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page 1 to 3

**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a dinner hosted by President Prokopios Pavlopoulos on
the occasion of the Federal President's first official visit to
the Hellenic Republic
in Athens
on 7 April 2017**

After my trips to Paris and to the European Parliament in Strasbourg, my third official visit as Federal President takes me to this proud city, which is also the cradle of European democracy.

The historical significance of Athens alone would justify being here, considering that democrats are facing difficult times these days. But of course there are very specific reasons for my trip, and a key one is to nurture and deepen the relations between Greece and Germany. In addition – and this is something I'm very much looking forward to – we will be jointly opening documenta 14. This is the first time it will be equally split between two locations, and its beautiful motto – both here and in Kassel – is "Learning from Athens". Culture, after all, is uniquely suited to reveal the different perspectives that we ourselves and others have on, and that shape our view of, the world. documenta is such a forum for altered perspectives and for the controversies this generates. It is outside politicians' comfort zone, to be sure – but that's what makes it valuable!

Controversy, and the courage to engage in it, is what we need these days, when democracy is being challenged in so many places in the world – also in Greece's immediate vicinity. In its history, Greece, like Germany, has had the painful experience that democracy can be lost.

The coup through which the Greek military seized power occurred precisely fifty years ago, in 1967. Many of the Greek women and men who then fled their country ended up seeking and finding refuge in

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Germany. Some enrolled in the University of Giessen, where I later also would study. You were one of them, Minister Kotzias. While living in Germany, you took part in the resistance movement against the military junta in your home country. Who knows, maybe the two of us – a young German and a young Greek, both of whom would one day become Foreign Ministers – already passed each other in the hallways of our university or in the narrow streets of the old town in Giessen. We would only actually meet decades later, as each other's counterparts. But we did immediately realise that we shared a similar past, and this helped us in our work.

In the end, Nikos Kotzias and other opponents of the regime – as well as Konstantin Simitis, who would later become Prime Minister and also spent time in Giessen – were able to return home. After seven dark years of dictatorship, Greece returned to the path of democracy – and in 1981 it joined the European Union. You, Mr President, helped lead your country down this path from the beginning. The principles that guided you and everyone else involved in these efforts were summed up by Konstantinos Karamanlis: "Greece belongs to the West!"

Today, Greece is experiencing difficulties of another kind. For many here, their lives have been heavily impacted by the euro crisis. As if this were not enough, your country is also bearing great burdens in connection with the refugee crisis. And we, the rest of us in Europe, are not only grateful to you for this – we owe you support and solidarity.

That brings me to a third important reason why I am visiting you so soon after taking up office: I want to send a signal. A signal that, for us Germans, Greece is part of our common European house. And that I neither can nor wish to imagine a European Union without Greece. We want the EU 27 to remain together, in solidarity – despite all the difficulties and differences of opinion we may face.

In Germany and Greece, it seems to me, all sorts of stereotypes have been invoked in recent years. The relationship between Germany and Greece is successful and beneficial when it is characterised not by suspicion, but by trust, and when it is dominated not by accusations, but by openness and willingness to learn from one another.

Greece and Germany continue to enjoy close relations, also thanks to the values and convictions of open and democratic societies. To this day, every society ought to heed the words of Pericles:

"Know that the secret to happiness is freedom ... and the secret to freedom is courage."

Yes, we need the courage to stand up for democracy! This advice, which a godfather of democracy gave us right in this very place, is still relevant two-and-a-half thousand years later. As

indispensable as democracy is, it was never a given, and it must not be taken for granted. Who knows this better than we Germans and Greeks. So we must act in accordance with our convictions!

I would now like to ask you to raise your glasses and join me in a toast to President Pavlopoulos, to the Greek people and to the friendship between our countries!