



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the symposium Lithuania and Germany in Europe: View
from the Perspective of 700 Years
on 30 May 2023
in Vilnius**

I'm really delighted to be here today, literally at the heart of Europe. At any rate, that is the claim made by French scientists, who calculated over 30 years ago that the geographical centre of Europe is only a few kilometres from here. It goes without saying, as you know, that other methods of calculation by other institutes have established that the centre of Europe is either in Poland, Czechia, Hungary, Estonia or indeed in Saxony, in Germany.

But the Lithuanians were so thrilled that they went and dedicated a sculpture park, the Europos Parkas, to this centre. They saw this as confirmation of what people here had always felt: Lithuania belongs right at the heart of Europe, right at the heart of the European fold.

This feeling, this European identity, is as old as Lithuania itself. It is in evidence in the letters sent by Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas 700 years ago. I am delighted that these three letters will be on display from today at an exhibition at the University Library. A copy of these letters, a "transumpt" on parchment, was brought here to Vilnius from the Prussian Secret State Archives to this end.

Back then – 700 year ago – these missives were sent to potentates, to councils and citizens, to merchants and craftsmen in Hanseatic and trading cities all over Europe – to Lübeck, Rostock, Szczecin, Riga, Magdeburg, Cologne – even as far afield as Rome. Gediminas invited the recipients of these letters to come and settle in Vilnius. He promised them privileges, religious tolerance and diversity. These letters were far more than an attempt to recruit foreign skilled workers. Gediminas sought to forge relations with German dukes and links to the Christian rulers of Europe. His message even back then was this: Lithuania is truly European.

Nowhere else can this openness be so keenly felt as here, in Vilnius, the Rome of the East, the Jerusalem of the North. Or, as Tomas Venclova once dubbed it, the "surrogate of the West". East, north, west – as you can see, geographically speaking, it's all over the place. And I'm really glad to be speaking to an audience of historians and not to an audience of geographers today.

For over 700 years, different cultures and ethnicities have coexisted in Vilnius, mostly together, sometimes alongside each other, but, most importantly, only seldom against one another. In few places in Europe is this as omnipresent as here. But the upheavals of Lithuanian and European history can also be felt in this city. You can follow these traces.

Before you, the experts, hold discussions about this chequered history of Lithuania in a moment, I would like to talk about a great constant of your country's history: the Lithuanian people's unquenchable thirst for freedom.

Allow me by way of example to touch on the mid-19th century, when Lithuania was part of Tsarist Russia – the time when the Lithuanian anti-russification resistance movement was organised from the Memel Territory. Against the loss of their culture, their language, their identity.

When Tsar Alexander II banned the dissemination and printing of Lithuanian works in Latin script in 1866, a resistance movement that was most unusual for Europe was born. Three and a half million books and journals were smuggled to Lithuania from 1866 to 1904 – with the help of people to the west of the Memel. Printing presses were established especially for this purpose in what was then East Prussia, particularly in Tilsit. The knygnešiai book smugglers are revered in your country to this day as national heroes in the fight for freedom of the press and freedom of expression. They risked their lives – they risked them for their fatherland and for their mother tongue. Many died for the sake of a few pages of printed paper. The fight for their own script became a symbol of the Lithuanian people's existential struggle.

From that point onwards, the Lithuanians did not let anyone take their words, their identity, from them. Calls for autonomy and cultural independence became ever louder. And they were not silenced even during what was probably the darkest chapter in the history of Lithuania. Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union brought death and terror to the country following the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939. The Lithuanians were at the mercy of the Soviet occupation. Mass arrests, torture and deportation were the order of the day. Everything that was part of the Lithuanian national culture was forbidden. The aim was to wipe Lithuania off the map.

When the Soviets had long since entered Vilnius and the Second World War was already raging in Europe, the city, Vilnius, was still a

place of refuge, especially for Polish Jews. As late as 3 January 1940, Emanuel Ringelblum, the world-famous chronicler of the Warsaw Ghetto archive, wrote the following in his diary:

“The writers heard tell of Gan Eden in Vilnius [...]. They moved there when Warsaw was no longer able to afford them much in the way of protection.”

With its publishing houses, Jewish unions and relief organisations, and with its educational and research institutions such as the Yivo Institute founded in 1925, Vilnius still seemed at the time, in 1940, like a safe haven to many Jewish people. It turned out to be a death trap. During the occupation of the country from 1941 to 1944, the Germans murdered almost all of the Jews living in Lithuania.

Vokiečių gatvė, German Street, which was home to merchants and craftsmen from Hanseatic cities back in Gediminas' day and had been a trading centre for centuries, was the dividing line between the Large Ghetto and Small Ghetto in Vilnius during these dark years. Once a symbol for openness and ethnic diversity, it now stood for racist fanaticism, for criminality, suffering and death.

Six years ago, I paid a visit to the wood in Paneriai, to the memorial just a few kilometres from here. This place was to become a place of exceptional horror and the very worst crimes during the German occupation. Tens of thousands of Jews, primarily from Vilnius, were murdered there by the Germans. It was the end of the European Jerusalem.

Even after 8 May 1945, the day when Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender was celebrated in Western Europe, the terror did not end for Lithuania. Once again, the Lithuanians were at the mercy of a Soviet occupying power. But they never just accepted their fate. In the diaspora, they clubbed together in the Lithuanian World Community – in order to preserve as much of their identity as possible. Until they were, at long last, independent once again.

We all, or my generation at any rate, remember the images of 23 August 1989: two million people standing side by side, hand in hand, from Tallinn in Estonia to Riga in Latvia, to here in Vilnius – and they were singing. A 600 km human chain wound its way right across the Baltic region. I was deeply moved by these pictures at the time. Three months before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe witnessed a singing, a truly peaceful, revolution here. And that is why I say that the fact that it was possible to reunite Germany in freedom, the fact that this was possible, is also thanks to the Lithuanian people's unquenchable thirst for freedom and their resistance to heteronomy and subjugation.

Today, Lithuania is finally free, and has been integrated into the European Union as a free country. Its independence brought prosperity and progress. Today, Vilnius is a city of the future with a booming IT

sector without parallel throughout Europe, in a country where nothing is ever that far away, which is closing ranks ever more closely thanks to its well-developed infrastructure.

All of Lithuania breathes this spirit of modernisation. But its values have remained unchanged: tolerance, openness and, above all, the unquenchable thirst for freedom. Especially here, in Vilnius.

Tomas Venclova once wrote the following about his city. "Cities may fall into disrepair, but they do not perish. No power has managed to bring Vilnius completely to its knees and destroy its aura."

Despite all of these upheavals in its history, the Lithuanian people have held firm to one thing: their belief in Europe.

When Lithuania, together with nine other candidate countries, signed the accession treaty to join the European Union, Europe was not just simply expanded, but, so to speak, its fences were mended. Or, to put it another way, Europe was restored.

Today, Lithuania is not only a member of the European Union, but is also an Alliance partner in NATO. And so it is important to me to take this opportunity to state very clearly once again that we stand by your side! Your security is also our security!

Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine has shaken not only the people in Lithuania and Germany, but throughout Europe. It has also reawakened the very worst memories, especially among the people here, on NATO's eastern flank.

Putin dreams of past greatness and wants to revert to the borders prior to 1989. The freedom and independence of non-Russian people in Eastern Europe is a historical mistake in Putin's mind's eye, one that he is seeking to correct with all his might. This is why he denies Ukraine's right to exist and why he wants to eradicate its independence, and even the very notion of a separate Ukrainian identity. Putin is deploying methods here that are so brutal that they call to mind our continent's darkest days. His troops are at large in Ukraine, plundering and murdering as they go. They are torturing and killing civilians, raping and kidnapping, as well as abducting children. This has been going on every single day for almost 66 weeks. Putin's goal is the subjugation of former Soviet territories.

Here in Lithuania, you know what it means when freedom is at risk, when foreign rule puts your own identity at risk. And this is why Lithuania is offering Ukraine its particular support. Germany is also lending its support to Ukraine, militarily, financially and with humanitarian assistance. Together, we are helping the Ukrainians in their fight for freedom and independence. Never again should one country be allowed to determine the fate of another. These are our common lessons from the past.

Germany accepts its responsibility – within NATO and within Europe. This is what the German servicemen and -women, who are stationed here, some of whom I will visit today, also stand for. Together with our partners, we are protecting Lithuania, NATO's eastern flank and every single square inch of NATO territory. This is also the message that we will be very sure to send at the NATO Summit in Vilnius in July.

Lithuania's history has shown that you can be full of pride for your national identity and preserve your independence while seeking stronger alliances at the same time. You can be a Lithuanian with all your heart and be an ardent European at the same time.

Lithuanians have always known where they belong: at the heart of Europe. And this is precisely not a question of geography. Rather, the European Union stands for the values that the Lithuanian people have fought for over the course of centuries. Europe is where people love and embrace its values, namely freedom, democracy and autonomy!

Let us embrace them, these values, together. Let us see this as an invitation to one another, perhaps also as a challenge for another, sometimes even a test for one another, but, above all, as a joint opportunity.

Allow me to wish you an exciting conference – many congratulations, Vilnius, and here's to the next 700 years!