



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the ceremony to  
mark the Day of German Unity  
Mainz, 3 October 2017**

"I do not pine for the past at all  
For worries left behind  
Germany, Germany is reunited  
But I, I am still torn."

Today, we celebrate the Day of German Unity – as we do every year. We have good reason to celebrate the 3 October, the day when East and West Germany again became one.

Yet, this year, something is different. Not only Wolf Biermann, whom I just quoted, but many others as well feel doubt, worry and insecurity when they look at internal cohesion in our country. That's one aspect we should focus on today. It's an undercurrent that can clearly be felt this year.

However, I see something else, too, right before me in this room. Young people, pupils from 16 Länder, to whom I want to extend a very warm welcome.

"The Day of German Unity?" you may ask. "Why is it only once per year – isn't every day a day of German unity?" 365 days a year, for the last 27 years. For you, that's how it's always been. There's now an entire young, optimistic generation that was born in reunited Germany and calls it home.

You, young people, are the future of this country. We, your parents and grandparents, have a duty to pass down to you what was accomplished 27 years ago: a unified, free and peaceful Germany. No matter what emotions we feel today, whether it be joy or inner conflict, disappointment or hope, it behoves us to pass down to our children a unified Germany, a free and democratic Germany, a Germany that can look to the future not with fear, but with confidence.

Young people, you are right. Every day is a day of German unity. We are today celebrating something that, although it may appear ordinary, should by no means be taken for granted. Those of you who were born after German reunification can't know what it was like. You should ask those who do.

Ask our guests from Eastern Europe. Especially these days you should talk to people from Poland and Hungary, whose great desire to live in freedom and democracy weakened the Communist bloc and put the first cracks in the Berlin Wall. Ask the East Germans who brought the Wall down – not with hatred or violence, but through peaceful protest and by showing tremendous courage. Ask the statesmen or, more likely, google the Western and Eastern statesmen who expressed confidence that a unified Germany would be a peaceful Germany. This year in particular, look to the statesman and German European who was born and raised right here in Rhineland-Palatinate and who seized the historic opportunity to make German reunification politically possible. I am of course referring to Helmut Kohl, who died three months ago.

This is the Germany that you were born into. It is a Germany that has truly come a long way, from the unfettered nationalism that brought war and devastation on Europe to a divided nation during the Cold War and finally to a strong, democratic country in the heart of Europe. Our path must remain one of peace and friendship with our European neighbours. We must never fall back into nationalism!

Every day is a day of German unity. But do we feel this unity every day? How often, in our daily lives, do we actually sense that we are part of an 80-million-strong community?

For many, that may have been the case nine days ago, on 24 September. The right to participate in free and fair elections unites us. We feel this every time we line up with our neighbours at polling stations, waiting to cast our ballot. On 24 September, a record number of people exercised their sovereign right to vote compared to both previous general elections. That's the good news.

I say so because, that same evening, many of us felt our internal cohesion crumble. Small and large cracks appeared throughout this country. I don't subscribe to the negative views that have been expressed during the past nine days. But I do think that, even while we celebrate a national holiday, we must not act as if nothing happened, saying "let's chalk that one up to experience and get back to business as usual!" We must not say that this outcome concerns only the parties, parliamentary groups and coalition talks. Certainly, they have the most responsible task right now. But a signal was sent to all of us – and we, we Germans, are called on to respond.

We must start by asking ourselves: Whom do we mean by “we Germans”? This day, this 3 October, we can say that yes, German unity has become an everyday political fact. The great wall that once separated our country is gone. However, on 24 September, it became clear that other walls have gone up. Less visible ones, without barbed wire or a death strip. But they are walls, and they keep “us” from standing united as a people.

I mean the walls that run between the worlds we live in. They separate rural and urban communities, those on both sides of the digital divide, the poor and the rich, the old and the young. These walls isolate us, so that we hardly notice one another any more.

I mean the walls that create echo chambers on the internet, where voices are growing louder and more aggressive. Despite all the loud talking, we’re barely communicating, because we hardly listen to the same news reports, read the same newspapers or watch the same television broadcasts any more.

And I mean the walls that arise due to alienation, disappointment and anger – feelings that have grown so entrenched in some of us that we are becoming unreceptive to arguments. Behind these walls, deep mistrust is stirred up, mistrust of democracy and its elected representatives, the so-called establishment, which some believe to include everyone except those in the self-proclaimed anti-establishment movement.

Please do not misunderstand me. Not everyone who has lost faith is an enemy of democracy. But democracy is weakened in the process. That is precisely why, on 3 October, we must not remain silent about 24 September.

Of course, this means engaging in controversial discussions. Differences are part of who we are. We are a multifaceted country. What we have to ensure, however, is that our differences do not give rise to enmity or irreconcilable rifts.

The task of politics in our day and age is to make sure that enmity does not take hold, and that irreconcilable rifts do not become part of the political landscape. No place is more important for this task than our parliament. This year, the 3 October falls into a transitional period. The old Bundestag has adjourned, and the new one has not yet formed. One thing, however, is certain. The German Bundestag that was elected nine days ago will be different. It reflects the sharper contrasts and the dissatisfaction that exist in our society. The debates will be more harsh, and our political culture will change.

To those members of parliament who are present here today, you can now render a great service to democracy. You can prove that democrats have better solutions than do those who deride democracy. You can prove that anger is ultimately no substitute for taking on

responsibility. You can prove that, although breaking a taboo may get you on the next talk show, it will not solve a single problem. I firmly believe you will prove that rational arguments will serve us much better than angry tirades.

Arguments, not outrage, are what we truly need when addressing the issue that has shaken our country more than any other over the past two years – refugees and migration. On no other issue do people have such staunchly different views – even within families and around the dinner table. What is considered by some to be a categorical “humanitarian imperative” is criticised by others as a supposed “betrayal of one’s own people”. I fear that, as long as this remains a moral battle between two diametrically opposite views, we will not do justice to the actual task at hand. What we must do is to square the situation in the real world with what our country can actually do.

We must never be indifferent to the plight of others. On the contrary, we must do even more to promote peace and to alleviate the suffering of people in large parts of Africa. Our Basic Law guarantees the right of asylum to persons persecuted on political grounds. It does so for good reasons. This stands against a historical background in Germany that we all recall. However, we will only be able to continue granting political asylum in the future by again properly distinguishing between those fleeing political persecution and those escaping economic hardship.

We must be honest in two respects. First, even though political and economic migration are caused by difficult human circumstances, they are not the same. They do not give the same unconditional entitlement to protection by our constitution. Second, we must be honest about what kind of immigration we want, how much we want, and maybe also how much we need. In my view, this means not simply wishing away migration, but – apart from the issues of asylum and joint European efforts – defining what constitutes legal migration to Germany, so that it can be controlled and managed as we see fit. Only if we are fully honest with ourselves in both respects will we overcome the polarisation in the debate. I am certain that, if our political system takes on this task, we can break down the walls of enmity that have risen up in our country over this issue. And that’s something we truly need.

The debate over refugees and migration has roiled Germany. But it is a consequence of, and points to, the disorganised state of the world. There have been so many upheavals and international crises and conflicts in recent years. As a result, I’ve heard many citizens say, “I simply don’t understand the world any more.” And to be honest, I know where this is coming from.

But this year, after assuming my new office, I heard another thing as well, namely, "I simply don't understand my country any more." Now this statement I find much more troubling.

After the G20 demonstrations, I met with owners of shops in the Schanzenviertel district in Hamburg, who said, "We saw with our own eyes how ordinary bystanders became onlookers and looters."

In Bitterfeld, a woman told me, "I'd actually gone to the political rally to hear a speech. But then fellow citizens, my own neighbours, showed up who began to shout and were so full of hatred that they really scared me."

In Stuttgart, I met with an auto worker, who incidentally is the son of Turkish guest workers. He said, "For years, I was proud to be working in Germany's showcase industry. Now everyone asks me if I was in on the cheating."

More than once, I've heard in eastern Germany that "My company is bankrupt, and my village is deserted. It's good that you're looking out for Europe – but who's looking out for us?"

These are not things we like to hear on a national holiday. But, when someone says, "I feel like a stranger in my own country," then we can't simply respond, "Well, you see, times have changed." If someone says, "I simply don't understand my country any more," then we've got work to do in Germany. And I mean more than the work that creates good growth rates and feeds economic indicators.

Because everyone wants to understand and be understood. That's what everyone needs to live a self-determined life.

Understanding and being understood – it's what makes a country feel like home.

I am convinced those who want to feel at home are not stuck in the past. On the contrary, the more dizzying the pace of the world gets, the more we long for home. A place that I know well, where I have my bearings and where I can rely on my personal judgement. With rapid change all around, this has gotten so much harder for many to find.

We must not let those who construe home in terms of "us against them" have a monopoly on the longing for home. They cling to idiotic blood-and-soil ideologies and fantasise about an ideal German past that has never existed in that form. The longing for home – for safety, for things to slow down, for community and, above all, for acknowledgement is something we simply cannot allow to become a nationalist prerogative.

I believe that what we call home is all about the future – not about the past. Home is a place that we as a society must first create. Home is a place where "we" takes on meaning. A democratic society

needs, and Germany needs, a place like this. A place that connects us by bridging all of the walls that we build in our lives.

During my travels through Germany, I've been delighted to discover that, where there's a sense of home, there are many stories to be told. In Sönke Wortmann's new movie *Sommerfest*, a sentimental film about the Ruhr region, a Bochum native says in his dialect, "Listen ... ya got stories lying all over the street here – all ya gotta do is pick'em up."

I think that's where we should begin. Let's not simply ignore each other, but instead pick up these stories of ours. We need to pop the social bubbles each of us finds ourselves in, shaking our head after 24 September, where all we do is talk about, but in the end don't engage with, one another. We need to learn to truly listen to one another again, we need to learn where we're from, where we want to go, and what's important to us.

When someone from eastern Germany talks about how his home country in the GDR changed radically after Germany's political upheaval of 1989 – when they speak about how this new-found freedom was not only something they longed for, but something that also imposed high demands, and when they say that many things they would have liked to hold on to were lost during the transition – then this, too, is part of our German storybook. Creating a unified Germany was a tremendous task. Of course, mistakes were made in the years after 1990. There's no reason to sweep them under the carpet. After reunification, people in eastern Germany experienced upheaval in ways that my generation in the West could only imagine. Still, these stories from eastern Germany never became an integral part of who "we" are, like those that are told in the West. I think it's time for them to become just that.

The courageous lawyer and author Seyran Ateş recently explained to me, "Every time I see the Bosphorus in Istanbul, I feel my heart jump for joy. And every time I return to Berlin, I feel the same joy in my heart when I see the TV tower." This story communicates a simple yet important truth: We can have multiple homes. It's possible for a person to feel at home in more than one place, and to find a new home. The Federal Republic has already become a new home for millions of people. All of them have become part of who "we" are. Entire generations of immigrants today proudly proclaim that "Germany is my home" – and they've enriched our society.

This should make us confident that we can master the major integration challenges that lie ahead. However, we also say that home is an open concept – but not without boundaries.

This means that those who arrive in our midst must first learn to speak our language. Without that, they will neither understand nor be

understood. But there's more to it than that. Those who are looking to make Germany their home are entering a society that is built on the order that was established by our Basic Law and based on shared values: the rule of law, respect for our constitution, and equal rights for men and women. All this is not only the law of the land, it is absolutely essential if we are to live together well in Germany. Therefore, it is non-negotiable.

And, finally, despite all the debates, and all the different opinions, there's one thing that's not negotiable in this German democracy. I mean that we all must show commitment to our history, a history that for young generations brings with it not personal blame, but enduring responsibility. The lessons of two World Wars, the lessons of the Holocaust, the full rejection of all nationalist thinking, racism and anti-Semitism, as well as assuming responsibility for the security of Israel – all this is part of being German.

Therefore, becoming German means acknowledging and accepting our history. I say this also to those who have come to us from Eastern Europe, Africa and Muslim-majority regions in the Middle East. Anyone who seeks to make Germany home cannot say, "That's your history, not mine."

But how can we expect immigrants to make this commitment if it is called into doubt in the midst of our democracy? Assuming responsibility for our history is always a work in progress. Let me add that this applies in particular to Members of the German Bundestag.

Being part of this country means sharing its great benefits *and* its unique historical responsibility. To me, that's part and parcel of enlightened German patriotism. If there is one thing that we Germans are known for, then it's that we are committed to the drawn-out, tedious and even painful process of coming to grips with our past and the special perspective we have on those dark shadows that belong to Germany just as much as the many bright aspects. Others genuinely respect us for this, and we can be proud of that.

Too often, after the general election, I read that many people feel disappointed about Germany, about democracy and democratic institutions. But when you think about it, those who feel disappointed about the Federal Republic quite obviously expect it to deliver something.

I am firmly convinced that we can expect a great deal from this country. It's a country that has overcome many a crisis. Its political system does not shun unanswered questions, but rather takes its future into its own hands. If this becomes our policy-making motto, then we will preserve the Germany that the overwhelming majority of Germans want – a democratic country, a globally-minded and European country, and a country that sticks together.

That's what must – and will – endure! Because it's not the know-it-alls and naysayers who define our country, nor is it those who are constantly outraged and vent their anger at everything and everyone on a daily basis.

No, what fills me with confidence is seeing the many millions in our country who roll up their sleeves every day and set about getting things accomplished and building a sense of community.

Those people who of their own free will look after sick neighbours, read to the elderly in nursing homes and help refugees get settled here. Those who may give a single mum or dad an afternoon off or enrich the culture of our country by participating in one of its countless associations. Those who make life in their village worth living, and those who in the evening after work volunteer for their local council, keeping libraries and swimming pools running. Those who accompany the dying during their last hours of life. In short, all those who care about more than just themselves.

They are the ones who keep our country together – by defying all the naysayers. They are the ones who sow the seeds of German Unity – every single day.