



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
to the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia
on 29 November 2022
in Skopje/North Macedonia**

Many thanks for your invitation to the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. It is an honour for me to address you here today. Because it is less than half a year ago that you made history in this very place, on 16 July, when you took the decision – doubtless not an easy one for any of you – to agree to the protocol with Bulgaria in order for North Macedonia to continue on its path to European Union membership. The image of the flags of North Macedonia and the EU waving here in this place after the vote was met in Germany with joy, with relief and with great respect for all of you and for your country as a whole.

Of course, we also saw the other images surrounding the vote, the signs here inside and outside this parliament that called for a “no!”, as well as the images of the protests in Skopje and other places around the country.

The protocol with Bulgaria, the constitutional amendment that is needed, these issues are generating strong feelings among the people of your country. After all, they are ultimately questions of national identity, of Macedonian history, language and culture. It is certainly right to debate these issues passionately. Important societal debates also need passion.

I believe that you can hold such debates with confidence. You alone, the people of North Macedonia, determine what makes your country what it is. You decide how Macedonian identity looks today and in the future! Just as you have been doing in your country for thirty years; just as the Macedonian writer Blaže Koneski described it: “Language is our homeland.” I very much hope that Macedonian culture will soon enrich the cultural diversity of the European Union! And I am here now to learn even more about it.

I am aware that the path to European Union membership is anything but easy, that trust and patience are strained in arduous

negotiations, sometimes perhaps strained too far. But my appeal to you, the members of this parliament, and to all of the people of North Macedonia is: continue resolutely on the path towards accession! Do not turn back in the final metres!

Here in this place, you can once again make history together. I am certain that you will once again hold passionate and confident debates. But the constitutional amendment is about more than point-scoring in domestic political debate, it is about more than political parties or individuals making a name for themselves. Now is not the time to lapse into simplistic slogans and nationalistic sentiments. I ask of you: do not lose sight of the goal that you have pursued for so long, of the EU accession that you have sought for seventeen years now. I am certain that the path to Europe is worth even the next, challenging step!

With my view from Germany, I can assure you that we have great respect for your country. And we have this respect not just since the triumph of your national football team in the World Cup qualifiers in Duisburg last year.

Our respect, my respect, stems from your very difficult path to EU membership. Your country has consistently shown great political courage. The Ohrid Agreement of 2001 and the Prespa Agreement with Greece of 2018/2019 show that your country is capable of what is perhaps the most difficult business of all in a democracy: holding painful debates, resolving conflicts of interest, making compromises – and thus finding a durable solution to complex problems of national impact. For this, you have my very personal respect, too.

I have been observing and supporting the Western Balkan countries' path to EU membership since the nineties. I was able to help set the course at many points along the way during my time as Foreign Minister, particularly after the Berlin Process began in 2014.

In my view, two things are important. Firstly, the EU is not complete without the Western Balkans and without North Macedonia. But secondly, at the same time, the accession process must bring tangible improvements now, for the people of North Macedonia and of the whole Western Balkans region.

To make this possible, there is a need for political and economic reforms as well as reforms to the judiciary – reforms that will benefit people in their everyday lives. North Macedonia is on a very good path, as proven by the first EU accession conference as well as the European Commission's country report. Further down this path, many more improvements await the people of your country. There are the measures to fight corruption and modernise the public administration, to name just two examples.

The fact that the Western Balkan countries and Germany were able to make progress on a range of other concrete projects in Berlin just

recently, in early November, is very encouraging – not only for us but also for you! Soon it will be possible to cross borders in this region with just an identity card, soon it will also be possible for people to work and study in another Western Balkan country because educational qualifications are mutually recognised. There have already been no roaming fees in the Western Balkans since 2021, and the Common Regional Market will bring further economic progress to all of the countries in the region. All of this makes life simpler and better for the people of your country, but not only in your country but also in the other Western Balkan states.

For the people of North Macedonia, EU accession will open the door to the European single market, to the world's largest trading bloc, to the free movement of the vast majority of goods and services. And it will open the door to 450 million Europeans, to work, to life and to travel on our continent. We will be thrilled to see you here in North Macedonia go through this door!

Now in particular, in light of the war in Ukraine, it is enormously important for us to stand together in reliable partnerships in Europe, for us to strengthen one another, for us to support one another. We are seeing Russia seek to redraw borders through the use of force, and attempt to impose its rule on the people of Ukraine.

24 February of this year was an epochal shift. It plunged us into a different time, into an uncertainty that we actually thought we had left behind us: a time marked now by war, violence and displacement, by concerns that the war would spread across Europe like wildfire.

In these times, the achievements of the European Union shine especially bright. As a community of shared values, we stand by the side of those who are attacked. We will not permit a large state to seek to violently subdue a smaller neighbour. The European Union stands for the rule of law, for prosperity and freedom, and it remains the largest peace project of all, both internally and externally. Almost exactly ten years ago, on 10 December 2012, the European Union thus received the Nobel Peace Prize for its contribution to reconciliation between formerly hostile neighbours, between the people of Europe.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has destroyed the hope of an increasingly peaceful world. This makes it all the more important for the countries of Europe to stand together and offer one another security within a Union of partners.

And indeed, Putin's aggression has not divided Europe, but has brought us closer together than ever. North Macedonia is playing an important role in this: in the United Nations, as a partner in NATO for more than two years now, and with its steadfast support for the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy and the increased

economic pressure on Russia, as well as with weapons supplies and your warm welcome for refugees.

Your country is a reliable partner for Ukraine, but not only for Ukraine but also for all of us in Europe. I am therefore particularly pleased that North Macedonia will take over the Chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe for the first time on 1 January 2023. I myself served as the OSCE's Chairman in Office in 2016 and I therefore have particularly great respect for all of the tasks that lie ahead of you. The OSCE's already difficult work has become far more difficult since 24 February of this year. But I am certain that we will all be able to benefit from your political courage, your negotiating skill and your experience with regional cooperation and conflict management. I therefore thank you for your readiness to make this commitment, I thank you for your willingness to take on responsibility and leadership – and I am already looking forward to one day seeing you do the same in the European Union, with North Macedonia's first Presidency of the EU Council!

I am firmly counting on the intensive bilateral relations between North Macedonia and Germany continuing to gain momentum. Today, North Macedonia is already a valued location for over 200 businesses with German capital, which number among the country's largest employers, providing around 20,000 jobs and offering training opportunities for many young people here in North Macedonia. More than 30 percent of North Macedonia's exports go to Germany.

More than 100,000 of your compatriots live in Germany, forming a network of close interpersonal ties that bind our two countries together. Germany's economic involvement here in North Macedonia will, I hope, lead to new and greater prospects for the people here in your country, to the development of training opportunities and jobs with good conditions, here in their home country, in North Macedonia.

Tomorrow, I will have the opportunity to explore an important, pioneering project that exemplifies the strong economic relations between our two countries, when I visit the first wind farm in the Western Balkans, in Bogdanci. Built in just 18 months with German support, this wind farm is a real milestone for a more environmentally friendly energy supply for your country in future. And the largest German investment project currently being planned is also a wind farm, called Veteran Park Virovi, that should ultimately supply 290,000 households.

These wind farms point the way forward. We must utilise the economic opportunities offered by the green transformation while also harnessing the potential for energy security! This is a lesson for both North Macedonia and Germany from Russia's war of aggression. And it is crucial in order for all of us to survive in the face of the increasingly dramatic impact of climate change, which we in Germany can feel, which

you here in North Macedonia can feel and which is having an even worse effect in other parts of the world, on other continents in the world.

Tomorrow I will have the opportunity to talk to Hatidže Muratova and with other makers of the film Honeyland. When Muratova, one of the last wild beekeepers in Europe, collects honeycombs and honey, she says to her bees: "Half for me and half for you." The message of this both deeply expressive and successful Macedonian film has resonated around the world – we know it in Germany, too. In my eyes, Honeyland is two things. An expression of the proud culture of a small country. And the bearer of a greater message that applies far beyond the borders of a single nation: we must not exhaust the gifts of nature, nor irrevocably destroy our environment. That is the task facing humanity. We, Germany and North Macedonia, want to work together on this task.

Considerable tasks lie ahead of you, ahead of all of us. The fight against climate change, the green and socially just transformation of our economies, the consequences of the brutal Russian war of aggression, solidarity within Europe. We will find it easier to tackle these challenges together, in reliable partnerships, in political communities. Germany and the EU stand shoulder to shoulder with North Macedonia. We are confident that our path will remain a shared path, a path within the European Union!

In his masterful novel *Pirey*, Petre Andreevski vividly describes the lives of the Macedonians Jon and Velika in the early twentieth century. The novel shows us, amid all of the suffering it contains, that there is something stronger and more important than nationalistic interests and political disputes: the "irrepressible longing for a peaceful life," as the German book description has it.

This longing still exists today, it exists all over Europe, here too, over one hundred years later. Let us give this irrepressible longing for peace and for freedom a shared home: a shared home in Europe!