



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
on the occasion of the informational and contact building
visit with the Diplomatic Corps
to Rhineland Palatinate
on 18 September 2019**

Rhineland Palatinate, the Hunsrück and the Moselle are particularly beautiful regions of Germany. If word of this has not spread all around the world yet, then this will change tomorrow at the latest. After all, I still remember that mainstay of day to day diplomacy – the telegram. Tomorrow morning – as soon as they get back to Berlin – the ambassadors will cable news of the hilly Hunsrück and the meandering Moselle around the whole world.

Nuncio, Ambassadors, you can put your telegrams to one side for the day.

For me, our trip is a wonderful opportunity to get into conversation away from the trappings of protocol. When we meet on official occasions – for your accreditation or my New Year's Reception at Schloss Bellevue – things are a bit more formal. Morning coats, the receiving line – you know the drill.

We're going to go on a little boat trip together today and we'll be in good company when we do so. Kurt Tucholsky, Karl Marx and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote about their experiences on and by the Moselle – often inspired by one or two, or perhaps three, glasses of Moselle wine.

In 1792, Goethe was on his way back from France, heading downriver in the vicinity of Traben-Trarbach. It was night and a powerful storm brewed up. The poet prince feared for his life, noting the following:

"The boatman did not conceal his uneasiness; the danger appeared always greater the longer it lasted; and it had risen to the highest pitch, when the honest fellow assured us that he neither knew where he was, nor in what direction he should steer."

I was particularly struck by the line about the boatman who "neither knew where he was, nor in what direction he should steer".

This isn't an entirely unfamiliar sentiment. Our world is changing – at an ever faster pace, and ever more fundamentally. We are losing sight of the shoreline – old certainties of the international order appear obsolete. The storms of international crises blow into our faces and the waves crash together also here at home, over the boat that is our community.

As Federal President, and perhaps also you as diplomats shouldering responsibility for the peaceful coexistence of peoples, I sometimes ask myself these days where we are, and where we are headed.

As far as my country, Germany, is concerned, many storms, many upheavals and new departures in German history left their mark here in Rhineland Palatinate, in the Hunsrück and on the Moselle. Nascent and dashed hopes, downturns and upswings, setbacks and detours, structural change and new beginnings.

It was not far from here that thousands demonstrated for freedom and democracy at Hambach Castle in 1832. Karl Marx, a son of Trier, described how repression and restoration subsequently raged, how the Moselle winegrowers suffered from arbitrary behaviour on the part of authorities as well as from oppression. Crop failures and famine forced many people to emigrate.

Edgar Reitz – a great film maker – testified to these upheavals in the Hunsrück in cinematic form in his "Heimat" trilogy, an impressive chronology from the middle of the 19th century to the fall of the Wall. I recommend that anyone looking to understand this country and its people watch these films.

And today? Democracy – also here in Germany – is certainly not safe as houses for all eternity even today. Today, we are experiencing political, social and technological upheavals, such as those meticulously recorded by Edgar Reitz over the course of decades, almost as if in time lapse.

And we sense that these upheavals and centrifugal forces are shaking our democracy as well. Indeed, not only certainties of foreign policy have become uncertain, but also a number of domestic questions, questions concerning the constitutional make up of democracy and the rule of law, questions that we thought we had answered long ago, are being asked once again anew.

I firmly believe that we must not shy away from such fundamental questions. We must not play down criticism and we must not disregard those who are frustrated or angry. Instead, we must learn, also here in Germany, to fight self confidently for democracy anew and to ensure that opponents of democracy are never given a platform. And we must find new answers where old ones evidently no longer bear fruit.

To my mind, part of this process is open dialogue with and also learning from others. In the first half of my term in office, I have visited countries around the world that are undergoing transformations that give us hope, which – in the midst of all the global crises and upheavals – are treading new paths, their own paths, towards the future. In Ethiopia and Ghana, in Ecuador and Uzbekistan, in Iceland and New Zealand, and I could mention many more besides.

I have become acquainted with new and different answers – answers to foreign policy questions, to social challenges, to the open questions surrounding the future of democracy. I'm profoundly grateful for these impressions – and seek to convey these to people in Germany so that they – in the flood of terrible news that flickers across our screens each day – will be inspired by these stories of new beginnings and renewal.

"No man is an island, / entire of itself", is what an English poet wrote in the 17th century.

By the same token, no country is an island, not even those with a great deal of water around them. Our world is interconnected, intertwined, and we are all strongly interdependent.

The Congress of Vienna had already obliged the countries bordering the Rhine to regulate shipping jointly.

For centuries, the major rivers here in Europe were considered to be bonds between principalities, empires and kingdoms: the Rhine, the Danube and the Memel, which is called "Nemunas" in Lithuanian and "Njoman" in Belarusian.

It was also on a river, on a small Moselle vessel, that five EU member states signed the Schengen Agreement in 1985. This historic trip down the Moselle paved the way to the borderless movement of persons and goods, casting the barriers of Europe onto the scrapheap of history.

This wasn't the End of History, however. Today, we sense how the idea of the benefit and value of international interconnectedness, cooperation and our common, rules based order is being challenged, even called into question.

The guardian of the familiar world order shuns the burden of responsibility today; "Welt ohne Hüter" (world without a guardian) was the title of an essay by the German political scientist Herfried Münkler, which recently appeared in the "Tagesspiegel" newspaper. The rise of new powers with entirely different political systems is leading to a new competition between powers. While we all feel that the tectonic plates of the world order are shifting, a new order is not yet clearly discernible.

I believe that if we don't want to simply put up with this new global order, then this requires all of us to demonstrate self confidence and a willingness to act. This also goes for my country.

That is precisely why we as an international community must remain in dialogue with one another. Being in a dialogue with one another cannot primarily be a question of who is right. It cannot be a question of defining boundaries, excluding people or thinking in terms of rigid definitions, along the lines of "you're like this and we're like that." Rather, dialogue can be constructive especially in the midst of tensions, and especially in the face of our differences.

You, esteemed Ambassadors, stand for a dialogue, for open channels between Berlin and the capitals of the world. I would like to thank you sincerely also for that.

This dialogue enables all of us to have an open horizon. Goethe's stormy night on the Moselle ended in a similar fashion: "And thus we were tossed to and fro in the total darkness, till at length a light was seen at a distance, and hope also was awakened within us. We now steered as directly as possible towards it."

History is not a long, calm river. Its path is not preordained, but rather we steer into the open and unknown. But there is a light in the distance. There is hope in the distance.

I have been privileged enough to feel this time and again in many of your home countries – and I'm grateful for this. We are steering into the open, but the rudder is in our hands.

Thank you very much.