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Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier at an afternoon event in Schloss Bellevue on 23 May 2019 to mark the 70th anniversary of the Basic Law

We certainly have something to celebrate. On this day 70 years ago, on 23 May 1949, nothing less than a miracle happened.

Four years after the darkest period of German history, 65 Germans gathered in an austere gym hall in Bonn, largely unnoticed by the general public. Scarred by war and dictatorship, they solemnly promised each other that they would transform this country, which lay in ruins, by providing it with rules for freedom and democracy, a bulwark for human dignity and the foundations for a better, brighter and peaceful future.

Their promise came true. Seventy years later, we live in a reunited country, in a strong democracy, and in peace and even friendship with our neighbours. Yes, this Basic Law and its 20,000 words are certainly a good reason to celebrate!

“What better way to celebrate this anniversary of our democracy than a free and lively debate with the public?” I asked myself.

Let’s talk with people whose views and lives are different to ours! That’s why you – members of the public from all over Germany and government leaders alike – have come here today. We all sense not only a willingness, but indeed a fervent longing in our country for the channels of communication to be kept open in our society.

I would like to thank all of you who are taking part in this discussion today – the representatives of our constitutional bodies, our moderators who come from many different fields in society, and you, our guests from all over Germany, from Sylt to Breisgau and from Krefeld to Herrnhut. I think today’s debate event is also a wonderful symbol that truly reflects the spirit of our Basic Law. A very warm welcome to you all!
Not only is it the anniversary of the Basic Law, as many as seven of you here in the garden are also celebrating your birthday today, and three of you—Ursula Höring, Thomas Pannecke and Ortwin Quaschnik—turn 70 today, just like our Basic Law. I would like to wish you all a very happy birthday!

Whether or not it is your birthday today, I have invited you to an afternoon event. And coffee and cake will indeed be served. However, it will not be a relaxing afternoon.

You are here because you have big questions. What is going on in our country? What is working well and where is there room for improvement? And most importantly, what needs to be done for the future of our democracy? What sort of country do we want to have in five years’ time when we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Basic Law?

To sum up, we are celebrating the Basic Law by putting it to the test. Please speak freely and frankly over coffee! Talk about what is on your mind and share your ideas on how we can all live together in Germany.

That is precisely what makes our constitution so wonderful. It underpins our freedom—the freedom to have one’s own opinion and to live a self-determined life, as well as the freedom to ask questions, to criticise even the most powerful people, and to have one’s say about the future of our country. We are practising and celebrating this great freedom today over a cup of coffee.

However, freedom needs rules. The Basic Law provides the framework. It states what is non-negotiable in our democracy. "Inviolable" is the famous word used in the text. And for our discussions, this means that no matter how much freedom we enjoy and even when a discussion is very heated, we need to uphold something that can be summarised in two words—civility and reason. No democratic debate will work without civility and reason.

We are also here today because we do not want hatred and hostility to seep into our debates like poison, the differentiation between facts and lies to be eroded, and the volume of discussions be confused with their urgency. We will not leave our debates to loud voices and political hooligans—neither in the internet nor in our streets and squares!

What do we actually want to discuss when we sit at the tables in a few minutes’ time?

We Germans have achieved a huge amount in 70 years. We have become a wealthy country. We are a peaceful country; we have many close ties; and we are respected all over the world. Nevertheless, I think our country is currently looking for the answer to a very fundamental question—what binds us together in Germany?
Cohesion is the topic I have come across most frequently in your letters.

Many years ago, the great liberal Ralf Dahrendorf spoke about a “world without cohesion” where we were headed, a world where social ties become fragile and people are thrown back on their own resources.

One feels this in daily life. On the bus or underground, passengers take out their smartphone and plug in their earbuds. We no longer join a sports club. Instead we go to the gym, where we work out on our own, with our eyes kept firmly on the screen in front of us.

However, those who withdraw are left alone with their questions, such as: Will I manage to keep up with the constant acceleration? Where do I belong in this society? Am I accepted the way I am? Do I live in a way that will ensure my children will also be able to live on this planet? Will I be secure in my old age? Will my neighbourhood be safe? Will I be able to find an affordable apartment in a city or any sort of future in the countryside?

Powerlessness is toxic for democracy. People who feel powerless revert to isolating themselves, be this alone, in a large group or a small group. They set themselves apart from others or the so-called “system”. They are quick to think: “Those at the top don’t care about me”. Populists make use of such feelings in a devious way. They exploit them and convert justified concerns into blind rage.

I appeal to those who hold responsibility in German politics or media to take this seriously and to address the questions that people really ask.

However, responsibility is never held by one side alone in a democracy. Just like Mrs Merkel, Mr Schäuble, Ms Maischberger or Mr di Lorenzo, you too hold responsibility for cohesion in your hands.

But how can we achieve cohesion?

I would like to make a simple request of you now. Have a look around you! Who is here with you in this garden?

Your ages range from 15 to 85. Fortunately, you are incomparably more diverse than the group of men – they were in fact almost only men – who met in Bonn 70 years ago. We have here with us a police officer and a butcher, a singer and a nun, a YouTuber and a Federal Chancellor. We have a customs officer whose father was the first Turkish guest worker in Viersen. We have a career soldier who has served in Kosovo and Afghanistan and will retire soon. We have two siblings, aged 19 and 21, who were born in Damascus and fled the civil war. We have a psychotherapist who was imprisoned in East Germany and now helps people who used to work for the State Security Service.
We have a young mother who wrote to me after her young child finally fell asleep.

All of you are our country. And no matter how different and contrasting you may be, you are united by one thing – all of you have something to say about the future of our country!

That is the spirit of the constitution we are celebrating here today. Yes, the Basic Law is an imposition! But it is an imposition in the best sense of the word, as it puts you in a position where you can make the future your own! That is why you are here today, and I would like to thank you for that.

The Basic Law does not state that “all good things come from the top”, but rather that “all state authority is derived from the people”. The Basic Law is our country’s social compact. Its promise is also a promise among us citizens to take on responsibility and