



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
in a speech titled "Strengthening everything that connects
us" at an event with the Deutsche Nationalstiftung
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Every person in our country who woke on 24 February and saw the images of rocket attacks in Kyiv, of columns of tanks on Ukrainian streets, of the vast scale of the Russian invasion – everyone who woke to these images knew that, on that morning, the world had become a different one.

Nobody felt the dreadful horror of that morning as deeply as the people of Ukraine itself. I sat with some of them on Tuesday in Koriukivka, a small town near the Belarusian border, in an underground bomb shelter. These people told me their stories, told me how this 24 February, the horror of war, erupted into their thoroughly normal lives: the terrible noise of the bombardments, the smoke, the fire, their naked fear – these men and women trembled as they spoke to me. An older woman recounted how she had watched the seemingly endless convoy of Russian tanks, lorries and military equipment roll past, when her grandson asked her, "Grandma, are we going to die?" The grandmother could not answer his question – something that still brings tears to her eyes today.

Ladies and gentlemen, each and every one of you will remember this 24 February. As do I. The wailing of sirens, the dark smoke over Kyiv, the terrible images of that morning not only affected me and continue to affect me. They marked the definitive, bitter failure of years of political efforts, including my own, to prevent precisely this terrible moment.

24 February was an epochal shift. It plunged us here in Germany, too, into a different time, into an uncertainty that we thought we had left behind us, a time marked by war, violence and displacement, by concerns that the war would spread across Europe like wildfire. A time of severe economic upheaval, of energy crisis and rocketing prices. A time in which our successful model of a globally connected national

economy has come under pressure. A time in which societal cohesion, confidence in democracy, indeed confidence in ourselves, has been damaged.

Politics cannot work miracles. Nobody, including the Federal President, can allay every concern in this deeply uncertain time. On the contrary, I believe that many of these concerns are justified. This is the deepest crisis that our reunited Germany has ever experienced.

But I firmly believe that, if we take in this moment, this epochal shift, if we gain an understanding of the age that has ended and the new age that has begun – then, and only then, will we have a keener sense of what is now asked of us, and I am certain that we will not have to face this new age fearful, or even defenceless.

In the years before 24 February, Germany had the wind at its back. They were years defined by the joyful occasion of German unity, the peaceful withdrawal of Soviet troops, the end of bloc confrontation and the growing together of Europe. They were years in which peace paid dividends, and in which we Germans at the heart of the united Europe profited greatly.

And let me add that our own German good fortune shaped our view of the world. We counted on the conviction that we were surrounded by friends and that war at least in Europe had become inconceivable. Freedom and democracy seemed to be gaining ground everywhere, trade and prosperity seemed possible in every direction.

Despite all of the crises of that time, and although of course not everything that we hoped for came to pass, those years were good years! Germany, a country with this dark history, had grown to become part of the community of states, was respected, even popular among its partners, with growing opportunities for influence, as well as growing responsibility in the world.

And Germany, such a small country on a global scale, and practically devoid of natural and other resources of its own, had become a strong, modern, globally connected economy – thanks to good education and training, a willingness to reform and trade relations around the world.

And so I say, those years with the wind at our backs, they were good years. Nothing simply fell into our laps. We worked for peace and prosperity. We relied on international cooperation and played by the rules.

Then came 24 February. On 24 February, Putin did not merely break the rules and end the game. No, he cast the board itself to the floor!

Russia's brutal war of aggression in Ukraine has reduced the European security order to ashes. In his imperial obsession, the Russian

President has broken international law, committed land grabs, called borders into question. The Russian attack is an attack on all of the lessons that the world had learned from the last century's two World Wars.

Today, these shared lessons that kept the peace have faded away. Dialogue and searching for common ground have been increasingly replaced by struggles for dominance. China's quest for economic and political power is a key factor. This struggle will shape international relations for quite some time. Unfortunately, the sad truth is that the world is on the path to a phase of confrontation – although it depends on cooperation more urgently than ever. Climate change, species loss, pandemics, hunger and migration – none of this can be solved without a readiness and willingness for international cooperation. That is why we must not slacken our efforts – despite the crisis and the war.

What does this mean for us in Germany? My answer is that harder years, tough years are coming. The dividends of peace have run out. For Germany, an age is beginning in which we must brave the headwinds.

To prevail in this time, we can build on the strength and power that we have worked to gain over the past years. The experience that we have acquired in overcoming other severe crises will help us. Despite all of our concerns, we must not forget, now in particular, that we have a strong economy, stronger than many others. We have good research, strong businesses and a capable state. We have a broad and strong centre-ground in our society.

But alongside the strengths that have helped us to date, we need something more: we must become capable of handling conflict, both internal and external. We need the will to assert ourselves, and we need the strength to make sacrifices. We do not need a war mentality – but we do need resilience and a spirit of resistance.

This includes, first and foremost, a strong and well-equipped Bundeswehr. Something that is expected by the people of our country, as well as by our neighbours and partners. We are the strong country at the heart of Europe. We have a duty to contribute our share to collective defence – today much more than at a time when others, particularly the US, took us under their protection. For a long time we were able to rely on others, and we can continue to do so, but now others must also be able to rely on us.

I assure our partners that Germany accepts its responsibility, within NATO and within Europe. This is borne out by the security policy decisions that the Federal Government has made since the watershed of 24 February. It is above all also borne out by the broad public consensus backing these decisions.

And – this is particularly important to me – it is maybe also borne out by the growing awareness of and the growing respect for the

Bundeswehr across our society. Finally, I say – it is high time for this development. This society needs a strong Bundeswehr – but the Bundeswehr also needs a society that supports it. I will continue to advocate this as Federal President.

Resilience and the ability to handle conflict require more still. As the expectations placed on us grow, so too will the criticism we face. We must respond to this maturely and not immediately exploit every external criticism as ammunition for domestic political conflict.

We will have to get used to the fact that a country such as ours faces criticism. Just look at the US – it has plenty of practice in this. The US is a leading global power. It is criticised for what it does – and for what it does not do. It cannot point to others or call upon higher authorities. It must know what it does and why.

And Germany? No, Germany is not a global leader. But we are one of the big powers in Europe. Leadership is expected of us, leadership in the interest of Europe. What matters is not the audience's applause. What matters is strengthening Europe. The more uncertain the world around us becomes, the more certain we must be of this shared path.

Looking ahead to this new time with an open mind also means asking difficult questions of ourselves. The world has been a different one since this epochal shift – and that means that we must cast off old ways of thinking and old hopes.

That applies very particularly to our view of Russia. I know that many people in our country feel a connection to Russia and its people, love Russian music and literature. In eastern Germany, what is more, there are very different, extremely controversial recollections of forty years of history, which still resonate today. In east and in west, we are thankful for the miracle of reunification, and we do not forget that we owe the peaceful nature of this event to Mikhail Gorbachev.

When the Soviet troops returned home without firing a single shot, it gave many people hope for a peaceful future. And I shared in this hope, and it motivated my work over the course of many years.

But when we look at today's Russia, there simply is no place for old dreams. Our countries are today opposed.

Putin is commanding an invading army, and the Ukrainians are defending their country, which they have been building since their independence thirty years ago. Russia's war of aggression has demolished Gorbachev's dream of a "common European home". It is an attack on the law, on the principles of the renunciation of violence and of inviolable borders. It is an attack on everything that we Germans too stand for. Anyone who shrugs their shoulders and asks "What does the war have to do with us in Germany?" is, I believe, speaking with no sense of responsibility, and especially no sense of history. We as

Germans cannot prevail in Europe with this attitude – this attitude is wrong!

And so, Ambassador Makeiev, we support Ukraine and will do so for as long as necessary. This includes military support – your President has just told me how life-saving the German air defence systems are. It also includes financial and political support. It includes acutely needed support for a rapid recovery after Russia's truly despicable attacks on power, heating, hot water, on all forms of vital infrastructure as winter approaches.

And, Mr Ambassador, I am not just talking about support from the political sphere. There are so many people in Germany who are doing their part to help, who have taken in refugees or are accompanying them in their first steps into our schools, businesses and public authorities. There are countless civil society initiatives as well as municipal partnerships and networks that are providing practical help on the ground in Ukraine. For this I would today like to thank everyone in our country, all of you who are providing this vital help and ensuring that it continues – I sincerely thank you for what you are doing!

And because this war affects us too, there is no way to avoid economic pressure on Russia. That is what I say to those who ask me why we should bear the burden of a war in another country. "Don't the sanctions hurt us more than anyone? Can't we just drop them?" I hear questions like this often at the moment, and I do not want to dismiss them, because the fears behind them are real. What I want to say is this: We need to answer these questions.

Sanctions, breaking off contact, supplying weapons for a raging war. Nothing about this is ordinary, nothing about it is compatible with our previous visions of peaceful coexistence. But we are simply not living in an ideal world. We are living in conflict. And so we need conflict instruments. Yes, sanctions do come at a cost, including for us. But what would be the alternative? Standing idly by and watching this criminal aggression? Simply carrying on as if nothing had happened? It is, after all, in our interest to oppose Russia's lawbreaking together with our partners. It is in our interest to extricate ourselves from our dependency on a regime that sends tanks out against a neighbouring country and uses energy as a weapon. It is in our interest to protect ourselves and reduce our vulnerability. Nobody has said this more clearly and concisely than the Estonian Prime Minister did recently: "Gas might be expensive, but freedom is priceless."

I have said that we are living in conflict, and that this war affects us too. But what is equally important to me is that our country is not at war. And we do not want that to change. Any spread of this war, let alone nuclear escalation – that must be prevented.

And I know that many people in our country long for peace. Some believe that there is a lack of serious efforts on our part, indeed a lack of willingness to negotiate. I can assure you that nobody in their right mind lacks the will. But the truth is that, in the face of evil, good will is simply not enough.

Because Russia's brutal attacks over the last eight months are nothing other than that – despicable and cynical, lacking regard for human life. A supposed peace that rewards acts like this, a peace that seals Putin's land grabs, is no peace. It would mean a rule of terror for many people in Ukraine, would leave them at the mercy of the Russian occupiers' arbitrary violence. Worse yet – a sham peace like this would only increase Putin's hunger. Moldova and Georgia, as well as our partners in the Baltic, live in fear.

The people in Ukraine too, the men and women and children who flee to their basements daily in the face of Russian rocket attacks, they too wish for peace, more desperately still than we do. But they are right when they say that the peace we long for must be a just peace. A peace that preserves the independence and freedom of Ukraine. An unjust peace is no peace – it carries the seed of new wars within it. What is more, an unjust peace would strengthen all those in the world whose hunger for power knows no law and no rules. That cannot be in our interest.

Wanting peace, but supplying weapons to a warzone; supporting one side in the war without ourselves being at war; imposing sanctions on others but also suffering from them ourselves – these are all contradictions indeed, and I hear every day how many Germans are filled with doubt, and some even with despair, by them.

For us Germans, it is a test of our mettle. The headwinds are blowing deep into our country. This new time poses a greater challenge than we have faced in a long while. It is a test of our mettle that indeed nobody will relieve us of, and that there is no easy escape from. How can we prevail in this situation, as a country that is itself plunged into uncertainty? Where can we draw the strength to withstand contradictions when we ourselves are plagued by doubts?

I believe that this moment of crisis must first of all be a moment of self-affirmation for us. Let there be no doubt in our minds that the core of our identity will endure. Even in times when we must brave the headwinds, we remain who we are. A strong democracy at the heart of Europe. A free, diverse republic of self-determining citizens.

What this epochal shift that I am talking about changes is not the values that we stand for. But we must define our goals more strictly and adapt them to the new challenges. We want to be able to say two years from now that we have passed through the worst of the economic slump. We want to be able to say five years from now that not only has Ukraine

asserted its sovereignty, but we, too, must not fear any new wars in Europe. We want to be able to say ten years from now that we have held this society together, taking the weaker of its members by the arm and supporting them, and the majority has retained its confidence in democracy. We want to be able to say fifteen years from now that, despite war and crisis, we have ensured that the generations to come will be able to enjoy a good life on our Earth, too.

Yes, it is probable that we will not be able to drive forward our country's success story at the same pace that we have done over the last three decades. But the essential is becoming important once again, and it deserves all of our effort.

I say "our" effort, and I say that very deliberately. Fellow citizens, this new time requires every individual to act. Perhaps it was possible when the wind was at our backs to get by without making too much of a personal contribution. Perhaps it was possible to simply leave politics to other people. That is no longer the case. Germany, our country needs your will to change, needs your contribution to our community, so that we can get to where we want to be!

So what does concentrating on the essential mean? And what are we prepared to expect of ourselves? It's clear that, over the coming years, we will need to accept that sacrifices must be made. Most have already felt the effects. We all must contribute whatever we can. And this crisis demands that we relearn to be modest.

Now that may sound like mockery to the ears of those who already today are not making ends meet. I know that, although we live in a rich country, many cannot make sacrifices – because they're already making sacrifices all day, every day. This crisis is affecting people who, even before the war began, faced a daily struggle to get by; to pay their rent, or to give their children a good life. This crisis is affecting companies, the self-employed, shops that once did good business but are now in financial trouble due to interrupted supply chains and high energy costs.

That is why every debate must begin with an assurance: also in the present situation, the government will not abandon you. It will use its resources to help those who cannot manage on their own. Relief packages and a special crisis fund, measures to rein in the price of natural gas, housing benefits, and support for businesses small and large alike – all this underscores the desire to help. What is important is that this support must swiftly reach those in need. No country in Europe – and this, too, is true – can do as much to help its citizens as we can. And yet our state, too, will not be able to alleviate every burden. And it need not do so. Because this crisis is also affecting many who – thank goodness – are doing well and are in a position of strength. Those years when the wind was at our backs, they even attained prosperity and financial security. They can make sacrifices without putting themselves in existential danger. And indeed, there's also a willingness to make

sacrifices, as some people have written to me. Let us have faith in this strong centre-ground of our society!

Finally, this crisis is also affecting many in our country who are well off – even the rich. People who have a great deal to fall back on and can shoulder a greater burden. They must help others now, so that the tremendous cost of badly-needed relief can even be borne. They must help out now, so as to avoid new injustice. Impressive relief packages are important – but it is no less important to make sure that burdens are distributed fairly. A lot will depend on this, I think.

My fellow Germans, I am fully aware that no one likes to make sacrifices. But I would like for us to change our point of view. Instead of our first question being “who can relieve me of this burden?” it should be “will this help us all get through this crisis together?” – that, I hope, will be the attitude we will adopt to make it through the winter together.

But it is also the honest truth that getting through this winter will not be the end of it. As worried as we are about inflation, energy prices and the war right now, once this winter has passed and we’ve got out of the economic doldrums, we simply can’t go back to the way things were. Because, even though the war has moved some items further down on the political agenda, climate change, too, is calling on us to act – also and especially now! To be honest, I am worried that the spotlight has been stolen from this task facing humanity. Climate change is not taking a break during the war in Ukraine.

It’s clear that, if we want to drastically lower emissions and break free from fossil fuels, we will need to give up some much-loved habits, both small and large. We will have to look at how – and how fast – we move around, what we eat, how we build and where we live. In these areas, too, every person can contribute. Let’s get started right away. Every step, no matter how little, is better than none.

Yet still these individual efforts will of course not be enough. Our country and our successful economic model will be undergoing a historic transformation. We are currently leaving the industrial era behind, an era that was powered by fossil fuels and that both provided the foundation for Germany’s rise as an export nation and accompanied us during that rise. And we are entering an age with declining use of coal, oil and gas, an age in which Germany will need to assert itself, and will indeed assert itself, anew. Despite the many challenges I have mentioned, this age truly holds great opportunities for our country. Actually seizing these opportunities, in order to build new prosperity on a new and better foundation – this is the foremost task that engineers and developers, businesses and political decision-makers must now tackle. And the chances that we will succeed in this endeavour are, I believe, good.

And because global climate change can be averted only through concerted action, we must also make sure that essential institutions and cooperation will endure, so that a new confrontation between blocs across the growing geopolitical gaps can be avoided. Dividing the world in two and pitting “us against them” is, I believe, not in our interest. Yes, we must become less vulnerable, and we must reduce one-sided dependencies. This does not mean becoming less interconnected with the world, but rather – and this will surprise you – more interconnected. Not maintaining ties with only a few, but spreading out both our opportunities and risks. So my advice is, in the course of and after this epochal shift that we are talking about, let us not forget everything that made German foreign policy strong: being strongly anchored in Europe, striving for international cooperation, establishing common rules, pursuing dialogue between different-minded parties and striving to establish partnerships with those who are different from us. This is, after all, not a question of style – it is a question of survival.

Without fighting climate change, everything becomes pointless. We must put all the strength we have into this fight. Let us prove now how strongly we can tackle the task of transformation. Let us give our children, and our children’s children, a good life on our planet. It’s up to all of us.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are making sacrifices in order to get through this crisis. We are transforming ourselves to preserve our planet. There is a third thing that these times demand of us. We need active and more resilient citizens.

Because while we’re braving these headwinds, attacks on our free society are increasing. Putin is attempting to divide Europe, and he is injecting this poison into the heart of our society. We are vulnerable because we are open, and because we desire to stay open. The railway network, the unrestricted internet, the software on our mobile phones, and our energy supply – all of these, as you know, have already been the targets of attacks. We will need to do a better job of protecting ourselves.

Our democracy, too, is part of our critical infrastructure. And it has been coming under pressure. We are the only ones who can defend it. We democrats must do more than pay lip service. We must get engaged, and here, yet again, show a spirit of resistance and resilience.

Resilient citizens stand up for what they believe in, and they express their concerns – but they also refuse to be co-opted by those who attack our democracy. Resilient citizens distinguish between necessary criticism of political decisions and all-out attacks on our political system. Resilient citizens can cope with uncertainty and are not misled by those who hold out the promise of simple solutions. They rightfully expect policy-makers to remain focussed in these difficult times on what is most important, and they expect pragmatism to prevail

over ritualised sparring. Resilient citizens demand space in which to live as they see fit – yet they also do not forget how much we all depend on each other. Resilient citizens expect something of themselves: respect and reason, for example. That is a lot to ask, quite a lot, in fact. But it is the only way for us to provide an effective antidote to the poison of populism, to the danger that we may drift apart.

Ultimately, that is also what we must focus on as we brave the headwinds. Instead of allowing ourselves to drift apart, we must strengthen everything that connects us.

Strengthening everything that connects us – for example, the connections between the young and the old. Many younger people are impatient and accuse those older than themselves that they were too careless with our planet, and too hesitant in changing course. The younger ones feel cheated – while the older ones feel they are not getting enough credit for everything they've done for their children and their country. Let us not pit the generations against one another. This will not create any common ground. Because, at the end of the day, we hopefully all have the same goal. We want to change our country, we want to make it better – and the only way to do that is, after all, through joint action. And that is why the older ones, my generation, must now despite our advanced age rethink what we've grown accustomed to and help make change happen. And to the younger ones, many of whom are also here in this room, I say that it's now up to you to take on responsibility, to play an active role, also by voicing criticism, but not in a destructive way. You need to change our country, and maybe even do a better job of this than previous generations. You all have my support.

Or let us take a look at the misunderstandings between the eastern and western parts of our country. Here, too, we must strengthen what connects us. Many in the eastern parts of Germany are currently experiencing a relapse into the 1990s, the last time when secure structures crumbled and livelihoods disappeared. How much of these experiences and this fear was truly felt in the west? This time, we must do a better job as we face up to a crisis that once again is having a greater impact in the east. Because of course even 32 years after unification, it is harder to ensure the east's energy supply, and people there have lower levels of income and savings. Strengthening what connects us means that the eastern parts of Germany do not become an afterthought. I know that people there are deeply worried. But I also know how bright the sun is just over the horizon, how many entrepreneurs and world-class innovative technologies are being minted in the eastern parts of Germany, thanks to its top-notch universities and research institutions. A company in the Free State of Thuringia just won the Deutscher Zukunftspreis twice. Long-hoped-for semiconductor production facilities are being set up in Saxony and soon also in Saxony-Anhalt. Leading companies in the field of electromobility are also setting up shop in Brandenburg. All these are more than individual signs of

hope. Let us work to build up this new, sustainable strength in the eastern parts of Germany. That is our common task.

And strengthening what connects us is also a task for urban and rural areas. Many who live in rural regions (actually the majority of people in our country) do not identify with the debates we are having in the capital. These discussions are often more far removed from their actual problems than the next medical specialist or post office. By the same token, many in large cities may take a romantic or haughty view of those who live in the country. They yearn for the quiet, remote life – but it's something they only want to enjoy on the weekends. What is often lacking is an honest appraisal of the different conditions in which people live in urban and rural areas; what is lacking is the willingness to take the needs of people in the countryside seriously and to preserve the standard of living in villages and small towns. And this requires more than a reliable internet connection. It means paying attention, and it means respecting a different way of life. Let us go ahead and make a habit of looking beyond the confines of our own lives and realities. I think we can do this, that we owe it to ourselves to do this in our shared country.

Rich and poor, young and old, urban and rural – strengthening what connects us, across generational boundaries and above all among people from all walks of life – that is what I want to focus on now. I am grateful to everyone who thinks of more than his or her own personal needs. Many people in our country do this, and these people are the backbone of our society. Yet words of praise for volunteer work must no longer be completely confined to Sunday sermons. It's true that volunteering as we know it is starting to go out of fashion, and responsibility rests on fewer shoulders. Yet helping others – especially in times when the wind is in our faces – is crucial. I could put it another way: it's systemically relevant. So that's why we must find new ways to fight alienation, to strengthen our community and spirit of togetherness.

So I have made a proposal. And I will be plain about this: I do not expect the idea of compulsory social service to be met everywhere with applause. What I want to see is an honest debate on what we do to contribute to the society that we're all part of. It is a debate that I hope will not peter out again, with no results. I firmly believe it is not excessive for us to ask people what they are willing to contribute for cohesion in this country.

For, and this is my deep conviction, democracy will not function without cohesion. Cohesion will not come about on its own. It also requires practice. It comes about through people, and empathy; it is born of responsibility, and of charity. Simply rejecting the idea of compulsory social service is no answer to the challenges of our time. Maybe there are other convincing ideas. But if endless calls to strengthen cohesion do not lead to results, then we will need more: more ideas and

more people who, at least once in their lifetime, devote themselves to helping alleviate the worries of others, helping people who were complete strangers before, by simply devoting themselves to them for a certain amount of time. In this way, we can strengthen what connects us – and that is what we need now – now more than ever.

Dear guests, I want to conclude by saying that, being citizens in times of crisis, proving that we can resist the headwinds – this is asking a lot. Today, for the first time in the history of our united Germany, we have come to a fork in the road. Do we dare set out into this new day and age, with its new challenges? Are we prepared to do what we are called on to do?

I firmly believe that, in facing up to this challenge, we can nurture new strength – even a new togetherness. It will not be easy; it will be hard work. Yes, we will need to endure a stretch of hardship and insecurity before we finally reach truly safe, solid ground once again. I hope that we will not lose sight of one another in these difficult times, that we will not waste our energy on daily confrontations with others. If we show solidarity, if we show courage and ambition, then I'm confident that we will be up to the task we've been set.

We will preserve our freedom and our democracy. We will make Germany a new type of industrialised country – a leader in technology and a good steward of the climate, in the heart of Europe. Interconnected, but less vulnerable. Able to defend itself, but not a warmonger. An open, friendly country with more, new international partners.

I firmly believe that our country is strong enough to weather crises. We have the people who time and again put in the necessary work, the businessmen, the researchers, the engineers, the skilled workers. Our country has the requisite knowledge and the ideas, the experience of multiple generations, and the ambition of the young.

Let us have faith in one another – and let us have faith in ourselves. Let us not be discouraged by the wind in our face that this new day and age brings. This is not about everyone doing the same thing, but it is about us having a common goal: strengthening everything that connects us.

That's the task. Let's tackle it.