



**Federal President Joachim Gauck
on the occasion of the presentation of the Grand Cross
of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany
to Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament
on 2 December 2016
in Schloss Bellevue**

Let me bid you all a very warm welcome to Schloss Bellevue! It is a pleasure for me to have the privilege of sharing this moment with you. Awards and honours are always a kind of expression of confidence. If we take a look at the honours that a most diverse range of individuals and institutions have bestowed upon you, Mr Schulz, there is no doubt that here today we are showing our esteem for an enthusiastic and inspiring European who is held in high regard and enjoys considerable trust both at home and further afield.

Together we recall that this was particularly noticeable when you were awarded the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen last year. Together with the President of the French Republic, François Hollande, and King Abdullah II Ibn Al Hussein of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, I had the privilege of speaking at the ceremony on the significance of the European integration project and, in that context, the significance of your engagement for Europe. I would like today to continue in this vein.

Where does the future of Europe lie? Mr Schulz, that is the issue to which you have dedicated your life. Do we need a new or a modified vision for Europe as a consequence of the crises we have experienced in the recent past? Or do we simply need more pragmatism? We ought not to restrict this debate to Brussels and the role of the Brussels institutions, as you point out, with good reason, time and again. Around us things are happening that challenge us as Europeans more than we might like and that we have long not wanted to concede. So when we talk about the future of Europe, we are talking about the future of us all, about the Europe of us all, about us as citizens of Germany and as citizens of the European Union.

I would like to thank you, Mr Schulz, for not becoming tired of reminding us that our lives and the lives of future generations both in Germany and in other European Union Member States crucially depend on how we shape Europe. It is our responsibility as Germans and as Europeans to work together to overcome the crises that are currently so starkly calling into question the idea of a Europe united in diversity. It is our responsibility to confront the trend towards isolating and excluding others and fuelling fears and hatred. And it is our responsibility to restore the trust in the European idea that has been lost.

Mr Schulz,

You have dedicated your life to this mammoth task – with an energy and a passion that can be seen, heard and felt throughout Europe. Sometimes we wonder where you find that energy. What motivates you?

I think it perhaps has to do with the fact that you had first hand experience of borders as a very young person. That has shaped you – experience with borders of very different kinds that have challenged you not only in political life. When you look back, you have often recalled the border controls in your childhood and youth. You remember hurdles that were an everyday experience for families like yours, who would travel from Germany to Belgium or the Netherlands to go shopping or visit relatives. As we know, you grew up in this border region. Würselen is where you come from. At the award ceremony for the Charlemagne Prize, President Hollande uttered the charming sentence: “To be wholeheartedly European you must wholeheartedly come from somewhere.” You are wholeheartedly European because you are wholeheartedly a Würselener.

As mayor of your home town for many years, you entered the European Parliament in 1994. Then, as now, your mission for Europe was “to emphasise what unites us, not what divides us.” European cohesion is a precious commodity. There has never been a more successful European project than the idea of the European Union – for freedom and security, for democracy and the rule of law, for respect for human rights and for the development of prosperity in Europe.

I would like to thank you, Mr Schulz, for constantly striving to reach understanding on a shared Europe. Even your experience in the home you grew up in has taught you that cohesion is by no means only a question of party allegiance. As a defender and architect of a vibrant European democracy, you have also earned great respect outside the Social Democratic Party family. Your election and subsequent re election as President of the European Parliament, which was a first, is impressive confirmation of this. It appears that soon your appeals for more European democracy will be heard from Berlin. And I am sure that this will enrich the German debate on Europe.

For where the issue is giving Europe's citizens a voice, you go on the offensive – in word and in action. Your campaign to make the European elections in 2014 a decision by the electorate on the Commission President attracted considerable attention, not least because it met with resistance. You did not allow that to distract you and thus fuelled a discussion with great significance for the acceptance of Europe and for its capacity to function. The decision making process at European level, the credibility and powers of the European institutions will continue to occupy us – and you personally, whatever position you hold – in the future.

Mr Schulz, I strongly welcome the fact that you have strengthened and raised the profile of the European Parliament as a central forum for debate on fundamental issues. Of course, we need public debate also outside parliaments on how we want to stabilise and shape Europe and make it fit for the future. Where else should discussion on the future of Europe occur than in a place where representatives of citizens from Lapland to Malta, from the Portuguese Atlantic coast to the eastern border of Estonia convene? You have combined the many questions this raises into one key question: "What kind of Europe do we want to live in?" This is the question that concerns you, that literally drives you out towards the people and into the public eye.

A European mindset and approach now makes no small number of citizens uneasy, sometimes doubtful, sometimes even hostile. Europe's diversity is perceived by some as a threat rather than an asset. We are experiencing how freedom of movement is also triggering feelings of alienation and a fear of losing control. And we are experiencing the limitations of European solidarity and European motivation as well as in some places – very clearly – a withdrawal from European thinking and acting, and yes, even departure from the European Union, something that would have been inconceivable twenty years ago.

In this critical situation, Mr Schulz, you are doing something I would like to see more of in politics in general. You state clearly and compellingly what is at stake. "[...] make sure that we do not bequeath this great House of Europe to our children as a ruin." You don't try to appease people or gloss over anything. You don't mince your words. And that is exactly what we need also in the coming years, when we will have to reach a consensus with other Europeans on tempo or deceleration, on the way in which we can continue to foster cohesion in Europe with the idea we once had. You confront yourself and us with the scenario of a divided Europe, because the united Europe is something you hold dear. You are not prepared to allow nationalism and populism to jeopardise what the European unification process has brought forth despite its flaws: the great European achievement of peace in freedom.

To preserve this achievement we need Europeans like you, Mr Schulz. The term "European by instinct", which you yourself have coined, sums it up particularly well. We need people who feel and sense that we belong together. And so I combine my sincere thanks to you with a significant request: that, even when you hold a new position, whatever office you may have, you continue through the power of your words and actions to fight for Europe, for European democracy and for the benefit of Europe's citizens.

Mr Schulz,

I am delighted to award you the Grand Cross of the Order of Merit.