



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the opening of the debate with students on
“Germany and Bulgaria – Partners in Europe”
during the state visit to the Republic of Bulgaria
in Sofia/Bulgaria
on 23 June 2016**

How diverse ties are among us Europeans, also those between Bulgarians and Germans, how deeply rooted these ties are in our shared history, is brought home to us in this lovely place.

The Bulgarian Renaissance, in the spirit of which the University of Sofia was founded, was influenced not least by figures who had also studied in Germany. First and foremost, I am thinking of Petar Beron, who played such an important role in the development of modern Bulgaria. To this day, academic exchange fosters understanding between Bulgarians and Germans, and I am therefore especially pleased to be here today. Thank you very much for your warm welcome.

This is no ordinary day for a discussion on Europe. While we are gathered here, citizens in England, in Scotland, in Wales and in Northern Ireland, are voting on whether Britain should remain in the European Union. That is their sovereign decision. However, it is a decision which affects all of us in Europe. Britain stands for an especially long democratic tradition. It stands for liberal principles and for the transatlantic friendship. Its voice in the European Union has carried weight for more than 40 years. To be frank, the United Kingdom's departure would be a loss for Europe as a whole.

The best thing about the debate on Brexit was the debate itself. It brought to light resentment about the European Union which had previously often only bubbled beneath the surface. It also encouraged people to think about Europe and it provided impetus for reforms. No matter the outcome of the referendum, we cannot simply return to business as usual. We should learn the lessons of this crisis and continue debating how we in Europe want to live together – on the firm foundation of shared values. In particular, we should speak with those

who have a different point of view, who have adopted opinions and arguments which seem implausible to us. We should listen to each other instead of following the current fashion of only exchanging ideas with those who share our own views.

Such a debate is important because it can help us to reflect on how we see ourselves at a time when friction and conflict is widespread. The wars in Syria and Iraq, as well as the fighting in Ukraine, demonstrate how fragile peace is, even in our immediate neighbourhood. We did not have that impression ten or twenty years ago. The horrendous terrorist attacks in the heart of our continent make it clear that European values, indeed the cornerstones of a life together in mutual respect and harmony, have become the targets of fanatics and fundamentalists. And the refugee crisis has brought home to us that Europe is not an island. Developments in other parts of the world have a direct impact on us. They affect our security, our prosperity, as well as our political achievements and social progress. In a world which has become more confusing and more unpredictable, we Europeans – not least in our own interest – have to shoulder more responsibility together with our partners.

However, the refugee crisis shows us how difficult it is to reach a compromise which reconciles national interests with European solidarity and global responsibility. Populist movements offer seemingly simple solutions. And once again they are attracting support. In many cases, they propagate retreat to the nation-state and fuel fears of “outsiders”. In some places – in Germany as well as in Bulgaria – people have even put up resistance against those seeking refuge. It must be clear to everyone that the state has the monopoly on the use of force in all our countries. And it is also clear that cutting ourselves off and putting up barriers are not solutions at a time when the world is becoming ever more interconnected.

The European Union is also facing major challenges within. In the wake of the financial and economic crisis, the unemployment rate is still very high in some member states and many young people, also here in Bulgaria, do not see a future for themselves in their home countries. The European Union has not yet delivered on its promise of prosperity.

However, one thing is especially important to me today: in the current situation, we should not only talk about Europe’s problems. We should also realise what an asset Europe is for all of us. We should say out loud that we do not want to be without it. For in the course of its history, the European project has generated enthusiasm time and again. Following the terrible bloodshed during the Second World War, pioneering intellectuals in Europe were driven by a desire to establish peace, democracy and prosperity in Europe. Decades later, following the peaceful revolutions in Central Eastern Europe, people could often

hardly wait for their countries to join the European Union. Those in countries once behind the Iron Curtain longed to finally become Europeans.

Today Europe has become a way of life which we take for granted. Being European means, for example, being able to study throughout the European Union, from Tallinn to Valletta and from Belfast to Sofia. By the way, I am pleased that there is an especially large number of Germans among the students here in Sofia. And I am also pleased that an especially large number of Bulgarians are studying at German universities. May that continue. And there is something else which gives us all pleasure or of which we are often not so aware, especially your generation: in Europe today, everyone can express their opinions freely at all times. The older generation remembers a time when that was not at all easy and when many people stopped telling others what they thought. When people were put in prison or their careers were ended for expressing their views. Or when many others had to flee due to their views, flee to countries where it was possible to express an opinion.

All of this should enable to see what the term community of shared values means. We use the term often and sometimes we can perhaps still understand it intellectually, but no longer emotionally. That is a pity and it has to change.

Sometimes I have the impression that many people, including young people, especially those in the European Union's founding states, take for granted freedoms and fundamental rights and believe they are guaranteed for ever. However, we have to consolidate these rights time and again. Above all, we have to appreciate them. For countless other people in other parts of the world yearn for the rights which we take for granted. We therefore have to strive to protect these rights time and again if we want to preserve them. Looking at Central Eastern Europe, I have the impression that many people, including the young generation, expected the European Union to provide quick solutions to their countries' biggest problems. Now they realise that there are also unresolved questions within Europe and that they have to commit to Europe, to fight for Europe and also to make compromises for Europe.

Here in Bulgaria, the enthusiasm of 2007, the year of accession, is still palpable to some extent. The majority of your fellow Bulgarians have confidence in European institutions. You know how important the support of European partners is if the reforms in your own country are to continue. I am thinking here of the necessary progress made in combating corruption in your country or organised crime, as well as the reform of the judiciary and the administration. However, it is also good and important that a vibrant civil society continues to develop in Bulgaria. For it is often the citizens who back and support reform

processes – indeed, sometimes they have to initiate them or drive them forward – both within the nation-state and in the European Union.

Allow me say something about my personal relationship with Europe. When I was your age, I lived in the German Democratic Republic, in a dictatorship within the Soviet sphere of influence – just like the one your parents and grandparents experienced here in Bulgaria. Back then, when people were not free, when my country and its capital were divided, I could only dream of a free Europe without borders. Many years later, during the peaceful revolution in 1989, I then dreamed of being part of a Europe in which freedom and justice prevail. I thus experienced first-hand how dreams can come true.

The images we have of Europe vary from country to country, from generation to generation. Today, I would like to hear about your hopes and dreams when you think of Europe. I would like to know what you expect from the European Union, for you personally, for your country and for our continent. Let us try to understand each other's perspective. And let us continue to defend what is precious to us: freedom, democracy, peace and human rights. I am confident that all of you gathered here today, and the young generation in Bulgaria as a whole, can make a crucial contribution towards this.

I am looking forward to that and now I am looking forward to our discussion.