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Berlin, 09/10/2019  
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**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at a ceremony marking the 30th anniversary of the  
Peaceful Revolution  
at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig on 9 October 2019**

They were now among thousands. It seemed to them as if they were hovering but a hair's breadth above the ground. [...] What could possibly stand in their way now?

What could possibly stand in their way now, wrote Erich Loest in his novel "Nikolaikirche" – in the way of the people who courageously wrote history here in Leipzig 30 years ago. In "Nikolaikirche" – many of you will be familiar with the novel and the film version – the great author provides an account of the final years of the GDR, up until 9 October 1989. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Leipzig at the time to protest for freedom and democracy. No one wanted to stand in their way. Indeed, no one even dared to anymore.

9 October was a great day in the history of Germany. I am grateful that I can be here with you today to celebrate this day together with you. I am honoured to do so. Thank you very much for inviting me here today.

Yes, 9 October is great day in German history. But I want to, indeed I must, start with the present day. During my travels through Germany – especially in regions that are otherwise seldom the focus of our attention – I keep on meeting people who do not feel much like celebrating. Much less so than on previous anniversaries.

Today, 30 years after that 9 October, I see before me a strong, but also unsettled, country.

I see a country in which cracks are opening up – cracks that are reflected in election results, and also in the way in which we talk about each other and about this country.

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I hear about a country in which people feel left behind, ignored by politicians and the elites. I hear about a growing gulf, long since not only between East and West. A gulf also between different walks of life, between cities and the country, between those who are better off and employees working under precarious conditions. I hear from young people who feel abandoned, indeed betrayed, by the older generation, who are afraid that they are being deprived of their future on this planet. I hear from Jews who have been insulted and attacked. I hear people who say that our country has taken in too many refugees and migrants from other cultures and that the feeling of being a stranger in one's own country is growing; and I also hear how citizens with migrant backgrounds increasingly feel threatened. I hear nationalist and xenophobic sentiments that have evidently gained in seductive power.

Thirty years after the Peaceful Revolution and the fall of the Wall, I hear East Germans who feel misunderstood and West Germans who do not want to hear any more about this.

I see a country that is struggling to find common ground together.

Is this our country? Is this the whole truth about our country?

I would like to try and look at this in a different way. When I am out and about, I also meet people who have most astonishing things to relate. I hear their stories, of new beginnings and upheavals, of successes and failures, of hopes and disappointments. I hear stories, life stories that – each in their own right – while not epochal at the level of the individual, have shaped this country in all its diversity of 82 million people. After all, who are we, and what is this country, if not the sum of our stories?

I am particularly impressed by the stories of this city, which tell of the incredible power that drove people back then, in the autumn of 89, onto the streets, of their incredible longing for freedom and democracy, which was unleashed in the Peaceful Revolution.

For my part, I was pouring over my doctoral thesis in an attic room of the University of Giessen. I had heard about this longing and I admired the courage of the many. But did I sense how much courage was really required in order to turn nascent demonstrations into a new dawn that became a revolution? Those who took part in the Peaceful Revolution met – many of them long before 1989 – in church communities and at private residences. They fought against environmental pollution and decline, for greater participation and equal opportunities, for freedom of opinion and travel and for free elections. They dreamt of a peaceful and united Europe. They founded environmental libraries and printed leaflets; they penned resolutions

and open letters. Many of their demands were worked into the draft of a new constitution, which was later drawn up at the Round Table.

Back then, or so the people here in Leipzig tell me time and again, there was an incredible spirit of euphoria. But if you listen carefully, then you hear not only about new beginnings and tales of heroism at that time, but also about doubts and fear. The fear of arbitrariness and persecution; the fear of violence, sometimes manifest, sometimes threatened, a constant shadow stretching as far as families and friendship circles. Today, we also commemorate the many victims of despotism and oppression.

But then, during that autumn 30 years ago, something amazing happened.

Fear switched sides.

The few became many. This first happened in Plauen on 7 October. Two days later, on 9 October, well in excess of 70,000 people gathered here in Leipzig to pray for peace and hold the biggest Monday demonstration so far. This was in spite of the fear of a "Chinese solution" that hung in the air just a few months after the massacre on Tiananmen Square. Despite the uncertainty as to whether the SED would put down the protests.

The SED had refused to allow Western journalists to travel to Leipzig. But they were unable to prevent film footage that Siegbert Schefke and Aram Radomski had secretly shot from the tower of the Reformed Church from being smuggled to the West. When in the days after 9 October these images flickered across television screens in people's living rooms, many, in the West and the East alike, sensed that something was happening in the GDR that it was impossible to stop. Fear had changed sides – and after 9 October 1989 in Leipzig, nothing would be the same again in the GDR.

Many of these courageous people are with us here today. Kathrin Mahler Walther, Gesine Oltmanns and Ines Maria Köllner, Uwe Schwabe, Tobias Hollitzer and Roland Jahn – it is great to have you with us here today! Freya Klier will speak on behalf of the many in just a moment.

Their stories helped to shape Germany's history of democracy. They are therefore in keeping with the best tradition of our history, the tradition of Germany's freedom movements of 1848 and 1918. Their accounts are exceptional stories of the shining moments for our country. They have added an important part to our history of democracy. We want to celebrate you today, those who took part in the Peaceful Revolution, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for your courage, and thank you for showing that change is possible!

The Wall did not fall by itself, ladies and gentlemen. The people in the GDR made it collapse, peacefully and without violence. The

autumn of revolution was preceded by the summer of escape of 1989. Hundreds of thousands of GDR citizens left everything behind them, sought freedom – and found it. They were also part of the great transformation; their stories also made history. It is good that the Federal Government's Commission will focus on these multifaceted and at times contradictory stories, many of which have not yet been told or heard enough. Thirty years after our reunification, it is time for them to also become part of the common perception of who "we" are.

The stories of our European neighbours are also part of the stories of our German unity. The epochal transformation that we recall today would not have been possible were it not for our eastern neighbours' fight for freedom. In Poland, people had rebelled against dictatorship and bondage for many years. Mass protests and strikes, the foundation of Solidarity and the Round Table – despite all of the setbacks, democratisation was unstoppable. The conflagration spread to other countries – to Hungary, which opened its borders in the spring of 1989, and to the former Czechoslovakia. And what happened in Eastern Europe was a source of encouragement for people in the GDR.

We know today that history would have taken a different course had Mikhail Gorbachev in the Kremlin not decided to refrain from sending troops; had the SED leadership not called for restraint; if Gorbachev and the Western allies had not given German unity their blessing later on.

The fortune of German unity is inseparably bound up with European integration and with the new trust that our neighbours placed in us after the catastrophes of the 20th century. We Germans can be grateful also for this.

Gratitude is not everything, however. No, we Germans have a particular responsibility for the success of this peaceful and united Europe. We will continue to shoulder this responsibility also in the future. And we take this seriously at a time in which this Europe is being driven apart once again. And this promise is also part of what we are doing today.

Those who speak only of the shining moments and the watershed of that time certainly do not take into account all the stories that shape our country today and continue to resound and reverberate in our own era.

German unity was an enormous undertaking. It demanded a great deal of the people in our country – of those in the West, too, but above all of those in the East, who mastered transformation of a nature never experienced by my generation in the West. And for many years – that, too, is part of remembrance – this tremendous achievement was not sufficiently recognised.

Most people in the West experienced the transformation from a distance. And many people believed that everything would simply continue as before in the united Germany, too. That belief was mistaken, even at the time. The West also changed after reunification. And I see that as a good thing!

This reunited Germany reflects a great deal of impetus from the East – positive impetus, a drive for renewal. Yes, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany established a dictatorship that brought ongoing fear and violence to society. And yet there was also input from an East German social reality, which in some ways was unyielding, headstrong, modern and advanced. Examples include the self-confident role played by women and the excellent social infrastructure ranging from childcare to medical care, with concepts that are now being rediscovered. And it is certainly no coincidence that East German women in particular have shaped and changed the reunited Germany at the very highest level.

Naturally, many people in the West also wanted to get involved – West Germans who were curious, who helped to rebuild eastern Germany and who moved to what were then still the new Länder, not only for the sake of their career, but also because they wanted to be a part of the process of transformation. And alongside exciting challenges, many of them found a new home in eastern Germany.

However, there is no doubt that the transformation hit people in eastern Germany disproportionately harder. Each and every family was affected. Factories were closed down. Millions of people lost their job or had to retrain. Parents worried about how they would provide for their families in the future. And young people in particular often saw no prospects for their future and moved to the West. This youth drain has had a profound impact. Almost an entire generation is missing in some places.

I often hear stories about people feeling uprooted and certainties being dashed. We now know – and how could it be any other way? – that of course there were other options at the time, whether we are talking about factory closures or the constitution. We know that mistakes were made wittingly and unwittingly. We need to talk about these mistakes and, where possible, to correct them. That, too, is a task for politics.

And 30 years later, this task has lost none of its urgency, for example in some rural areas, where only older people have stayed behind and hope and prospects have left along with the young generation. Policymakers are called on to ensure that infrastructure works and living conditions are good. Let us not abandon these people who have worries and needs! Take their problems seriously and do something to provide kindergartens, schools, bus services, a fire

brigade, midwives, general practitioners, employment opportunities and broadband!

Yes, the post-unification decades were difficult years of transformation and adaptation, years whose impact continues to this day. It is thus all the more incredible to see the courage, pragmatism and energy with which East Germans tackled and overcame the challenges.

When I am in the eastern part of our country, I meet people who restored crumbling towns or halted environmental destruction. I meet people who fought for their factories to be kept open or who set up their own company.

And increasingly I also hear stories about people who returned. Many people now move from western to eastern Germany – in fact, slightly more people move to the eastern Länder than the other way round, thanks to the affordable rents, good infrastructure in many places, and interesting degree courses and jobs. The new appeal of the eastern Länder is a sign that German unity – even three decades later – is not rigid and complete, but rather that the path to it is dynamic.

To quote Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, “Eastern Germany is a special place, with special experiences.” And a new eastern German self-confidence has developed from these special experiences – a confidence that is aware of the differences, but does not see them solely as shortcomings.

And they are right. These special cultural and biographical characteristics are not in fact something one had to leave behind as quickly as possible in order to belong, as many East Germans believed in the 1990s. Instead, they are an asset for a diverse country – a country comprised of many different regions and in which other regions do not exactly lack self-confidence...

We need eastern Germany’s experiences of transformation and change. We can draw strength from memories of how the people stood up together for a better life and a better country. It gives us courage to see that new and good things have been created. This experience is so valuable. Let us take some of it with us into our common future!

So much is certain – there is no one official history of German unity and there never will be. And nor does this country need one. After all, history consists of stories – of all of our stories. And our history is as diverse as we Germans are.

This diversity and complexity are not shortcomings. Instead, we can see it as a strength. Democracy and dictatorship, division and unification, the Peaceful Revolution and the merging of two systems, migration and integration – what other country brings together so many and such varied experiences in recent history? Let us be curious about the different experiences in the East and West and the different

experiences of those who have lived somewhere for years and those who arrived recently. And let us build our common future on this basis! Let us agree a new solidarity pact of appreciation in our society!

No, I am not just thinking about sitting around in a circle or political symbols. The solidarity pact I have in mind is both an offer and an imposition, as it means "you on the other side belong here, and I am willing to listen to you, your story and your point of view. But remember that I expect the same from you!"

This solidarity pact is an offer because it says that this country has room for many people and no shortage of appreciation. This solidarity pact is an imposition, as appreciating people means accepting those who are different and who think differently. Those who write off, marginalise or give up on other people have already written off democracy.

"We are the people!" That rousing cry of 1989 means "All of us are the people!" In a democracy, the people only exist as a plural. Policymakers continue to face the difficult task of developing a line for joint action from the wide range of opinions in a democracy. But never again may any individual or group be allowed to claim to speak alone for the self-appointed "real people". That, too, must be a lesson from our history. We also learned that from the Nazi dictatorship, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany regime and the liberation of the Peaceful Revolution. Esteemed guests, we should and we must heed this lesson.

After 30 years, I would like us to look at our own country in a positive way. I would like us to not only see a long series of ruptures, crises and impositions when we look back at the past years and decades. Instead, I would like us to see the people who shouldered and overcame the huge tasks in the process of unification itself, but also in what came afterwards, namely the economic rise of a country that had lagged behind in Europe into a thriving economy, the EU's monetary union and eastern enlargement, the solidarity and determination during the economic and financial crisis of the late 2000s, through which we Germans emerged better off than most of our partners, and yes, also how we took in and helped over a million refugees in 2015 and 2016. Despite all the challenges we still face, that too was a huge achievement by this society as a whole, an achievement that was only possible together and of which we can all be proud.

Those who look at this country can quite rightly say that we did not suffer our history – we determined it ourselves.

And those who look at this country can trust that just as we did not suffer our history, nor do we have to endure the present or feel paralysed by thoughts of the future.

Yes, we face inequality, disadvantages and problems. Recognising that, and most importantly, changing it, remains an ongoing task, especially because we are not victims of the course of time. Victimhood is not part of democracy. Democracy has in fact come up with a wonderful antonym for "victim" – the word "citizen".

We are citizens, free and self-determined, with equal rights and equal responsibilities. That is why it pains me when some people say eastern Germans or some other group are "second-class citizens". We can never accept a situation where some people see things this way. Let me say in no uncertain terms that there are no "first-class" or "second-class" citizens in our country.

Instead, there is the one Federal Republic of Germany – its citizens, and with them the many people who live and work here. All of us have a right to be part of the common future. And all of us share responsibility for a good future and peaceful coexistence in our country.

Naturally, it is true that responsibility primarily lies with our policymakers. They must ensure that children enjoy a good education, their parents have good jobs and their grandparents receive good care. But that is not enough. To a large extent, responsibility for our democracy and future also lies with each and every citizen. I understand that some people feel this responsibility as a burden and perhaps even feel overwhelmed by it. It is true that we need tremendous courage in order to be able to repeatedly face up to this responsibility.

But democracy cannot work without courageous democrats. That is the legacy of 1989 to which we are all bound – active democracy needs courageous people, optimists and pragmatists. And those who have lost their courage, feel dis-couraged and turn their backs on democracy are not necessarily opponents of democracy but a loss to it. We must never simply accept this loss with a shrug of our shoulders. Instead, we need to bring such people back into the fold. That is something we can expect of our country and our citizens. Responsibility for our democracy is not held by policymakers alone. All of us hold this responsibility, ladies and gentlemen.

Many people are currently asking what actually remains of the energy and the incredible strength that blazed a trail on the streets of this city 30 years ago and slowly but surely made its way across our country. What is left?

I think these questions are important. It is obvious that strength and energy are what we need at a time when the unanswered questions seem greater than ever – from climate change and digital transformation to inequality and cohesion – but the old answers clearly

no longer hold, a time when we are worried about the future of our democracy and the democracy of the future has not yet taken shape.

I am certain that it would do our country good if we made use of the wide-ranging legacy of the Peaceful Revolution in the present.

Let us build on the strength to bring about change that the East Germans repeatedly demonstrated in 1989 and in the decades afterwards!

Let us build on the courage to take on civic responsibility!

Let us build on the energy to do away with shortcomings and injustices!

Let us build on the willingness to bridge rifts, tear down walls and find joint solutions!

And – why not? Let us build on the Round Tables, where politics were conducted with great passion, in an open-minded and non-ideological way, and with a pragmatic and dialogue-based approach! Let us find ways to put civic participation and decision-making into practice! There are already many exciting ideas at the local level. Our democracy can only become more vigorous as a result. Yes, I believe that it is time for new round tables in this country. Round tables instead of non-stop indignation and hate speech – that is the right way to keep our democracy strong.

In conclusion, yes, it is true that not all the hopes of those who took to the streets here on 9 October 1989 have come to pass. Unity is not complete. It is an ongoing challenge and there is still much to do.

But let us remember that if we rely on our strength, “what could possibly stand in our way now?”

We live in a country where naturally not everything is good.

But it is a country that gives everyone the opportunity to do things better.

“And because we’ll make it better / Let us guard and love our home.”

So let us love this country and look after one another.

We owe that to the people who showed courage 30 years ago, who united this country and who made this the best Germany to ever exist.

Thank you very much.