



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the presentation of the Grand Cross 1st class of the  
Order of Merit to Kersti Kaljulaid, former President of  
Estonia  
on 15 March 2023  
in Tallinn/Estonia**

I am delighted that we have come together today on such a joyful and special occasion. One of the many wonderful tasks performed by a Federal President is to express deep gratitude on Germany's behalf – and as a visible sign of this gratitude to award the Order of Merit. This is especially an enjoyable task when the recipient does not just have strong political ties with my country but also shares with me the close bond that you do, Kersti.

After you became President, we met on many occasions, also in Berlin. And needless to say, I also remember our first encounter when I visited Estonia a good six years ago, the evening before an anniversary which was very meaningful for our two countries, indeed for Europe as a whole.

I came to Tallinn back then to remember 23 August together with you – a day associated with one of the most horrendous but also one of the happiest moments in our continent's more recent history. On 23 August we remember on the one hand the year 1939 with the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the war unleashed by my country, the occupation and above all we remember the abhorrent crimes committed by Germans and in Germany's name.

However, we also, especially at the present time, think back to 1989, to the unquenchable and indomitable thirst for freedom of Estonians, of the people of Central and Eastern Europe, and their resistance to heteronomy and subjugation. We remember how hundreds of thousands of people across the Baltic states joined hands on 23 August that year together forming a human chain, a chain that stretched 600 kilometres from Vilnius in Lithuania through Riga in Latvia to Tallinn

here in Estonia. What a courageous and liberating sign this singing human chain was back then!

I am full of admiration for the Estonian's immense love of freedom, for their passion for the European cause. I am grateful for their reconciliation with my country, with the people of Germany and for how we have been able for some time now to work together to build a better Europe. And I am delighted that we had the opportunity to cooperate, Kersti, that we met often, supported one another and of course developed our friendship over the years.

During your time in office, you were tireless in your efforts to bring our countries even closer together. It is thanks to your work and dedication that exchange between Estonia and Germany, between businesses, universities, and also cultural institutions in our two countries, has become much more intensive. I remember how you always advocated digitalising administration when you visited Germany and shared with us the progress Estonia had made in this field – how you graciously overlooked how much Germany needs to catch up here.

You made relations between our countries better. And you made Europe and the European Union better. Freedom and security in the digital space were always a particular priority for you and you placed defence against cyberattacks and the fight against fake news on the political agenda at a very early stage. Europe's liberal democracies also need to be resilient democracies, as you time and again pointed out – and you did your utmost to bolster these defensive capabilities and this resilience. For this, I am very grateful and all of Germany with me.

When we first met in 2017, we were full of hope that the brutal logic of 23 August 1939, bringing with it war and violence, had been overcome. And yet war has come back to Europe. For the first time since the Second World War, a campaign of conquest is again unfolding at the heart of Europe. Russia denies Ukraine its right to exist, it wants to destroy Ukraine as an independent nation. Russia's attack against Ukraine has reduced the European security order to ashes.

Germany, just like Estonia, remains firmly at Ukraine's side. We are helping those who have been attacked, we are helping the Ukrainians as they fight for their freedom and independence. Today, Germany is Ukraine's largest supporter on the European continent, also in military terms. And we are playing our part in collective defence. This morning I visited the German soldiers in Ämari who are monitoring the air space of NATO territory as part of Baltic Air Policing. I was able to see for myself the close cooperation between Estonian, British and German troops. Together we are protecting Estonia, the Baltic states and every square inch of Alliance territory – as shown by the successful operations in recent weeks. For me, it is important to say to you again today in all clarity that Germany accepts its responsibility – within NATO and within Europe. Our Allies, and indeed Estonia, can rely on this!

It was very important to me to come to Tallinn today to present you, my friend Kersti Kaljulaid, with the highest Order of Merit that the Federal Republic of Germany can award. You were the first woman at the helm of your country and your tireless work to promote cooperation and compromise, your clear and also very direct way of addressing issues, your sincerity and your warmth – all these things have impressed me time and again.

I know that you posted a video on Facebook just a few days after leaving office showing a kaleidoscope of mishaps, slips of the tongue and comical scenes. Showcasing, in other words, all the things that can happen to a head of state when getting ready for a live appearance or a televised address. Your wonderful ability to laugh at yourself shone through and I think that this is precisely why many people so enjoyed the video. It showed a top-level politician who, despite the serious nature of her daily work, has managed to hold on to her humour and her joie de vivre.

What I did not know before this trip, because we had never actually talked about it was that you moved your residence out of Tallinn every now and again and set up your office in various regions of your country. I was all the more delighted to hear this as I have been doing the same. Numerous times I have been moving my office out of the capital and taking up residence elsewhere in Germany. As I say, we never actually talked about this idea and the fact that we had the same idea independently from one another is perhaps also a reflection of our close bond.

This bond and our friendship will stay. And I look forward to our future encounters – regardless of what capacity you might find yourself in. Your journey will continue. After all, your discipline isn't the 100-metre-sprint but the marathon. And over this long distance, a lot of things can happen.

My friend Kersti Kaljulaid, I honour you today for your great, indeed truly outstanding commitment to German-Estonian relations. You have left your mark. And so I would ask you to come to me now so I can present you with the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. And this is your applause.