



**Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the event held on the occasion of the Day of the Basic
Law entitled "Democracy brought to life in municipalities"
in Berlin
on 23 May 2016**

Distinguished guests,

Yes, all of you here are indeed distinguished – from the first to the very last row sit 700 officials from all over Germany. I've invited you to this anniversary of the entry into force of the Basic Law because you contribute to our community life in a very special way. Since 1949, the principle that municipalities be autonomous in regulating their own affairs has been enshrined in Germany's Basic Law. If our cities and communities are nowadays so diverse, lively and incidentally also self-confident, it's largely due to Article 28 of the Basic Law. Mr Klaußner, we have you to thank here. Presenting such texts should get you a bonus; as we've all seen, they were very dry protocol texts, and you did a sterling job of maintaining our interest in them. Thank you!

I would of course also like to express my gratitude to the large number of you who accepted my invitation to be here. Thank you for having made the at times very long journey from all corners of our country – from North Frisia to Traunstein, from Kleve to Görlitz. Above all, however, I would like to thank you for bringing our Basic Law to life at the municipal level, for putting democracy into practice in Germany – as mayors and District Commissioners, as members of city and community councils, as party chairpersons in local government, on a paid or voluntary basis.

Each and every one of you represents a few dozen or a few hundred thousand people. You have not been chosen, you have been elected. You have been afforded a democratic mandate for a set period of time. A number of you have been re-elected once or even twice because so many people trust you. They trust you because you do not simply perform the duties of your office, you understand the concerns of the people you represent and you work to defend their interests.

You are close to the people, your doors are open to any of them to come and talk to you.

Distinguished guests, what you do is amazing.

You shoulder responsibility for the individual and local details, and by doing so, together, you make an essential contribution to the bigger picture, shaping democracy in our country. You are the ones who implement on the ground decisions taken at the federal and state level – this is often very demanding, as we saw recently with our refugee policy. Not only do you ensure the provision of decent accommodation, you champion acceptance and strengthen social cohesion anywhere it comes under threat. You are the point of contact on the ground for many matters, at times of crisis as much as on an everyday basis, and most of all when it comes to launching your own local projects – be it a business park or a tourism strategy.

Every day you are confronted with countless questions. Some of them are put to me as I travel around our country – for example, how can the infrastructure and vibrant life of a municipality be preserved in the face of out-migration? Or how should we deal with high debt and dwindling coffers? Or another, how can we provide affordable housing?

Everywhere, I've met people who don't shy away from such difficult questions, but rather who embrace them as challenges and energetically go about seeking solutions. For example, I recently visited the Emsland district where I saw that people have got together and developed an education hub in the region that – from an early start in nursery to a master craftsman's certificate – connects all education stakeholders to improve job prospects and thus encourage young families to stay in the area. In Kronach in Upper Franconia, Bavaria, I experienced an exceptional wealth of ideas at the grassroots level. Let me give you just one example: they are developing a dial-a-bus service to take pupils who live scattered all over the countryside home in the late afternoon without long waits. Creative solutions are to be seen in Arnsberg in Westphalia, too. There, under the motto 'no longer lonely – no longer alone', new ways of living and interacting are appearing because people are not simply lamenting the trend towards an ageing population, they are seeking ways of tapping into its potential and integrating it into everyday life in a useful way. I have heard from municipalities that obtain all their energy from renewable sources, or others that involve their constituents in planning how to spend municipal funds through participatory budgeting. And it is not just a few municipalities that offer their constituents more options to play their part by asking for their opinions and at times involving them in decisions online.

All of this goes to show that in our cities and communities people are rolling up their sleeves and working hard to try out all kinds of ideas. That is something I would particularly like to pay tribute to

today. Municipalities are centres of innovation, often actively involving the people they represent.

Your work is so diverse because you juggle administrative tasks with work to shape your communities. Municipal policy guides, it moderates, inspires and influences quality of life, it creates opportunities for the future. Above all it enables millions of people to play their part and have their say.

Municipalities give democracy a home and serve as its workshop. Where, if not in the place where people come into such direct contact with the state, can you build trust in the principle of participation and learn to take on responsibility for yourself? Where, if not in municipalities, can you develop trust in others as well as the willingness to entrust them with tasks and responsibilities? Yes, the authors of our Basic Law believed in the maturity of our people when they conferred upon them the right to play their part in municipal life.

This is where the essence of our Basic Law fundamentally differs from the malevolent ideology of undemocratic regimes. Self-assured citizens and self-governed municipalities are unwelcome in authoritarian and totalitarian systems; they're even seen as subversive. And that is exactly what we saw in Germany. During the National Socialist dictatorship, municipalities were de facto denied the ability to self-govern. In the GDR their right to do so existed merely on paper. We all thus have cause to celebrate the fact that we live in entirely different times today.

Besides all the opportunities created by self-governing municipalities, they can do something else that we should be particularly interested in at the moment: they can forge bonds. They can bring neighbourhoods and boroughs together. They can form links every time people meet and show the desire to be there for one another. Municipalities can foster a sense of belonging just as the world is becoming more globalised, life is increasingly digital and people are growing ever more individualistic. They can help create a sense of belonging at a time when people's life plans are more diverse than ever.

In this way, municipalities become – largely unparalleled – places for people to progressively commit and dedicate themselves to achieving goals whose benefits stretch far beyond their own interests. They provide a home for our shared democratic life. Moreover, municipalities offer space for discussion in which people can debate the future with friends, relatives and acquaintances alike – the future not only of their local community, but of their region or even the entire country. For having their own small home for democracy gives people cause to cherish the bigger picture of our democratic life. And of course you're all well aware that sooner or later many of the

developments of 'big politics' trickle down and affect even the smallest municipality.

In recent months I've seen a great thirst for discussion that I've rarely encountered before. There is palpable anxiety in our country, a feeling of insecurity or uncertainty regarding so many things – debt and pensions, free trade and European unity, flight and immigration as well as terrorism and war in the Middle East. In some places all of this can be a volatile mix. All of a sudden, angry words fly back and forth with ever more haste and ever less heed, in public meetings just as much as at the dinner table or the local bar.

As municipal politicians you are familiar with the full range of opinions and views, from "Well we have to do something about this" to "Oh we don't want anything to do with that." It's not easy to keep your political bearings amid complex and unclear circumstances, to resist the pull towards the quick-fix, easy solutions that are sometimes clutched at before all options are even on the table. At the moment we're seeing divergent views cut through the party spectrum just as they do through circles of friends and families. You can even find yourself in two minds, torn by a surprising mix of opinions.

How is one to deal with such confusion and uncertainty?

Well there is certainly one option that won't help. The path of radicalisation that sows discord and in some communities can even poison the atmosphere of public life.

Some people have even been caught up in a friend-foe mindset because they feel overlooked by 'politics' or 'the establishment', and because they claim that their voices go unheard and they're not represented. It's possible that in certain cases this may even be true. Yet this binary attitude leads to the use of bellicose rhetoric such as "the press is lying about reality." Sometimes it goes further still, and then terminology is bandied about such as the 'system', a term used back in the Weimar Period to undermine democracy. Some critics group together online, whipping themselves up into veritable frenzies of rage. And sometimes they take to the streets, where resentment often turns to hate, and hatred gives rise to criminal offences.

It must be crystal clear that the tolerance of a democratic, constitutional state draws the line when hatred or violence is incited.

Of course we should always strive to establish dialogue. Yet we have no common ground for discussion with those who oppose the constitution, those who want to alter or destroy the very core of constitutional democracy. And it goes without saying that anyone who commits a crime will feel the full force of the law come down upon them.

In the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, the number of people who resort to violence or violate the constitution has always

been low and this remains true today. I am firmly convinced that such people will never become the majority in our country. It's a far cry from reality, ludicrous even, when their spokespersons talk as if they represented the will of the people.

You're all aware that I grew up in the GDR, and that in autumn 1989, I joined hundreds of thousands of people in taking to the streets. It was thus a particularly bitter experience for me to see the recent abuse of the very slogan we used to overthrow the system of injustice back then. In 1989, the slogan "We are the people" – perhaps the most important words ever pronounced by the German people, the most significant phrase of our country's recent history – expressed what was thought and felt by the majority. Most people wanted to be rid of an unjust regime, devoid of any democratic legitimacy; a regime that could not be unseated by free and secret elections. That was the context at the time.

And what about today? Those who, at certain demonstrations, claim to represent the will of the so-called "real people" should be aware that the "real people", our people, chose who they wanted to legitimately represent them in real – namely free, fair and secret – elections. They elected you, mayors, that's how you came into office: through elections like those I've just described, and the same goes for the Minister-Presidents of our Länder and our Land Governments, the Chancellor and the Federal Government. And if people have become dissatisfied with the job their political representatives are doing, then no one is stopping them from voting for other representatives at the next elections. And indeed, no one is stopping them from speaking out between elections and influencing public opinion, swaying the decisions taken by Government and the Bundestag. Furthermore, our Land constitutions offer people the opportunity for direct involvement through opinion polls, plebiscites and referenda. Many local constitutions also grant people the right to direct participation. This serves as a connector between representative and direct democracy.

Our political representatives – you – are thus in no way representatives of a purported 'true popular will', but rather you represent different political views. In our democratic system, the aim is not to draw cultural distinctions between those who belong to the so-called 'real people' and those who supposedly do not. In our form of democracy, we want to promote and provide for true diversity within society so that as many people as possible feel represented.

So let us open up a political dialogue with everyone and anyone who values debate and doesn't allow themselves to get caught up in bouts of rage. In doing so, we should keep at the forefront of our minds that controversy is no bothersome scourge but a pre-requisite for the success of democracy. Democracy shouldn't gloss over differences but should carve out space for variety and contrast, above

all at a time when the range of political views in Germany is becoming broader. It is only by debating the different options that alternative approaches can be examined and compromises reached; this is the only means of ensuring democracy is successfully renewed and revived.

Taking a critical look in the mirror is also part of this process. Engaging in public debate, as you all know, is not a perfect science, and at times we must all remind ourselves of this. It has never been so over recent decades. In politics and the media there has sometimes been a tendency to somewhat hem in discussions out of a well-intentioned desire to enlighten people – to give a helping hand to what we believe to be, or what actually is, the right option and avoid promoting the allegedly false one.

However, it's becoming increasingly clear that you cannot dissipate tension by excluding people and stigmatising certain views. Tensions are relieved through openness and counter-arguments. The more convincing these arguments are, the harder it is for sensationalist propaganda to have its desired effect.

As Willy Brandt urged, we should venture to be even more democratic. Even if for some that means bearing to be more democratic.

If we really think about this, we sense a need for dialogue and, sometimes, a need for patience. Especially in municipalities where everybody knows each other, because they went to school together or they played in the same football club, direct interaction occurs on a daily basis. In places where everyone knows everyone it's less likely for someone to be excluded due to their political views. That said, this kind of proximity can pose risks. I'm sure we've all heard people say "He's actually quite a good guy;" here people are happy to eschew or drop much needed political discussion for the sake of keeping the peace.

It's all the more important thus to make use of municipalities as workshops for democracy, to use them as spaces to practice democratic debate. As places in which we learn to take into account the greater political, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity that has developed in our country. Differences, contrasts or even contradictions will remain features of our lives whether we like it or not. They will continue to be characteristics of our country. We want to maintain this pluralism and it's something we should make more effort to do full justice to – by tolerating different opinions and respecting others, including those we don't know. This is especially important since Germany has become a country of immigration.

Ladies and gentlemen, you all know that we're here today, on the anniversary of the entry into force of the Basic Law, because our

constitution is recognised, respected and held in high esteem by the vast majority of the population. Never before have Germany's government and society rested on such a solid foundation.

We are meeting on this anniversary because we are deeply committed to the concept of humanity that its founding mothers and fathers enshrined in our Basic Law. Their understanding of what makes us human is shaped by the experience of totalitarian regimes and is inscribed in Article 1 in the single, short sentence that you all know by heart: "Human dignity shall be inviolable."

The state is there to serve humanity. Its reason for existence lies in nurturing and protecting human dignity, and helping individuals lead a life worth living by enabling them to fully develop their personality. This concept and the constitution based on it guide all political decisions. They constitute the foundations of our democracy.

However, for us to truly come together and feel connected to one another in our everyday lives we need more than just recognition for our wonderful Basic Law. One element of what helps us live together can only come from within, namely a perception of ourselves as citizens. This implies a willingness to approach others and take an interest in public affairs, be it by voting, speaking out openly about what is going on or engaging in concrete terms.

I strongly believe that a common thread links all different people. It is present when people see themselves as citizens, citizens who are connected by common views, joint action and shared responsibility. If people work towards a common goal in this way, then an individual's political views, social class, ethnic group, culture or religion fade into the background.

This can open a door to the future, anyone who sees their place as a citizen of a democratic system, who appreciates it and is ready to defend it will want to preserve it – for themselves, for their children and for upcoming generations.

Anyone who has this mindset, who feels and acts this way will not shy away in fear but will help shape what we've described in order to improve their lives and embrace the future.

There are good, indeed very good reasons to foster such an open, democratic civil society. Our lives are shaped by circumstances that are not stipulated by decree but rather determined by the will of the people. We live in an order based not on the law of the strongest, but the strength of the independence of the law. Decisions taken democratically by majority vote are the most legitimate it's possible to make. At the same time, despite majority voting, minorities can rest assured that their rights will be respected.

Life in our country is now defined by something that people from all around the world have dreamed of for centuries, and that many more still dream of – the freedom to determine one's own future.

Where in the world is there another political system that so far-reachingly guarantees people's rights and security, their chances of developing their personality and wealth? Where? In reality I can't think of anywhere else. I know only of dreams, desires, fantasies or ideas, but no real-life examples.

I'm a realist, and so of course I'm aware that even democracy is never perfect, despite everything I've just said. It's not perfect, and I know that even majority views are fallible. Practising democracy is not easy, quite the contrary, it's demanding, at times extremely so. Yet the great advantage of democracy is that by virtue of its nature it can be self-corrective, not least through the option of voting in a new government.

Our daily political activity also proves that when it comes to important political matters, Germany's society and political establishment have opened themselves up to critical questioning – we've seen this already. For example, we've learnt lessons by confronting our past, we've learnt from tackling important environmental issues, and we're constantly learning new ways of handling migration and integration.

So let's once again remind ourselves that democracy is the best political system there is and, in contrast to other political regimes, it exists because people want it to.

In our recent history, the people of our country have had two empowering experiences. Around 70 years ago, the Germans achieved a great feat when western Germany was given the chance to restore democracy. And just over 25 years ago we saw another incredible feat when the movement fighting for democracy in the East managed to bring about reunification. We've transformed our state on several occasions and made it what it is today: a country in which freedom and the rule of law prevail. We can draw on a vast reserve of self-confidence, a deep-seated trust in ourselves that we'll let no one rob us of.

In conclusion, I hope that following our meeting here today, each and every one of us will leave safe in the knowledge that:

We remain what we've become: people who believe in our ability to achieve.

It's up to us to embrace change as an opportunity rather than a threat, and:

It's up to us to decide how our country wants to live and develop together.