Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the closing event for the
"Freedom is Our System" campaign
of the Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany
in Berlin
on 26 September 2019

It is a pleasure to be here with you today, at the closing event of this important and broad campaign for academic freedom – which you have hosted to mark the 70th anniversary of our Basic Law.

You may know that fitting tribute was also paid to the 70th anniversary at Schloss Bellevue, in the German Bundestag and at the Federal Constitutional Court. I am all the more pleased by the fact that – and how – you, our country's scientific and academic community, are celebrating this anniversary.

It is good to see that your community can speak out, loud and clear and with one voice, on such an important issue – namely the constitution that underpins our society. For that, I extend my special thanks to both the Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany and to all of you.

It is also good to see you here, in a house of the future, State Secretary Lukas and Mr Brandt – a House of Futures, as you call it – the new Futurium in the heart of Berlin. Visiting the exhibit sparked my curiosity about the many ways we can shape our future, for which you have hands-on displays here at the Futurium. Moreover, I am curious about what the Futurium itself holds in store for us.

We don't live in times of abundant optimism, after all. Dark clouds currently hang over society, politics, business and the media. There is a sense of insecurity, faint-heartedness and frustration. There is the fear that less comfortable times lie ahead; more and more people are seeking solace in the past.

I think those things make this House of Futures all the more important. I hope this place will remind our country of what made us strong – namely our ability to innovate, and our conviction that

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scientific and technological progress can and should benefit our society as a whole. In a nutshell, it should remind us of our passion for the future. I therefore hope the Futurium will be a great success – also far beyond the limits of the capital.

Ms Wintermantel and Ms Brockmeier, Presidents of the Alliance of Science Organisations – in your statements in the film that we just saw, you do not mince words. You say clearly and unmistakeably – on the occasion of the anniversary of our constitution – that, during seven decades with our Basic Law, we have accomplished something we can be proud of: we have reached a broad consensus on academic freedom in our country.

I would add that this was a fortunate development – there was much opposition, and it extends far beyond the scientific community.

This consensus can be summed up in two sentences that we have probably heard many times before –

Namely: first, academic freedom is a valued asset in our democracy and a fundamental right set out in our Basic Law – a freedom that we all are called on to nurture, protect and, if need be, defend.

Second, in a liberal democracy, academic freedom brings with it the expectation that science bears responsibility for the world it explores, for the society in which it conducts research, as well as for humanity and nature in general.

I think that each and every one of you will agree with me when I say that the academic freedom we are bound to protect and the responsibility that arises from this freedom are inseparably linked.

So, ladies and gentlemen – will that be all? We've watched a short film, and heard a brief summary from the Federal President. We've paid tribute to academic freedom, so we're that much closer to the buffet reception.

Frankly, no – because the agreement that exists in this room hardly mirrors the outside world. We are witnessing attacks on the freedom of science – very real attacks, across the globe.

For this, we need not even look to distant lands, to strong or rising autocracies, where freedom is not worth much – countries in which science must serve authority and ideology.

We also need not look across the Atlantic, where scientific discoveries based on decades of research are brushed aside with an abrupt tweet – where, in the worst case, one can no longer distinguish between the two.

No, we need look no further than Europe, where an entire university is driven out of a country, where some opinion leaders

express their desire for a world without what they consider to be troublesome experts, a world without critical thinkers and where science places itself entirely at the service of politics.

All this should worry us. And, what is more, we must speak out when scientists come under pressure. We must help where we can – this includes, for example, when academics from these countries seek refuge here.

The influx of academics under threat shows that Germany, which has a truly difficult history, has today become a harbour of reason, a partner for all those who demand freedom of thought and speech worldwide. Let us be ambitious in realising that potential.

Yes, academic freedom is valued in this country. But that is no reason for us to rest on our laurels! Particularly given the situation around the world, particularly because we can see every day how academic freedom is being challenged, we should ask ourselves in what ways we can secure a future for this precious basic right.

I want to address three areas here.

Firstly, there is always also a material aspect to academic freedom. As our country's scientists and academics, you are entitled to a solid financial foundation. Top-notch, world-class research, the kind that we all want to have, as well as freedom of thought and creativity – all this requires sufficient funding. Our country does fare well by international comparison, particularly in view of increased investment over the last decade and a half. That said, in the next few years, it will at least not become any easier to maintain this ambitious level. This effort requires universities and research institutes to remain fully aware of the conditions that guarantee their independence, and to be circumspect in defending these conditions. This applies as much to the political sphere as it does to third-party funding – for example, from business and industry. To me, however, one thing is clear: Primary responsibility for ensuring that the basic material needs of science and academia are met lies with the state. It is therefore not a bad idea for you to periodically remind everyone of this fact.

Secondly, academic freedom must apply not only at the very top, but also for junior scientists and researchers. I would like universities to be places where people can experience and learn about what democracy means. For the university to be a place of democracy, it must first be a place of freedom. Some complain that, these days, courses of study give individuals too little opportunity for finding their calling in life and their place in society. I think that's somewhat exaggerated. Apart from the many new structures and increased demands imposed by Bologna – with Bachelor's and Master's courses, modules and grading – there is one key priority: students' freedom, which begins with their course choices and extends to intellectual

growth beyond the boundaries of their chosen subject and their country; this freedom should be, and should remain, at the core of every academic education.

Later, among doctoral students and research assistants, there is of course also the freedom to develop one's research topics, unfettered by dependency on, or excessive influence of, one's predecessors. Because the academic freedom to which we are paying tribute today begins not at the upper end of the academic salary scale, but rather must extend to all research assistants, doctoral and postdoctoral students, as well.

Thirdly, and most importantly, we must firmly anchor the freedom of research in society. I believe this will only succeed if we build trust in scientific methods, renewing it where necessary.

After all, the often-invoked post-factual age is dawning not only in other parts of the world. In Germany, too, 43 percent of those questioned already believe that facts are a matter of opinion. This number can and should worry us. We must, of course, understand what lies behind it – but more importantly, we must learn how to deal with it.

I believe that where there is a lack of trust in scientific discoveries, there is an all the greater need for trust in the process by which these discoveries are made. The process must be credible – that is, not subservient to predominant interests. By advancing logical arguments, verifiable facts and transparent methods. And by making an honest distinction between proven findings, on the one hand, and hypotheses that are still disputed in the scientific community, on the other hand.

Faced with public pressure, science must not become yet another bubble of opinion. That is why I want to direct the following words of encouragement at all scientists and academics: remain engaged in the scientific process, with the ambition and high aim that you are engaged in "the production of truth". Because, for there to be social progress, it must be based on your findings. The big issues of tomorrow call for not only emotional, but also well-informed, debate.

Yes, it is politicians who must express their commitment to, and garner support for, trust in science – but science itself must also time and again create this trust. Because without trust in research, society will lose its ability to detect future opportunities, and science will fall easy prey to the enemies of freedom.

A few months ago, I was in Iceland, a small country at the outermost edge of Europe – and one that is feeling the existential impact of man-made climate change. You can imagine what it means for a country that even has "ice" in its name when the first glaciers cease to exist – even today.

As is often the case for such trips, I invited guests from Germany to come along and represent our country. These frequently include scientists – some of them are here in this room – and I am happy to see all of you.

As we sat down during this trip to Iceland for a discussion with scientists about climate change, one thing was clear: no one questioned whether the facts were real. The data and their interpretation were not the issue.

Rather, the discussion centred on why "politics" is not taking action, why "politics" is not living up to its responsibility and why "politics" – which should finally begin listening to what scientists are saying – is so slow to implement the necessary measures.

This brings me to something that has been very important to me recently – something we must talk about when it comes to academic freedom and responsibility – namely, the relationship between "science" and "politics" in general.

Particularly regarding the major issue of our times, climate protection, I see and hear much incomprehension, disappointment and dissatisfaction when scientists talk about "politics". I see and hear how people citing scientific facts are accusing "politics" of delay and failure – not only during my travels as Federal President, but also in town squares all across our country.

But let me quite clearly say that, as Federal President, it is not my role to take up the cause of one of these sides. As Federal President, it is my role to help reconcile differences.

Of course, people have reason to be impatient. And criticism is justified. Naturally, it is politics that is first and foremost called upon to act. It is also right that Germany, as a country that once led the way on mitigating climate change and the development of renewable energy, runs the risk of losing not only this position, but also its ambition. A number of years ago, we set ourselves lofty goals. What counts now is mustering the political will to actually reach these goals! That is the true benchmark of climate policy, and to get there politics must act courageously and with decision.

That is all true. No one can deny anymore that action is urgently needed. But that alone is not enough. Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker once said, "it must be the scientist's top priority to recognise how discoveries and changing the world are interlinked".

Yes, discoveries and changing the world are closely interlinked – but they are not one and the same thing!

You may be thinking "that's a shame, isn't it?" – and Plato, for one, would probably agree. We're in need of philosopher kings – and

instead we have subcommittees, summits and climate cabinet meetings.

As Federal President, I am not here to justify politics – and I'm certainly not here to defend specific decisions the coalition has taken on the climate protection dossier. Yet I would like to remind everyone that democracy does not work like science. Democracy does not function exclusively thanks to a keen sense of reason, or on the basis of merit, peer review and the impact factor. Politics in a democratic system has its own rules. For that alone, it should not be derided – also not by science – as being intrinsically indecisive, or even bothersome.

Science is essentially focused on discovery – and politics is essentially focused on action. This means that democracy needs science – and very much so – yet democracy needs many more things, as well. It must weigh different views and priorities, balance interests, seek majorities, struggle to find compromises, and look after those whom progress leaves behind. Politics – and climate policy in particular – becomes even more effective when more people are given the opportunity to participate and assume responsibility.

The discussion during my Iceland trip also gave me the impression that we were actually speaking different languages and talking at cross purposes. We increasingly fell into the trap of viewing "science" and "politics" as two orbiting planets that send out brief radio transmissions to one another and then get upset when the other side does not immediately reply "roger" in confirmation.

I want to make one thing perfectly clear today, namely, that misunderstanding and walls of silence must not come to characterise the relationship between science and politics.

To avoid this requires effort on both sides. Politics, for its part, must not take the easy way out – the path of least resistance, by choosing the smallest common denominator. Politics should be a motor – and not at the mercy of events, as appears to be the case all too often regarding climate change. Politics must have the courage to also take daring steps. Politics can take advantage of the opportunities that are being created by civil society.

Especially for such a highly complex topic as climate change, it holds true that politics needs expertise and evidence. Politics should get back in the habit of visiting lecture halls and laboratories. Politics must time and again go and seek advice from experts; it must place its trust in scientific expertise – and it must defend this expertise against the notorious individuals who oversimplify the world, stir up opinion and beat the populist drum.

However, my appeal is directed both ways. Science, too, especially because it enjoys certain freedoms and privileges, bears a

special responsibility for the success of democracy. First and foremost, it must remain honest and transparent to both itself and the general public – in line with the fact/value distinction that was drawn by Weber. This also means that when science makes normative judgments, and when it sees the need for change, science must be willing and able to step up to politicians and society – explaining, advertising and acting as an intermediary. It must be willing to become part of the democratic debate. It shouldn't put its own findings on a tall pedestal – thereby making democracy, with its many voices and complexity, appear to be not the way to a solution, but rather an obstacle.

In short, we must avoid pitting science against politics.

Regarding climate change, we are most certainly faced with the proverbial Gordian knot. As we all know, it can certainly not be cut by a single actor – or act of legislation. However, if in frustration over this situation we each begin tugging at the knot, then it will only become more snug. Therefore, it is my wish that we stand shoulder to shoulder and continue to demand that democracy deliver no more, but also no less, than what it truly is: a space in which we can jointly untie knots!

Anything else is the apocalypse. I don't know if you agree, but I think that the spectre of the apocalypse paralyses. It does not invigorate. It creates fear where we need the courage that can bring change. It makes doubts appear larger than they are, and it drains every effort of vigour.

That is what I ask of science:

Be persistent!

Explain that which needs explaining – and if need be, more than once.

Point to what the future holds.

Encourage others.

Enlighten our democracy!

Thank you very much.