



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck  
at the opening of the symposium "Refugees in  
Germany: making integration possible – strengthening  
social cohesion"  
in Schloss Bellevue  
on 7 April 2016**

Our country is changing, not quite overnight, but certainly on an unprecedented scale. People who are fleeing from armed conflicts and persecution, or who simply want to escape the economic hardship they had to endure in their own countries, have come to live amongst us, some on a temporary basis, others for good.

It has long since been clear that the arrival of hundreds of thousands of people presents Germany with great challenges which we have to tackle as a state and as a society. I am therefore pleased that you are all here today: hands-on practitioners and academics, journalists and politicians, who all have to deal with integration in a wide variety of ways. I would like to extend my special thanks to the Robert Bosch Stiftung, which helped to organise this forum. For me, this shows in an exemplary manner that not only state institutions can master such a huge problem. Rather, all of us, including civil society, have to make this issue our own. Thus, my heartfelt thanks go out to the Bosch Stiftung.

But whether you come from the Bosch Stiftung or are engaged somewhere else, allow me to welcome you all most warmly to Schloss Bellevue.

Today we want to discuss how integration can succeed. For no matter what our stance is on the political issue, whether and how the flow of refugees should be limited: we have to help all those who have a good chance of being permitted to stay in Germany to find their place in our society. Many of them will make a new home here and build a new life, although some of them perhaps find it difficult to imagine that at the moment.

We would be well-advised to also look after individuals who cannot stay in our country on a long term basis: all those who do not

receive a residence permit and will have to go sooner or later. Moreover, we also have to direct our attention to those who leave our country by their own free will, after months or years, once peace and security prevail in their own countries again. For a time at least, they will be our fellow citizens and they will need our support, even if they have not been granted the status of German citizens.

As you can see, we are faced with a complex situation. And this situation is making us increasingly aware of the magnitude of our task.

The first thing we need in this tense political situation is a serious political discourse, along with various very concrete solutions. The tasks are long since on the agenda at federal, regional and local level: expanding the housing stock, training nursery and school teachers, adapting the labour market and vocational training, offering language courses, providing information on Germany and its society, its laws, values and customs as well as enabling people to take part in our cultural life. State institutions are facing immense challenges and in some cases also have to learn something new, namely to work without unnecessary bureaucracy.

For experience in many countries has shown that the integration process should begin immediately after arrival. I know that sounds very idealistic, but we should set ourselves big goals when faced with big tasks. The sooner people who will probably stay are able to learn the German language and work, the sooner people only in our country on a temporary basis are integrated into our society, the better it will be for all of us. Otherwise there is a danger that frustration and boredom will lead to violence and crime or that political and religious extremism will thrive. We must not allow conditions to develop which we later regret.

It is therefore good that we have come together to examine integration – a key and complex issue of our time. Mr Laschet, you will present the individual fora and their themes shortly. No matter what the political solutions ultimately look like, integration policy will demand much of our society: it will take much energy, much commitment and probably also a lot of money. Nevertheless, I am certain that the effort and expenditure are a good investment in the future if they give the largest possible number of newcomers the opportunity to work and to earn their own living, thus enabling them to contribute to the welfare of society as a whole.

However, integration cannot be shaped by the state alone. It is a process in which many, if possible everyone, should take part. What we need is impetus and initiatives from the bottom up, the engagement of civil society. Only if we work together can we – those whose German roots go back countless generations, people from migrant families and newcomers – gradually build a society in which everyone living in Germany feels accepted and represented.

That means engaging with each other with empathy and interest. That means those who have always lived here or have been here for a long time taking newcomers by the hand and explaining our country to them. Whatever you like to call them, they should act as sponsors, mentors, advisers, helpers. They are always people with energy, patience and, if possible, also intercultural skills. Other countries, countries of immigration such as Canada or the United States, have had a positive experience with this approach.

Those from families with a migrant background have a special role to play here. They can act as links between the worlds, bridge-builders between newcomers and native Germans.

However, integration also means facing up to the all too familiar conflicts in our society of immigration, which have come into sharper focus recently.

Migration, both voluntary and forced, provokes tensions. Often the fear of loss plays a role in this: the newcomers have left their homes behind, often also their families. In some cases, all their possessions fit into a rucksack. They feel like strangers in the new country, they fear they will lose their way of life. On the other hand, the native population, or at least a large portion of it, is concerned that familiar surroundings will change due to the influx of so many people from different cultures. These people are anxious because the newcomers bring different customs and views, different languages and religions, as well as different values to daily life. Many people on both sides thus see the world they know in jeopardy.

Paul Scheffer, the Dutch sociologist, hit the nail on the head: we must acknowledge these concerns. We must face up to conflicts, those of both a cultural and a social nature, and resolve them peacefully without stigmatising entire groups. Conflicts, ladies and gentlemen, are not a sign of failed integration – quite the opposite! For societies renew themselves through constructive conflict and the more openly problems are discussed, the more peaceful societies are. We must not leave the field to populists and racists. That is why we want to talk about this.

The solid foundation on which we resolve our conflicts is our constitution. The Basic Law protects the fundamental rights and dignity of each and every individual. It protects minorities from a “tyranny of the majority”, against which the philosopher John Stuart Mill warned more than a century ago. In Germany, everyone can live as they please within the parameters set by the constitution and laws. It is this openness which also enables people from other cultures and countries to feel at home here.

Our society is open to change, provided that such change is negotiated in a democratic process. That is its strength, particularly in

times of great challenges. A society of immigration is thus synonymous with a society of negotiation. We have already conducted many debates in Germany sparked by the desire for recognition, equal rights and ownership. The large number of people who have arrived in Germany is now provoking new debates. It is important that no one who sticks to the rules be excluded from the discourse. Only in this way can trust develop.

In everyday life, many of us have already experienced how different attitudes and values can clash. One example of this is when a young man refuses to shake hands with his head teacher because she is a woman. Other examples are when it becomes difficult to discuss the Holocaust in a class or when people do not want to be served in a restaurant by a waitress wearing a headscarf.

We must not hesitate to speak up whenever we see that equal rights and respect for people who have different beliefs and faiths are being disrespected. Time and again, we must make clear that an open society has nothing to do with indifference. Every day, we can be self-confident role models for what characterises our society, namely openness and mutual respect. We can open our eyes and ears and intervene when these values are disparaged – regardless by whom.

However, the debate comes to an end whenever violence is involved or laws are broken. It is also clear that the laws apply to everyone who lives here, irrespective of where they come from and how long they have lived in our country. Cultural views that contravene the law cannot be tolerated.

At times like this in particular, we ask ourselves if there is something that connects us in our open society, something that goes beyond the Basic Law and legislation, something that is binding and applicable to everyone, including newcomers.

In order to live together in harmony, I think it is ultimately crucial that as many people as possible in this country, no matter where they come from, regard themselves as social beings rooted in our democratic society. The spirit of citizenship is what connects us in Germany, regardless of whether someone is a citizen of this country. In the first instance, we are all what we can be together, namely citizens. Our cultural and religious beliefs are secondary to that.

This does not mean that we need to reject or hide these beliefs. Culture and religion can be practised within the framework of an ideologically neutral state. Culture and religion often help migrants to settle in a new country and to find a new home. The work of religious communities can also make a special contribution towards integration. Namely, by preserving intellectual or spiritual roots, something which is important to people in a completely new and strange environment

and which can deflect anxiety in a situation which, in some ways, is overwhelming.

But as citizens, we work together to shape the coexistence of differences. We engage with one another, show consideration and assume responsibility. We get involved in the workplace, clubs, associations, initiatives or political parties. We know that democracy, freedom and tolerance cannot be taken for granted, but must be learned, lived and sometimes even fought for, time and again.

Integration, ladies and gentlemen, is successful when as many individuals as possible from different backgrounds take part as equals in public life. That is why our aim must be to support as many as possible of these newcomers who want to stay and have a right to do so in becoming citizens, perhaps even German citizens. This will not happen overnight, we all know that. We will need patience and perseverance. And we need role models – people like you here in this room.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt thanks to all of you, both voluntary and professional helpers, who have been working so hard for months on this difficult matter. Some have toiled to the point of exhaustion but have refused to give up. I commend you most highly for your efforts! Nothing done in this way is ever in vain. For solidarity and creativity serve as an inspiration to others.

Let me say the following to all newcomers who want to stay here and are allowed to do so: this country gives you the chance to build an independent life. This society can also become your society. Get involved – and let us join forces to shape the future!

We have every reason to tackle the tasks ahead of us with self-confidence. We are certainly not starting from scratch. We can learn from the mistakes of the past and build on our achievements. Despite difficulties at the start, many people from migrant families are now firmly rooted in our civil society. Countless people who once felt like strangers in Germany now feel at home here. An open, liberal society founded on the Basic Law has given them the freedom to choose their own beliefs, religion and lifestyle – something that was not at all possible, or not to the same degree, for many of them in their country of origin. They have found their place in this country with its laws, background and history. Many, countless numbers of them, feel profoundly grateful. I often almost feel ashamed when I hear these people expressing their gratitude, and I am sure that many of you have had similar experiences. Especially now, we should remind ourselves of that and not get bogged down in debates about problems. We can certainly allow ourselves to be sustained by our knowledge that immigration can be a source of inspiration and innovation. Successful immigration is an opportunity for everyone.

Our country is strong and stable, even if, at present, there is increasing polarisation and the tone of political debates has become harsher, indeed often harsher than necessary to solve the problems. Let there be no doubt: neither the state nor society at large will tolerate some individuals becoming hatemongers. In the words of the historian Ulrich Herbert, Germany has become "a state that is liberal to its very genes". We all fervently want to believe that now! Its system of law and freedom, as well as its culture, appeal to people all over the world. I am certain that none of this will be lost. Even if Germany changes, it will remain true to itself.

So let us not succumb to fear. We can add a further chapter to our republic's success story. We can create a society in which it does not matter where a person comes from, but rather what they are and where they are headed.

We are here today to discuss how this can be achieved and how we can enhance social cohesion. I am very interested to hear your impressions, suggestions and ideas. And I am looking forward to meeting and talking to many of you.