



**Speech by Joachim Gauck,
President of the Federal Republic of Germany,
for the opening of the *Challenges of Democracy* Forum
in Santiago de Chile
on 12 July 2016**

In September 1939, the French ship Winnipeg reached the port of Valparaíso. On board were over 2,000 people who had fled Spain following Franco's victory and had now arrived in Chile with their hopes and dreams – 2,000 people, including one man who would later become a Chilean winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature and who had organised the crossing. His name was Pablo Neruda. Entire families had travelled from Santiago to Valparaíso to welcome the ship on its arrival and to offer their hospitality to the refugees.

This is an episode from Chilean history that I find deeply moving. It tells of profound humanity and kindness, virtues that shine out, time and again, in the history of peoples. Those who came from the Old World back then in 1939 found the freedom and security they longed for here in Chile.

During the dark years of Augusto Pinochet's rule, the roles were reversed. Europe then became the continent of refuge and hope for many Chileans – the place where they could hoist, before the eyes of the world, the banner of resistance against the oppression in their homeland. The fact that we can rely on each other to be a safe haven in times of distress is a sound basis for the trust that has developed between us.

Between Chile and Germany, indeed between Chile and Europe, we therefore sense the presence of that special bond that unites democracies. And so I am delighted that we are here together to explore one of the major issues of our time, namely the obstacles and challenges confronting democracy today. I am, of course, aware that some things are not the same in Latin America as they are in Europe. Please allow me, therefore, to do what comes naturally and describe the state of democracy through European eyes and with particular reference to Europe.

The “end of history” that was heralded by Francis Fukuyama in 1992 has not come to pass, as we know, and the hope that liberal democracy would sweep all before it has not been fulfilled. Instead, freedom is under threat in many places today. It seems as though the movement towards more democracy is stagnating. In some parts of the world, acceptance of democracy as a form of government is as low as it has ever been since 1989, which means low acceptance of an international order based on democratic values and standards. Is it therefore correct to speak of a crisis of democracy, as we hear from several quarters these days, not only in Europe but in Latin America too?

Now talk of the crisis of democracy is as old as democracy itself. Democracies have always had to deal with threats – from the Right, from the Left, from forces seeking to impose theocratic rule, from autocrats, traditionalists and oligarchs and, time and again, from external enemies. The last have generally been countries with authoritarian regimes and dictatorships. And even though I have no wish to subscribe to the crisis theory, and although I am very well aware of the differences between the regions of the world, I nevertheless believe that the challenges to democracy in 2016 are particularly complex.

The external threat faced by the Western democracies in particular today consists partly in the declaration of war by proponents of extreme Islamist ideology on liberal values and on the principle of a pluralist society. The acts of terrorism that are orchestrated by organisations such as so-called Islamic State or committed by individuals are designed to destroy people’s sense of security and spread alarm throughout entire societies. In the struggle that must be waged against terrorists, it is not easy to maintain the finely tuned balance between freedom and public safety.

Another external threat lies in an assertive authoritarianism which makes enticing promises of efficiency and is fuelled by divisive nationalist pride. And this can be accompanied by a revival of imperialist thought and action; in Europe, we have even experienced an unlawful annexation that has jeopardised the peaceful order in our continent. Meanwhile in Asia, China’s present conduct gives cause for concern, not only to neighbouring states.

The renaissance of authoritarianism, as we know, is not confined to the world outside the liberal societies of the West. It also influences and encourages those populist forces that feed on a very widespread longing for national autonomy and exploit existing resentment to whip up animosity towards minorities, decrying any opinions that diverge from their own as lies, simplifying a complex reality perennially and remorselessly until it matches their own image of the world. And once

populists have achieved power, the temptation to expand this power at the expense of fundamental freedoms can prove irresistible.

We must say to those who regard so-called "illiberal democracy" as an acceptable option that democracy, except in limited transformation phases, is either liberal or it is not democracy at all. There is no such thing as democracy à la carte. The hallmark of a democracy, in fact, is respect for fundamental values – inalienable human rights, the rule of law, the separation of powers and the sovereignty of the people.

But what are the origins of today's need for demarcation and isolation? It seems to me that one of the main sources is fear of the forces of globalisation, of an erosion of borders that could entail the loss of people's own identity and lower their standard of living.

All of this, incidentally, played a part in the regrettable but in fact entirely democratic decision of the British to leave the European Union. There is therefore a need to recognise people's attachment to what they hold dear whenever nations reach agreements on closer cooperation and integration, such as those concluded by us in Europe and by you here in South America.

In the face of these contemporary criticisms of globalisation, we must not forget that it has created opportunities we once could scarcely have imagined, particularly in trade, communications and transport, but also in education and science and throughout the spectrum of international cooperation. In the course of the last few decades, it has helped very many people around the world to free themselves from poverty. I say this, however, in full awareness and deep regret that in various parts of the world, and especially here in Latin America, social inequality is in fact growing in some areas. We must take this trend very seriously. At the same time, however, we must recognise and harness the benefits of globalisation for ourselves and our countries.

In spite of all the challenges and in spite of increasingly difficult circumstances, democracy is not by any means in retreat, let alone in ubiquitous decline. One need only look at your country and your continent – democracy has experienced a rebirth in Latin America, after the violence and repression to which many societies were subjected in the 1970s and 1980s. There are, of course, still crises in some Latin American countries today. That is plain to see. Nevertheless, the path taken by Chile is impressive, both politically and economically.

The fact that the dictator Augusto Pinochet, whose coup had visited the "first September 11" on Chile, was actually toppled by a plebiscite is certainly an irony of history. As in East Germany, where I grew up, the Chilean people managed to put an end to authoritarian

rule without bloodshed. This is a historic achievement that can scarcely be overvalued. Since then, your country has once more been what it was before 1973 – a democracy. I know, of course, that democrats had limited room for manoeuvre following the end of the military dictatorship. And that was not only the case here, but also in other parts of the world. That is why this transitional stage, which was undoubtedly negotiated successfully in very many respects in Chile, must normally be followed by a transformation, in which further bold reforms must be enacted to bring down the barriers previously standing in the way of genuine renewal. I speak of the hope of a development path that is capable of deepening the people's commitment to freedom and democracy, as well as their confidence in themselves, in their own creative power and, ultimately, in their state.

Madam President,

I wish to express my respect for your political work towards this goal and for your focus on those areas where key choices are made for the future of a society, as poverty and a lack of opportunities for upward mobility undermine democracy in the long run. Its credibility also suffers when some have better prospects of asserting their interests than others. Access to education for everyone and participation in working life are indispensable prerequisites for fruitful development.

Involving the people in a new Constitution for your country is an important step on the way to greater participation and transparency and hence to stronger bonds between citizens and their state. A new Constitution always begs the question as to which development model should be adopted. The people of Chile now have the opportunity to decide on the foundations of their future, although the process will no doubt require patience and perseverance. I see and hear that you have a very ambitious agenda, and wish you every success with it. Giving people a say and listening to them attentively can also lend additional new and important impetus to Chilean civil society.

Over the past three decades, Chilean civil society has already recaptured some of the ground in the public domain that was taken away by the military dictatorship. I am sure that civil society can also act as a corrective force. We in Germany have seen how this can happen, for example in a very specific area, namely the environmental movement, where it has proved possible to transform positive impetus from civil society into policies. Those involved in this movement have become interlocutors, advisers and ultimately players in the worlds of politics and business.

Incidentally, the state of civil society says a lot about a society as whole. Where it is weak, democracy is generally weak too. Where, on the other hand, the state broadens people's freedom of action rather

than restricting it, where it invites its citizens to help shape the community, that is where trust will grow.

Foundations are an excellent example of this type of process. I am delighted that this conference stems from a joint initiative taken by you, Madam President, and the German political foundations and that it creates a forum for open exchanges between academics, journalists and representatives of human-rights organisations and governmental institutions from both countries.

That, of course, is precisely what distinguishes the work of the political foundations – they foster dialogue, create a broad network of contacts with civil society in the host country, and support and strengthen democracies. For this work, ladies and gentlemen of the German political foundations, I would like to express my sincere thanks here and now and at the same time to thank your colleagues in many other countries around the world.

You have very good conditions for your work in Chile. You and your local partner bodies can operate freely here. Sadly, as we know, that is not the case in all parts of the world. In some countries, the work of foundations is being increasingly restricted. Their staff are subject to harassment or are even branded as “foreign agents” or deported on false pretences if they dare to voice critical thoughts. We, the democratic states, must oppose this and take a stand wherever foundations’ freedom of action is restricted or even suppressed.

The democratic development of a country has many sources. One is the ability to come to terms with its own past. As far as Germany is concerned, it was rejection of democracy and Western values, and indeed rebellion against them, that led my country into the tragedy of National Socialism and the crimes against humanity of the Holocaust and ultimately plunged it into the most dreadful of all wars. It took a long time before suppression and denial of guilt gave way to an honest appraisal of the past. The fact that this transition was achieved in West Germany changed the identity of the country for ever and would subsequently make it easier to come to grips with the second German dictatorship, the one in East Germany.

As we in Germany have learned, the experience and effects of a dictatorship linger on in attitudes, mindsets and behaviours. Those who were once oppressed sometimes find it more difficult to exercise their rights because their fear has never left them. This is one reason why it is important to face up honestly to our history. The experiences of the victims of tyranny must not go unheard, nor must individual and collective traumas be closeted away, as it were, and preserved in cold storage.

Those who were hardest hit in Chile were the families of the victims who were abducted, imprisoned, tortured or murdered on the

orders of the regime. Every trace of these occurrences was obliterated. The victims' suffering was supposed to fade into oblivion.

The quest for the truth, however, is crucial for all people, whether they are torture victims or the bereaved. Until the truth comes to light, the wounds of individuals and of society cannot heal.

Chilean author and activist Ariel Dorfman, wrote the following in the postscript to his play "Death and the Maiden":

"It [...] is my belief today more than ever that a young democracy can only be strengthened by the universally visible expression of the great tragedies and pains and hopes that underlie it, for it is not by concealing the damage we have caused ourselves that we can prevent its recurrence."

How can this be achieved? It can be achieved primarily through the ability to criticise ourselves. This quality plays a key part in enabling democracies to renew themselves and to go on developing. It goes without saying that democratically constituted states make mistakes too. And sometimes they likewise incur guilt. We see signs of that when we consider the traces that Germans have left in Chile. When, for instance, German diplomats turned a blind eye for many years while in the German Colonia Dignidad sect people were deprived of their rights, brutally tortured and oppressed, and even the Chilean intelligence service was then able to torture and murder there, we are deeply shocked – also by what democrats were capable of suppressing and hiding.

Our Foreign Minister is now taking exactly the right and necessary steps by declassifying the German files on this case and thus encouraging an open examination of the circumstances. However, the more important files on the dictatorship are not the German, but rather the Chilean files. The knowledge on which the dictatorship based its power is found in your country. And in a democracy, that knowledge needs to reach the hearts and minds of the victims.

In a very special way, the vast majority of Europeans – like me – have come to the priceless realisation, based on experience, that an open society, liberally and democratically constituted, is better equipped than any other to deal with the challenges of an increasingly complex world. That is because, with its fair balance of interests and the strength of a vibrant civil society, it enables people to have their say, because it strengthens social cohesion and because it simply comes up with better solutions. It is, moreover, a system that is able to learn, which makes it – in a word – sustainable.

The simplistic recipes of the new authoritarians may seem enticing to some at first sight today, but they lay no sustainable foundations for our future. A society which, in the 21st century,

interprets compromise purely as weakness is neither capable of learning nor is it fit for the future.

In democracy, political and social consensus are born of debate and contention. Therein lies one of the essential strengths of democracy. All discourse, however, must be rooted in a civilised political culture. And that culture must be actively defended and encouraged. This is a challenge for all of us, from ordinary citizens to presidents.

One element of this careful stewardship of democracy is the trustful relationship between the people and their representatives. There must never be such a distance between politicians and the public that walls of silence develop, followed by mutual alienation.

If we keep reminding ourselves of that precept, we democrats will have every reason to be optimistic. Yes, we shall also experience setbacks. We must understand them and draw the right conclusions from them. But they do not entitle anyone to sound the death knell of democracy. If we were to succumb to doom and gloom, we would run the risk of making a self-fulfilling and possibly even suicidal prophesy.

Liberal democracy is, and will remain, the greatest hope for well-being and justice, even in a world of wars and crises. Commitment to democracy and human rights binds our countries together. Let us therefore promote and defend democracy worldwide. Let us continue to contribute together to the effort to build a cooperative, value-based and regulated global order. And let us to do together, as partners, in the long term and reliably.

Thank you very much.