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**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
on the occasion of the visit
by Miloš Zeman, President of the Czech Republic,
Schloss Bellevue,
21 September 2018**

I am delighted to have you with us during this special year for the Czech Republic. Allow me to offer you an especially warm welcome to Berlin!

In October 2018, the Czechs will be celebrating the centenary of the founding of the Czechoslovakian Republic.

In November, Germany will be commemorating the end of the First World War and the proclamation of the republic. Just a few hundred metres away from here, Philipp Scheidemann stood at the window of the western balcony in the Reichstag. There is an impressive photo of this moment: Scheidemann is holding onto the window frame with both hands. However, you get the impression that he has thrown the windows wide open to welcome the new age, the republic, democracy.

I know that, after many visits to Prague, this moment of freedom is, for the Czechs and Slovaks, very closely bound up with Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the founding father and first president of the Czechoslovakian Republic. According to his contemporary Thomas Mann – for whom I have the greatest respect – Masaryk was not only an extraordinary human being and statesman but, what is more, a tremendous asset for his country. It seems that no other politician of his time caught Mann's imagination more:

"May his like, no matter in what personal or national guise, be with us again here on Earth when a European confederation of states is looking for a head," Mann wrote about Masaryk. I am sure that we would both be happy with this choice.

For if I have understood rightly, you yourself Mr President are linked to Tomáš Masaryk by a special personal story. It is said that you were refused a place at university due to a presentation on the book

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"Talks with T. G. Masaryk" by Karel Čapek. It was just as inexpedient to mention Masaryk as it was to cite Čapek. By giving this presentation, you had thus committed two offences at once. Perhaps we will learn more about this during our luncheon.

It seems to me that there was no better or more true champion of democracy in Europe than Tomáš Masaryk at that time. He regarded it as more than a system of government. Nor, as Masaryk once told Karel Čapek, did he believe that it only subsisted on what was written in constitutions. Rather, he said, he was convinced that democracy was a way of life based on trust in people, in humanity and humankind. He added that it was a conversation among peers, and that the democratic ideal was therefore not only political, but also social and economic.

Europe has received fresh impetus from your country time and again. Fifty years ago, it hoped for socialism with a human face, mourned the violent end to the Prague Spring and admired the Velvet Revolution. Personally engaging in direct dialogue with your citizens has been especially important to you, Miloš Zeman, for many decades.

This gentle yet determined pursuit of politics with a human touch is the Czech legacy of the last century. We should work together to preserve it.

Fortunately, the Czech Republic and Germany are closer and enjoy more friendly relations than at any time previously in their history. As friends, we share responsibility for overcoming the long-running European crisis, for finding joint answers to unresolved issues and, above all, for sparing Europe another division into East and West.

Given our chequered history, our friendship certainly cannot be taken for granted. Let us join forces to ensure that this remains so. I would like to propose a toast to the health of President Miloš Zeman, to the friendship between our countries and, above all, the people in Czechia and Germany and their future in a free and democratic Europe!