



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the 2018 German-Spanish Forum
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I have just met with the President of the Congress of Deputies to discuss why visits like this one are important. Now, I certainly think – at least that is what my many years in politics have taught me – that part of our job as politicians is to deal with crises. We must, of course, also address issues that arise in connection with difficult neighbours. However, in so doing, we sometimes forget to foster relations with partners that are functioning well and without any problems.

Why is that important? Because, in the end, if we want to solve European crises, we need to have effective working relationships with some partners that we can rely on. That is why I am pleased, Your Majesty, that we managed to make arrangements for today's events, and that there is so much time available for meetings and discussions. My talks with all of you today – with the Prime Minister, and with Deputies representing almost all parliamentary groups – once again impressively demonstrated the close relations that Germany and Spain basically enjoy.

Our views on all of the large issues are very similar. Yet, we have so far not unlocked the full potential of our bilateral relations. This is why I of course also view my official visit to Spain as a way to help provide fresh impetus to the long-standing relationship between our countries. I am very pleased that this is a joint effort.

Current developments in Europe do give us cause for concern. This was a common theme in all my talks today in Madrid. We face growing pressure from the outside, due to issues in our immediate neighbourhood, the unpredictable political policies of important allies, increasing polarisation within our own societies in most European member states, and maybe even a crisis of European solidarity. We are grappling with all of this right now. Taken together, these four challenges are maybe the reason why it is so hard for us right now to

maintain a common understanding regarding cohesion of the European Union on many of the key issues that we have discussed today.

However, in times of severe crisis, it often helps to step back for a broader view. For Spain, and for Germany, the European Union is intricately connected with the consolidation of our democracies. For the Federal Republic of Germany, following the betrayal of all civilised values that was National Socialism and the Holocaust, our return to the family of nations was made possible by cooperation in the European Economic Community and, more generally, by European cooperation. For Spain, the prospect of accession to, followed by membership in, the European Economic Community as of 1986 was a key factor that drove *transición democrática* – a decisive step, if I may say so, toward democracy after Franco. Despite our historical and geographic differences, it was in this European project that both our countries found their permanent seat at the table; their proper role, so to speak. They did this not by forfeiting their national identities, but by taking on an additional European identity.

We Germans deeply respect Spain's commitment to Europe. For Spain, the past few years have not been easy – but it has always maintained a full appreciation of the value of European integration. Its recent economic consolidation is impressive, and I know that many of your fellow citizens have had to make great sacrifices. However, even in difficult times you did not turn your back on Europe, but rather saw and sought your own future as lying in Europe.

Europe can learn a great deal from Spain, also for addressing the challenges presented by displacement and migration. It seems to me that your country has managed better than other EU member states to strike a proper balance between the obvious need to protect those who are fleeing political persecution, war and civil war, and the need to regulate, according to clear criteria, the immigration of those who are seeking a better life. This includes consistent protection of the EU's external border and pragmatic cooperation with the countries of North Africa. Only by making this clear distinction will we be able to find the right balance throughout Europe, – between the humanitarian responsibility to protect, the willingness to take people in, and the capacity of a society of immigration to admit migrants. In this regard, Spain is a few steps ahead of us.

We must also look to the future. And that's just what you have done, Your Majesty. Europe's prosperity is, after all, not built on natural resources, but rather on its ideas and innovative potential. If we look at what is driving the digital revolution, then Europe is in fact not at the cutting edge of these efforts. I myself strongly believe that the effects of the digital transformation should be viewed from both a social and an economic perspective. I am sceptical of those who wish to solely focus on the economic opportunities of innovation, while

others – that is, political actors – are left to deal with the social consequences. I believe this distribution of tasks simply will not work. We must instead take a comprehensive approach from the very beginning.

Acknowledging the necessity of smart regulation, we must of course also avoid Europe falling behind in the sphere of technology. Innovation, assessing consequences, economic momentum and responsible regulation – all these aspects must go hand in hand, rather than be addressed as a series of tasks with distinct objectives that need to be consistently recalibrated. Here, too, the wider context of European cooperation gives us greater sway when it comes to standing our ground and having our say in the global marketplace. In other words, even the larger EU countries will not be heard in the changing global arena with new, powerful actors if they do not fully harness the power of the European Union.

I am looking forward to tomorrow, because I of course know that innovation and modernisation are not limited to the large urban centres. If we are worried about growing polarisation and a loss of cohesion in our societies – and this is something we are witnessing as much in Germany and Spain as in other places – then we must not be indifferent to the future of so-called rural regions.

Currently, I am spending a lot of time travelling through Germany, including in remote, non-urban areas, where everyday life has not been entirely shaped by the digital transformation. It is in these regions – which often do not have a reliable internet connection, and where there is either no local doctor or people need to travel a long way to see one – that innovative ideas have a harder time taking hold than in the city. In these regions, some feel left behind, or that their life has nothing in common with the rapid pace of development in Berlin and Madrid. They may feel they are more victims of, than able to determine, their own fate.

This is where we must look for answers if we want to prevent further social polarisation. The answers are not easy to find. But I hope that through the cooperation of Germany and Spain we will have an easier time doing so than if each of us were to set out on our own. Naturally, politicians cannot formulate such answers on their own. I am certainly looking forward to heading to Extremadura tomorrow, as well as to Badajoz and Mérida, in rural Spain, where I can compare the experiences I have gathered in Germany with the ideas and developments that we will certainly discover tomorrow.

On both a large and small scale – in the European Union and in rural communities – we must make an effort to develop visions of the future, encouraging visions that can shape what is to come. There is the widespread – and dangerous, because it's misleading – nostalgic idea that solutions are to be found in the past. The only way to

effectively counter this nostalgia is with convincing ideas for the future. This is what Spain and Germany are called upon to do – precisely because, based on our own past, we know how precious a united Europe is. That, too, is why I am so grateful that you are hosting this forum, and that you have invited us to attend. I am confident that you will continue this work with the same commitment you've shown today.

Thank you very much.