

Interview with the *Bild Zeitung*

Federal President Joachim Gauck gave the daily newspaper *Bild* an interview that was published on 20 July.

*An established democracy like the United Kingdom is leaving the EU, while a country like Turkey, where the reintroduction of the death penalty is being discussed in the wake of the failed military coup, has the status of a candidate for EU accession. How can this be?*

I see no direct connection between the events in Turkey and the Brexit decision, although both events will potentially have a massive impact on the European Union. The coup itself has been thwarted, but the ensuing current developments trouble me greatly. The Turkish Government needs to adhere to democratic principles and the rule of law in its reckoning with these events. Anything else would damage democracy in Turkey. Precisely because Turkey is a candidate for EU accession, it now has to be the case that a country which understands itself as a democracy and would like to become a member of the EU does not lock up journalists who voice criticism, does not summarily dismiss thousands of judges and does not discuss the reintroduction of the death penalty.

*During your visit, you criticised current Turkish President Erdogan's authoritarian style of government. Now he may feel vindicated in light of the militant enemies within his country ...*

Turkey is facing major problems: domestically, with its very sharp social divisions, as well as in the region. There will be no simple solutions to these problems. But even though we are living in a time of unrest and of threats, Turkey must follow the common rules—not least because it is a member of NATO and is holding accession negotiations with the EU. As I have mentioned, democracy and the rule of law are not negotiable for us Europeans. There is no room for an authoritarian style of government.

*In Germany too, Erdogan's Justice & Development Party (AKP) has many supporters who take to the streets to demonstrate. Are Turkey's internal politics coming to Germany now?*

Certainly, citizens with Turkish roots have grieved especially intensely for the hundreds who died and the thousands who were injured. And we stand beside them in their mourning. Many people are also wondering with apprehension how things are going to go on in Turkey. And as long as they continue to gather peacefully in solidarity, as they have been doing, and share their concern and grief, there is absolutely nothing to object to.

*A few days ago, the attack in Nice shocked the world. The attacker hunted people down, not even sparing children. In such a world, where can we take comfort?*

It is very difficult to find comfort after these horrific events, let alone after the loss of a loved one. But I believe that the experience of great solidarity everywhere in Europe and around the world gives people at least a bit of a

feeling that they are not alone in their grief. Here too we as the European family must now stand together especially closely.

*French President Hollande views his country as being at war. How can Germany help to win this war?*

Here too, what matters is that we in Europe must stick together. Right now especially, we cannot allow ourselves to be divided. We can only stand up to terrorism if we strengthen our cohesion and work together more closely and intensely, for example in terms of our security agencies.

*Can one really leave Islam out of the terrorism debate?*

The causes of terrorism are extremely complex. We need to grapple intensely with them. We need to understand better where the crises in the Middle East come from, but above all why some young people in our European societies are so susceptible to radical Islamist ideas and why they allow themselves to be exploited for inhuman deeds. Here we should be seeking solutions at every level: in security policy, but also in social integration, for the majority of terrorist murderers come from the margins of society; that is why their future prospects must also be improved.

*In the long term, is radical Islam dividing our societies?*

First of all, the large majority of Muslims in Germany are peaceable members of our society. We should not lose sight of that. There are some troubling developments, but our society is not really being divided! We are called upon to prevent any such form of division, not least because it is precisely what the terrorists want.

*But must, should, or will our way of life change?*

Of course, we will not change our values such as freedom, human rights, the rule of law and our liberal way of life. However, this is not a reason to be unconcerned; rather, there are many reasons to stand up for our values and to defend them—with a clear view of the dangers, but also with a sense of proportion.

*The past five years can be broken down into the financial crisis, the Ukraine crisis, the refugee crisis, the Brexit crisis ... Do you ever long for the old Europe?*

*[laughs]* I do sometimes long for the times when the vast majority of people associated Europe above all with hope, and looked forward happily to a common future.

*Why do we not actually think of the EU when we think of this Europe?*

For a part of the public this is indeed true, which is a real shame in my opinion. The vision does not concur with the institution for all citizens. The European Union has been very beneficial to those Europeans who were poor for a long time. Consider Portugal, Spain, Ireland, or countries in Eastern and

East Central Europe: in these places, the EU has done a lot of good. But the EU has also brought Germany social progress, growing prosperity and international respect. Unfortunately, some citizens of Europe do not currently keep that in mind.

*Is the political sphere doing enough to remind them of it?*

All of us who are working in or around politics must make a constant effort to explain political processes and political decisions anew. Citizens must not get the feeling that the experts agree on something, make a decision and then get back to business as usual, even though the citizens still have many questions. This is true, for example, of complex projects such as the free trade agreements with the US and Canada, which are currently the subject of so much controversy, as well as refugee policy, and now, very currently and of course very naturally, the future of Europe. Policymaking should not sound to citizens like a medical conference where the doctors understand one another, but a patient, should he listen in, would understand scarcely anything. However, this is not just about politicians explaining their policies; rather, citizens should be interested in these explanations. That is to say, they should inform themselves, even if it takes time and effort to do so. To put it another way, it is not only politicians who have obligations; citizens have obligations, too.

*How did you learn of the results of the Brexit referendum?*

I went to bed expecting that those in favour of remaining in the EU would win by a narrow margin. Right after I got up in the morning, I was shocked to learn that things had taken a different course.

*What was your first thought?*

I was sad and I wondered: What's that about? Sometimes I think that peoples are like individuals: more guided by their fears at some times than at other times. Fears surely played a strong role in the Brexit vote.

*With a bit of distance now, has your appraisal changed?*

I am optimistic that we will overcome this crisis too. We have a lot of stable democracies in the EU. A number of countries have good economic data, and on the whole we in Europe agree about more things than we disagree about. Perhaps we need to be more aware that while populists and critics of Europe dominate the public debate, in most countries they are not a majority. Above all, however, they have no vision for the future; they have nothing convincing to offer.

*So are things only half as bad as they look?*

No. Now we Europeans have to roll up our sleeves, pause for a moment and consider very carefully, before we keep pushing things forward very fast: where do we stand? Where have we succeeded so far and what areas still need to be reworked? What things need to be governed by Europe and what things by the individual Member States? It is completely clear that Europe can

only remain a successful project in the long term if it brings most people along; at best, it should bring them along *and* inspire enthusiasm in them.

*To do this, do we need to listen to the people more again? So do we need more popular referenda?*

When I entered politics many years ago, I was a proponent of popular referenda. I have since gained some experience with them, and now see things in a more nuanced way. Popular referenda are used often at the local and *Länder* levels. At the federal level, however, our representative democracy is the best answer to the complex problems of our time. There are many issues—security, taxation, monetary policy and many others—for which simple yes-or-no answers do not suffice. Often, difficult compromises must be found, which are not possible with popular referenda. Furthermore, it is unfortunately often the case that not many people take part in the votes in the places where they are held.

*Can Europe still be saved, President Gauck?*

Definitely. I am not worried at all for, as previously mentioned, the anti-Europeans ultimately have nothing to offer that could promise a better future for people. Together, we Europeans can brave bank crises; we have Europe-wide study and training programmes; and if we were to close all the borders, not only would travellers on holiday sit in traffic jams, but all of our goods and commodities would too. Only a few years ago there was war in Europe, in the Balkans. This is unthinkable within a Union. By the way, one must be patient with the countries that have their own special wishes regarding the EU. The European Union must send a signal to the Irish, the Polish, the French, the Frisians and the Bavarians that everyone can remain who they are. But we will do so together.

*Many people in Brussels now believe that an example must be made of the British, and they must be punished severely for their Brexit. Is this a good idea?*

In politics one is always well advised first to breathe deeply three times and then to seek talks with others. Making the British feel the consequences of their decision in a pointed and especially harsh way would not be a good approach in terms of future generations. We, the other 27 EU countries, do not need to behave now as if we were the weaker ones, the humiliated ones. Taking on the posture of the injured party here will not get us anywhere.

*The issue of immigration played a crucial role in the Brexit vote. Is the political sphere not taking people's concerns seriously enough?*

I believe that on balance the issue of immigration is discussed openly and extensively. Of course, we had a few very eventful months beginning last autumn, when moods and discussions shifted to and fro—it was an emotional roller coaster. There were protests against the many refugees, but there was also a strong culture of welcoming them. When the Chancellor said “We can do it!” as a message of encouragement to people in Germany, this was misunderstood in some countries as an invitation, and some people perhaps wilfully misinterpreted it. But the other Europeans and we ourselves have now

come to understand that Germany gives refuge to people in need, but it also knows that it cannot take in all refugees and it acts accordingly.

*Did this realisation come too late?*

Even at the beginning of the major refugee movements last year, no political decision-maker—and, by the way, only a small proportion of the public—said that everyone who wants to come here should come. For the overwhelming majority, it was clear from the start that we were balancing the wish to help as many people in need of protection as possible with the knowledge that we would have to send back some of the men and women who were coming to Germany. By the way, I do not find the fact that many politicians and members of the media sought to show a human image of Germany to be cause for criticism.

*An EU with Bulgaria and Romania as members and Albania as a candidate, but without the United Kingdom: is that still an EU that Germany feels committed to?*

Why, of course. This post-war Germany is intended to be European. We, who wreaked so much enmity, havoc and destruction upon this continent, are born Europeans. The fact that we are able to live today in a modern, rich country despite this past also represents an obligation to champion peace and prosperity, especially on our continent.

*Do we run a risk, through our fervour for Europe, of falling into a dominant role that leaves a bad taste in our neighbours' mouths?*

Here we must indeed be very cautious. It is a good thing that our ethics and our politics do not diverge too wildly. This would, however, be no reason to adopt a lecturing attitude towards other countries—and I believe that this is an attitude we cannot be accused of taking.

*Is it wrong when countries such as Slovakia or Hungary speak out against the multicultural model of society?*

We in the EU have agreed on a common set of values and legal system, to which all Member States must orient themselves. But of course, different countries conduct their politics on the basis of different experiences, cultures and traditions. Each country should—as long as it adheres to its legal obligations, for example regarding treatment of refugees, and as long as it does not simply leave it to other countries to take in people seeking refuge—gauge the extent to which it is able and willing to engage in integration. Ideally, all people should be cosmopolitan; in reality, they are not, at least not all of them. It would be of little benefit to Europe if some countries were to prescribe for other countries what their understanding of society was supposed to look like. But when I look around in German politics, I do not notice anybody presuming to do that.

*Those who were discontented used to stay home on election day. Now radical parties are drawing previous non-voters out of their apathy. We are experiencing more democracy, but in a way that harms the social climate. What is to be done?*

Low voter turnout is a major problem for democracy. This makes it all the more important for responsible politicians to make an effort to reach out to those who feel left behind or misunderstood.

*President Gauck, you will be leaving office in 2017. What are you most looking forward to about returning to life as a private citizen?*

*[laughs]* First of all, I look forward to just unwinding and attending to the things that have been short-changed in recent years: family and friends, books that I haven't finished, my home in Mecklenburg ... However, I'm also looking forward to the coming months, that is, my last months in office. Some wonderful tasks still await me— and I am awaiting them.

*Interview conducted by Tanit Koch and Ralf Schuler*