



## **Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier at a luncheon with Albanian President Ilir Meta at Schloss Bellevue on 26 September 2017**

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you here today on your first official visit to Schloss Bellevue in Berlin.

As I said at our press conference just now, Albania is, without a doubt, one of our closest partners among the countries of the Western Balkans. When we – following the military honours – proceeded to the cameras and the children in the audience, I told you that they were some of the children of the approximately 50,000 Albanians living in Germany. That fact alone is a reflection of our close relationship.

And yet, your visit has made us face quite unique challenges. We have had to compete with Albania's trademark hospitality, which I myself have also enjoyed and which you bestow upon both friends and strangers alike. I wish to emphasise this point because we, as Germans, find Albania's reputation for its hospitality particularly moving. Historically, you had the courage to protect your guests even when they were defenceless and had been abandoned to their fate in other parts of Europe.

I am referring here to the occupation of Albania by Nazi Germany and its allies. I know that Albanians steadfastly refused at that time to surrender the Jews in the country to deportation and therefore to certain death. When reading up on Albanian history, I was especially moved by the fact that this protection was not only granted to the Jewish citizens of Albania, but also to the many other Jews in search of temporary refuge in your country. And so I can say that hardly any other nation is able to boast a culture of hospitality with such deep historical roots.

I am delighted that the fates of our countries are linked under much happier circumstances today. At our press conference just now, I called to mind Albania's mediating role, which is needed throughout the region. This mediating role is a testament to the fact that we Germans perceive Albania to be an anchor of stability in the region –

one that is urgently needed in order to step up cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans significantly in the years to come.

Today, we talked about the resurgence of nationalism in politics – also in light of the election result in Germany on Sunday. This issue is now making itself felt in election results in Germany, too. It has long been an issue in the countries of the Western Balkans. Particularly where new nationalism hampers the integration of the entire region, specific countries and actors are called upon to oppose this. Actors and countries which emphasise the things that unite people rather than the things which drive them apart. Actors and countries which endeavour, step by step, to overcome the sources of division. The role scripted for Albania that is bound up with your friends' and supporters' great expectations – expectations that are, to your mind, perhaps too great at times.

By the same token, allow me to assure you that we will be glad to continue to support your expectations regarding your constant and steady progress towards the European Union with the prospect of accession. We discussed this issue in our talks behind closed doors, and I told you that I had seen with my own eyes how difficult this process of drawing closer to the EU can be in Albania for reasons relating to domestic policy. You have long wrangled over the decisive steps to be taken in the area of judicial reform. The issue was at the top of the agenda of my latest visit to Albania. I am delighted that an agreement has been reached with the opposition and that the path to judicial reform lies open once again.

Many things have happened in your country since my last visit to Albania. Elections have been held, for instance – elections that have handed the Prime Minister and his Government an even greater majority. This can be interpreted as an encouraging sign for continuing down the path of reform. I am pleased that we both agree that the issue of foreign – also German – investment is contingent upon whether the path of reform continues to be pursued successfully.

I am not just talking about the expectations that Europe has of Albania, however. Europe must also have expectations of itself. Having talked about the situation in Eastern Europe, in Hungary and Poland, at our meeting, I believe that Europe would be well advised not only to harbour expectations of others, but, above all, to overcome the current European crisis.

We now have an opportunity to discuss all of these matters over lunch. But before we talk to each other, let us raise our glasses – to you, Mr President, to the friendship between our two peoples, and to our common future in Europe.