



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
before the Riksdag of the Kingdom of Sweden  
in Stockholm, Sweden,  
on 7 September 2021**

Thank you very much for your warm welcome to this House, Mr President, to the very heart of Swedish democracy, esteemed Members of Parliament,

My wife and I are most delighted to be able to accept His Majesty's invitation to travel to the Kingdom of Sweden on a state visit today, and we are more than thrilled by the warm hospitality that we are enjoying now.

Sweden numbers among the Federal Republic of Germany's most important and closest partners. The origins of our ties stretch back far in history, right back to Hanseatic times. For over 400 years, the tower of the German Church has risen above Stockholm's skyline, reminding us of our common history. It is the monument to and the symbol of our long and chequered common past.

I would like to thank you for the great honour to be able to speak to you at the Swedish Riksdag today – a place that gives guests from Germany such as myself an opportunity to experience the uniqueness and idiosyncrasy of Swedish democracy up close. For example, I have learned that the Members of the Riksdag are not seated here in the Chamber according to their parliamentary group, but by constituency. It is not your fellow party member who sits beside you, but rather your neighbour. Regional identity continues to play an important role also in Germany, as you know – but we have yet to come up with this idea.

Whether parliamentary business is conducted a bit more peacefully as a result is another matter. At any rate, this is a good example of how different our democracies are – for all the unity we enjoy on fundamental issues – and of how much we can learn from one another. Many Germans have long admired Sweden's social model, its great achievements in the area of gender equality, its forward-looking family policy and social cohesion. In the midst of social change and increasing fragmentation in

the party system in our countries, we Germans admire the ability of Swedish politics to, time and again, forge stable coalitions and governments capable of taking action. If I consider the upcoming elections to the Bundestag in Germany, then we might have to take a leaf out of this book in Berlin in the near future.

Sweden's foreign policy also enjoys great respect in Germany, a foreign policy that, like almost no other, places inalienable human rights and the humanitarian imperative at the heart of its actions. This policy is often both a source of inspiration and a challenge for us Germans. In these increasingly rough times on the world stage, it is good to hold discussions also about this in a spirit of trust. How can and should we deal with the world as it is without losing sight of the objective of a better world at the same time? How can we, as democracies, strike the right balance between what is non-negotiable for us and what we have to negotiate with those who do not share our objectives and values?

As you can see, we are excited to visit your country, and I speak for our entire delegation when I say that, for us Germans, Sweden is a fascinating, a greatly admired country – not only touristically, but also socially and politically. We can learn a great deal from Sweden.

We are meeting in turbulent times. This applies not just to international policy. Our liberal democracy with its welfare state is being challenged from both within and without. The world has long since ceased to revolve around Europe. Our way of life is no longer the unquestioned yardstick and object of human desire and social development– if indeed it ever was. Not only our economy, but also our liberal democratic order is facing fierce international competition. Countries such as China and Russia want to prove that security and prosperity can also be attained without democracy and freedom. And vocal minorities here at home are fishing for votes by triggering authoritarian and identitarian reflexes and pretending that there is also such a thing as an illiberal form of democracy – something that I consider to be a contradiction in terms. Democracy is either liberal – or it does not exist.

The competition between political systems is also reflected in the competition between economic areas. Around the globe, major companies are emerging whose head offices are located neither in the US nor in the European Union, as well as major research institutes whose working language is not necessarily English. With growing, self-confident middle classes in Asia, Africa and Latin America, an incredibly strong demand is growing, and along with it the supply of skilled professionals. The rich democracies around the Atlantic are not the only ones who are engaged in cutting-edge research and who are able to develop new technologies. On the contrary, others are further down the line when it comes to critical technologies of the future such as semi-conductors and

battery cells. Innovation has long since ceased to be the exclusive purview of us Europeans.

This fierce competition is making itself felt in Europe, not only economically, but also socially and politically. Our prosperity and our competitiveness form the material basis for the strong social cohesion of which our countries are rightly proud. The welfare state is one of Europe's most important achievements; it ensures balance in our societies when they are at risk of getting out of equilibrium. And it is precisely this balance that is coming under pressure in our two countries and throughout Europe. Everywhere we look, social milieus are changing ever more rapidly; everywhere we look, there is migration and demographic change; everywhere we look, the digital transformation and industrial change are turning the world of work on its head. To my mind, migration and integrating migrants in particular are currently the social question, perhaps even the social question for Europe's future. And this is not only a challenge and a political minefield, but also a great opportunity. I for one am convinced that isolationism is not the solution for a self-confident, strong and globally competitive Europe.

In short, our democracy is locked in a competition – and it must deliver, it must prove its worth. When I consider the years and decades ahead of us, the great transformation that lies before us, then I see a triad of challenges: the more rigorous protection of the climate and environment, preserving our economic strength with innovation, and all-important social justice, without which the upheavals of the coming years will put social harmony at risk. It is within this triad of objectives that the success of our ambitions will be judged. It is within this triad that liberal democracy will prove that it withstands the test of time.

Our countries, Germany and Sweden, are – in this threefold perspective – more like-minded than only few other countries in the world, and also better positioned than almost all others. Climate and environmental awareness are firmly established in our societies and our industrial sectors are worldwide pioneers. Our research community is first class and the roots of our welfare state run deep.

All of this makes Sweden and Germany natural partners when it comes to developing convincing responses to the great challenges of our generation. And we can and should also inspire our partners in the European Union with this self-confidence. We have something to offer the world. It is this ambition, this passion for new ideas and the irrepressible will to help shape the world of tomorrow that we need in this crisis-ridden Europe of recent years. Only when Europe perceives innovation and transformation as a strength and not as a tiresome imposition will we keep ahead of the global competition.

Belief in progress has been a characteristic trait of Swedes and Germans for many decades; the confidence that we can make people's lives better thanks to innovation and inventive genius – and not only for

the privileged few, but for as many people as possible. We must preserve this confidence, this passion for the future – and we can inspire Europe with this too.

If Europe is supposed to be a continent of ideas, we really ought to be redrawing our maps already. Because when it comes to innovative power, Sweden is not situated on the northern fringes of the continent, but at the heart of Europe. Swedish inventive genius has transformed the whole world, while Swedish academics are an integral part of a global network – and that is not just a recent development. Back in the Renaissance, in the earliest beginnings of European enlightenment, Swedish and German reformers gathered in Wittenberg to discuss Martin Luther's theses. Our two countries' universities have enjoyed close ties for many centuries – and to this day, German students like to come to Sweden and German scientists are keen to visit your country's institutes. The Nobel prizes inspire excited curiosity around the world, as does the Swedish aviation and space industry – we will visit the European Space and Sounding Rocket Range in the north of your country the day after tomorrow. Whoever has a smartphone in their pocket uses Swedish technology – including Bluetooth radio communication, which was largely developed in Sweden. We have long been aware of the fact that everyday objects such as Tetra Pak and pipe wrenches are Swedish inventions. The same applies to intelligently packaged furniture for screwing together yourself. As a German, I am, of course, particularly interested in the powerful Swedish automobile industry, with regard to both existing cooperation – tomorrow we will be the guests of Scania – and the competition that keeps it alive. Sweden is a country of inventors – one of the most attractive countries for investment in the world – and itself invests three percent of its economic power in research and development.

Our innovation partnership is particularly close on an issue that is shaping our future like no other: climate change. I am delighted to see the intensity with which our two countries are cooperating on this issue, whether in setting goals for CO2 reduction in Europe or in determining the climate policy focus of the COVID-19 Recovery Fund.

Yet our countries' efforts to make a fair contribution to limiting global warming go well beyond this. Our enterprises are working on the e-mobility of the future and on obtaining renewable energy from hydroelectric and wind power. Sweden is building the largest wind farm in Europe and plans to produce the world's greenest battery. Moreover, we should not forget that thousands of young people in Sweden and Germany are going out into our streets and public squares and calling for more ambitious goals and more engagement in the area of climate change mitigation – and essentially, they are right.

Not only with their calls for us to act more quickly and more extensively, but also with regard to our future in global competition. Is

it not the case that fighting climate change harbours a great opportunity for Europe? Are our ideas, our innovative potential, our capital, not most effectively invested in the areas of renewable energy, sustainable industry, climate-neutral mobility and environmentally friendly lifestyles? Billions of people all over the world are striving for ownership and prosperity – and how could Europe better position itself in the competition between economic systems, what more worthwhile contribution to the future of this world could we make than to offer all these people a way to live in prosperity without destroying their natural livelihoods?

I believe that, deep in their hearts, many people in Europe sense that such an approach could be a good path to our future – with skilled jobs, a booming industry and leading research institutions. We as Europeans have the ability to develop a competitive option for the future, and thereby do justice to the great task of transformation that we share. Many of our political initiatives are already working in this direction, and many of our enterprises are already planning with this goal in mind. Now it is up to our governments and parliaments to do everything they can to support this transformation and at the same time ensure that the necessary social policy is in place. I am delighted that the European Commission has presented an ambitious programme with the European Green Deal – and one thing is clear, which is that the people in Europe expect the member states – with countries like Sweden and Germany leading the way – to take concrete and substantial steps to tackle this major task. After all, future generations will judge us by our success, not by our pronouncements.

When I look at the recent past, I have no doubt that we can succeed in this endeavour. The COVID-19 pandemic has tested our mettle like hardly any other crisis in recent decades. It has hit us hard, both as societies and as individuals. But there is one thing I want to put on the record today: we can be pleased about and proud of how far solidarity in Europe has brought us, despite all the teething problems. Fortunately, we noticed at an early stage that neither Germany nor Sweden nor any other country could emerge strong and healthy from the crisis if our neighbours were not also strong and healthy. The solidarity demonstrated in procuring vaccines and the strong European Recovery Fund were urgently needed – indeed, I believe that they have kept our united Europe alive.

Our journeys through the pandemic differed, in our individual countries we wrestled to find the right strategy, and we Germans observed Sweden's approach continuously with great interest and lively debate. Yet despite all the differences between our COVID-19 strategies, we have shared one fundamental conviction from the first day of the pandemic: the only successful way out of the pandemic in the long term is the way of science and medicine. I do not believe it is merely coincidence that two of the first available vaccines were largely

developed and manufactured by companies from Germany and Sweden. No, this innovative power is not an exceptional case in the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been the driving force behind our success for a long time and it is the reason for our conviction that we have something to offer the world.

If we keep proving that this is the case, if we take the lead in Europe in this area and pass on our enthusiasm to others, we will not only secure our prosperity, but we will also show the world that our liberal democracy based on social justice is alive and exerts a great attraction. Where could this be better illustrated than in this distinguished parliament? Democracy in Europe has a long tradition – and, what is more, it has a future.