



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck  
at the state banquet hosted by President Rosen Plevneliev  
in Sofia, Bulgaria,  
on 22 June 2016**

Mr President,

Thank you very much for those personal words, which were a successful reflection of the bilateral relations between our countries. I retain fond memories of our previous meetings: your first official visit to Germany in 2012, our trustful talks in Berlin in 2014, and our encounters at the Arraiolos Group meetings.

There are many proofs of the diversity of Bulgarian-German relations – the lively exchange in the fields of science and education, for instance, with over 150 Bulgarian and German higher education institutions maintaining valuable partnerships. Around 7000 Bulgarian students are enrolled at German universities. I am particularly gratified, however, by the great – and increasing – interest traditionally shown by many Bulgarians in the German language, and by the interest shown by the hundreds of thousands of my fellow Germans who visit and appreciate your country each year.

Our close economic ties are another key pillar of our relations. Germany is Bulgaria's most important trading partner, and some 5000 German companies do business with Bulgaria. These firms support Bulgaria as a location for business and investment, not least by what they do for vocational training. Above all, however, they lay the foundations which can give young Bulgarians sound prospects for the future in their home country.

Mr President,

You spent several years in Germany as the co-owner of a construction company in Germany, and you still have close personal links with the country. As you once said, you helped build key homes of German democracy: the Federal Chancellery and the Reichstag building in Berlin. It is no exaggeration to say that very few heads of

state in Europe, indeed in the world, are as familiar with my country as you are.

Above all, however, you have done your country a huge service over the past few years as a far-sighted, wise facilitator. Your emphatic advocacy of the continuation of the reform process in Bulgaria, your clear commitment to the rule of law and your engagement for a modern Bulgaria within Europe deserve our respect. We in Germany are following this process with sympathy, and we offer our support.

Mr President, you have also done your country great service in calling again and again for a thorough, honest reckoning with the Communist past.

Today membership of the European Union and NATO forms the basis of our relations. We work closely together, most recently also on the refugee issue. Bulgaria is making a contribution to secure the external borders. This is not an easy task, but it is an important one. Together we are seeking a European solution to the refugee problem. Because how we deal with people who are fleeing is a test for our liberal societies.

I expressly welcome Bulgaria's endeavours to ensure regional stability and secure the European perspective in the Balkan states, whose importance has been made so clear to us once again in the context of the refugee crisis.

We know that Europe is facing major challenges. Tomorrow the United Kingdom will be voting on whether to remain in the EU. Of course this decision is a matter for the people of Britain. But Bulgaria and Germany are in agreement: we want a strong United Kingdom in a strong European Union.

I shall be back in Bulgaria again in September for the next meeting of the Arraiolos Group. I am already looking forward to that, just as I am to the coming two days in your country.

Ladies and gentlemen, may I now ask you to raise your glasses and join me in a toast – to the health of President Plevneliev, to the Bulgarian people, to the friendship between Bulgaria and Germany, and to our future in a united Europe!