



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the end of his term in office on the question “what
should our country be like?” addressed in his inaugural
speech of 23 March 2012
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When I took office as Federal President almost five years ago, I asked myself and my fellow Germans what this country – the place our children and grandchildren are to call their country one day – should be like. And I found a great deal on which we can build and that makes me feel grateful and optimistic about the future. In thousands of encounters since then, I also sensed the strength and energy that the people of this country feel for each other and for democracy, freedom and progress. And I had the privilege of also seeing Germany through the eyes of others. In my many trips abroad, I experienced the respect – indeed, sometimes even the admiration – that people feel for our free and stable country.

Yes, we live in a republic that makes personal happiness and achievement possible, a country that strives to combine freedom with equal opportunities and social justice. The law is not in the hands of the powerful. Administrative and constitutional courts guarantee that the people can assert their rights against the power of the state. Free trade unions play a role in shaping the world of work, as do responsibly minded companies. The social market economy, culture and the arts can flourish, while highly diverse free media stimulate discourses and foster opinion-forming. And then, particularly gratifyingly, a strong civil society comprised of initiatives, associations, foundations, non-governmental organisations and ad hoc groups exerts influence on the public sphere. Now, as then, I believe that this is the best and most democratic Germany we have ever had. But when I think of future generations, my hope is that we will have the courage to meet current challenges so that this country remains such a good place to live – ideally without some of the shortcomings of which we are aware.

Now, after almost five years, I am influenced to a greater extent by the awareness that this democratic and stable Germany also faces threats and that great endeavours will be needed to strengthen it for the future. That is why today I do not only want to ask what our country should be like. More importantly, I also want to ask what we can pass on to our children and grandchildren so that this peaceful, free and socially responsible Germany can be preserved and developed. And above all, what attitude do we need to achieve this?

Even a small selection of the headlines from the past two years, as we have just seen, reminds us that the world is not only full of contradictions, but also that much has simply turned out differently to what we expected a good 25 years ago, back when, as we recall, the Berlin Wall fell and we cherished a dream of a Europe of free and liberal democracies. I have not forgotten the euphoria felt both in general and naturally by me personally. The triumph of the western model of society was seen as a given. I, too, believed that a "new era of democracy, peace and unity", as depicted in the Charter of Paris, was almost an inevitability.

Instead, we are neither all united in Europe today, nor do we all live in peace. The uniting force of the European Union has declined significantly. Doubts within the EU are also being stoked from the outside. For the first time, a country even wants to leave the Union. The wars in the Middle East and eastern Ukraine, as well as Russia's occupation of Crimea, have revealed the limited scope for action of German and European foreign policy. The threat posed by Islamist terror has grown. With the inauguration of the new US President, we face challenges to the international order and transatlantic relations, particularly NATO.

Expectations of the end of history have thus long since been dashed all over Europe and, of course, also in Germany.

The aim was freedom – but now some people feel threatened or even lost in freedom.

The aim was a Europe without borders – but now some people see the openness as a threat.

The aim was a united continent – but now some people fear the loss of too much of their own sovereignty.

In our societies, we are also seeing the development of movements that present opposite standpoints, but do not have coherent programmes. However, their school of thought makes clear that they preach a return to the nation state and resistance against foreigners and free trade. They favour cultural homogeneity over diversity and present counter-models to representative democracy. They declare themselves to be the sole voice of the people and they attack the so-called system. They call the European project into

question. Some combine anti-American and anti-western reflexes with sympathy for the authoritarian regime in Moscow.

We cannot avoid facing up to this challenge. The fact is that liberal democracy and the political, normative project of the West are under fire.

It is as if all of us are experiencing a transitional situation – many people feel that so far, the degree to which we are confronted with uncertainties is greater than the degree to which we are capable of adapting our democracy to the new challenges.

Each generation must undergo its own experiences. But it can in fact be helpful to look at history, as we then see that powerful fears – the “fear of freedom”, the fear of risk and the fear of the loss of identity-forging ties in religion, culture and a familiar environment – very often went hand in hand with marked historic changes. And yet people have repeatedly proved capable of turning what was initially experienced as a threatening development to their advantage. They have adjusted to the unfamiliar, expanded their scope of knowledge and action, and ultimately come to feel at home in the changed world.

We only need to think about the time of the Industrial Revolution. In the first instance, it transformed society radically and with an unprecedented suddenness, creating vast wealth, but equally glaring poverty. But then resistance against Manchester Capitalism led to revolutions or social reforms, and later still to the social market economy and relative prosperity, including for workers. Why should we not take historical experiences such as these seriously?

We want to continue trusting that major changes by no means need to spell inescapable and overwhelming doom. We remain convinced that we can find effective answers both to political developments and to challenges such as climate change, pollution and a growing population, and even to the digital revolution, which will permeate almost all parts of our lives in the near future and is likely to significantly change our concept of what it means to be a human being. So let us draw strength from our experience in the past that perception guided by reason can lead to knowledge and to resolute and far-sighted action.

Resolute action – yes, but this can be difficult in times of change when we can only partly see what is on the horizon and we are occasionally compelled to endure uncertainty. It is also difficult to take resolute action when a society that has lived in peace and prosperity for decades has found a comfortable spot for itself and shies away from risk.

On the one hand, we have a large number of voluntary workers and dedicated people, who give our country an inner structure of cohesion and solidarity. But on the other hand, there is a sense of

entitlement among parts of society, with some people regarding the state merely as a service provider, which they, like customers, believe should meet their expectations and fulfil their wishes as extensively as possible. However, democracy is not a political mail-order company. Democracy means being actively involved in shaping one's own destiny, whether at the municipal, city, regional or national level. Democracy relies on free citizens who do not hand over vision and responsibility to a strong man or woman who makes all the decisions. Democracy requires – indeed it is – self-empowerment. It is we, the people, who decide on what form our communities take. And we, the people, are responsible for the future of our children and grandchildren.

Keeping pace with reality in times of rapid changes naturally also poses a particular challenge to governments. We are witnessing a wide range of endeavours to maintain or regain control and to develop ideas and strategies in real-time to cope with change. In general, those who waste time in such phases avoiding decisions and risks or who do not see things through to the end may find that they have to pay a very high price financially and – more importantly still – politically. And the latter will be in the widest possible terms, affecting foreign, social, legal and security policy. I would like to remind you of just two important current problem areas.

Firstly, it has proved possible to significantly reduce the number of refugees and illegal immigrants arriving in Europe and Germany. However, everyone knows that unless Europe's external borders are secured efficiently, unless we have a regulated European immigration policy, and finally unless the living conditions in the countries of origin improve, we can expect the situation to worsen again to the point of crisis in the future. And some European societies could also be overwhelmed by the challenge of taking in and integrating large numbers of refugees and migrants.

Secondly, through huge efforts, it proved possible to develop suitable instruments to stabilise the euro in order to preserve the single currency. However, everyone knows that the future of the single currency can best be safeguarded in the long term with a common budget and financial policy.

Resolute and far-sighted action generates trust. But when parts of the population believe that those in power no longer have the situation under control, then populists have another reason to sow doubts about liberal democracy.

However, by no means should the warning of US political scientist Francis Fukuyama become reality, that is, the term "populism" must not become "the label that political elites attach to policies supported by ordinary citizens that they don't like", thus excluding these people as a whole from the discourse.

Yes, including positions and topics that are viewed critically by the political centre naturally makes the debate more heated, but it can also be helpful to include them, as this increases the acceptance of democratic government in the medium term. After all, we want a representative democracy to actually represent as many people as possible. Of course, this does not mean legitimising resentments or granting prejudices the status of arguments.

I think we need to have the courage to conduct discussions that include the majority to a far greater extent than has been the case to date and do not only encompass those who regularly take part in political discourse. Exchange and discussion are the oxygen of an open society and argument is its enlivening element. Some people may not like this idea, but now in particular it seems appropriate to me to remind ourselves about it.

The large number of lifestyles has led to a large number of social environments in our society, each of which has its own ways of communicating. Plurality often no longer exists in the form of communication between different groups. Instead, it takes place in parallel, with no point of overlap between groups, or even takes the form of opposition to other groups. It is thus all the more important to counteract fragmentation, ideally through contacts with people who think differently to oneself. Genuine discussion is often the first step on the path to compromise and the starting point for change – and thus for the development of democracy.

That is why I agree with the almost paradoxical suggestion by English historian Timothy Garton Ash, who calls for a “robust civility” in the culture of discussion. What this means is having heated arguments, but with respect and sometimes with a thick skin. I would add that as in sport, there should be respect for the rules in these heated arguments.

Democracy is a large arena. Interaction in this arena only ends for me when parties, movements or individuals overstep the norms and laws of democracy, preach hatred or use violence – regardless of whether they are motivated by right-wing or left-wing extremism, Islamism or anything else.

We are living in uncivil times. It is often no longer possible to discern what is true or false. In social media in particular, there is almost no limit to lies, insults and hurtful comments. Furthermore, foreign powers conduct information wars aimed at destabilising other countries. This is all the easier to do because feelings have often become more decisive than facts when it comes to forming opinions. However, we should remember that if we only accept as fact what we already believe anyway and if half-truths, interpretations, conspiracy theories or rumours count every bit as much as the truth, then the path is clear for demagogues and autocrats.

Power can only be evaluated and, where necessary, criticised if we adhere to facts and the truth. Let us not allow a situation to occur whereby power gains hold once again without arguments founded on truth. Instead, let us defend democracy as a power that trusts in argument and allows itself to be guided by it.

An acquaintance of mine recently told me that one quiet evening she took the Basic Law, our constitution, down from her bookshelf and read parts of it once again, very consciously. And to her own surprise, the text did not only reach her mind, but also her heart. She suddenly felt pride in her ancestors, who placed Germany on a democratic foundation after so many years of war and dictatorship. And she said that she felt strengthened inside because it had become clear to her how modern the Basic Law still is and why its norms and spirit can continue to serve as guidelines for our thoughts and actions.

That evening, this woman felt that she belonged politically. She felt that she belonged to a civil society that appreciates the values and institutions that have brought our country freedom, prosperity, legal certainty, social security and peace. She felt that she belonged to a body of citizens who are willing to represent and defend what they do not want to lose because it is something they hold dear and value.

I mention this example as modest proof that the term "constitutional patriotism", which was coined in academia, is not merely a theoretical concept, but can in fact be a reality wherever people feel such goodwill for democracy. It disproves all those who regard constitutional patriotism as a weak, bloodless construct, a makeshift from the times of a divided and morally discredited nation.

My own ties to the constitution – that is, my own constitutional patriotism – do not only result from intellectual comprehension, but just as much from an emotional connection. This country is the home of my values – it has become this home. And that is the main reason why I feel I belong here, why I feel at home.

Like many of my generation, I was only able to develop trust and a sense of belonging in Germany at a later stage, once the country no longer ran away from its own guilt, but instead dared to ask itself questions of an existential nature. Ultimately, it was the miracle of democracy in western post-war Germany and East Germans' later "yes" to democracy in the Peaceful Revolution that made me feel at home in both my heart and mind as a constitutional patriot in this new Germany. And this was because I, along with countless other people, shared the experience that what we had longed for, that freedom and self-determination, actually became a political reality.

As a constitutional patriot, I naturally also remain a German. I live with our language, songs and literature. I live with our beautiful landscapes and our incredibly chequered history. Respecting a

democratic constitution with universal values naturally does not mean shrugging off one's own culture or ignoring traits that have developed over the course of history.

In this context, allow me to just remind you of the development of our welfare state, which is also enshrined in the Basic Law – an achievement that is the envy of quite a few other countries in the world. Over the course of the 19th century, socialist and social-democratic ideas merged with the conservative notions of a Christian view of human life. And the idea was that redistribution by the state would help all those in need. Irrespective of how inadequate it may have been, Bismarck's health and accident insurance system made Germany a global pioneer of a state social security system, which developed constantly over the course of time.

Forty-five years ago, Willy Brandt said: "Germans, we can be proud of our country!" I myself would not have been able to speak like that at the time. When I hear Brandt's sentence, this sense of pride stems in particular from the internal peace we have created in Germany in large part through our welfare state, but also through greater equal opportunities. Our country cannot give each and every citizen great wealth, but it is vital to enable people from all backgrounds, without exception, to enjoy the education they desire. Unfortunately, that is not yet the case everywhere. But we have made significant progress on the path to greater equal opportunities. These and other valuable achievements must not be put at stake. We need to deploy considerable imagination and great willpower in order to safeguard them for future generations.

Other key areas of the Basic Law are shaped by our experiences in the past. With memories of the Weimar Republic, which had proved powerless over the rise of National Socialism, still fresh in their minds, the founders of the Basic Law set a clear course. The aim was that German democracy would be resilient rather than weak. As Carlo Schmid, one of the great politicians of the post-war era, said, the new German democracy should have "the courage to show intolerance towards those who wanted to use democracy to destroy it".

Many, however, remain fearful of a strong state, recalling National Socialism and how it persecuted all opposition and subjected every individual to a dictatorial regime. Liberal-minded defenders of fundamental rights, for example, fear that strengthening security-related legislation could excessively restrict individuals' civil liberties. We face a dilemma. Yes, anyone who focuses disproportionately on security will also restrict civil liberties. Yet it is the rule of law that would suffer should the state prove to be too weak or even helpless in its efforts to fight violence and terrorism. What is more, it would lose its credibility.

I would like to remind you that Germany has a precious asset that should by no means be taken for granted – the fact that the large majority of its citizens abide by the law. This general attitude has come about because the population knows it can trust the state to guarantee an orderly and safe environment. It is a paramount duty of the democratic state to protect this valuable asset. It is thus currently the case that greater security does not so much threaten democracy but rather greater security is required to protect it.

I believe we need closer international cooperation, and we must enhance our internal security. We specifically need effective prevention measures, that is, political, cultural and religious education, so that people do not fall prey to any form of extremism. Our focus must be on continued, further intensified citizenship education – beginning in families, but also in nurseries, schools, integration courses and universities, as well as in the media, and especially on the internet.

Learning to live in a democracy – by respecting others.

Learning to live in a democracy – by assuming responsibility for the community.

Learning to live in a democracy – by each individual heeding the call to political citizenship.

We then realise that democracy is not simply a matter of being, but rather of becoming. Democracy lives, and it can learn. New issues, new generations and new worlds of communication constantly require new responses to meet the needs of our day and age. For instance, the protection of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities has been enshrined in our state's democratic order. The state has ventured into new fields of law, such as by enacting legislation on data and environmental protection – and it now faces the great challenge of designing legislation for the domain of digital technology. Democracy may at times be slow to act. Yet history has shown that despite numerous setbacks no other system is as highly adaptable politically and economically, or as effective and successful, as is democracy.

The men and women who wrote our nation's constitution envisioned not only a vigilant and assertive democracy, but also one that is based on values. They strove to promote peace and justice, and they protected human dignity by enshrining it in an eternity clause. So now we have two things: an enduring and protected foundation for our democracy, as well as a flexible, open space for plurality to unfold. This dialectical relationship between mutual commitment and freedom has become increasingly important over the decades, because society has become increasingly diverse, in terms of politics, culture, religion and ethnicity, and in terms of the recognition of sexual orientation.

Germany has only recently embraced immigration, and the relationship between mutual commitment and freedom remains a

challenge, as we are reminded time and again. Both the native population and immigrants are under an equal obligation to respect the Basic Law and German legislation. At the same time, the native population and immigrants are free to live in accordance with their own cultural and religious beliefs. They can follow their personal convictions, as long as they do not restrict the freedom of others.

For our society to thrive, it must be willing to adopt an open attitude. For some, it is openness towards the majority that is called for. For others, it is openness towards minorities. Some must desire to participate, while others must enable participation. Our society has no room for defamation, agitation, ostracism or hatred, and certainly not for violence against immigrants. However, fear of being labelled a racist must not cause us to refrain from pointing out intolerance and unlawful behaviour among immigrants, or keep us from debating questions such as what form of Islam is suitable for a secular democratic society.

Let me put it this way: the important dividing line in our democracy is not between those who have lived here for generations and those who have just arrived, and it is not between Christians, Muslims, Jews and atheists. No, the important dividing line is between democrats and non-democrats. Attitude, not background, is what counts. Especially among immigrants, there are many who highly value our country, because they have prospered here – because here they have been able to live in a peaceful and free society built on the rule of law. This country may be far from their home, but it is where their dreams have come true.

Those who love democracy will protect it, not only against the enemies of an open society at home. Those who believe that respect for human dignity is at the heart of their constitution must assume responsibility, among other things, for maintaining the international order, the essence of which consists of shared norms and values, and which aims to safeguard peace and uphold the rule of law.

We know full well that Germany cannot afford to become an island by pulling up the drawbridge and simply retreating into a national fortress. Peace and prosperity in our country are inextricably linked with peace and prosperity elsewhere. At the institutional level, we are intertwined with the international organisations and military alliances of which Germany is a member. Events in China, for instance, have an impact on our lives in Germany. Similarly, we would be directly affected if the United States were to actually alter its relationship with the European Union or the Western Alliance.

Every day, we are confronted with the fact that what is happening in Syria has an effect on migration flows to Germany or, for example, that events in the Maghreb countries can increase the risk of terrorism in Germany.

Every day, we must ask ourselves if we will lose our credibility if we do not oppose at least the most egregious cases of inhumanity and brutal persecution, and of the annihilation of human life. We must ask ourselves if we are becoming morally jaded, fatalistic and cynical, and are thereby undermining the universality of human rights.

Also in the international arena, those who refuse to take prudent and decisive action, by instead choosing to wait things out, are actually allowing others to take matters into their own hands. It is not least a consequence of the United States limiting its action that zones can emerge in which newly shaped powers are taking hold and new claims are being made. Rulers with an authoritarian leadership style have already begun to dictate rules, subjugate the norms of international cooperation to their aspirations for power, and devise new orders.

Germany – in fact the entire European Union – can of course watch this happen and try to limit the damage. But Germany, as a strong and responsible partner in the Union, can also demonstrate greater willingness to exert its influence for the greater good than has been the case so far. We could? No, we must! We must do more, in concert with others, to maintain order, prevent conflicts, mitigate crises and deter opponents. This also means that we must do more to stabilise the European Union and to counteract the internal and external forces that are trying to cause division.

Despite some self-doubt and quite a few internal crises, in the European Union we have created a unique project of peace and prosperity. Germany and most European countries are firmly committed members of NATO, which in light of recent developments is actually becoming more, not less, important! Germany and the European Union have a lot of say in the world. And they have more than enough reason to self-assuredly come to the defence of an international order that is built on the idea of freedom, democracy and human rights. Considering the tremendous challenges that lie ahead, we Europeans and we Germans cannot and must not shirk this responsibility.

In recent years, much has been done in this regard. A change in mentality has been set in motion. There is greater political will to take tangible and effective action. The Federal Government has developed various instruments through which it can react to crises, and it has increased its funding for this purpose.

And yet, Germany is far from meeting all of its obligations. That is why I am in favour of us keeping the promises we have made to our partners and friends. Considering our present-day challenges and the means at our disposal, we can and should do much more in support of crisis prevention and diplomacy, development cooperation, and United Nations missions – but also to enhance defence capabilities in the Western Alliance. Although it sounds good and rings true to say that

there can never be a military solution, this is only valid as long as all sides uphold this maxim. That is why I support enhancing European defence – which certainly does not preclude further diplomatic efforts to de-escalate situations. I also support making unmistakably clear to our eastern European neighbours that NATO's mutual defence obligation is and remains a solid commitment.

No one need fear that Germany will in any way cease to be a peace-loving member of the international community that is open to dialogue. On the contrary, what is at stake is creating the basic conditions for peace and open dialogue. Germany must work towards this end if we do not want our country or other European member states to become the playthings of actors who are pursuing entirely different interests. That is at the core of both vigilant democracy and our willingness to defend our republic.

After the Second World War, it was not self-evident that Germany would one day re-enter the fold of Western civilised nations. Those who built the young Federal Republic themselves entertained doubts as to whether the German people, who had sunk so low, could ever become true democrats. The succeeding generations were well aware of the sins of their predecessors, and they felt a special responsibility, even an obligation, to respond to this question with a credible, loud and resounding "yes", confirming that they wanted to live in and build up this new democracy. They were determined that Germany would never again revert to nationalism, that it would be a European Germany, one they would jointly build and that East Germans, too, would seek to emulate and later reunite with.

Self-confidence, which is of great importance to me, was something we did not want to feel for a long time. Indeed, we were not able to feel it, as it seemed too close to a feeling of ignorant pride. This gave birth to a prevailing culture of reservation and self-restraint. But when, do I ask, would there have been more reason for healthy self-confidence than when democracy was being peacefully built in West Germany, the Peaceful Revolution was being pursued in the East and divisions were being brought down in Germany and throughout Europe?

If we overlook the potential within us, we will be bogged down in eternal political standstill, in a baneful culture marked by fear, indifference and self-doubt. We would be trapped, until one day others with completely different values and no self-doubt whatsoever would bend our precious society and freedom to their will.

When I ask myself what the most important thing is that we can pass on to our children and grandchildren, I believe it is first and foremost an attitude – trust in ourselves and in our own strength. We will stay calm and composed.

Although fear may be a constant companion, we will not allow it to rob us of confidence in ourselves and in our democracy.

Although voices may praise the fool's gold of long-outdated nationalism, we will remain Germans – as Europeans.

Although the uncertainty of our times may alarm us, we will not flee from our responsibility.

It is with true confidence that we let our deeply held conviction be heard – our firm belief that we will preserve, develop and defend what we have achieved and what we hold dear to our heart.