

**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the ceremony to mark the Day of German Unity
in Potsdam
on 3 October 2020**

We all thought we would be celebrating this 30th Day of German Unity differently! With packed halls and a large public festival here in Potsdam, with thousands of people from all parts of Germany and our neighbouring European countries. A festival that reflects Germany's diversity.

All this we wanted, but it was not to be – with coronavirus, we've almost got used to this. The pandemic has prevented many things, including the Day of Unity festival. Even though the large celebration has been cancelled, the day remains significant. The Day of German Unity is an important moment of joy, of recollection and of encouragement. We remember the Peaceful Revolution, we gladly think back to the fall of the Wall, the end of deadly shots at the border, the end of the all-pervasive spying and dictates by the state; and we are encouraged by the bravery people showed in the autumn of 1989. We look back with gratitude at the end of the Cold War and the dawn of a new age.

And we can look back on the path that we as a country have travelled together – towards becoming a reunited, free, democratic country in the centre of Europe. What good fortune! What an achievement! Of that, we are rightfully proud on this day – and this feeling of pride is something that no pandemic can take away.

Celebrations of great historic turning points are normally singular events – normally. But this year, the commemoration of national unity has two faces. It is a notable coincidence that, this year of all years, the 30th anniversary of reunification coincides almost exactly with the founding of the first German nation state 150 years ago. This chance occurrence brings things into focus. Because these two events could not have been more dissimilar; they were underpinned by fundamentally different ideas.

National unity in 1871 was brought about by force, with iron and blood, after wars with our neighbours; it was built on Prussian dominance, militarism and nationalism. Only few weeks ago, I visited the Bundeswehr Museum of Military History in Dresden – it is a large and good exhibition – and in a corner of the large room, I saw countless old children's books suspended from the ceiling on long strings. In them, I saw small boys who were hardly tall enough to look over the edge of a table – but who were proudly wearing a military uniform and were enthusiastically prepared to go to war. This glorification of militant nationalism, this glorification of war, of a hero's death, from the time that these children could walk – this was the fateful spirit of that day and age. The founding of the German Empire would soon lead to the catastrophe of the First World War.

How different, then, are the images that we all carry with us of the great changes that occurred 30 years ago. People celebrating on top of the Wall, crying tears of joy and embracing each other. Soldiers and officers of the People's Police laying down their guns. Fear had changed sides. A powerful state was incapacitated, because the people refused to follow its orders.

And something else had changed, too. Reunification in 1990 was specifically not achieved through sabre-rattling and wars of conquest. It emerged from international negotiations, was laid down in an agreement, and was shored up by a European and international peaceful order. Generations of politicians built this order after the Second World War, despite all of the setbacks that occurred during the long years of the Cold War.

Today, too, we must constantly remind ourselves that without the peace treaties with Poland and the Soviet Union, without international recognition of the Oder-Neisse line, without the Helsinki process, without NATO, and without the European Union, reunification would not have occurred. Just as it would not have been possible without the courage of Mikhail Gorbachev, who soon will be celebrating his 90th birthday. All this we will not forget, and for this we are sincerely grateful!

Without the United States of America, as well, without its essential commitment to a strong and well-respected post-war order, without its unconditional support for European integration, we would not be reunited today. To this America, we would like to express our sincere thanks on this occasion! As we do to our European friends and neighbours!

Indeed, the Day of German Unity reminds us of how precious an international order is that is today so strongly contested, also in Western societies. We Germans stand behind international cooperation, even though it has become more difficult – particularly now that it has become more difficult. We want to fight for a strong and fair

international order, a task we undertake together with our partners in Europe. That, too, is a lesson drawn and an obligation incurred from our history.

How fundamentally different the world in 1871 was from that of 1990. The German Empire was also governed domestically with an iron hand. Catholics, socialists and Jews were considered "enemies of the Empire" and were persecuted, marginalised and locked up; women were not allowed to participate in politics.

Today, we live in a reunited country, and we do not expect everyone to be the same. "We are the people!" – which after all means: "We all are the people!" Bavarians, those who live on the coast and eastern Germans are all proud of their identity. People who live in the countryside are cut from a different cloth than city-dwellers. Christians, Muslims, Jews and atheists are all part of our country. Eastern and western Germans still exist, but for many this distinction is no longer all-important. Thanks to eastern and western Germany growing together, and thanks to immigration and integration, our country has become more varied and diverse over the past 30 years. The task we face now is finding out, time and again, how the many different people in our country can live together peacefully. It is a task that we all know is not always easy. But it is, after all, an expression of the freedom that is the hallmark of this country, for which so many before us have fought, and without which we do not want to live!

Our unity is a unity in freedom and diversity, a unity that Germany must always also define in the European context! We have decided against national navel-gazing, and instead for a European Germany. This is precisely the path on which we want to continue.

There are people, however, who always search for answers to questions of the future only by looking to the past. Yet how ignorant of history must those individuals be who these days wave the black, white and red flag of the German Empire, or even the imperial war flag, in front of the democratically elected Bundestag! They want a different state, one that is authoritarian and that marginalises in an aggressive manner. They follow in a tradition that does not stand for this republic, for our democracy.

No – today, we stand firmly on the foundation of the freedom movement and the history of democracy! We draw on the ideas of the Hambach Festival, the Paulskirche, the democracy of the Weimar Republic, the Basic Law and the Peaceful Revolution. We are proud of these traditions of freedom and democracy, proud of the historic roots, without averting our eyes from the abyss of the Shoah. And the colours of this history of democracy are black, red and gold – the colours of unity, justice and freedom.

Those are our country's colours, and they are on display in front of our democracy's buildings. We will not allow them to be pushed aside, abused, or co-opted. Black, red and gold are our colours, and we will hold them fast!

Thirty years after reunification – where do we stand today? I think we are living in a paradox. We have by no means come as far as we should have. But at the same time we are much further along than we think.

Without a doubt, the transformation hit people in the east of our country disproportionately harder than in the west. And the traces are visible to this very day, despite all the great progress that has been achieved – not only in people's biographies, but also and especially in their hearts. There are still too many stories of lives that have been upended and hopes that have been betrayed; of degrees rendered worthless; of places where generations are missing because young people did not see a future there and simply moved away.

There still is a significant pay gap between eastern and western Germany. Still too few companies have set up for business to the east of the river Elbe. And eastern Germans at management level in companies, universities and Ministries, in the judiciary, the media and also the Bundeswehr, are still few and far between. We may have all underestimated how long-lived some of the handicaps can be that often still extend down through generations. We cannot rest until these handicaps have been done away with, until a person's prospects no longer hinge on whether they lived in the east or the west.

And we have come to realise one more thing: Growing together is not measured merely in terms of employment statistics and economic data. The feeling of being fully part of society, of being seen and taken seriously as an equal, is determined not only by the size of one's paycheque. It remains our duty – as we heard just now, too, in our small panel discussion – to also grow closer together, to remain curious, and to at least acquaint ourselves with, as well as respect, others' lifestyles and worldviews.

In eastern Germany, the transformation had an impact on every family, whereas in the western part of the country, most people experienced it from afar – and it was often met with indifference. Since reunification – and there are actually studies and statistics on this – nearly all eastern Germans have travelled to the western part of our country, while every fifth western German has still never been to eastern Germany. When eastern Germans talk about themselves, this always includes the west – because the west always plays a dominant role in their lives. Yet many stories told by western Germans do not include a single mention of the east. Too often, the western German perspective is aloof, claiming to be that of all of Germany. Yet life in the East was, after all, not a deviation from the norm; it was a

different life, as Sabine Rennefanz writes. Moreover, stories from eastern Germany have not as naturally become part of our common history, of our shared identity.

Truly sharing with each other the history of division and unity – and of the difficult time of the transformation – that task is not yet complete, even 30 years after reunification.

This includes openly discussing mistakes and injustice, and debunking false myths – regardless of the side on which these persist. Finally opening the records of the Privatisation Agency to the public is not only good, but also important, I think.

Now that 30 years have elapsed, new judgements and arguments will certainly be possible about what was “right” or “wrong”, “unavoidable” or “justifiable”. There is, however, no need for us to argue about what dramatic consequences the shuttering of entire companies had. What the dissolution of the social and cultural structures associated with these companies meant for people in East Germany.

Just how much this colours many people’s views even now, after 30 years of living in a united Germany, and just how much those born after 1990 share these views, is something I have come to understand over my long years as an MP in and for eastern Germany. It is something I continue to be confronted with, time and again, at many round and other shaped tables in the east, at talks that I host. Facing this fact and – on the basis of the available files – agreeing on a joint narrative that is both critical and self-critical, that too is something we must do in the course of writing our history together and ensuring that our common future is not built on myths and suspicions.

I put it to you seriously that this is more than a question of style. It’s not a matter of politeness or decency. This is a question of democracy! For if people feel they are always ignored, if their views are never reflected in political discourse, if they lose their belief in their own ability to shape their future – this is, simply put, not something we can respond to with indifference. Because then our cohesion starts to erode, people lose their trust in politics, and the breeding ground for populism and extremist parties grows and grows.

And that is why we cannot tolerate injustice and adopt an attitude of ignorance. Let us continue to work to improve things, let us remedy grievances wherever they exist, let us listen to each other and learn from each other – be it in the east or the west of our country, in the north or the south. This is a task that needs tackling today.

But that’s only one side – and something else is equally true: we are much further along than we think. For all the tasks that remain, there is so much that has been accomplished.

Leipzig and Rostock today are economically stronger than some cities in the Ruhr region. More people are now moving from western to eastern Germany than in the other direction. And many eastern German universities and research institutes have long since become a magnet for students and academics not only from Germany, not only from Europe, but from around the world.

Time and again I meet impressive people who have founded successful businesses, whose new ideas make their empty cities attractive again, people who bring vigour and pragmatism to every challenge they tackle. People who have done exceedingly well, who have succeeded, and continue to succeed, in the difficult task of driving forward the transformation in small and large towns. On my travels I see a vibrant, overwhelmingly dynamic country, I see more going up than coming down, and in many places the watchword has long ceased to be "imitate the west" and has meanwhile become a confident "Vorsprung Ost", the east is in the lead! The largest factory for electric cars in Europe has just been built in Zwickau in Saxony.

Here in Brandenburg, in Grünheide, just outside the gates of Berlin, Tesla City – a factory for future mobility solutions – is currently being built. It is attracting a throng of creative start-ups and innovation hubs. The unemployment rate here is already lower than in Brandenburg's national partner Land, North Rhine-Westphalia. "It can be so easy," people in Brandenburg say – knowing full well that this isn't always the case.

30 years after reunification, we are seeing not only more and more eastern German success stories. First and foremost we are seeing the many things we have achieved together – precisely because we have worked in concert, pooling our divergent experiences and strengths.

The British historian Timothy Garton Ash recently wrote that the 30 years since reunification have been the best 30 years in Germany's history. This might not square with some people's experiences. But it is true that without the courage of the Peaceful Revolutionaries and the impetus they provided, without the convergence and fusion of ideas from East and West, we would not have become this modern, successful country at the heart of Europe.

The list of things that originated in East Germany and have made our united country better is long and diverse: the so-called environmental libraries, round tables, civic participation, local medical care for all, childcare and – not to forget – special insights as regards East-Central Europe. And quite apart from the specific ideas, I have found many of the new attitudes to be enriching and therapeutic. By way of example let me mention the type of healthy pragmatism that did so much good in certain ideological debates that I know from the

West. And the pressure for change, which also arrived with some delay in the West with its greater amassed inertia.

Because it was our shared aspiration, our country has become more modern and open – and we have come further than we realise. Because we bring together people's experiences from East and West, we are able to do justice to our special role as a vigorous country in the heart of Europe, especially now, when the forces pulling Europe apart are again noticeably gaining strength.

Today we truly do live in the best Germany there has ever been. Let us thank everyone who has helped, in a team effort, to make it such! Let us all delight in it together! And above all, let us build on it for a bright future!

Because that is what we must do – build the future on it. This much is clear: our future will not simply be the continuation of a successful present. Coronavirus has taught us humility. And climate change poses a fundamental challenge to our way of life. Old alliances are waning; the world has become less secure. Many of the certainties we have cherished for years and decades have vanished.

What I want to stress is that humility is not the same as resignation and despondency. On the contrary, we must be brave now, we are allowed to be brave now – just as we were 30 years ago, and during the past 30 years. Why should we, the darlings of fortune at the heart of Europe, be the ones to be despondent? That is the key question. Our country is demonstrating, in these times beset by COVID-19, that we stand together, that we are strong, and that we are acting responsibly. We truly have every reason to be confident. The pandemic will certainly not steal our future.

It is right to be careful. To focus on fighting the virus. But we shouldn't let our concerns paralyse us. We should look at what urgently needs doing. The post-corona future is being negotiated now – worldwide. We have to be on board when it comes to the climate, the digital transformation and cohesion. We have to be good at what we do, and fast, and ready to rethink our approach.

In some cases, we must be ready to radically rethink it. The melting polar ice caps and the raging fires in California are a grim reminder that the future will not wait. The erosion of the international order, the forces tearing at our united Europe, the new rifts in our societies – action is needed to meet all these challenges!

Of course, we can build on our economic strength, on the industry of the people, on their sense of what is necessary and their willingness to lend a hand. And we can build on the experience of the Peaceful Revolution, when the Wall did not simply crumble but was brought tumbling down by hundreds of thousands of individuals who rose up together for a better life. We can build on the tremendous

achievement of 16 million people whose lives were turned upside down, who had to start anew, who learned afresh and reinvented themselves, who organised the transformation and rebuilt eastern Germany. We need that courage, that drive, again today.

Let me conclude with a suggestion. If it is the case that the Peaceful Revolution can still be a source of encouragement in these times, let us create a site to commemorate this courage!

The Monument to German Unity will be soon erected as a central symbol in the heart of Berlin. Already today there are many sites recalling the oppressive East German regime, the Berlin Wall, the Stasi prisons and the re-education centres. Remembering these places is important – very important indeed.

But don't we need some prominent place, more than a monument, to commemorate the Peaceful Revolutionaries' potent ideas about freedom and democracy? A place that commemorates the dreams, both fulfilled and unfulfilled, of a better and more just future. A place that recalls that the East Germans took their future into their own hands and freed themselves.

It would also be a place that pays tribute to the many men and women, known and unknown, who defied the state with candles in their hands. A place that commemorates the civil rights activists who were the face and mouthpiece of the people's anger and discontent, as well as their hopes. A place that says how the story of the Peaceful Revolution went on. A place where exchange and reflection can occur – about how we became who we are today and what others can learn from this.

There are also very practical reasons why such a place does not yet exist. In the GDR, the civil rights activists for the most part met secretly in private homes or on church property. After the Wall came down, the central Round Table met in various locations.

The German revolutionary movement of 1848 is inextricably linked with the Paulskirche in Frankfurt. The first Republic is inseparable from the Weimar National Assembly. The Basic Law has its ties with Herrenchiessee Palace in Bavaria and Museum Koenig in Bonn.

But there is no such prominent place associated with the Peaceful Revolution. Wouldn't the 30th anniversary of reunification be a suitable occasion to think about how we could change this? The Peaceful Revolution brought down a dictatorship. It is one of our country's finest hours and will always have a lasting place in Germany's history of democracy.

Remembrance is never an end in itself. History has no end. We are today forced to come to the painful conclusion that the struggle for freedom and democracy is never won – anywhere in the world. It

continues, and it's up to us to pick up the banner over and over again. My advice is: let us accept this challenge! We do this in full awareness of what happened in 1989, of the courage and determination of the civil rights activists and the Peaceful Revolution. We do it knowing full well how much strength was summoned by those who rebuilt eastern Germany – in the east and the west! Let us draw strength for the many tasks ahead by recalling all that has been achieved!

The Federal Republic of Germany in 2020 is a country forged by East and West Germans, by natives and immigrants alike. It is a country that, from the victory of ideas in 1989, draws confidence that responsibility will always triumph over control, and freedom will triumph over oppression. Given the present developments in this world and in Europe, the legacy of 1989 has never been more important than it is today.