BUNDESPRÄSIDIALAMT



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier upon receiving an honorary doctorate from the Faculty of Law of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in Athens, Greece, on 11 October 2018**

It is really something very special to receive an honorary doctorate here in Athens. We are all aware that the European university as we know it developed in the intellectual hubs of Paris, Oxford and Bologna in the Middle Ages, before first being radically reformed during the 19th century by Wilhelm von Humboldt and becoming an international role model in this form.

However, the roots of all academic education, teaching and searching for knowledge and truth ultimately lie in an idea that was born here in Athens and founded as an institution by Plato – in his Academy. The very word "academy", which has been used since then in numerous languages for so many outstanding educational institutes, shows how the notion of Plato's Academy continues to resonate to this day. Towards the end of my speech, I will return to this era. Although it was a long time ago, it continues to shape Europe.

First of all, however, let me leave you in no doubt about how very moved I am. In awarding me this academic title here in Athens, of all places, you are bestowing on me a great honour for which I am personally profoundly grateful.

However, this gesture today cannot only be intended for me personally. As President of the Federal Republic of Germany, I represent the country in which I was elected head of state. And thus I regard the honorary doctorate from the University of Athens both as an award intended for me in this office as President of the Federal Republic of Germany and as a gesture towards my country. That does not diminish my personal pleasure in this award – it doubles it!

It is no secret in this room, and elsewhere, that things have not always been easy between our two countries in recent years. The euro

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crisis and the ensuing negotiations and controversies left deep wounds and led to hard feelings. To a certain extent, old stereotypes were resurrected on both sides – stereotypes that we all believed had already been overcome. Both Greeks' image of the German people and vice versa became seriously distorted or tarnished.

In the meantime, much has improved. We have taken many steps towards one another and I have the feeling that we can now look each other amicably and openly in the eye and extend our hands sincerely to one another.

All Germans who are interested in Greek politics and culture and to whom Europe is important have been following with great empathy how you undertook and are continuing to undertake reforms here. We are well aware in Germany of the heavy burden many Greeks must bear and of the radical changes the reforms meant for everyone here in Greece.

The dimensions of this social transformation can only truly be perceived by those who live here every day. But in the meantime, we Germans have acquired some insight into the extent of these changes, even if this is only as tourists, many of whom frequently visit your country and naturally observe what is happening here during their visits. We can merely express our respect for the resolute will you are demonstrating as regards undertaking reforms and making progress. That is a great achievement, one that demands much from all of you. Naturally, you are primarily doing this for your own country, but as a result also for Europe as a whole. And Europe should recognise this clearly and unambiguously!

We Germans supported this path. And this support is not undermined in any way if, after intense and frequently tension-filled years, we now stop to ask ourselves self-critically whether our positions, speeches and manner did not sometimes appear overly cold or overly dogmatic. And of course, conversely certain words, gestures and accusations directed at Germany here in Greece proved hurtful to some people in Germany.

In the meantime, however, I think we have patched things up. To put it more elegantly, I would say that we have learned little by little from one another to work constructively together again, to trust the other side once more and to look to the future together with hope. Mr President, the fact that I now have the honour of visiting your country for the second time as Federal President, and indeed that I am here on a state visit this time, can certainly be seen as a sign of this friendly optimism. And I very much regard today's wonderful ceremony as a step on the path to a new and ever-closer friendship between our two countries. With that in mind, allow me to express my profound gratitude once again for this honour today.

Germans and Greeks have always had a great deal in common. I do not intend to recount the entire history of Germans’ enthusiasm for Ancient Greece. That story is told often enough on other similar occasions. But I would at least like to mention it. If one takes a close look, one sees that it rightfully remains a crucial part of the foundations on which our special relations are based. I for one am happy that Ancient Greek is till taught at German grammar schools and that young people can learn about the sources of European philosophy and culture in the original language.

Our good connections in the more recent past certainly include the countless relationships that have developed since tens of thousands of what were then known as “guest workers”, migrant workers, came to Germany from Greece from the early 1960s onwards. They got to know our country. Those who did not come to Germany themselves have relatives or friends there. As far as I am aware, almost every family in northern Greece in particular has some connection with Germany. This, too, forms part of the foundations of our relationship.

And no one should forget how during the time of the military dictatorship, many Greeks from the opposition or facing persecution fled to Germany, were welcomed there and later on often – by doing vocational training or a degree – created a basis for a future in a free and democratic Greece, as the country is today. As an example, I would like to mention just two people, whom I myself know – Kostas and Spiros Simitis. I mention these two because one of them returned to Greece, where he made a career in politics, while the other remained in Germany, where he pursued his political path and career. Dora Bakoyannis did not go directly to Germany. Her family lived in exile in Paris, but she moved to Germany at a later stage, more precisely to Munich, where she attended university. Later on, she was my counterpart when I served as Foreign Minister. And I even worked at the same university as Nikos Kotzias, current Foreign Minister of Greece.

That is a brief overview. Germany and Greece also share a tragic and terrible past, one that was forced on your country by Nazi Germany. The criminal and often inconceivably cruel occupation of Greece by German troops and the SS, particularly the deportation and annihilation of the Greek Jews, cannot and must not be forgotten. Tomorrow will mark the 74th anniversary of the troops’ withdrawal from Athens and the beginning of the end of this period of terror.

These barbaric acts were perpetrated by representatives of a people that is so very proud of its culture, and they were perpetrated against a people whose intellectual and cultural legacy the perpetrators claimed had profoundly influenced them. What an abyss of guilt and moral depravity!

No matter how disturbing and shameful these facts may be for us Germans, we must do our utmost to ensure that memory of this time is not repressed. We need to remember and to do so actively, not only for the sake of the past, but also for the future!

That was what my predecessor, Joachim Gauck, had in mind when he visited Lingiades on 7 March 2014. He was the first German head of state to ask for forgiveness for the crimes committed. He said: "What happened was a brutal crime. On behalf of Germany, and with shame and pain, I ask the families of those murdered for forgiveness. I bow before the victims of the monstrous crimes committed here and in many other places."

As his successor in the office of President of the Federal Republic of Germany, allow me to say today that we Germans will not forget our forefathers' crimes. And nor will we forget the special responsibility that we will continue to take on from the past in the present and the future.

The free, united and democratic Europe was ultimately the lesson from these experiences. Never again should there be war! Never again should there be dictatorship! Never again should the strong oppress the weak! Never again should there be repression and censorship! Never again should people be persecuted for their religious or political beliefs! These were the main motives for the foundation of the first European Community under the Treaties of Rome and they remain motives for enlarging and deepening the European Community to this day.

Europe was, and is, a promise we gave each other, one we never cease to give each other. Europe is the task to which we jointly commit ourselves time and again. And in my opinion, we should commit to it.

In the meantime, we see and hear movements in many European countries, even in some governments, which want to leave behind the democratic, social and just Europe based on the rule of law. Nationalist, authoritarian, xenophobic and even racist tones are unmistakeable. Some actors seem to have a strange desire to see Europe self-destruct. And that is not merely polemical talk on their part – there is a very real risk that relations between European countries and peoples will be poisoned.

I am glad that even during the contentious discussions on the euro and rescue, the vast majority of Greeks firmly supported and believed in the European Union and continue to do so. We Germans in particular are very grateful for this.

Europe is our future. But Europe can only be our future if we manage to counter these movements; if we manage to convince those who feel disappointed, discontented or sceptical that a good life is only possible for everyone in Europe through this united continent. And

naturally, that is not easy. But I ask you, particularly the young people sitting in front of and behind me, the students, those who will hold responsible positions in the future, to work with us to convince others of this, to persuade them through firm beliefs, hard facts, good arguments and, above all, to present a united front as European democrats.

Some people who have already heard many – too many – speeches about Europe and its health and ailments will perhaps have the critical reflex to ask what this "European spirit" really is. What is it that binds us together although our countries are so different, our situations so varied, and our interests so often conflicting?

Nobody in Athens will be surprised to hear that the convictions which forged the architecture of this united Europe did not appear out of the blue just yesterday, nor were they dreamed up in the universities last semester. They have evolved over thousands of years and have withstood the test and trials of numerous crises. They were fought for and disputed, they were trampled underfoot time and again, but were held to be so precious that we seek to preserve them. In other words, their roots go very deep.

If we set out to find these European roots, we will find some at least in two famous speeches given here in Athens. And given that I am speaking in Athens today, I will talk a little more about these speeches.

Since my honorary doctorate is being bestowed by the Faculty of Law, I trust that the learned jurists here in the hall will forgive the irony inherent in the fact that both these speeches relate – directly or indirectly – to judicial killings. Indeed, at the risk of overstating my case, I could say that European culture and the European spirit were inspired by these two judicial killings in Ancient Greece. What speeches, and what men, could I be referring to?

The first speech I am thinking of is Socrates' statement in his defence at his trial in 399 BC, as preserved in literary form in Plato's "Apology". Socrates was accused of not believing in the city's established gods and, the charges alleged, of corrupting the youth of Athens with his philosophising.

Many learned treatises about Socrates' trial and defence have been published in the two-and-a-half thousand years since then. I will not even attempt to compete with them. I only want to make the following remarks – as food for thought in today's historic situation.

Socrates was famously declared the wisest of all men by the Oracle of Delphi. However, he himself did not feel at all wise, but rather claimed that all he knew was that he knew nothing. Why do I say that? Because I believe that this is precisely how it became his philosophical quest to probe and doubt certainties and to question his

fellow citizens about what they knew and believed. The result of this questioning was frequently that the subject himself had to accept that what he had held to be true and proper did not stand up to close scrutiny. Socrates challenged his fellow citizens to doubt, to show willingness to revise their views, and to constantly examine their own judgements and convictions.

To use a colloquial phrase, people like Socrates often seem like a pain in the neck – or worse! – to others. Young people, however, tend to be more willing to take up new ideas – and that has not changed since Socrates' day. Such non-conformist individuals, who question customs and query absolute certainties, are essential in any society. If a society or state does not want to become intellectually impoverished, or collectively mired in misconceptions, it needs the prodding of a non-conformist.

In a democracy, it is the majority that decides. That is as it should be. This city of Athens was one of the cradles of democracy – and democracy is one of the most precious elements of our European heritage. Likewise part of European heritage are the ideas of individual dissent and opposition to the majority. Europe's heritage also includes an appreciation of individuality, respect for individual dignity and deference to individual conscience.

It is only possible for an individual to live in dignity, give voice to his doubts, and follow his conscience if he lives in freedom. Freedom must remain constitutive in Europe and must be resoundingly defended by us.

In his statement in his defence, Socrates underscored the need to follow his *daimonion*, his divine inner voice. And it is impressive, even today, how he faced his inevitable death without trepidation or fear, at least according to Plato, and even made a final ironic enquiry as to whom awaited the better fate – he who was to die, or those listening to him who would carry on living.

Such inner freedom of spirit can only be attained by each of us for ourselves alone. But the external freedom needed so that people may lead their lives as they believe to be right is something for which we all – not only politicians – bear political responsibility in our own communities.

The other address I referred to was Apostle Paul's sermon at the Areopagus, given a good 450 years after Socrates' death. Paul had travelled from Asia Minor to Europe and had arrived in Athens to proclaim the word of Jesus Christ here as well. The latter had been sentenced to death by crucifixion in Jerusalem.

Wherever he had stopped on his journey, Paul had normally first spread the word within Jewish communities. It was by building on their common background that Paul managed to explain the message of

Christ, reformist and revolutionary as it was, because it was in its origins a Jewish message.

Here in Athens, Paul was confronted with educated Gentiles – Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, whose outlook was informed by their classical education and belief in the Greek gods. They asked Paul what new doctrine he was propounding, and if he could possibly explain what it meant.

And what did Paul do to explain his strange, new message to these people from another culture? He picked up on issues of concern to others, to his interlocutors. He had seen an altar in Athens with the inscription: "To an Unknown God". Referring to that, he said: "What you worship but do not know – that is what I now proclaim." All people, he said, should "seek God, and, it might be, touch and find Him: though indeed He is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live and move, in Him we exist; as some of your own poets have said, 'We are also His offspring.'" In this way he built his argument on elements with which his audience was already very familiar from Greek philosophy.

In my opinion, Paul's Areopagus sermon has two semantic levels of relevance to our present situation. Firstly, it shows how it was possible for the message of a small Jewish movement to be infused with the great tradition of ancient philosophy. Only once its teachings had been subjected to philosophical reflection could Christianity develop its full impact. And only on this basis was the development of academic theology, which embraces constant enquiry and doubt, conceivable. And it is only that – the constant questioning and doubting embraced by a faith – which can save religion from totalitarian tendencies and prevent it from fuelling terrorist delusions.

The second meaning is this. Of course, Paul wanted to convert and convince other people of the things he held to be true. But his way of going about this task could in fact be said to have prepared the ground for what would much later be called interfaith or intercultural dialogue – something we need all the more now and will need to an even greater extent in the future. That is what I firmly believe. Such dialogue can only hope to succeed if you start off by picking up on things of importance to the people you are talking to, by referring to their beliefs, to things they have always considered plausible. Only then can you comprehensibly communicate your own beliefs and ideas. This is because we are only prepared to learn from people who are themselves willing to listen.

In our present times, where religious and cultural matters are so often driven by people who will not listen, by confrontation and aggressive dogmatism, it is at times like these that Paul's words at the Areopagus can serve as an important reminder that even if matters of

life and death, even the "last things" of Christian eschatology, are at stake, we can try to talk to each other civilly and calmly.

And last but not least – just in case any questions have not been resolved – the encounter at the Areopagus has a further lesson, namely that if a subject cannot be addressed today because it is too strange and disconcerting, then it should be left until tomorrow. When Paul spoke of the raising of the dead, a very strange concept for the Greeks, some scoffed and others said, with a slightly ironic undertone, but still peaceably: "We will hear you on this subject some other time."

Since their beginnings, the universities have provided a venue for such benevolent yet critical debate motivated by a desire to understand, and I consider myself fortunate to belong to this very special university from this day forward.

I am sincerely and profoundly grateful for this honour, and hope that the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens will remain a forum for critical reflection, a place where people take pleasure in education and knowledge and where human encounters continue. Such places help establish and preserve humane conditions for us all.

We are all called upon to establish – through our political actions, by means of vibrant relations between our peoples and countries, through solidarity in practice, by the creation and consolidation of just social orders – those humane conditions that ensure that the dignity and freedom of the individual actually remain guaranteed and that permit us to live together in the best traditions of our European heritage.

For the good of everyone here in Athens, Greece, Germany and Europe, that is my wish for you.

Thank you very much.