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**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
during his first official visit to France  
Paris, 30 March 2017**

Mr President,

I remember well our first encounter. That first meeting in Berlin was not between two heads of state, but between two opposition party leaders. To be honest, I must add that you were about to win an election, whereas I still had two difficult years ahead of me as a member of the opposition.

Back then, in the midst of the euro debt crisis, you were in Germany to deliver your first major speech in our country. You made a passionate case for Europe – at the very same congress at which former Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt delivered his last major speech, in which he also made a passionate case for Europe.

We have met often since then – in a European context and at international gatherings, but most often in Berlin and in Paris. Yet no meeting is more ingrained in my memory than that of 13 November 2015: The day was actually intended to pay tribute to the many Frenchmen and women who had shown untiring commitment during the response efforts in the aftermath of the Germanwings plane crash in the Alps. We were sitting next to each other in the Stade de France with those volunteers on the evening of 13 November, looking forward to a friendly match between our two national football teams.

After only half an hour, the evening took a dramatic turn. We both received initial reports about a terrorist attack right outside the stadium. By the minute, there was more and more horrendous news about what was happening near the stadium and at other locations in Paris. Shocked and appalled, we eventually got a clearer picture of the absolute barbarisms that had occurred. Maybe, dear François Hollande, it was more than just a coincidence that Germany was able to stand shoulder to shoulder with France on that fateful day.

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Today, it is of course not a coincidence that my first official trip abroad as Federal President has taken me to France, Germany's closest partner. It is a visit in turbulent times and a decisive moment for the European project. We have come to a fork in the road. For the first time in the history of the European Union, a country yesterday gave notification of its intention to leave the Union. In many member states, purveyors of populism are claiming that the root cause of all misfortune lies in Brussels. Fascination with authoritarianism, nourished by a desire for simple answers in a complicated world, has taken a deep hold on Europe.

It is at times like these in particular that we should tirelessly remind everyone of the lessons of European history.

One hundred years ago, France and Germany were at war. In March 1917, German troops withdrew to a fortified front and destroyed the territory they had left behind. For one and a half more years, this horrific Grande Guerre would drag on.

Sixty years ago, on 25 March 1957, France, Germany and other European states signed the Treaties of Rome, thereby laying the foundation for the European Union. It is only through this act – and thanks to Franco-German reconciliation – that lasting peace in Europe became possible.

Today, we are the ones who must jointly open a new chapter of European integration. Yes, the EU can be changed. But it remains indispensable – because it guarantees the peace, freedom and prosperity of our peoples, and because, if our countries are to retain their global clout and seat at the table, Europe must stay united.

Franco-German friendship, too, is indispensable. We must not neglect nurturing and developing it. As a precondition, we must be curious about one another, and we must know each other well. That is why I am very pleased that France will be the guest of honour at this year's Frankfurter Buchmesse. Everyone knows that Paris has always held a large attraction for German writers. Already for Goethe, Paris was "a cosmopolitan city, [...] where every step on a bridge or square recalls a glorious past, and where at every street corner a fragment of history has taken place."

There probably is no other city in the world where so much thought has been given to the body politic and to democracy as here in Paris. France's contribution to the enforcement of human rights, and to the development and spread of democracy, has shaped our world, as well as France's image in the world. In 2017, its contribution in this regard is more important than it has been in a long time. For this reason, too, France's neighbours and partners are most eagerly watching – and pinning their European hopes on – the upcoming presidential elections.

Monsieur le Président,

malgré ce départ, j'espère que nous conserverons les liens d'amitié noués au fil de ces dernières années!

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would now like to ask you to raise your glasses and join me in a toast to President Hollande, to the French people and to Franco-German cooperation and friendship!