



BUNDESPRÄSIDENTIALAMT

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**Opening statement by
Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the Federal President's coffee afternoon
Chemnitz, 1 November 2018**

Honoured guests, citizens of Chemnitz, I'd like to bid you a very warm welcome to my coffee afternoon!

Let me begin by thanking you, Ms Wolfram, for placing this venue at our disposal. I'd like to thank you all the more for your hospitality because I know how much the people of Chemnitz love and value this museum!

And let me also say a big thank you to the Mayor of Chemnitz, not only for welcoming me to your city but also for engaging in dialogue, a dialogue which you began quite some time ago, and for keeping it going, especially the discussion on difficult issues. You are thus following in the spirit of these coffee afternoons. However, I've been told that in your conversations there's no coffee or cake until the work has been done.

Honoured guests,

Why is the Federal President now sitting before you?

First of all, I want to say that I haven't come to talk about Chemnitz. Or about "the people of Chemnitz". Nor have I come to talk about Saxony or "the Saxons".

Enough has been said or written in that vein during the last few months – and that hasn't necessarily helped to close the divides that exist.

No, I've come to talk to you. I've come to listen and to discuss with you how we want to live together and what binds us. Fostering a sense of belonging means listening to others and being listened to by them. That's the idea behind the coffee afternoon!

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I'm delighted to have guests here today with a wide range of backgrounds, experiences and opinions. This encounter between people who are open to Germany taking in refugees and those who are critical and fear that there is too much immigration, the encounter between people who themselves have an immigrant background with those whose families have always lived here – this direct interpersonal encounter is necessary.

Of course, I have been concerned about what has happened in Chemnitz during the last few weeks. One of your fellow citizens was killed quite close to where we are today. Such a violent crime sends shockwaves through a city. I would like to express my heartfelt sympathy to the victim's family.

Of course, the perpetrators of this serious crime must be held to account – just as in the case of any other crime, regardless of who committed it. However, one thing is clear: the state, and only the state, is responsible for security and the enforcement of the law!

The sadness in the wake of this crime was mixed with anger, and in some cases fierce outrage. However, a line was crossed when this anger was used to stir up hatred against foreigners, to display anti-constitutional symbols and to incite violence on the streets. The uncovering of and initial investigation into the right wing terrorist group "Revolution Chemnitz" highlight the immense danger which crossing certain lines poses.

Before we start, I want to make a point of saying that there's no issue we cannot talk about today. Everything's on the table for discussion at this table. I always express my categorical disagreement when people pretend that such a debate isn't possible. Everyone in Germany is entitled to voice their opinions as well as to state their dissatisfaction provided they do so without disparaging, excluding or threatening others, or without running after those who preach intolerance or show a complete disregard for our constitution. Each and every one of us must draw this line!

I know that speeches alone cannot solve problems: not in Chemnitz nor anywhere else in Germany. However, we have to start with dialogue. We have to be prepared to sit around the table so that all the issues can be put on the table. For the differences, contrasts and conflicts remain. They're part and parcel of a liberal society – we have to tolerate them and talk about them.

Let's try that today!

There's no referee and no agenda. However, we do have to abide by a few simple rules:

- Everyone deserves respect. We should treat each other with consideration and regard.

- We want to debate but look each other in the eye! That applies in particular to those who have a very different opinion and to whom we probably wouldn't otherwise talk.

- Everyone will be listened to carefully and everyone should be allowed to finish expressing their ideas without interruption.

- This is not about being right or proved right. It's about finding solutions.

I'm looking forward to our discussion!