Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the Foundations for the Future of Europe conference
in Warsaw, Poland,
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Thank you for your kind invitation and for giving me the opportunity to speak here, in the heart of Europe, about this Europe.

When we think about the foundations of a house or an institution, then we do so to make sure we have built on firm ground.

We do so at a time when many people are looking for something to hold on to, for protection or security, at any rate for a future that is less uncertain.

I am no stranger to such thoughts. But ultimately I belong to those who firmly believe that the ground we are standing on will hold. The foundation of the European Union is safe and solid ground.

We Europeans laid this ground together, and Poland was one of the architects from the very start. The idea of European integration originated long before the establishment of the European Union. It was inspired by Europe's shared cultural, religious and humanist inheritance. It is a child of the Enlightenment and, like the Enlightenment itself, it is a process that is never complete, but rather ongoing.

The European idea has a special history in Poland, where it is closely linked with the fight to overthrow foreign rule and to regain or safeguard Polish statehood. That was the case during the 19th century, the interwar period, the Second World War and most recently among the opposition in communist Poland.

We have the Polish scientist Wojciech Jastrzębowski to thank for what may be the first constitution of a united Europe. He wrote his treatise, "On the everlasting peace between nations", during the November Uprising against the czars in 1831. His vision included some ideas that simply could not be any more modern. He wrote about a Europe of equal nations, a Europe without borders, a Europe united by common European legislation and common European institutions.

ADDRESS Bundespräsidialamt
11010 Berlin
TEL / FAX +49 30 2000-2021/-1926
E-MAIL presse@bpra.bund.de
WEBSITE www.bundespraesident.de

Later on, during the 20th century, at home and in exile, Polish intellectuals and politicians frequently formulated ideas on Europe. Some of them thought along the lines of a regional confederation, while others had the idea of a Europe-wide federation of free nations.

As far back as the Second World War, Polish resistance fighters were among the early advocates of European integration. Ideas about a common European post-war order – and I find this striking – developed almost simultaneously in many parts of German-occupied Europe, that is, among various resistance groups in Central and Western Europe, as well as among important representatives of the German resistance, specifically the Kreisau Circle, and among church resistance groups.

Such ideas, thoughts and hopes became part of Europe's democratic principles and our community's political values and aims, which were last reaffirmed in Lisbon in 2007, in the Treaty on European Union. And it is the experience of two world wars that has been the main backdrop to the peace project of Europe to this day.

This is the foundation of the Union. This is the ground on which we stand. And this history of European integration arising from the spirit of resistance to totalitarianism and tyranny – and thus the commitment to freedom, democracy and the rule of law – is and will remain the narrative that connects us. It is the bond that holds us together from Lisbon to Warsaw. And we know that this bond stretches as far as the Euromaidan in Kyiv.

Poland paid a very high blood tax so that the plan of a free, united and peaceful Europe could be achieved decades later. We Germans in particular owe Poland a debt of gratitude because it was Polish priests and intellectuals who, time and again, envisaged a shared future for Poland and Germany in the united Europe. The period since the Treaty between Germany and Poland on Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation was signed, 25 years ago on this day, has been the best and most peaceful phase in our relations. Were it not embedded in the European integration process, it would be inconceivable.

Among the many people who contributed so much, one person in particular stands out: Pope John Paul II. He bequeathed us his vision of Europe, and I quote: "... a Europe that is free of selfish brands of nationalism, in which nations are seen as living centres of a cultural wealth that deserves to be protected and promoted for the benefit of all."

We can say that Poles are not only proud Europeans – Europe can be proud of Poland.

However, the fact that we have built our house on firm ground does not yet tell us anything about how things stand with the rules of the house and adherence to them.

I expressly welcome a discussion on how we want to live together with one another in the future. This discussion is necessary because no matter how much integration we have, Europe is a continent of differences and diversity. Even a community of shared values is not static. Instead, it builds on the further development of both the European idea and the legal system. We should not fear such discussions.

On the contrary, we should conduct them openly, publicly and as equals. We need to talk with each other and to listen to the other side's arguments. We should not succumb to the temptation to simply listen to the echo of our own arguments.

The European Union is facing great challenges – we hear that everywhere. But what we have known for a long time is that it is not facing challenges – it is in the midst of them. This is not sophistry. This distinction allows us to look at the situation from a different angle and shows us that we need to take immediate action. Now. We experienced this during the financial crisis and we are experiencing it now during the refugee crisis. Although different countries are affected in different ways, such crises can only be overcome together. All of us are called upon to play a part in this in accordance with our abilities and international obligations.

There has been hardly any better definition of the principles on which Europe is built than that provided by the Polish Pope. The Europe in which John Paul II believed was "a Europe whose unity is based on true freedom". He described freedom of religion and social freedoms as "precious fruits [that] have matured in the humus of Christianity". The modern state is aware, he wrote, that it cannot be a state based on the rule of law "if it does not protect and promote the freedom of its citizens, allowing them to express themselves as individuals and as groups." This includes the rights of minorities. In other words, unity in freedom and diversity – a unity that does not regard shared European heritage and awareness of national identities as irreconcilable opposite poles

This must also apply in an era of faster globalisation. Although closer cooperation between countries makes ever more sense, individual, national and cultural identity will not be lost. Indeed, if we are firmly rooted in our own national and cultural identity, we will experience expanded political integration processes not as a threat, but rather as a gain.

Regardless of where we are at home in Europe, if we were to take an inventory of our intellectual wealth, we would see that we owe

most of it to an extremely wide range of influences. We would see that it is not German, Polish, French or English, but rather European.

The future can be shaped from this heritage.