruction of Leuven, but also in the justification of such crimes by prominent German scholars, writers and artists.

Leuven was in fact destroyed a *second time* by the Germans a few years later. In World War II, Belgium was again invaded by Germany, and a large part of the country's Jewish population perished under German tyranny.

When we consider the casualties of the two world wars, the vast war cemeteries in Ypres, the senseless killing of civilians, we feel grief and anger to this day. We begin to comprehend the depth of the divide across which the Belgians reached out in reconciliation. Your country, Your Majesty, was one of the first to re-establish diplomatic relations with the Federal Republic of Germany in 1951 – a huge gesture for which we are still grateful today. We will not forget the Belgians' generosity of spirit.

The need to overcome national egoism is the lesson we should draw from the horrors of the two world wars. "Federate or perish" – as the British Prime Minister Clement Attlee once said, an insight adopted by Belgium as its own soon after World War II.

Belgium's willingness to seek reconciliation helped Germany find its place in Europe. And thus began a new, happy phase in our two countries' neighbourly relations. This phase has now lasted more than six decades. Decades in which the foundations of our friendship have grown strong and resilient.

The story of this friendship is remarkable, with many particularly gratifying episodes and plot threads. One such thread concerns the stationing of Belgian forces in Germany. They came after World War II as victors and occupiers, and left 60 years later as friends and allies.

The strong amity between Belgium and Germany that has evolved over the years also finds expression in numerous university partnerships. Furthermore, this September we will celebrate 60 years of the Belgian-German Agreement on Cultural Cooperation. Cultural exchange forges links across linguistic and political borders. In this year, for example, the Netherlands and Flanders will be guests of honour at the Frankfurter Buchmesse, Frankfurt Book Fair. Next year the guests of honour will be France and Wallonia.

The German-Belgian Conferences doubtless have a fixed place in any list of bilateral meetings. I recall with pleasure our first encounter in February 2014, Your Majesty, when we met at the fourth German-Belgian Conference in Berlin. The question discussed on this occasion was what kind of Europe Belgians and Germans would like to see.

Europe runs on partnership and friendly relations. These are beautifully exemplified by the numerous and varied twinings maintained between Belgian and German towns and cities. I think particularly fondly of the links between Antwerp and my home town of Rostock – but there are of course many more, such as the partnership of Cologne and Liège.

We should not overlook just how close the economic ties between our two countries have become. Germany is Belgium's biggest trading partner, and Belgium is one of Germany's most significant counterparts. Only a few weeks ago it was announced that the new electric SUV from VW subsidiary Audi will be produced in Brussels from 2018. A zero-emissions car – that symbolises beautifully our joint endeavours to combat climate change.

These are just some of the facets of the rich and varied relations between our two countries. They bear witness to how once hostile nations can bridge their divides, how cooperation in a spirit of trust can take root in a multilingual and diverse region.

Fifty-nine years ago, on 25 March 1957, Belgium and the Federal Republic of Germany signed the Treaties of Rome. As founding members of the European Union, our countries share the conviction that the community of European nations, built as it is on mutual trust and shared responsibility, remains indispensable to the peaceful future of our continent. Many Belgian statesmen have forcefully demonstrated this over the past decades: Paul van Zeeland, Paul-Henri Spaak, Leo Tindemans and Herman van Rompuy – all these men were and remain committed Europeans.

They were also familiar with the difficulties faced by a federation, in which differing interests have to be weighed up and balanced. Belgium with its regions and communities is, like Germany, a federal state, one which is home to many assertive political players. Coordination within such a state can be a long and complex affair. Federalism is sometimes challenging and exhausting. It can also result in slow, difficult decision-making processes, as your country has found first hand on a number of occasions. However, our two countries share the conviction that taking away the strong federal element in our state structures would greatly damage the relationship between people and their state. And with a view to Europe, it is to be hoped that our experience with federalism helps us look with particular understanding on a continent that unites so many different regional and national identities.

It is this at times laborious but ultimately constructive interplay between differing forces that is precisely Europe's strength. It makes us flexible and able to compromise, and above all capable of learning new ways forward. Communication, understanding and the endeavour to balance interests are the tools of a modern confederation such as

the European Union. Withdrawing into your shell, standing alone as a nation state, is in contrast a throwback to a bygone age. Even the largest European state with the strongest economy would today be too small and weak to tackle the challenges of a globalised world on its own.

These challenges include some that have the potential to become a deadly threat if we don't address them together. I'm thinking of the threat posed by terrorism, of the attacks in Paris and Istanbul, in Beirut and Kabul. Belgium itself bears the scars of international terrorism. I recall the cowardly attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014, which claimed four lives.

Religious tolerance and freedom are among the basic European values that we Europeans will defend whatever the circumstances. We hold them so dear because we ourselves had to learn their worth and fight to attain them in a long and often brutal process. To defend them, we must use all the instruments that a constitutional state and civil society have at their disposal.

Belgium and Germany want to master even the greatest challenge of our times, the growing influx of refugees to Europe, in a spirit of tolerance and solidarity. Our shared background and convictions oblige us to take in and give protection to people who flee political persecution or war and terror. But the more people who come seeking refuge, the greater the challenge of integrating them all. We are also seeing concern among our populace, with some warning that we might not be able to cope. We must and will take these worries seriously, at least where they are genuine worries rather than expressions of hostile attitudes or attempts to peddle prejudice.

The united Europe has withstood many tests in the course of its history; it has healed the wounds left by wars and mastered severe crises. It has transformed setbacks into advances, and I am convinced that it is up to *this* challenge too. When the founding members of the European Community met to lay the cornerstone for economic and political union in the Treaties of Rome, they were picking up where they had failed three years previously.

This European spirit, which is so vigorous in Belgium, is our argument to those who want to give in to the temptations presented by new strains of nationalism. We need European solutions, not unilateral action. To get these, we have to exhibit the strengths of our Union: the ability to understand and the capacity to balance interests. But above all we need the qualities that have always singled out Belgium's European statesmen: perseverance and patience.

Your Majesties, with its experience and its negotiating prowess, your country will always play an important and meaningful role in Europe. In this spirit, let us drink a toast – to the health of Your

Majesties, King Philippe and Queen Mathilde, to the friendship between our countries and to a peaceful and united Europe!