



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a dinner hosted by the President of the Republic of
Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid
in Tallinn/Estonia
on 22 August 2017**

I am delighted to be in Tallinn once again. It is – and this is something I feel from the wonderfully cordial reception you have given me – a visit among friends!

I have been here many times before. As Germany's Foreign Minister, I visited the Baltic states more frequently than any other region of the world. However, today is the first time that I stand before you as the President of my country.

For anyone who is not so familiar with the ins and outs of the German political system, allow me briefly to explain what my new office is about. The Federal President is not only the German head of state, signing laws, representing the country around the world, appointing ministers and accrediting ambassadors, but here in Estonia, in the country with a strong choral tradition and singing festivals, I would like to emphasise that the Federal President is also the patron of the German Music Council and awards the Zelter-Plakette for efforts to cultivate choral music and folk song.

Not to worry though – I do not intend to sing my speech at you.

Rather than sing, I would like to tell you about an old German folk song that I hold most dear: "Freiheit, die ich meine", or "Freedom that I mean". It is a wistful song, and unfortunately its verses resonate all too well in our age in which freedom is being restricted and democracy is coming under pressure in many regions of the world, also in our immediate neighbourhood.

"Freedom that I mean," is how the song goes, "that fills my heart; do you not like to show yourself to the hard-pressed world? Do you lead your dance only among the stars?"

Those who have doubts about freedom should look to Estonia! It was here that freedom showed itself and blazed a trail. No date stands as clearly for this as 23 August, which is tomorrow. The date marks the low point that was the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939. It stands for war and occupation and for the courageous act of self-liberation that was the Baltic Chain fifty years later. Freedom blazed a trail in Estonia. And it took firm root here – in your country’s constitution and the rule of law, as well as in its membership of NATO and, above all, the European Union.

In an interview with the German magazine DER SPIEGEL in 1999, President Lennart Meri said that “Europe’s strength” lay in the “sum of different mentalities and creativities. In the EU, small states can also feel that they are accepted as equals”.

I intend to make this point even more forcefully today, because Estonia is playing a leading role in the European Union in the second half of this year. The EU is not only intended to convey a feeling of equality, but the inverse is also the case: equality in action is no less than vital to the survival of the EU itself. At a time when populism and nationalism threaten the cohesion of the Union and when the transatlantic alliance is facing a difficult test – what we need are small countries such as Estonia, whose love of freedom and sense of responsibility are unwavering.

This attitude – the passion of the overwhelming majority of Estonians for the European cause and your tangible willingness to take responsibility for Europe’s cohesion – is on display right now in Estonia’s Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Permit me to thank you for this commitment. I would like to raise my glass to President Kaljulaid, to the Republic of Estonia, to the German-Estonian friendship and to the European Union – may the freedom that we mean dwell within it!