



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the event to mark the 70th anniversary of  
Atlantik-Brücke  
in Berlin  
on 13 October 2022**

It's a great pleasure for me to be here with you today, at what we might call Atlantik-Brücke's seventieth birthday celebration. I see many familiar faces in the audience, from the spheres of business, culture, and politics, as well as from various associations. But I also see young people who Atlantik-Brücke supports, in particular through its Young Leaders and New Bridge programs. In other words, I see people who share a common interest, and who are doing what Lucius D. Clay once said about Atlantik-Brücke, namely that the organization's purpose "is to try to develop between people of good will an understanding of each other's problems." This came from Clay, who is considered the father of the Luftbrücke, as the Berlin Airlift was called, and who therefore knew a thing or two about bridge-building.

So that is precisely what Atlantik-Brücke has been doing for 70 years now: bringing people of good will together for the joint transatlantic project, solving problems, promoting mutual understanding, and in the process strengthening freedom, security, trust, and friendship.

The founders of Atlantik-Brücke – Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, Erik Blumenfeld and Ernst Friedlaender, Eric M. Warburg and Gotthard von Falkenhausen – were all either opponents of National Socialism or, as Jewish Germans, had feared for their lives under the Nazi dictatorship. A few years after the betrayal of all civilized values that was the Holocaust, they wanted to lead Germany back into the community of democratic states. They knew that a free Germany needed close ties to the United States to face up to the danger posed by totalitarianism, in the form of the Soviet Union. Moreover, it was the best way to ensure that Germany's misguided past would not repeat itself, and to give liberal democracy in the young Federal Republic a secure future.

Atlantik-Brücke has spanned a bridge over the Atlantic for the past seventy years, one that so many have crossed in both directions; it has also played a key role in helping the Federal Republic return to the fold of, and firmly anchor itself in, the political and cultural mainstream of the West. Today, Germany and North America have an abundance of very close ties – so many economic, cultural, and scientific connections that have grown over decades, in good times and bad, and have proven resilient in crises and conflicts, as well as during changes of government on both sides. I am thinking here of the more than 4500 German companies that have branch offices in the U.S., and of the 700,000 jobs that German corporations have created there. I am thinking of the many thousands of German middle and high school students who go on an exchange to the U.S. or to Canada every year. I am also thinking of the most recent Deutschlandjahr USA in 2019, during which more than one thousand events were held in all fifty states, and new friendships were established between Germans and Americans.

You, dear members of Atlantik-Brücke, are a part of this great tradition of German-American friendship. Today, I commend all of you, who contribute to Atlantik-Brücke, who keep this forum and, with it, the transatlantic project, alive as its members and guests, independent of their political affiliation. Thank you for everything you do. I expressly want to thank the chairman – you, dear Sigmar Gabriel. Thank you all very much!

When Atlantik-Brücke, originally Transatlantik-Brücke, was established seventy years ago in Hamburg, Germany had been cast out of the international community. While in the eastern part of our country, those who had lived under Nazi dictatorship were once again made subject to a system in which they lacked freedom, the western part of Germany embarked on a path to political, cultural, and economic reconstruction, which could lead to success only with substantial support from the United States.

It was the Marshall Plan that enabled the ruined Germany to start afresh, economically and morally. It was the American soldiers who had been stationed in Germany after the end of the war who secured our efforts toward a democratic rebirth. It was the educational work of the various American institutes that shaped an entire generation of young Germans and gave rise to their devotion to America.

After Germany's first democracy had failed, with such fatal consequences, we relearned democracy and lived it anew after 1945, thanks to the key support of the United States. The Americans were the first to believe in German democracy again. And that is how the young Federal Republic became a recognised, active member of the international community, rising to prominence at the U.S.'s side, joining NATO and, ultimately, the United Nations. All this would have been inconceivable without the United States.

Throughout the decades that spanned the Cold War, and after the collapse of the totalitarian systems in the Eastern bloc, the transatlantic partnership has always been a community of shared values that was aware of its calling: in international relations, putting the strength of the law before the law of the strong; campaigning for an order based on a strong foundation of just and reliable rules; and protecting the principles of democracy and the rule of law, as well as the right to free self-determination of peoples and – especially important right now – the inviolability of frontiers.

Therefore, on February 24 of this year, we indeed witnessed an epochal shift. Beyond violating international law, Russia's brutal attack on Ukraine irreversibly destroyed Europe's peaceful order that had emerged during the five decades since the conclusion of the Helsinki Final Act. We are seeing the horrible images of air strikes on Kyiv and of wounded and killed civilians. Since February 24, unimaginable suffering has been brought upon millions of Ukrainians.

We stand firmly at Ukraine's side – in humanitarian terms, economically, and militarily: Germany has meanwhile become one of Ukraine's most important supporters with a view to strengthening its defensive capabilities, providing not only Gepard self-propelled antiaircraft guns and ammunition, but also howitzers, multiple launch rocket systems, and state-of-the-art positioning technology, which have helped it defend itself against Russian artillery attacks. And by providing the Iris T air defense system – so modern that it has not even been made available to the Bundeswehr – we are helping to better protect people in battered Ukrainian cities from new Russian air strikes.

Ukraine needs our unwavering solidarity as it defends itself against Russia's brutal attack. And we will support Ukraine for as long as it takes – so that Ukraine can defend its freedom and sovereignty, and so that Ukrainians can keep their country, which they have been building up for more than thirty years since regaining independence. Of this Ukraine can be certain. We will also not accept Russia's sham referendums in Ukraine, this illegal shifting of borders brought about by force.

Looking back on everything that has been written after the fall of the Wall, our country's unification, and the East-West confrontation, how great was the hope for a breakthrough of liberal democracy around the world. Today, we know the much-talked-about "end of history" never actually happened. The Balkan wars, international terrorism, and 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, the illegal annexation of Crimea, the conflict with Iran over its nuclear programme – a steady series of new crises and conflicts has passed through the world's political spotlight.

In terms of Europe's security, nothing is as serious as Russia's attack against Ukraine. Putin has torn down the last lines of dialogue, the last pillars of our peace in Europe. And, despite all our efforts, we were not able to prevent this war. The idea of cooperative security in

Europe, which many in this room have worked to build up over the last decades, has now been relegated to the history books; Gorbachev's dream of a "common European house" is now over. A nightmare has taken its place.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with the United States and Canada, and with our European partners, we have given Russia a clear response. NATO, the G7, and the European Union stand as one, and with determination, at the side of Ukraine. And we stand in defense of our Allied territory.

As visible reassurance, Germany is sending the Bundeswehr to provide military protection of NATO's eastern flank, together with many other Allies. We are underscoring this with our pledge of an additional 100 billion euro for the Bundeswehr, funds that will be spent on the long term reinforcement of our own defensive capabilities and on strengthening NATO. The events of the last eight months have reinforced the transatlantic Alliance's bonds, and we now stand probably more united than ever since the end of the Cold War.

What we want is for suffering and death to end soon in Ukraine. And I am certain that the Ukrainians want this more than anyone. But we cannot simply bring an end to this war by wishing for it. Russia is commanding an invading army, and Ukraine is defending its national territory, its independence, freedom, and sovereignty. Russia can end this war any day, should it decide to. Yet Putin has become entrenched in his imperial obsession. And that is why we should not delude ourselves: at present, there is no end to this war in sight.

What does that mean, beyond the current threat we are facing? Yes, we must strengthen our defenses. And yes, we must increase our ability to engage in conflicts. This message has gotten through to Germany. But military strength alone will not be sufficient.

In this world marked by a wide range of interdependencies, in a world in which the strength of established international organizations is in decline, and in a world that is recentering itself around old and new focuses of power, one in which the democracies of the liberal West must face up to the spheres of influence of Russia and China – in this world, there is a much greater danger of regional disputes growing into global conflicts. We must re-determine our position in this world and, at the same time, redouble our efforts to help others understand us and that for which we stand.

In other words, if the West is to be more than just a geographic direction, it must of course remain firm on its principles, yet at the same time be an open project. One in which people from all parts of the world – including regions with other histories, other experiences, and other religions – can participate.

We are specifically not fighting an us versus them battle, one that pits the free West against the rest. Many countries cannot be placed clearly on either side. They are neither liberal democracies nor authoritarian regimes. They do not desire to join one camp, one party to the conflict, or an old or new bloc.

In March, in response to the war in Ukraine, we witnessed this at the UN General Assembly: 141 countries called what is happening in Ukraine a war – but not even half of them wanted to explicitly condemn Russia as being the party responsible for causing the war. The question is, does that mean the other half is thereby positioning itself firmly in the Russian camp? I think the answer is no.

These are countries that, while they do not consider themselves part of the West, do for the most part share our interest in reliable rules, economic development, and exchange – and that like us do not accept illegal annexation, as was shown by yesterday's historic 143 country majority in the General Assembly. In my view, yesterday's vote underscores that we must not slacken our efforts. We must continue to campaign – not boastfully, but passionately – for the values and rules for which we stand. As the transatlantic community, we need two things these days: both internal strength and unity and outward vigilance, wisdom, and openness to engage in dialogue with others. This is what makes the upcoming G20 summit in Bali, and in particular discussions with India and China, so important.

John F. Kennedy put in a nutshell how we can pragmatically reconcile this tension between our differences and commonalities in the sphere of foreign policy. On June 10, 1963, he said in a speech at American University in Washington: "Let us not be blind to our differences – but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity!"

Our solidarity in the face of danger today is proof that transatlantic relations, which rest on a foundation that was laid in the 1950s, are solid. However, looking to the past must not make us idle in the here and now, and certainly not careless as we face the future. Liberal democracies are strong – but they are also coming under attack. The total lack of common ground between political groups and the discrediting of political opponents is something we are witnessing not only in the U.S. While the process of polarization is also well underway in European societies, it has most certainly reached higher levels in the United States – where it is spurred on by some radicalized media outlets.

I have faith in the American system of checks and balances. But a halt can only be put to these threats if the parties remember it is their role to compete with each other as part of the formation of political will. By engaging in battles of opinion where, at every turn, everything is at

stake, things simply will not work out in the long run. In such a poisoned, confrontational atmosphere, the decks are always stacked in favor of authoritarianism.

I am indeed looking forward to the U.S. midterm elections in three and a half weeks. They will show us whether ever greater polarization is unavoidable, or if voters will hold up a stop sign to this development. I am not exaggerating, and indeed I am somewhat worried, when I say that if the foundations of American democracy were to be shaken, this quake would not be limited to the United States, but would be felt here by us, too – and this would call into question the credibility of all liberal Western societies.

For the older ones here today, the transatlantic project was always perceived as a natural fact of life they were born into; they knew about the key role it played in the rise of liberal democracy, and they knew how important it was for the decades of military protection and economic success they enjoyed. For the younger members of the audience, it is no longer a given that you will remember our division, or the conditions under which it was overcome.

This is all the more true in the U.S.: for the generation that experienced the war, its children, and possibly also their children, the transatlantic community of values was something they took for granted, and they felt a natural, close bond with Europe. Latino or Asian immigrants, however, do not necessarily look across the Atlantic with the same natural feelings of affinity. Their biographical bridges lead not to Europe, but to Latin America and Asia. However, our community of shared values must not become the object of nostalgia of a single generation. It must not become a purely historical or biographical project.

I am firmly convinced that the quest to achieve human dignity, freedom, and self-determination is also the overarching aim of the human race in the 21st century. The transatlantic project still has, I very much believe, incredible appeal, and it will retain this appeal in the future. Because our common values will always remain important and relevant – although the natural way they were embodied by our generation may well fade.

The New Bridge that Atlantik-Brücke is building is a smart and much needed response. With this program, a new cross-section of American society is being brought to us from across the Atlantic: young people who maybe have never before, or never would, set foot in Europe. Who never would have thought they would be selected. New Bridge fellows are of course much more multi-faceted and diverse, very much like the American society they represent. The transatlantic partnership needs new faces, new identities, and a shared vision of how our societies on both sides of the Atlantic should develop. That, too, is

why returning to our root values and all that which defines us and who we want to be is not only important, but absolutely essential.

Let us therefore, dear birthday party guests, continue to make Atlantik-Brücke the place it has been for 70 years, a place where one can sense the appeal of the transatlantic project. Let us, in spite of the need for change, stride optimistically into the future. Let us add a New Bridge to the bridges we have already built.

So let me warmly congratulate all of you and Atlantik-Brücke on the occasion of this birthday. Congratulations, and thank you very much!