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**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a state banquet hosted by the President of Ireland,
Michael D. Higgins,
in Dublin/Ireland
on 27 October 2021**

“Here in the north the stars are high and distant,” writes the Irish author Colm Tóibín in his new novel about the German writer Thomas Mann.

“Here in the north” refers to Lübeck, the protagonist’s hometown, but Lübeck and Dublin are on almost exactly the same latitude, so I think we can confidently assume that one sees the sky from the same angle in both cities.

Countless Irish poets have sung the praises of this sky and brought the “distant stars” that bit closer to us grateful readers – Yeats and Wilde, Beckett and Boland, Joyce, Heaney and Shaw, and all the other great women and men of letters with whom your country has been so abundantly blessed, and without whom one could scarcely imagine our libraries and bookshops in Germany.

For my wife and me – and I can hardly believe it myself! – this is our first-ever visit to Ireland and I can assure you that we are filled with anticipation and curiosity about your country.

We have heard so many good things about Ireland and so we already know that it is a stunningly beautiful, fascinating and highly diverse part of the world. It is rich both in culture and natural beauty. It is as steeped in history as it is forward-looking and modern. It is as long-suffering in its lengthy struggle for freedom and independence as it is optimistic and energetic in its endeavours to foster a just democratic society and a more peaceful world.

We, the guests from Germany, have the privilege of experiencing all of these elements during our state visit: From the beauty of nature in Connemara and the Wicklow Mountains to cultural and linguistic diversity, not only here in the capital in the Museum of Literature Ireland and the venerable Trinity College, but also in the West, at the University

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of Limerick and in the Gaeltacht, where "Ros na Rún" is filmed, and hurling, a sport unfamiliar to the vast majority of even the most ardent of German sports fans. Ancient history in the legendary Book of Kells and the young, vibrant future at the start-ups in the Dublin Docklands. The painful history of Irish freedom fighters in the Garden of Remembrance, as well as the lively democratic spirit of the people earlier today during the discussion on the Citizens' Assembly.

My dear Michael Higgins, my dear hosts, on behalf of my entire delegation, thank you for sharing the richness of Ireland with us!

It wasn't entirely coincidental that I mentioned Colm Tóibín and his book about Thomas Mann at the start of my speech. I was not merely quoting one of the many examples of the dynamic Irish literary scene. I reckon that Ireland produces a greater number of exciting new works of literature per capita than almost any other country. And my dear Michael, I reckon that Ireland is one of the only places where you will find a president who actually reads most of these books and has even added several of his own works to these literary riches!

No, I mentioned this book by Colm Tóibín because it creates a wonderful link between our countries, as well as a link to the big question that occupies you and me as presidents of our countries, namely the question about the past and the future of our democracy!

My dear Michael, we cannot compare our countries' histories, and nor should we do so. Only one thing is certain: the path to freedom and democracy was long for both our countries. Perhaps more than any other illustrious German, Thomas Mann exemplifies the circuitous and often contradictory path my country took to democracy, as Colm Tóibín so wisely and subtly describes in his novel.

But when it comes to the future of democracy and its renewal and self-assertion in this rapidly changing world, I believe that our two countries have a great deal in common. And above all, they have a great deal to do! We can all feel how much democracy, the rule of law and international law are being put to the test around the world; how other powers with other ideas about society are on the rise; and how much even in our own countries, in the united Europe and among our friends on the other side of the Atlantic "it has become precarious to take democracy for granted", as Thomas Mann put it over 80 years ago.

We, the people of Ireland and Germany, know that we need to work for a fair form of globalisation, as well as for peace, human rights and international law worldwide. This joint engagement was epitomised in the literal handing over of the baton from Germany to Ireland in the UN Security Council at the start of the year.

And at the same time, we know that only a strong, united Europe can be strong in the world. Only a strong, united Europe has something to offer the world! And that is why European cohesion is a particular

concern of ours these days. The Brexit process was difficult and painful. But we Germans know that Ireland belongs inextricably to Europe. As Heinrich Böll put it, Ireland is "the glowing heart of Europe".

At the same time I hope that the people in Ireland know that Germany stands unwaveringly with their country. And that is not all. Despite the many challenges that Brexit creates, we can also open new doors to each other in trade and business, as well as in research and culture. And in the case of young people in particular – students, apprentices and those learning languages – a new momentum has already started. I would be pleased if our governments would lend it additional impetus, for example in the fields of education and culture. My dear friends, I believe that we should expand this German-Irish exchange and make use of these very concrete new opportunities. The time has come for us to do so!

When we talk about the future of democracy, this always makes us look at our own societies, at the fear of polarisation and the search for cohesion in growing diversity, the search for something to hold onto and guide us in an age of permanent acceleration, as analysed by Hartmut Rosa.

I am grateful that we will also discuss burning unresolved questions in our own societies with Hartmut Rosa and many other Irish and German interlocutors during this trip. That is what counts in the end. Despite all the engagement needed in the wider world, I believe that to truly foster democracy, we need to do so at home by ensuring it remains vibrant and renewing it at the heart of our society. In this context in particular, I am looking forward to discussing and learning new things here in Ireland and perhaps even to taking some ideas home with me from Ireland's courage to redefine itself, as exemplified by its Citizens' Assembly.

Allow me to conclude by saying a few personal words. When you travel into the unknown, to a new country, you feel lucky to have a friend who takes you by the hand. And that is exactly what I feel today! My dear Michael, in a few days' time, you will celebrate the tenth anniversary of your inauguration as President of Ireland. And just like my predecessor Joachim Gauck, I look back fondly on the many meetings and talks of the past years with you, especially your state visit to us in Germany in 2019 before the pandemic struck. I feel lucky to have not only a counterpart in you, but also an interlocutor who is as well-read as he is eloquent. I thank you, we thank you, for the time and the particular attention you and your wife are devoting to us during this visit.

My dear Michael, my dear Sabina Higgins, allow me to raise my glass to your good health, to new opportunities and to the friendship between Ireland and Germany.