Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
in Maastricht/Netherlands on 7 February 2017
at the Dies Natalis ceremony awarding him
an honorary doctorate from Maastricht University
during his visit to the Kingdom of the Netherlands

How wonderful it is to be here with you in Maastricht on this historic day. We are celebrating the anniversary of your university, but we are also celebrating a milestone in the process of European integration that was achieved here exactly 25 years ago with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. I am happy that so many young people from all over Europe are celebrating this occasion here at Vrijthof in the heart of the Old Town and in the Sphinx district, with its modern architecture. What an impressive picture this is of a vibrant and united Europe! It is a testament to our shared past and present and it gives us hope for the future.

Twenty-five years ago, Europe moved closer together here in Maastricht. And visitors to this city are reminded once again that we Europeans have long since been united by far more than treaties. Maastricht is a cosmopolitan meeting place shaped by its location between Belgium and Germany, Flanders and Wallonia, and its proximity to Luxembourg. Thousands of students from abroad make it a culturally diverse city, where a unique blend of languages can be heard on the streets and squares. There are extremely close cross-border ties in politics and business, but also between societies, in the Meuse-Rhine region.

The spirit of European integration can be felt here, including in these times of great challenges. A German graduate of your university once put it like this in a major German weekly newspaper: "Maastricht is at the heart of Europe, but Europe is also in Maastricht, perhaps more than anywhere else. (...) The idea of Europe has become reality here (...)."

Your university, too, is committed to the idea of Europe in a special way. Its graduates often remain dedicated to the united Europe. I am very grateful that of all universities, this institution is

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awarding me an honorary doctorate today. And I was particularly happy when I heard that the students had suggested I be granted this honour. I see this as an important sign that the European project and European values unite us across generations.

Your generation of young people and my generation look at Europe from very different perspectives. That is why it is so important that we take an interest in each other and discuss our experiences, hopes and fears. We also need to talk with those who do not only have hopes, but also fears and worries. Allow me to describe briefly here today what moves me when I think of the European Union.

I myself was born in 1940, at the start of the terrible and brutal Second World War, which was unleashed by Germany and brought untold suffering to the whole continent, including the Netherlands. Following the liberation of Europe from National Socialism and the division of my homeland, I grew up in the part of Germany that its communist rulers had named the "German Democratic Republic". This was a very brazen description by those who coined the name, as the reality was a dictatorship by the grace of the Soviet Union. At the time, and particularly after the building of the Berlin Wall, a longing lodged in my heart – the longing for a free Europe. I still remember clearly how I felt – and those feelings were shared by millions of people behind the Iron Curtain. Let me give you a very simple example. I was walking one day with my sons at the shore of the Baltic Sea. Behind us lay the guarded country, in front of us the guarded sea. We were looking at a white ship that had just set off to sea – the ferry to Denmark. My two small boys said, "We want to go on the ship!" And I told them, "We can't go on that ship." "But there are people on board!" "Yes," I said, "but they're different people, they're from the West. We're not allowed to go on that ship." We knew what we had to teach our children – that we can't travel, that we're locked in. And at such times, whether at the Baltic Sea or the Central Uplands, there were feelings of grief, pain, rage and fury. That was the other side of my longing for a united Europe.

Years later, after countless disappointments, I suddenly felt a sense of hope when the liberation movement was formed in Poland. And in East Germany, during the peaceful revolutions of 1989, I dreamt of being part of a Europe based on freedom and justice. I dreamt that the European tradition of the Enlightenment would prevail once and for all following the terrible experiences with the totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century. And then we experienced how dreams came true – not least because countless people in Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, Leipzig and many, many other places in Central and Eastern Europe took to the streets to speak out against injustice and oppression.

So we know that historic moments can come from dreams. And dreams are often the driving force behind historic changes. But we also know that we cannot simply content ourselves with dreaming or indeed with believing that liberation is the happy end. It is true that liberation is always wonderful and overwhelming. It is like a wedding. But freedom is often like a marriage – it is also nice. But such powerful feelings are rare in this freedom. And they are even rarer in politics. Former visions must be turned into policies and put into practice. For example, treaties must be agreed and laws must be passed. And this is precisely what was achieved here in this city. As the historian Heinrich August Winkler said, the Maastricht Treaty is a "qualitative leap in the history of Western European integration". However, I do not merely see it as a treaty or an important document, but also as a symbol of a Europe united in peace and freedom; a Europe that stands for the Enlightenment values of the West, that is, for democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, recognition of the separation of powers, the protection of minorities and gender equality. With the deepening, but also the enlargement of the Union, not least through the admission of Central and Eastern European states, the vision of an undivided continent, where democratic countries and their citizens enjoy close ties in business, politics and society, has become reality.

However, I also regard the Maastricht Treaty as a symbol of a project that has not been completed and must also cope with setbacks. It stands for a project that we, the people of Europe, must continue to actively support. In its preamble, it refers to "the process of creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe", thus tying in with the Treaty of Rome signed in 1957. This wording does not bind us to a particular type of union or to an institutional goal. It serves to remind and motivate us to shape our Europe step by step. The European Union is thus a work in progress. It is an ongoing process informed by the idea that people in Europe belong together and that a European spirit of solidarity can develop.

We know that the Maastricht Treaty is a historic compromise. It was controversial for many different reasons, and it remains contentious. It has also been amended several times by subsequent treaties. The Member States created a complex architecture *sui generis*, for which Germany's Federal Constitutional Court coined the term "union of states" to distinguish it both from a confederation of states and a federal state. We also know that the Treaty laid the foundation for the economic and monetary union, while leaving economic and fiscal policy to be decided primarily at national level. It was also this model that led the European Union to become dangerously unbalanced. The effects of the economic and financial crisis, but in particular of dramatically increased national debt levels in the eurozone, can still be felt today and will also continue to occupy us.

However, the Treaty also provides the basis of much that works well in Europe today and from which we Europeans benefit on a daily basis. One reason I underline this is because many people are completely unaware of it. The European Union actually runs extremely smoothly in countless fields and offers its citizens very tangible benefits. For example, it creates freedom of movement, something that young people in particular take for granted. No one wants to do without this freedom. Within the Union, we Europeans can live, work and study wherever we want. The European Union also provides us with economic opportunities. Manufacturers can use the potential of the single market in the knowledge that there is a level playing field, while consumers enjoy a wider range of products and services, often at lower prices. Examples of this include telephone and internet services.

The European Union does not only create scope and opportunities – it also offers its citizens protection. For example, the norms and standards agreed by the Member States increase safety in the workplace, protect consumers' health and preserve the environment. Global climate protection would not make much headway without the influential voice of the European Union. Many European regulations extend to non-member countries, in part because the Union is sought after as a trade partner. And I am also thinking of targeted structural aid, which helps regions to thrive thanks to creative and innovative projects. If you travel far into the western and eastern parts of the continent, you will see how important this structural aid has been for the development of certain regions. People who travel through Europe can enjoy historic architecture and nature reserves that have been restored or indeed preserved by European Union funding in many places. And they can visit companies and universities in which people from all over Europe are working together on the innovations of the future.

I am aware that all of this is now clouded by the enormous challenges confronting the European Union and its Member States today, 25 years after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. The economic and financial crisis, wars and conflicts in our neighbourhood, appalling terrorist attacks, the arrival of refugees, Brexit and the future of the transatlantic partnership – all this and more requires a strong and united Europe. But what we are now experiencing in this situation is a Union shaken by crises and doubts. Conflicting interests are emerging more clearly, the limits of solidarity are becoming visible, nationalist and populist forces are gaining ground, anti-rational thinking is in fashion, and there are so-called alternative facts and suchlike. Our cohesion and our common values are clearly being called into question by many people, not only in Europe, but also in other parts of the world.

And in view of this, I do not want to speak about the details of the Maastricht Treaty either this afternoon. In these times of

uncertainty, my priority is something else. Ultimately, the crucial question is how those who hold political responsibility can inspire confidence in the European Union once again. And what can we, the people who believe in Europe, do together to breathe new life into the European project, which met with such enthusiasm during the watershed of 1989 to 1990?

For years now, we have been experiencing something in Europe that we did not imagine 20 or 30 years ago. There is something like alienation between the political elites and large parts of the public – between those who discuss and debate politics, watch programmes about politics on television and read articles about politics in the newspaper and those who do not talk much or at all about politics, but at the same time are also members of the electorate. The first signs of this development emerged as early as the start of the 1990s when the Maastricht Treaty was supposed to be ratified in the Member States. In many countries, and for many different reasons, people harboured doubts and fears about the project at the time. In my country, too, in Germany, the consensus in society on European policy slowly began to disintegrate after decades of being a hallmark of West Germany. Then the Danes initially rejected the Treaty in a referendum, thus expressing most clearly what could be felt in many European countries, namely, that the public had reservations about what the governments had agreed. Many people had the impression that the executive powers had pushed ahead with integration behind their backs and that what was now being put to them actually went too far to their minds.

The history of the Maastricht Treaty and further integration steps shows that on the path to ever closer union, the political elites sometimes made decisions that some parts of the public were not able to accept and other parts were not willing to accept. Today, in the greatest crisis of confidence facing the European project since its foundation, we can now see even more clearly that the European Union cannot be shaped unilaterally by the elites. The united Europe cannot be established against the will of the people, but only with their support.

This means that one of the most important tasks of governments is to constantly inform the public about decisions made at European level. It is important that politicians explain European plans in clear and accessible language, without creating exaggerated expectations. But it is also important that the governments of Member States do not play a double game by agreeing to decisions in Brussels that they then sometimes criticise or, worse still, counteract at national level. Only the populists benefit from such conduct in the end because it hands anti-European arguments to them on a plate. Furthermore, we must not overload the European Union. Things that can be dealt with better at national level should be dealt with there. We are aware of the old principle of subsidiarity, and we should think about how we can make

even greater use of this principle, which is enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty.

All of this is essential, but it will not be enough to put an end to the crisis of confidence, as the doubts and fears occupying the minds of many people in Europe today are more deeply rooted.

Now, in the age of globalisation, we live in a world where we have ever greater scope for action. We have known this for a long time, but we do not all experience it in the same way. Freedom has opened many doors for those who know how to deal with it, particularly those who are well educated, speak foreign languages, and are able and willing to cross borders. The cosmopolitan elites, citizens of the world like you here in this room, are among the beneficiaries of this development. All of us and many of those around us benefit from this development. That is a good thing. However, there are also groups of people – and not only in Europe – who take a sceptical view of globalisation and the rapid speed of change because they do not benefit or are actually adversely affected. These people are experiencing a deterioration in their social position or an increasing feeling of alienation in their environment. Faced with greater scope for action, they long for a place where they feel at home.

I am certain that this railing against globalisation is a reason why people criticise or even reject the European Union, as these people fear any form of erosion of borders. Luuk van Middelaar, a historian and philosopher from the Netherlands, once summed it up well when he said that some people see the Union as "an ally of globalisation with its flows of goods and people", not as a bastion against its occasionally negative consequences. Many people see the European Union as a geographical space, but not as a place where they can feel they belong. And as a result, some long for a retreat to the nation state and are susceptible to the siren call of isolationism. Some people are more willing to punish the elites than they are to engage in debates on the actual issues, let alone to develop sustainable projects for the future. And at times, fear and uncertainty even turn into xenophobia.

The need to belong is fundamentally human. Describing it across the board as reactionary is too short-sighted. We need to realise that a simple desire to feel at home, to feel a sense of belonging, is often behind euroscepticism. People need a home. They want to belong somewhere. For a long time, many people in my country, especially intellectuals, found it difficult to accept this view. It is thus all the more important that we now say one can still feel at home and find a home in our united, open and diverse Europe, where home is found by those who seek a place to put down roots. Let us also use this fact to promote the European Union!

Along with our own region, which shaped us, the nation is, and will remain, an important source of identity. After the betrayal of all

civilised values that was National Socialism, many Germans, including myself, had difficulties admitting this to themselves. As an inhuman and aggressive form of nationalism had led Europe and large parts of the world to catastrophe, the German nation state was regarded *per se* as morally discredited. Some people therefore wanted European integration as a means of overcoming this nation state, which was regarded as destructive, once and for all. The word "post-national", which first appeared in Germany in the 1970s, reflected this longing.

But regardless of how justified the criticism of exaggerated nationalism was and how self-evident the idea of overcoming the nation state may have appeared to some, the aim of close cooperation between countries and close union among the peoples of Europe is not to erase national identities. And although some may have wished for a different outcome, even the great step of deeper cooperation, as agreed in Maastricht 25 years ago, did not create a post-national, but rather a supra-national alliance. The reason for this is both simple and profound – a united Europe cannot grow in opposition to the nation states, but only with their consent and in agreement with them.

Different cultures, experiences and traditions continue to have a home under the roof of the European Union. Our Europe remains an ensemble of different identities, but a common feeling of unity can grow out of the ground of regional and national identities. We know all that. We can be Limburgers and Netherlanders, Bavarians and Germans – and at the same time feel that we are all Europeans. This is possible – it is how we live. We often only become aware of the fact that Europe offers us a common intellectual home once we move in other cultural spheres and look at our continent from the outside or when we meet people from other cultural spheres in our continent, as is the case every day here in Maastricht.

The people of Europe are all children of the same cultural heritage – of antiquity, the Reformation and Enlightenment, the Renaissance and humanism, and the republican ideas of the revolutions of 1789 and 1848. They are also children of the historic integration project following the Second World War and the East and Central Europeans' liberation movement of 1989 and 1990. The latter – the movement towards Europe in 1989 and 1990 – resembled a renewal of vows to the values of democracy and a necessarily delayed expression of commitment to the united Europe, which you in the West had been working on for so long, by the people of Eastern Europe who had been kept outside it by force until then.

In view of the crisis of confidence in Europe, we cannot continue the project of European integration simply by stubbornly declaring "just try and stop us!" However, I must admit that I naturally much prefer this "just try and stop us" attitude to sticking our heads in the sand and fleeing from the populists. There is no doubt about that.

Nevertheless, I would like to advocate another approach. When I took office, I still saw "ever closer union" as the indubitable goal. But now it is no longer a matter of simply bringing the European Union Member States ever closer together, but rather of preventing the Union from drifting apart, as the fact that this is possible has been shown most blatantly to date in Brexit. In other words, we should remember that those who want to preserve the Union must also look out for new ways of working together. They should perhaps also factor in the idea that the European movement needs a creative break. One can still keep one's sights on the goal. But what is done in haste is not always done in the right way. And thus my thoughts are not those of a eurosceptic, but rather of someone who is passionate about Europe. In view of the different feelings among Europeans' different lifeworlds, however, I ask myself if we, who love Europe so much that we accelerated the agendas, are in fact particularly well advised if we prioritise further acceleration over a creative break at this time and – let's say – to prioritise it over a creative deceleration of the implementation of the European integration project.

A self-critical look also shows that responsible politicians at European and national level are not completely flawless. They were not flawless in the past – and one can assume that they will not be flawless in the future either. Allow me to remind you of just one example – the EU Member States agreed on budget deficit rules, but some governments were not in a position to adhere to them. And perhaps we stuck to the Dublin Regulation for too long, although we were aware of its shortcomings. In this way, some problems were dragged out. The same goes for our monetary union. Is it now stable enough? Well, there is still some work to be done. Then we developed rescue mechanisms, and this was a good thing. It was completely right of policymakers to do so. But the scope of such mechanisms was often not explained sufficiently to the public. There are shortcomings as regards communication. And these can quickly turn into an aggressive attitude of opposition and intransigence. The problem of different rates of development in Europe, for example in prosperity, various social standards and change in mentalities, also remains unsolved. And the more it seemed that the European Union was out of its depth or took advantage of some countries, while it was of benefit to others, the more influence was gained by populists, who fundamentally oppose the apparently opaque and complicated regulations.

As a result, the European project is now facing opposition – and not only from the inside, but also from the outside. And in this situation of opposition, we have gathered here today and are celebrating. We will continue celebrating Europe, but we note these tendencies and we respond to them. For quite some time now, we have been experiencing something we had not seen before, namely attempts to destabilise the Union, for example through cyber-attacks,

fake news and support for eurosceptic governments and parties within the European Union, for example on the part of Russia. In recent times, we have also been hearing some people in the United States, which was and is so important for freedom in Europe, express a wish for further countries to leave the European Union after the United Kingdom. All we can say is that we do not share this wish!

Yes, I think the European Union is at a parting of the ways. Perhaps it really is in crisis. But what direction should it now take? For example, should it return to a system of nation states, with each country jostling for its economic, political and security position on the continent and in the world? We had all that in Europe for centuries. And should these states then start competing with their neighbours again and look for new allies abroad, thus increasing tensions on the continent? The main reason why I take such a critical view of this desire for renationalisation found among some people in Europe – thank God by a minority – is that it does not have a truly innovative concept for the future. This desire points to a path backwards, although Europe's political past could set us straight on that course. So no, that is not what we want. What do we want then?

We stand by our decision to confirm, indeed to renew the European project, in a way that seems sensible and necessary today, to leave behind the superfluous regulations on minor details and instead focus on more resolute cooperation in the fields that no nation state in Europe can manage on its own either through its political importance or geographical location.

There are good old reasons, indeed there are also new reasons, for European cooperation. In view of the fact that only a continental player can prevail on the global market in the age of digital technology and rapid technological change, we need to move somewhat closer together. And we also need to move closer together in view of the ongoing pressure of migration, as well as international terrorism and an unstable world order with new wars on our doorstep.

Sometimes a shock is needed to open people's eyes. A shock can have a healing effect. And it seems to me that the pressure created by the new circumstances is activating the European Union. And if that is not already the case, then let us promise ourselves today that we will ensure it happens. When we see what is happening in some countries as a result of new nationalist and authoritarian appeal and the uncertainty that has arisen in our transatlantic partner under its new president, then we know what we as citizens have to defend in Europe. We know what principles remain binding for us if we want to preserve democracy and peace on this continent.

We must now argue passionately once again – and not merely out of a sense of duty – for what we had long believed we could already take for granted, that is, for representative democracy, the

rule of law, the separation of powers and universal human rights. We want to keep everything that was achieved through great endeavours in the past, something that is an integral part of democracy – the idea that no power is above the law and that power is bound to law.

The time has come for European countries and in particular for Germany, which for many years took their lead from the United States, to become more self-confident and autonomous. We have a special responsibility to stabilise the international order. We are rightfully discussing how Europe can increase its defence capabilities because we must not abandon the values on which the European project is based. However, we also need to look for intelligent solutions that do justice both to the differences in the European Union and to the new challenges.

European democracy and the European Union do not need timidity or escapism, but rather hard work and untiring efforts on our part. In particular, I would like to encourage the young generation – Generation Maastricht – gathered here in this city today. Let us look across the Channel to the United Kingdom, where the vast majority of 18 to 34-year-olds was in favour of their country remaining in the European Union. But far fewer younger people voted in the referendum than older people. I would therefore like to appeal to all young Europeans, not only you here in this room, to get involved in politics. Do not hand your future to others. Now in particular, I urge you to foster the idea of a united Europe and to play an active role in the debate on what sort of Europe we want to live in. After all, not only your future, but also that of your children and grandchildren, is at stake here.

Part of this debate also involves stating clearly that Europe, like all democratic politics, is a project on which we must constantly work. Perhaps things will not always move forward in a linear process as regards the European Union of the future either. But we need to think about the European Union of the more distant future. Allow me to quote Cees Nooteboom, the great Netherlands author. He once wrote: "As long as someone does not do something himself, his life will be determined by the people and things that appear in it." So let us make Europe a project of ours once again, a project of the people. The European Union, which was so profoundly shaped here in Maastricht, is worth our getting involved in its fate.

In conclusion, let us dare to look at the past once again. It was 70 years ago when Winston Churchill, one of the most outstanding figures of the time, gave a speech at another European university in which he called on his contemporaries to "let Europe arise". And our answer to him today from Maastricht is that we are giving Europe a future.