



# BUNDESPRÄSIDENTIALAMT

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**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
Address in a formal sitting of the European Parliament  
in Strasbourg/France  
on 4 April 2017**

It is a pleasure and an honour for me to be with you today – in this forum of free speech and open debate.

I see clouds on the horizon, however. It is heartbreaking to speak at this plenary session shortly after a member state has set the ball rolling for its exit from the European Union. You will adopt a position on this matter here tomorrow.

I find this to be sobering – and not only as a politician, but, first and foremost, as a citizen of Europe.

You should know that I am roughly the same age as the European Union.

When I was born, in 1956, the wounds inflicted in the course of the war unleashed by Hitler's Germany were still to be seen in our cities throughout Europe. The wounds inflicted in our neighbours' hearts were far greater still. And yet it was they – then of all times – who offered my country the hand of peace and, together – sixty years ago in Rome – laid the foundations of the "new Europe".

When I started school, young people were symbolically sawing away at the barriers on European borders. Their message was this: we want more Europe! What we have achieved is not enough! The customs barriers within Europe were dismantled in 1968, and the long lines of lorries at border crossings became a thing of the past.

When I started university, Europe's attraction was already so powerful that people in the south of Europe – in Greece, Portugal and Spain – not only swept aside dictatorships, but struck out on the path to freedom and democracy in a united Europe.

In 1989 – when I was in the process of finishing up my doctoral thesis – the Berlin Wall fell. It was toppled by courageous citizens in Eastern Europe who had won freedom and democracy by peaceful

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means. It was they who made not only the unity of my country, but also the reunification of Europe, possible.

All of this and much more besides is evoked by the proclamation contained in the Declaration of Rome that "We have united for the better!". This is the great legacy that the mothers and fathers of Europe have entrusted us with and upon which our children will depend. We must not let go of this precious legacy and turn it over to Europe's opponents. We must preserve, nurture and improve upon this legacy – this is our historic task!

When I look back on the sixty-odd years of my life and the same period of time in the history of the European Union, then my perspective is informed by the growth, evolution and success of the new Europe – the path from coming to grips with the economy of scarcity in post-war Europe to becoming a beacon of hope for a more just and peaceful world.

Some people – and I was among them – thought that what had been achieved was guaranteed for all time.

However, I have witnessed Europe's trials and tribulations during my career – the crises, contradictions and setbacks. I have come to learn that my belief, a belief shared by many of my generation, that the path of European integration was irreversible was a fallacy. No, Europe's future is not set in stone – it was never so, and this was something we knew before Brexit.

Allow me to think back to the year 2005. I had just been appointed as my country's Foreign Minister when the dream that was a European constitution was shattered. I clearly remember how disappointed we were at the time. However, I recall just as well how we – many of us in this room today – got back on our feet and did what Europe can do particularly well: we gathered ourselves and carried on. We picked up the telephone, listened to each other, sat around the negotiating table night after night – and forged, bit by bit, the Treaty of Lisbon.

What I want to say is this: Europe has never been a walk in the park. Europe is a complicated, a demanding project. But all the effort is worth it. We have an obligation and every right to stand up to the naysayers. Cooperation, growing prosperity and, above all, seventy years of peace – this is Europe's promise to its citizens. But this promise has, at no time in its history, been kept by itself. It was only kept when European reason, and not small-minded national interests, informed the actions of its stakeholders. This is the benchmark – and this is what we must live up to!

This is why I have come to speak to you today. I cannot think of a better place to give my first speech as Federal President outside Germany than here – in this Parliament. In times of growing forces of

disintegration and of strident prophets of doom, I want to take a stand for Europe. As a citizen, I wish to reaffirm, along with many citizens right now, that, yes, I want Europe! And, as Federal President, I can safely say that, yes, the overwhelming majority of the German people want Europe! We do not want to return to the bad old days of the past, but to continue along the common path towards a better European future!

In saying yes to Europe, we must not gloss things over or live in fear of contradictions. Those who say yes to Europe also say yes to a complicated and demanding, to an unfinished, Europe!

Such complicated political solutions, such a laborious process – is anyone out there more keenly aware of that than you here at the European Parliament? This is where not only competing interests, but also different cultures, languages and traditions meet. While Europe's diversity is an adventure, it is also strenuous.

However, what we need especially in Europe today is for us not to become entrenched in echo chambers. We must not only bewail the divisions that have opened up in Europe or go off in a nationalist huff, but must work earnestly on all sides to find ways to bridge these divisions.

Part of this – and this has always been a premise of Europe – is the assumption that others could be right. Europe was founded on the assumption that others could be right. Europe's successes have always been compromises. Europe's successes were brought about through a laborious but peaceful balancing of interests.

This is what this Parliament stands for. This is what you stand for in 28 countries. Who would want to become a parliamentarian without the willingness to convince others and, at the same time, the willingness to allow oneself to be convinced – without a passion for the complicated and for the trials and tribulations of democracy! Everyone in this room who has this passion – particularly now in these difficult times – has my greatest respect and support.

There are enough other forces out there who stand ready with extremely simple answers – with the strong arm of power and with clear-cut hostile stereotypes. A new fascination with authoritarianism is abroad – not only far to the west and east of Europe's borders, but also, unfortunately, here at the heart of Europe. Populists paint the world in black and white and exploit fears for their own political ends.

I am not one to dabble in alarmism. This Parliament can withstand arguments, indeed it needs them. However, those who decry democratic institutions and parliaments as a waste of time and who declare the willingness to compromise to be a weakness and, above all, who no longer care about the difference between facts and lies – are

interfering with the very foundations of democracy and must be given the benefit of our decisive and common objection as democrats!

The world that we live in has become less secure and more bewildering. This is giving many people cause for concern for the future – the fear of losing control. They become susceptible to the siren songs of those who say this: “Let’s go back and hide behind the familiar ways of our nation! Close the borders, batten the hatches – this is the only way for us to regain our sovereignty!”

However, it is not only naive, but also irresponsible to lead people to believe that dangers such as terrorism or climate change, which know no borders, can be banished with walls and barriers. It is irresponsible, in a world that is becoming more complicated, to lead people to believe that the answers are becoming simpler. It is wrong to say that a European country can make its voice better heard or can better assert its economic interests in this world on its own and without the EU.

On the contrary, if we don’t make Europe a full-fledged global player, then we’ll all become the playthings of other powers. That is presumably what Michael Heseltine, a British citizen of all people, meant when he said recently in an interview that Brexit is “the biggest sacrifice of British sovereignty” he can remember. His prediction may turn out to be right.

“Take back control” – it’s a strong slogan. However, I will venture to say that nationalists won’t deliver on it. This will only happen, if at all, through our collective effort!

If we avoid the temptation to oversimplify;

if, instead of shifting responsibility to Brussels, we jointly assume responsibility;

if we strengthen the internal market and, at the same time, protect and support those who in recent years have borne the brunt of globalisation;

if we focus our efforts on innovation and creativity, so that Europe actively shapes, instead of being on the receiving end of, change – only then can we dry up support for the populists and instead proclaim: We are not handing over sovereignty to Europe. It’s quite the opposite. Only by acting together are we stronger, and do we have more clout in the world!

This crisis is our opportunity to finally see Europe for what it is. We can strip away illusion and false optimism, to instead see all of Europe’s strengths and weaknesses. It forces us to answer the question: what kind of European Union – and how much European Union – do we want? The Commission’s White Paper has laid out our options. It’s not yet the solution, but it does make one thing clear:

permanent deadlock in the European Union would be the worst feasible outcome!

If we want to jointly make progress, then everyone cannot in the end get everything they want – the problems we face are too complex, and our expectations diverge too much.

Yes, we want a stronger Europe and more European solutions. But we also want to provide leeway to those member states that are not yet able or willing to take further steps towards integration.

Yes, we want to show solidarity for member states that are suffering the consequences of financial and economic crises, and that must initiate difficult reforms. However, European solidarity can only support, and cannot take the place of, national efforts.

Yes, we want to help people who are fleeing war and persecution. However, because our collective resources are limited, we must decide how, and to what extent, each member state has to share this responsibility.

Yes, we want the European Union to have strong internal cohesion. However, we also know that Europe is bigger than the European Union, and if we do not engage with our neighbours to the east and to the south, there will be no sustainable, peaceful order on this continent.

Not a single one of these problems is simple. We must also not ignore people's worries. But we must remember that those who built Europe grappled with much greater problems. They managed to substitute the negotiating table for the battlefield, and they engaged in peaceful balancing of interests instead of confrontation. They were prudent, and they were guided by reason. In today's world, which is full of uncertainty, we cannot afford to be any less prudent. The questions we need to address are plain as day – we have a full plate of problems before us. What we're missing is the courage, and at times the willingness, to find a European solution. We need to change that!

Interests get balanced through argument and debate. That's what we do in Europe – we debate – and that doesn't mean we lack cohesion. I, too, for more than 25 years was part of the European political debate – quite often, in fact – and I've engaged directly with some of you in such exchanges.

However, when we in Europe argue, we do so on a firm normative foundation. Many questions may be complicated, but we must keep our sights set firmly on our most fundamental and important principles: freedom and democracy, the rule of law and human rights are not negotiable. These principles are enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, and all member states are under an obligation to respect them. It's at the very core of what Europe stands for. It's what the rest of the world sees in us, and what

many may even be envious of. If we are proud of this fact, and if we want to bear a torch for the rule of law and human rights in the world, then we cannot remain silent if these core values come under attack in the heart of our Union. Europe must raise its voice if civil society, and even academic freedom – as is happening now at Central European University in Budapest – are being asphyxiated.

The role of my country, too, is again and again the subject of controversy. Some call on Germany to assume more leadership in Europe. Others warn of German dominance. And the newly elected president of our closest ally recently said the EU is nothing more than a “vehicle for Germany”.

At the very least, this is a misunderstanding! Europe’s strength cannot be built on the leadership of individual member states, but must be based on collective responsibility. Of course, Germany, as the largest and most populous member state, has a special responsibility. We know what we’re capable of – and we know there are limits to what we can do. And we will not forget that others in Europe may be right when we argue, in search of solutions. We know what we owe to Europe. A united Europe is the successful answer to our historical and geographic situation – both for us and for our neighbours. We also sense that a strong Europe is not only in our interest, but has become part of our identity.

You should therefore know that we Germans want to maintain cohesion of the European Union. We want to help build Europe’s common future, together with our partners, large and small, with equal rights and equal obligations.

Ultimately, however, beyond all national ethos, there is another motivating factor, one that may be far more important. Not for everyone, but for almost all people in Germany, the European project is close to their hearts.

That’s why I’ve told you my personal story about Europe. And that is why, over the last few weeks, many people, especially young Germans, have told me their stories about Europe. These young people are sick and tired of having only the nitpickers’ voices heard on the subject of Europe. They do not want their hopes and futures stolen away by populists, or lost to lethargy. That’s why they took to the streets, to show that Europe’s lifeblood is found not only here in this parliament, but also on the streets and in public spaces!

Even if members of our generation will not use the term: for many of our children and grandchildren, Europe has long been a “second fatherland”. These young people learned long ago that there is no contradiction between loving one’s fatherland and at the same time being a good European. And I think the young people are right!

Last year, I took a private trip with my family to Breslau (now Wrocław). I wanted to explore the city where my mother was born. My image of it had mostly been shaped by my mother's dark memories. She had told me about her experiences: war and destruction, fleeing west with her mother, aunt and sisters – seven women altogether. Rampant nationalism, and what it left in its wake, had cast a shadow over her life and had also shaped what I knew of this place. However, last year, in 2016, we visited a different city. A city that shone with the splendour of a European Capital of Culture, hosting lively discussions and music in all of its squares. Where young people from Vilnius, Wuppertal and Verona gathered to celebrate their shared Europe.

There was no faint-heartedness. In its streets, the dream of a European future came to life!

It is now up to us to make sure that the European dream will not come to an end during the next generation.

That's the message that I bring from my country: Yes, we want Europe! We want to build a better Europe, and we want to be a European Germany!