



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
to the Government of the Swiss Confederation
in Berne, Switzerland
on 25 April 2018**

Let me tell you: these are two very special days for my wife and me! Like so many Germans, I have been to Switzerland quite often, and have always enjoyed it. However, today is the first time I have visited as Federal President, and I would like to start by expressing my deepest gratitude for the warm reception you have accorded my wife and me.

If I were asked to sum up the political core of my visit in one sentence, it would be this:

“Throughout the world it has become precarious to take democracy for granted”.

That is a clever comment. It comes not from me, but from Thomas Mann, who was looking back at democracy in the Weimar Republic. But do not we today also feel “that democracy is not an assured possession, that it has enemies, that it is threatened from within and from without”? Do we not sense that different models – whether in China, Russia or elsewhere – are becoming more and more assertive on the world stage? And do we not feel that great irritation is spreading even within our democratic societies, and that some people, including in Europe, may be preaching democracy but in truth are inflaming the mood through marginalisation and authoritarian siren songs?

If we agree that Thomas Mann’s analysis is still so topical, then I would also like to repeat his appeal from back then: namely that “the time has come for democracy to take stock of itself, [...], for its renewal in thought and feeling”. My wish is that our self-contemplation as democrats, the self-confidence of our democracies in a world of new challenges – alongside all the close personal, economic and political ties – will renew the bond between Switzerland and Germany in particular.

And, if I may add one more thing, then my wish holds not just for our two countries, but for all the states of Europe. I am well aware that Switzerland has never found the European Union or the combination of the individual with the shared entirely unproblematic.

But, no matter how complex Europe may be, no matter how cumbersome the process of coordination – you here in Switzerland are familiar with that – ultimately we are all linked by a deeper bond which is our heritage and which must remain our standard. And it is this: the realisation that without democracy, Europe has no shining future. Without democracy, Europe has no core and no credibility in a world where it is us, the Europeans, who are standing up again and again for the rule of law and human rights, for international law, for a global order with rules that apply to businesses as well as to states and governments.

I would like to see the EU Member States and Switzerland side by side in this endeavour. And in this context to my mind Switzerland belongs at the heart of Europe – not just geographically.

There is another reason why I recalled Thomas Mann. I am thinking of the attitudes of a German who, while undoubtedly a gifted writer, was most definitely not a born democrat. This great German not only found a haven and a home here in Switzerland at a time when his own country was neither; it was also here in Switzerland that, later in life, he was converted, becoming a democrat of reason. Tomorrow, Alain, we will be visiting his grave by Lake Zürich. And a month from now, I will have the honour of officially opening the centre for intellectuals driven out of Nazi Germany, Thomas Mann's house in California.

What I have said about Thomas Mann's life applies equally to my country as a whole. We Germans truly did not inherit democracy. Democracy was something we achieved after the most terrible aberrations; it was made possible by the Allied Powers, and it was consolidated in our partnership and growing friendship with other strong democracies. One of those was most certainly Switzerland. And that is why we Germans would never dream of claiming to be omniscient or to have ready solutions to everything. Rather, we always come ready to learn. And I, too, have come to Switzerland as a curious President of Germany, seeking to learn, and conscious that Switzerland succeeded in becoming a republic and introducing parliamentarianism in 1848, when Prussia and Hapsburg were still failing to overcome the tension between nationhood and democracy.

And there is a great deal to learn on this trip. After all, democracy's ability to assert itself is decided not by fancy speeches, but by how we solve the pressing tasks facing our two countries: booming cities where rents are rocketing, contrasting with rural areas which are becoming more and more deserted, losing their young

people; migration and the integration of migrants on the labour market and in schools; and the spread of digital technology, which of course offers many opportunities, but also needs rules so that it does not exacerbate the growing polarisation in our societies.

For my biggest worry is that if society drifts apart, if the tone becomes ever harsher, particularly on the internet, if those of differing persuasions regard themselves as enemies rather than just opponents, then we are losing something that is vital for the survival of democracy – namely the willingness to let reason prevail.

This is something that all those who are opening the doors for all forms of irrationality in the fight against the alleged power of political correctness are completely forgetting.

Goodness knows reason is not the be all and end all in politics. But it is the only way to compromise, to balance differing interests. And democracy is impossible without a willingness to compromise.

You probably saw that compromises have become more difficult in Germany, too. It took longer than ever before for three parties to agree on the formation of a government.

So I am filled with even more respect when I see – and after all the Federal Council is sitting directly in front of me – how the readiness to reach understanding and the need to compromise are, as it were, “built in” to the Swiss political system.

Of course, your constitution is unique, and there are good reasons why there are differences between us, for example as regards the balance between direct democratic and parliamentary elements.

But one thing remains the same, in every democracy: democracy is dependent on the people nurturing it.

Just recently, we saw how many people in Switzerland care about and are committed to democracy – in the amazing level of participation in the public broadcasting initiative. And when I was still Germany’s Foreign Minister, I saw them for myself all over the world, in the United Nations, the OSCE and countless NGOs, even in the most dangerous crisis regions: courageous Swiss women and men, shouldering responsibility, taking off the blinkers and looking beyond their borders.

Switzerland boasts an especially high number of such people. That is a tremendous gift for your country and a stroke of good fortune for the world.

Today I would like to extend special greetings to all these people, people who think about more than just themselves. With people like you around, I am not fearful for democracy.