



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
to students at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy
in Kyiv, Ukraine,
on 29 May 2018**

I am delighted to be back here at your university after my first visit in 2006. That is twelve years ago, which is a comparatively short period of time in the long history of your university – the oldest university in Ukraine, as I discovered during my first visit. It is therefore a place where knowledge and experience come together in a splendid way, and for this reason alone a good place to enter into dialogue with one another.

That is precisely what I aim to try and do. I want to talk about the German Ukrainian partnership and share my thoughts with you on the future of Ukraine.

As Foreign Minister, a role that I held for eight years, I experienced – and I think I can say this – what were probably the most dramatic moments of my time in office just a few hundred metres away from here. The fate of your country, Ukraine, will stay with me for the rest of my life for that reason alone.

The Ukrainians risked a great deal back then, displaying courage and determination. And your courage impressed both me and the German people. When the protests were at risk of descending into violence, my counterparts from Poland and France, Radek Sikorski, Laurent Fabius, and myself agreed that we, as friends and fellow human beings, could not stand idly by.

I do not intend to stand here on this podium and recount what you all experienced yourselves. I will never forget 20 February 2014, the clouds of smoke from the burning barricades, the shots that rang out when we reached the Bankova – but above all I will never forget the over 100 people who had already lost their lives by that point, prior to our arrival. I paid tribute to those who died just a few hours ago on my arrival here in Kyiv.

Eventually, after more than 30 hours of negotiations, constantly going back and forth between the Maidan People's Union on the one hand and the office of the president on the other, a transitional agreement was signed. For us negotiators, this agreement promised that, after days and weeks of unrest, of clashes and shots and casualties, calm would return once again. However, this agreement was, as you all know, a short lived affair. Not long afterwards, the rock that we had just rolled up the mountain lay back down by our feet.

It is therefore all the more important not to allow what was achieved on the Maidan to fail. I want to try and explain what I mean by this.

A certain rebellious spirit, the willingness to resist the unreasonable, and the will to change are qualities that are probably considered to be virtues by most people. Politicians should be no strangers to these attributes.

Based on everything that I saw, heard and read, the protests on the Maidan in Kyiv in 2004 and in 2013/2014 had yet another quality, however. Civic spirit is perhaps the best way to describe this – the absolute determination to stick together, to stand up for an objective together and really to take the future into your own hands. Before our very eyes, a political sphere, a Maidan, if you will forgive my interpretation of this concept, emerged back then.

Without this politically guaranteed public sphere, freedom has no place in the world, Hannah Arendt once wrote. "We experience freedom only in our dealings with others, in relation to one another, i.e. only in the realm of the political. In reality, politics and freedom coincide," she stated. They are related to each other like two sides of the same matter.

Here in Ukraine, you have, in Ukraine's neighbourhood, made us witnesses of what Hannah Arendt describes. And neither I nor any of my fellow compatriots can remain indifferent to this. This is a chapter of European history, and one in which we, as Europeans, continue to be involved.

Europe's responsibility for Ukraine is, to my mind, about preventing the sphere that opened up back then from closing up once again, thus making political action more difficult in the process. Responsibility is about helping to ensure that this sphere can grow, and that it is translated into strong, independent and reliable institutions and into a constructive political culture.

This political sphere and Ukraine's political capacity to act must not be forfeited again – not as a result of pressure from without, and also not within as a result of an impatience that, while it is actually quite praiseworthy, has the potential to give way to disappointment,

cynicism and populism. This is – to my mind – both the Maidan’s mission and its legacy.

This is the reason why the European Union and the International Monetary Fund are making financial aid and cooperation contingent upon the fight against corruption. This is why we are resolutely committed to Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. And this is why we oppose the rise of an aggressive, us against them nationalism – wherever it manifests itself in Europe.

We encounter both far too often in Europe. Far too often. And Ukraine too is, of course, grappling with both of these phenomena, and both corruption and nationalism threaten, in different ways, what was achieved on the Maidan at such high cost.

We intend to do what we can to help strengthen Ukraine’s political ability to act and to expand its economic room for manoeuvre – both as Germans and also, wherever possible, with our European partners who are prepared to lend their support. We are doing this in the belief that we are not only helping Ukraine, but also the European Union, which is dependent upon strong and reliable partners in its neighbourhood. We are doing this in our own interests. But above all, we are doing this in Ukraine’s interests, and we hope that no one in Ukraine, and also no political party, thinks that they stand to benefit by blocking necessary reforms.

Our bilateral cooperation, cooperation between Germany and Ukraine, has become much more intensive and extensive since 2014. We have been able to draw on pre existing structures such as the German group of advisors to the Ukrainian Government. What is more, we very swiftly pooled Germany’s efforts back then in the form of a Ukraine Action Plan – an Action Plan that comprises both direct assistance and commitments for development cooperation to the tune of 500 million euros.

Each and every euro that supports the establishment of functioning and strong institutions – at both the national and regional level alike – is money that we believe is well spent. Following extensive preparations, the German-Ukrainian Chamber of Industry and Commerce finally commenced work in 2016. This has also helped to ensure that over one thousand German companies are now doing business in Ukraine. A third German-Ukrainian Business Forum, which will meet in Berlin next autumn, is proof of this growing interest. And we achieved a further big step together – likewise after long and difficult negotiations: you can travel to us without visas, we can get to know each other and learn each other’s language, and are currently celebrating the Year of the German and Ukrainian Languages, for example.

I believe that it is not far off the mark to say that German and European interest in Ukraine is still there; it is even growing and, with respect to the economy, so is the willingness to invest in your country. Substantial financial resources are available to this end. I have to rain on your parade a little, however, in view of reports that have come to my attention, which reveal that Ukraine did not use all of the financial resources provided by the European Union in the last period. We know that it is not always easy to meet the conditions that the EU sets for accessing funds. However, I believe there is good cause to do everything within one's power to take advantage of the help and expertise available from both the EU and in one's own country.

We do not underestimate – neither in Berlin nor in Brussels, nor in many other European capitals – the magnitude of the reform agenda that your country still faces. We know that transparency and efficiency are not merely ingredients of day to day politics. At the end of the day, and we have all experienced this in Europe, they are something like a key to the transformation of society, and this will apply just as much to Ukraine.

Moreover, we also know that the war in eastern Ukraine is making these mammoth reform efforts more difficult, even immensely more difficult.

When talking about Ukraine, it is impossible to fail to mention the annexation of Crimea and the war in the east of the country. Serhiy Zhadan writes that people in Ukraine cannot stop talking about the war. It is bitter, he writes, to see heroes following in each others' footsteps, to see how the fallen of the Donbas follow the heroes of the Maidan.

Yes, war is bitter, no matter where it is waged. It divides families and friends and destroys lives. And, above all, it strengthens a perception in many people's minds, namely the perception of Ukraine as a fragmented country where Russians and Ukrainians have struggled for supremacy since time immemorial.

Indeed, this conflict threatens an ancient, culturally vibrant region, which as far back as we can trace its history, has always been home to more than just two ethnic groups. It is a region whose history is so rich because it brought together so many cultures that inspired and supported one another. Virtually no other European country has absorbed as many influences as Ukraine. Greeks, Scythians, Khazars, Turks, Vikings, Mongols and Crimean Tatars have left their mark, while Russians, Belarusians, Hungarians, Bulgarians and Armenians have enriched this country. And, last but not least, Ukraine has been shaped by Jewish culture. There is no need to gloss over this history in order to see the richness of Ukraine in its ethnic diversity. And those who have discovered this richness should be at pains to preserve it.

Interactions between history and politics are difficult to define not only in Ukraine because history itself is contradictory and complex and, even on closer inspection, always remains complex. History shapes identity, also national identity, but it does not offer any justification for making a state a protective power over a population group in another country. Much less does it provide any grounds or indeed justification for invasions. I say this with the bitter experience of German history in mind, which had such a devastating impact in Ukraine and left so much suffering in its wake.

With this German history in mind, allow me also to say this: if we want to understand who we are, where we come from and who came before us, then we need a common culture of remembrance on the part of Ukrainians, Russians, Belarusians, Poles, Balts and Germans. We need this shared remembrance – if we define ourselves in contrast to one another in perpetuity, it will continue to be difficult to achieve and build a common, peaceful future. It is my hope that we will one day be able to reflect on the past together.

Overcoming the tragedy that the war in eastern Ukraine represents will require great efforts. But Serhiy Zhadan is right when he says that “we will only find a way out of this situation as a society if we work together”.

It will require as much strength again to stop this conflict from dominating the country’s fate in the long term. It must not be allowed to hold the country or its politicians hostage if Ukraine is to have a bright, European future. Reforms, as I have said, continue to be necessary, and standing in the way of these necessary reforms must not be perceived as an act of political heroism.

We want Ukraine to have a future in Europe. However, wherever the general interest is violated for the sake of personal advantage, wherever a nation purports to rise up above the other, this future is in jeopardy. This applies to us all. Law and the rule of law must not remain a promise, but must be translated into reality if the integrity of Ukraine is to be strengthened and its citizens’ trust in their state and its institutions is to grow. Lastly, the wounds that must heal need this protected and universally respected realm of which Hannah Arendt spoke.

The future of Ukraine will be decided first and foremost in Ukraine. Only its political and economic transformation and consolidation within will ultimately ensure its resilience to threats from without. And I promise you that whatever Germany can do to help we want to offer you as true friends – both today and also in the future.