



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
following his re-election by the 17th Federal Convention
on 13 February 2022
in Berlin**

I thank you! I am grateful for the trust of those who voted for me. And I ask for the trust of those who felt unable to do so today. The office of Federal President transcends party lines and I promise you that I will carry on acting accordingly. I bear a responsibility towards everyone living in our country. I will be non-partisan, yes – but I am not neutral when it comes to the matter of democracy. Anyone who fights for democracy will have me on their side. Anyone who attacks it will have me as an opponent.

I am very moved that you have entrusted me with this office for a further five years. For me, this is both an honour and a joy. However, my joy would be greater if the Federal Convention could take place under different circumstances, without the restrictions of the pandemic. Even more importantly, my joy would be greater if this Federal Convention did not come at a time of worry, worry about peace in Europe.

The absence of war on our continent has become the norm for us – protected by friends, living in peace with our neighbours, reunited for more than thirty years. What good fortune for our country! At the current time, however, we are learning anew what we could have known: peace is not something we can take for granted. We have to constantly work on it, engaging in dialogue but, whenever necessary, also demonstrating clarity, deterrence and resolve. We need all of that now.

We need to be clear that, although we can spend a lot of time discussing the reasons for the growing alienation between Russia and the West, one thing is beyond discussion: we are directly faced with the threat of a military conflict, a war in Eastern Europe. And Russia bears responsibility for that.

It is impossible to misinterpret Russia's troop build-up. It poses a threat to Ukraine and that is the intention. But the people there have a right to live without fear and threats, a right to self-determination and

sovereignty. No country in the world has the right to destroy that – and we will have a resolute response for anyone who tries to do so!

Fear is growing not only in Ukraine, but in many Eastern European countries. That is why we stand by the side of the Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians; we stand shoulder to shoulder with Poles, Slovaks, Romanians and all Alliance partners. They can rely on us. Germany is part of NATO and the European Union. Without them, we Germans would not be living in unity and freedom. We will not forget that. We categorically stand by our commitments within this Alliance.

Our community is the community of liberal democracies which places the strength of the law before the law of the strong. I am well aware that democratic institutions are regarded as weak by authoritarian rulers. Wherever power is concentrated in the hands of one person, gatherings such as this are despised as meaningless rituals. There, democratic decision-making processes are regarded as weakness, the law as a shackle, efforts to ensure the freedom and contentment of citizens as naive. However, I can only warn President Putin: do not underestimate the strength of democracy!

Why am I so sure of that? Our democracy is strong because it has the support of its citizens. Because it derives its strength not from oppression, not from threats to the outside world or fear within. Because it has more to offer people than ideas of national grandeur and rule over others.

Democracies are not all the same, no. However, in essence they share the same characteristics. And another thing which connects us is that we do not seek external confrontation. The same message is coming from Washington, Paris and Berlin these days: we want peaceful neighbourly relations characterised by mutual respect. Soon we will be marking the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act: I hope that on this anniversary we in East and West will not be forced to admit that the efforts to ensure lasting peace in Europe have failed. Instead, let us strive to renew this precious legacy. I call on President Putin: loosen the noose around Ukraine's neck! Join us in seeking a way to preserve peace in Europe!

Our democracy is strong – today's Convention is another self-confident demonstration of this strength. Look around you: the fact that you are all here today, from all around our country, despite the difficulties the pandemic has caused, shows that we honour our democratic institutions. We know that this democracy thrives on the plurality you all represent today.

What is more, this Convention demonstrates that there is a large majority in this country, far removed from the structures of government and opposition, who want to see our democracy strengthened. That is

how I understand the mandate you have given me. And I will do my best to that end!

However, I would like to take this opportunity to express my respect for the other candidates in this election. Allow me, Professor Trabert, to address an additional word to you: your candidacy has shone the spotlight on an issue which deserves more attention – the plight of the poorest and most vulnerable in our country. For that you not only deserve respect. I hope, too, that the impetus you have provided will remain. As you know, we have both long been concerned with the issue of homelessness. Why don't we look and see whether we can work together to focus more attention on this pressing issue? I would be delighted to discuss this with you.

Distinguished delegates, let us not underestimate the strength of democracy! However, let us also not underestimate the challenges it faces! During the pandemic, opponents of democracy, both from within and from the outside, have been sowing the seeds of doubt about our ability to act effectively and about our institutions, scientific freedom and the free media.

Yes, it is true that our way out of the pandemic is not devoid of detours. Mistakes and miscalculations have been made, in Germany as well. However, show me one authoritarian system which could have mastered the pandemic better! Is it not the case that the self-appointed strong men around the world have tarnished their own mystique in this crisis? The emperors with their fancy clothes, their accusations and conspiracy theories were ultimately more or less naked, were they not? The crucial breakthrough in the fight against the pandemic – the development of a vaccine at record speed – took place here, thanks to free research, thanks to brilliant researchers and courageous entrepreneurs, here in Germany in Mainz, in cooperation with our partners in Europe and the United States. Whilst there is a place for critical self-examination, we shouldn't hide our light under a bushel.

When I look at our country, I see people who have struggled through this pandemic month after month – not because they were forced to do so by an iron fist, but rather because they are trying to do the right thing, to endure, to tackle the situation, again and again. The overwhelming majority in our country has been acting responsibly and in a spirit of solidarity – for two long years, which feel like an eternity to many. As your old and your new Federal President, I want to thank you most sincerely for this huge joint effort. Thank you very much!

However, we are also witnessing something else. We see that frustration is spreading after two years of this pandemic, also disappointment and increasingly irritability, too. We have worn ourselves out arguing about the right way forward, in arguments which have also taken place far beyond the world of politics – in companies and in schools, among friends and colleagues, in every family. The pandemic

has inflicted deep wounds on our society. I want to help to heal these wounds.

To those who tear open these wounds, who spread hatred and lies amid the suffering caused by the pandemic, who create myths of a "coronavirus dictatorship", who do not even shy away from threats and violence – against police officers, care staff or local mayors – to them I say this: I'm here and I'm staying. As Federal President I will not shy away from controversy. Democracy needs controversy. There is a red line, however – and that is hatred and violence. And we must preserve this red line in this country!

I fear that the opponents of democracy will not grow any quieter after the pandemic; they will look for new issues and especially new fears, of which there are plenty in this day and age. Will our children still enjoy the same standard of living as we do? Can I keep up with the advance of the digital world? Is our country falling behind in global competition? Worries like these are fertile soil for those political operators whose tool is fear. And I am afraid they are taking the same approach with the major issue of our time, the fight against climate change. This huge task – the transformation towards a sustainable way of life on our planet – is not one that any country or any government has simply sought out. It is nothing less than the central question of humanity's survival.

And this task brings us into an era of transformation and upheaval. More transformation, hope some, more upheaval, fear others. I strongly believe that, if we want to turn all the upheavals into a shared transformation, then it will take more than just state regulation. We will need to build bridges! Bridges between the generations; between long-standing inhabitants and new arrivals; between start-ups and furnaces; between the city and the countryside; between talks in the pub and talks in Brussels and Berlin. In short, we need bridges towards the future that are broad and strong enough for absolutely everyone to cross. That is what I intend to work towards!

And I want to take the conversation around the country, to every corner of our society, far away from the bubble of the capital that fails to reach many people. I want to visit places where people are experiencing loss – and, yes, there are losses. There are places which are having to completely reinvent themselves. None of them lies on the margins of society. They are all needed for the future. They are all needed for a new togetherness. It remains our experience that transformation will succeed only if the weaker, too, have something to gain from it. And we remain certain that every one we lose is a loss for democracy!

More than anything else, such conversations need one thing: time. If we do not want to be constantly talking at cross purposes, if we do not want to get lost in wrong conflicts, then we must take time. I will

engage in time travel, and take my time to travel through our country. My second term of office begins on 18 March, the anniversary of the March Revolution and of the first free elections in the GDR. I will begin my journey through the regions on this proud day in our democracy's history and – quite consciously – I will spend the first day of my new term in eastern Germany. I am looking forward to it.

Distinguished delegates, the trust which you have shown in this office and in me is a precious gift. I promise you that I will treat it with care and respect.

A Federal President cannot reinstate old certainties. Of course he can't. However, he can help lessen the fear of the future and instil confidence. He can give a reminder of how many crises we have successfully overcome in seventy years, of how the East Germans brought down a dictatorship, and of how we helped build up a united Europe. He can encourage people to assume responsibility and support them wherever they are contributing to society and seeking solutions for the problems of our time.

Ultimately, trust in democracy is nothing other than trust in ourselves. After all, our Basic Law does not state "All good things come from above", but rather "All state authority is derived from the people". That is the pledge contained in our constitution for us citizens. However, it also constitutes a pledge among citizens to take on responsibility and not to withdraw. That is the twofold nature of democracy: it is both a pledge and a set of expectations. Democracy is an imposition. And encouraging people to embrace this imposition – that is precisely my task.

There are some who forecast the demise of liberal democracy, others who say that this century will be the age of authoritarian rulers, of the strong arm of power. You can tell that I don't think much of such doomsaying. No, only one thing is certain: the future is open. And nothing and no one, no autocrat, no ideology, has better responses to this open future than democracy.

So let us not be self-effacing! Let us not be fearful! Let us approach the future boldly! Let the authoritarian rulers build their ice palaces and golf resorts. None of that is stronger, nothing shines more brightly than the idea of freedom and democracy in the hearts and minds of people.

Each and every one of you, here and throughout the country, who is contributing to society, who cares for more than just the self, is winning a little piece of future for us all. Each and every one of you who is engaged, either professionally or as a volunteer, in the local council or in an association, is fighting for the future of democracy. Each and every one of you who is rolling up their sleeves, on a small or large scale, is highlighting the power of democracy.

My fellow Germans, let us work together! I am looking forward to what lies ahead!