



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck  
on the coexistence of locals and migrants  
in Offenbach  
on 29 November 2016**

Federal Presidents in general and this one in particular are very fond of success. We like things that function properly. And in this society we believe we can shape things. We believe not that we are born to lose, but that we can resolve problems, and that we will do so not alone, but by working together with others. So a visit like this one today is a lovely instance of encouragement for a person who, like me, has an important task to do in a state.

Experiencing the tremendous achievements of the young artists, something occurred to me when I heard that last song, a song from the Zaza culture in the Kurdish part of Turkey: what a good feeling it is for me to know just how many people who have trouble living out their culture, their ideas of political participation and their religion at home are able to do all that here in Germany. They may be Muslims, Alawites, or oriental Christians, or people who are very different, perhaps freethinkers who have difficulties existing in their countries. Here in Germany they can live in keeping with their convictions. And they can do so because our country is undergoing a process of learning. And it is in order to acknowledge this process of learning and to discuss it with you that I have come here today.

Yes, I have taken note of this city. I have taken note of it because it demonstrates something of importance to each and every one of us: Offenbach encourages us to keep on working courageously to finish off those things we have not yet finally resolved.

Surely there can be no better place in which to talk about the coexistence of locals and migrants than here in Offenbach, where over sixty percent of the city's inhabitants are either foreigners or Germans from an immigrant family.

Here in Offenbach, and here at the Theodor-Heuss-Schule, where so many pupils have their roots in so many countries, is a very good place in which to see and also to understand the process which we call

integration and which evokes so many different expectations and ideas, but also emotions. It makes us ask: How are people changed by their move to Germany? It makes us ask: How is Germany changed by immigration? And how do people manage, despite their differing traditions, religions and customs, to grow together here for the benefit of their city and for the benefit of our country?

So in talking about integration today, I would like to examine which aspects of the coexistence of locals and migrants have been successful in Germany and where adjustments still have to be made by both sides. I want to talk about those people whose families may have migrated to Germany a long time ago as well as about those who have perhaps only recently arrived and have the chance of staying. For migration and integration – and the refugees who have come to Germany in large numbers in recent times have highlighted this – will likely remain major challenging issues for us all.

After many years of working to promote integration, Offenbach is justly proud of its success. At the Architecture Biennale in Venice this year, Offenbach was celebrated as a model “arrival city” thanks to its active housing construction policy. However, Offenbach is also perfectly aware of the problems that come with migration.

Many of you who have been familiar with the migration issue for a long time will know that even the best integration policy cannot completely erase tensions. Quite simply, it is human nature to be wary of the unfamiliar. As Hans Magnus Enzensberger succinctly put it in his shrewd essay “The Great Migration” in 1992, drawing on his experience of life: “Every migration leads to conflicts [...] Group egoism and xenophobia are anthropological constants.”

Whether we like it or not, we have to admit it tallies with many instances we ourselves have experienced. Even a townie moving to a village is a stranger. How many of us have experienced that? Or a Bavarian who gets a job in Hamburg – he is a stranger, too. And the youngster who is the only black person at a workbench in Dresden – well, he really is a stranger. A stranger is anyone who does not belong, because he does not share the same history as the majority, the same historical and cultural influences, the same emotional ties, their standards, values, laws, preferences, interests, and often also not their language. The outsider confronted with the established group is always a stranger.

So it is often the case that the debate around the coexistence of migrants and locals is emotional and full of controversy, because local populations find it hard to cope with unfamiliar cultures, while the children and grandchildren of immigrants feel a conflict of loyalties vis-à-vis their parents and grandparents. It is natural that both sides feel their understanding of themselves, their identity, is being challenged.

I do not share the views of those who oppose immigration, who focus above all on the things that go wrong. Nor do I share the views of those unconditional supporters of immigration who ignore the risks and dangers and gloss over all the problems of integration. Yes, immigration expands our horizons. But it also brings problems. Immigration is always both a benefit and a burden, a gain and a loss. Above all, however, it is a lengthy process stretching over many years and, if you look closely, even across generations. Perhaps politicians and the media – with the best intentions – have often failed to realise how complex the reality is. However, only those who fully face up to this reality will also be heard by those who are sceptical.

We are late in getting the debate going. At the very least since the ban on recruitment in 1973, when the so-called guest workers fetched their families to join them, the Federal Republic of Germany has been de facto a country of immigration. Since then, it has been impossible simply to assume that neighbours will share the same experiences and memories, the same traditions and customs. Today some Germans also speak languages which other Germans do not understand, and celebrate their festivals while other Germans go to work as usual.

We should try to remember that, before we go saying to someone with a foreign-sounding name "My, you speak very good German!", as if that were still an amazing surprise, still an exception, as if German citizenship were still defined in ethnic rather than republican terms. What may have been meant as a compliment can easily sound like ignorance or marginalisation.

Fortunately, Germany now has enough people from immigrant families with the self-confidence to demand to be regarded as equal citizens. And there are also many who not only demand to belong, but have long put that into practice. Many of them are here today. They are committed to this country; they are German citizens and naturally regard themselves as Germans, as citizens who have found their home here but do not wish to deny that their family roots lie in Turkey, Russia, Poland, Iran, Iraq or Lebanon. If we want integration, we should by no means demand assimilation.

People who are at home in two cultures are important. They are important as bridge-builders who can make the majority society more sensitive to minorities and, vice versa, can draw those immigrants who are still standing on the sidelines closer to the majority society.

So let us not disappoint those who feel that they belong here and who regard themselves as Germans. Together with the majority society, they form the new "us", a community of people from different backgrounds bound by shared values. For this is the prerequisite without which coexistence cannot function: our constitution, the Basic

Law, protects all citizens equally, but, by the same token, it is equally binding on all citizens.

So let us seek to promote this democratic system which, while it may not have been – or be – familiar to many of those who have arrived here, does offer greater freedoms and more possibilities for self-development for most of them than they could ever expect in their old home countries. Let us provide social workers, teachers, nursery school teachers and instructors with the arguments and rules they need to educate children and young people to be democrats. Not even in a desire to appear tolerant should we allow philosophies which run counter to our principles to persist. Let us stand up for and defend the individual's right to self-determination, freedom of opinion, equal opportunities for women and men, sexual self-determination and the secular state. And let us learn to distinguish what requires immediate contradiction and a definition of limits from that which may seem unfamiliar but should nonetheless be tolerated in an open society.

Plurality of ways of life and religions has to be defended in different ways. We have to ensure that migrants are not disregarded, mocked or even subjected to xenophobic attacks. However, we also have to ensure that they are not left alone when they try to break out of the mould imposed by their communities of origin and thus risk rejection by their families, for instance if they seek to flee a forced marriage. And above all, we must not leave the field wide open for Islamists and terrorists by showing only disinterest and reserve. Instead, let us take effective preventive measures by giving young people a sense of belonging and convincing them that they have a future in our country, so that radicals have no chance at all of attracting those in danger of losing their way.

Integration not only poses a huge challenge for the receiving society; it is also a challenge for the immigrants. Of course the state can – and must – do a great deal, for after all it has to offset disadvantages. It can offer language and integration courses, enhance the intercultural skills of teachers, police officers or public administration officials, promote the absorption of migrants into the labour market, and take account of the specific needs of religious communities – Jews and Muslims, Alawites and Yazidis, Buddhists, Sikhs and Bahá'ís. In the end, however, it all depends on whether an immigrant wants to regard Germany as their new home, accept their rights and obligations and to become part of this society.

Let me give you one example. There are countless examples, also in this city and in Hesse – I do know that. But I will take an example from another region and tell you about 40-year-old Nuray Çeşme. Nuray Çeşme grew up near Neumünster where many Turks lived. "I never felt foreign," she says. Because she felt as though she was living in a Turkish village. At school she hung around with the

Turkish children, and she kept up the traditions from her homeland. She spoke, ate and thought Turkish. When her family decided to stay in Germany, her father said, "Go and mix with the Germans." And, unusual for the time, he sent her to a school with lots of German pupils. And what happened? Nuray Çeşme experienced her meeting with Germans in the same way that Germans experience their meeting with Turks: as both a boon and a burden. Overall, however, she saw it as a step which tremendously expanded the possibilities open to her, both professional and personal. Today Nuray Çeşme is a department head at a major company in Hamburg and encourages others, saying, "Anyone who really wants to integrate will manage it."

Many have indeed managed it. They work as sales assistants, police officers, doctors, teachers and journalists or run their own business. Their children go to schools like this one, the Theodor-Heuss-Schule, and want to emulate their parents. They take part in the life of society, in many cases have German nationality and are friends with people from many different cultural backgrounds. This is a wonderful development.

And that is why it is good that I am here today. Because here I can sense that I am not merely talking theory or highlighting a problem we are bound to get stuck at. Because here I can talk about everything you have worked together to achieve – you yourselves, with your limited funds, not with funds from other municipalities that are swimming in money, but yourselves with your own possibilities and your wonderful teachers, your sensitive public officials, your sensitive press. I know that I could add something to "sensitive". I am talking here today about succeeding and success. And that is why I am entirely confident that you here in Offenbach will also succeed in working through those things that still appear to you to be burdens. My visit here today is intended to show you that there are people everywhere – at the head of the state, in our major social groupings, the churches, the trade unions, the political parties – who appreciate and want to express their recognition of such active moves to shape society. You have allies.

We heard a little while ago that there are still problems on the horizon. I mentioned that briefly myself. And if we are touching on a specific sector here, then we should do so openly. I mean the education sector. Because things do not always work out as well everywhere as we saw with the wonderful students this morning. We need even more attention for those who have fallen by the wayside. Not only in migrant milieus, but often there, children are not where they should be: namely on a good course, an upward trajectory, preferably in a START scholarship which provides truly intensive support to enable the child to gain top qualifications for his or her professional life. I was delighted to see two START scholarship holders this morning. Nonetheless, it is still a fact that too few of our migrants

are engaged in political parties, or sports clubs. There has been some progress, but there is room for more in parents' associations or local and municipal councils. We must all help to improve the situation. And you young people have the task of having a word with your parents: "Listen, I'm a prefect, I'm class spokesperson, and what are you? Have you stood for the local council or for the parent-teacher association?" We cannot just shrug and accept that the life of many – still too many – migrants takes place outside the life of the majority society and has no influence on political life.

The advantages and disadvantages of parallel societies are well known. And that is why we must take care that we do not have such parallel societies in our municipalities. They do exist in some places – I am not talking now about Offenbach. Initially, parallel societies serve as a point of contact for new arrivals. And that is indeed helpful when one is completely new, when one is looking for support and trust. And such a group can help ease one's way into the new society. But parallel societies can also be something else, namely one-way streets, even dead-ends, if immigrants remain in this familiar environment and avoid contact with the majority society. And then sometimes parallel societies become places in which immigrants take a very demonstrative stance against the laws and rules of the majority society. That, too, we have to recognise. Or sometimes they represent the interests of their countries of origin and carry tensions with them to the majority society and into the migrant group, so that conflicts from elsewhere suddenly break out here in our territory, too.

I would like to say this to all migrants and their descendants who are here in Germany but still have not truly arrived: it is understandable that you want to keep up your culture and your religion and that you continue to be affected by the fate of your countries of origin. Please, that should remain so. But do not forget this: if your future and your children's future lies here in Germany, then please do get involved here and help to shape this country. It will be for the good of all of us.

Of course, migrants often still suffer discrimination in our society. However, if migrants predominantly see themselves as victims of discrimination and racism, they will not be able to realise their own potential.

Back to the problems. One example: Islam is subject to certain blanket suspicions in our country. That is unacceptable. And sensible people do not accept it. But when, for example, some migrants reject even a historical-critical interpretation of the Koran as anti-Islamic or xenophobic, it certainly does not foster the process of creating a united "us".

It is very clear that we need more encounters in these areas of the debate, in these areas of friction between old and new Germans.

We must talk more to each other, but also do more with each other, work with each other, shape things together. On all sides we must step up our efforts to ensure that this country remains an appealing place, a place worth living in, for each and every one of us.

The really important dividing line in our country, you see, is not between old and new Germans, locals and newcomers, and also not between Muslims and non-Muslims. No, the really important dividing line runs between democrats and non-democrats, between those who want to and will defend an open, democratic society and those who merely exploit freedom of opinion in order to sow the seeds of discord, hatred and violence.

There is one thing we must never forget: it is not our origins that count, but our attitudes.

This is how I imagine the Germany of the future: Germans with and without a migration background, together combating extremism, nationalism and terrorism; together striving to ensure social justice and solidarity; together defending democracy and human rights against enemies within and without; together as citizens in our country; together for our country.