



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a reception for fellows of the Alexander von Humboldt
Foundation
at Schloss Bellevue
on 29 June 2017**

Alexander von Humboldt had a very close, but also rather turbulent, relationship with Berlin. As a bright, but not particularly brilliant pupil, young Alexander initially had just one aim in life – to escape the monotony of “Boredom Castle”, as he nicknamed his childhood home. He left the backwater of Berlin for the vibrant city of Paris, which was the international hub for artists and scientists at the time. And he had no desire whatsoever to ever leave Paris again, apart from for his extended research trips, of course. At any rate, he wrote the following to his brother Wilhelm: “Just make sure I never have to see the spires of Berlin again!” That was the past.

In contrast, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and Berlin enjoy long-standing and very close relations. Before giving this reception today, I looked back in our files and saw that the Foundation’s fellows and research award winners were hosted by the Federal President for the first time – naturally, that was in Bonn – in the year I was born. It is an honour for me to now have the privilege of continuing this tradition with you. And when I see the many cheerful faces in front of me and think about the conversations I have already had the pleasure of having with some of you somewhere in the world and will hopefully have with others here over the course of the morning, I welcome this lively atmosphere and am certain that we would be able to persuade even Alexander von Humboldt that Berlin is not so dull and old-fashioned after all. Schloss Bellevue can certainly not be described as Boredom Castle. It is not boring today or indeed on any other day, so I would like to bid you all a very warm welcome to Schlosspark Bellevue!

Alexander von Humboldt was not a fan of the ivory tower. On the contrary, he enjoyed company and needed constant discussion with other people the way he needed air to breathe. Over the course of his

life, he wrote over 30,000 letters to people from all over the world. It is said that even when he was seriously ill, he almost had to be physically restrained from writing more letters, so great and unquenchable was his thirst for knowledge.

And he was not motivated by a craving for superficial entertainment, but rather by a never-ending need for knowledge. His goal was to merge knowledge into a whole, or as he would have put it, into a cosmos. And more than almost anyone else, he understood that this goal can be achieved faster by sharing knowledge with others and sharing in their knowledge in return. As the Humboldt researcher Ottmar Ette once put it, knowledge is thus a dynamic process in a community rather than the static possession of any one person.

When I look around the Schlosspark, I think this spirit is alive here today. Time and again, Humboldt fellows whom I have met around the world have told me – and my dear Professor Schwarz, you too constantly underline this – that knowledge thrives on exchange with the wider world. And that is why I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, Professor Schwarz, and the entire Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for making this exchange possible and, most importantly, highly successful, through your hard work and unwavering commitment. Thank you very much.

We are meeting today at a special period of time – a time full of contradictions and new uncertainties, particularly as regards the stance towards science and the relationship with it. On the one hand, our world is clearly becoming more complex. The need for knowledge and scientific solutions is growing as a result – that is one side of the coin. But the other side is that the rejection of knowledge and reason and the disparagement of advice from experts is becoming increasingly loud and abrasive. “This country has had enough of experts” – that sentence wasn’t said by just anyone, but rather by a member of the Government of the United Kingdom, a country we actually know as a birthplace of the European spirit, intelligent debates and above all, outstanding universities.

And it is not only the reputation of science or the validity of scientific methods and findings that have been discredited, for example as regards climate protection. There are countries, including some in Europe – when I think of the fate of the Central European University in Budapest – where the foundation of science is under threat. This foundation was defined as follows over 200 years ago by the second von Humboldt brother, Wilhelm, who was born 250 years ago: “Freedom is the primary and essential maxim for education and science.”

Last week, I met a courageous Humboldt fellow who has been deprived of this freedom. Hilal Alkan comes from Turkey. Through her research, she got involved in social issues, demonstrated the courage

of her convictions and showed solidarity with her fellow Kurds. As a result, she lost her academic career in Turkey. But she did not allow herself to become downhearted – and now she is researching as a Humboldt fellow at the University of Potsdam. I mention this example, and at the same time I am aware that unfortunately there are many such cases. With the Philipp Schwartz Initiative, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation has created a safe haven for persecuted and endangered academics. Professor Schwarz, I recall the first talks about this and, like you, I am happy that these talks ultimately led to the creation of this safe haven and did not merely remain an idea. Very much in the spirit of Alexander von Humboldt, this initiative sends a message that transcends the research field because it says something about the prerequisites for research and about freedom and democracy. And I would like to thank you for that!

I imagine that all of you here know these or similar stories and I ask you to tell these stories because they are the best argument against those who despise reason. Have a look around this park. Quite a few people here can tell you a thing or two about what education can achieve – be it for one person's life or for an entire society. Quite a few people here are committed to science. Quite a few people here want to uphold reason as a political category. In my opinion, this majority in society cannot allow the political discourse to degenerate into barbarism or the willingness to compromise, listen and discuss things objectively, and ultimately the validity of the better argument, to disappear in public or digital space. This poses a real threat to our democracy, the threat that social discourse will collapse and that we will increasingly find ourselves talking at cross purposes. I know that there are very lively discussions on this topic, particularly at universities in other countries, in your countries, not least in the United States. I would be pleased if you, as international researchers, also took part in this debate here in Germany, at German universities and other research institutes, because we need this discussion. In the same way that universities demand support from policymakers and society, society expects universities to speak up loudly and clearly. Yes, universities are places for research and teaching, but all those who work there are more than merely teachers or researchers – they are also citizens of their country. That is why we need you to get involved in society. Where the atmosphere in society becomes heated, we need universities to be a breath of fresh air.

My dear fellows and research award winners, during your stay, you have the opportunity to make use of the freedom that the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation has given you here in Germany. You are a great asset for our country. And the same goes for your families who have accompanied you to Germany and here to the park at Schloss Bellevue today.

Wherever academics are under pressure in the world, you should know that you are welcome here – as excellent researchers, critical thinkers and people. As Federal President, I want to assure you and your fellow academics all over the world that this country, which has a truly difficult history, when I think about the 20th century, is now a haven of reason and a partner for all those who demand freedom of thought and speech worldwide, the freedom that underpins and expresses our human dignity.

Once again, a warm welcome to you all!