

Joachim Gauck's Speech on the 25th Anniversary of Germany Unity (October 3, 2015)

Abstract

Looking back on a quarter century of German unification, Federal President Joachim Gauck, a former East German pastor, expresses his gratitude for the “peaceful revolution” and encourages his fellow citizens to rise to new challenges such as the integration of migrants.

Source

Joachim Gauck, Ceremony to Mark the 25th Anniversary of German Unity, October 3, 2015

The Day of Germany Unity. For 25 years this has been a date of powerful memories for our country, an occasion to look back in gratitude at people of courage. At people whose desire for freedom shook dictatorships, in Gdansk, Prague and Budapest. At people in Leipzig, Plauen and so many other towns in the GDR, too, whose peaceful revolution made the unification of the two German states imaginable in the first place. It is with special joy that I welcome those among us who were there at the time. We would not be here today if you hadn't stood up!

On October 3 many of us think of the ring of the liberty bell, the tears of joy not just outside the Reichstag, the mood of new beginnings that swept us along, of great happiness.

But some things are different this year. Many people ask, why look back? Doesn't the Federal Republic have more pressing problems and issues than this anniversary? What do we have to celebrate at a time when hundreds of thousands of men, women and children are seeking refuge among us? At a time when our society faces such immense challenges?

My answer is simply: We do have something to celebrate. Unity grew out of the peaceful revolution. This was a great gift from the East Germans to the West Germans and to the entire nation. They overcame their fears and defeated their oppressors with a powerful people's movement. They attained freedom. For the first time in German national history, the uprising of the oppressed truly succeeded. The peaceful revolution shows: We Germans are capable of freedom.

And so today we celebrate the courage and self-confidence of that time. Let us use this memory as a bridge. It connects us to a wealth of experience from which we can draw strength, now in particular. Let us make no mistake, inner freedom and inner unity arise when we genuinely desire them and consciously dedicate ourselves to them. Inner unity arises when we concentrate on the possible instead of allowing ourselves to be blown along by doubts or fantasies. And inner unity lives from continuing the conversation about what connects us and what should connect us.

In 1990, too, people quite legitimately asked whether we were up to the challenge. But then, too—as we have already heard— there was no historical model to offer us orientation. Nevertheless, millions of people took up the great national task of unification and turned Germany into a country that became more than the sum of its parts.

For me, there is no question that in the 25th year of German Unity the balance is a positive one. Even if there have sometimes been disappointments, even if the economy and wages did not grow as quickly as

most people in East Germany hoped, and financial assistance has continued longer than most West Germans would like, one thing is certain:

The great majority of Germans, wherever they come from, feel that they have arrived in this united country and are at home here. The differences have become smaller and especially in the younger generation have actually disappeared altogether. Germany has found unity in freedom—politically, socially and gradually also economically, and, with an understandable delay, mentally as well.

What belongs together has grown together—Willy Brandt has been proven right. The unification process was significantly more difficult, however, than most people expected amidst the euphoria of 1989/90. After all, both sides had long drawn their impressions of “over there” from a distance. When we finally had a chance to look at each other close up, many people were surprised and some were horrified. “How dilapidated,” said one side, “how superficial,” said the other.

One thing is true, of course: The East has not yet caught up with the West economically. This notwithstanding, the image of the dilapidated East is a thing of the past. The outward transformation can be portrayed very clearly in before and after images: hundreds of thousands of single-family homes, restored roads, villages and cities, salvaged historic buildings and cultural sites, clean rivers and lakes. All of the completely refurbished regions give occasion for joy. They are testament to a great shared effort and proof that the West Germans have also adopted unity as a task for all Germans, proving from the beginning their solidarity with those from whom they had been separated for decades.

I cannot and will not take today’s celebration for granted, but will honor it expressly and gratefully.

In this context, we should also remind ourselves that the West Germans also gave the East Germans a gift: the federal constitution, which places human dignity at the center and guarantees basic rights, and a functioning democracy, an independent judiciary and a social system that provides for the weak.

Unity has, however, made few demands on most West Germans in their daily lives, while the East Germans faced the enormous pressures of transformation. In the East, the new life brought not just full store shelves, fast cars and colorful vacation catalogues. It also brought the massive closure of so-called people-owned enterprises and with it mass unemployment and mass migration. Empty industrial plants, empty prefabricated apartment buildings, empty school classes—all of this left emotional scars. These were formative memories even for the youngest at the time, who now refer to themselves as “children of the *Wende* (turnaround),” and they have not forgotten them.

For 16 million people nearly everything changed within a very short space of time. But measured against the great hopes, some things did not change fast enough. Only gradually did it become clear that equalizing living conditions and mentalities in East and West would be a task and a process for generations.

We in the East learned painfully that while we could gain democracy overnight in 1989/90, we could not master it as quickly. What a mistake to believe we could be subjects one day and citizens the next! A feeling of helplessness took root in many minds. Helplessness after decades of totalitarian dictatorship in which basic human rights had been curtailed and a sense of independent action crippled, in which free elections had to remain a distant dream. This probably explains the greatest challenge for East Germans in the united country. They had to overcome decades of self-alienation, at lightning speed. They needed to do what had been anything but desirable before: to think and act independently. To not merely dream of freedom, but actually to shape freedom in freedom.

Despite all the difficulties: Millions of East Germans ventured and negotiated personal new beginnings, under new premises, in new occupations or new places. Millions managed to transform the ruptures in their biographies into a future, founding enterprises and democratizing administrations, introducing

freedom of teaching and research at the universities, establishing associations where the state previously considered itself responsible. Millions of people opened themselves to the fundamental insight that new freedom offers new opportunities, but at the same time demands the acceptance of new responsibility, including for themselves. The achievement of this change by East Germans was enormous and continues to this day.

[...]

Ladies and gentlemen, Germany's inner unity was able to grow above all because we always felt that we belonged together, and because we wished to live together respecting the same political values. But now that many refugees are being driven towards Europe and Germany by war, authoritarian regimes and failing states, the task of inner unity presents itself anew. We sense that we must preserve the cohesion among those who are here but also create a sense of cohesion with those who are arriving. We need to attain inner unity again and anew.

No one could have foreseen this development 25 years ago. At the time, after the collapse of the Communist regime and the end of the East-West conflict, we looked towards the future with optimism. We even believed we were at the dawn of a new era. The superiority of democracy had been strikingly proven, we thought, and its international triumphal march seemed merely a matter of time. We recall Francis Fukuyama, the US political scientist, who announced the "end of history." Many people, including myself, believed along with him in a more just, peaceful and democratic future.

The hope of such changes worldwide has vanished, though. Instead of further victories for freedom and democracy, in many places we are experiencing the advance of authoritarian regimes and Islamic fundamentalists. Instead of the world becoming more peaceful, we face terrorism, civil wars, imperial land grabs and a renaissance of geopolitics. And the community of Europeans, which began 25 years ago to bring Eastern and Western Europe closer together, finds itself in the midst of a real test of its strength, with attempts to save the euro, discussions here and there about leaving the union and above all the need to cope with movements of refugees.

But what does it mean to achieve inner unity again and anew when the composition of populations changes so significantly in a short space of time? How do states and societies manage to create an inner sense of connection between natives and new arrivals? And how can the European Union come to an agreement if attitudes towards refugees differ so greatly?

The pressure has not yet wholly unified the European states. The most recent decisions of the European Union, however, show that people are increasingly reaching the conclusion that there can be no solution to the refugee problem unless it is a European one. We will not be able to stem the tide of refugees unless we redouble our joint efforts to support refugees in the crisis regions, and above all combat the root causes that lead people to flee. And we must be very clear about this: We will be unable to maintain our current openness unless we all decide together to improve the security of Europe's external borders.

Certainty about these shared tasks does not, however, automatically remove the divergences between the member states. The current debates reveal differing attitudes based on varying historical experiences. This is something we already experience here, in the reunified Federal Republic of Germany. West Germany had several decades to become accustomed to being a country of immigration, and that was hard enough: a country with guest workers who later became immigrants, with political refugees, civil war refugees and ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe who resettled here. For people in the East, it was a different matter altogether. Many of them had little or no contact with migrants before 1990. We saw that changing attitudes towards refugees and migrants can only ever be the result of protracted and often conflictual learning processes. This insight should also help us to respect the experiences of other nations.

When we Germans think back to the “boat is full” debates of twenty years ago it is clear how much the thinking of most citizens in this country has changed in the meantime. The reception of refugees this past summer sent, and continues to send, a strong signal against xenophobia, resentment, hate speech and violence. And what I find especially positive: A wholly new and wonderful network has arisen, between volunteers and professionals, civil society and the state. Those who themselves were once new to Germany or who come from migrant families also became involved. Extraordinary things were accomplished on the local, state and federal levels. The country can be rightly proud of this and feel glad. And I say today: Thank you Germany!

And yet almost everyone can sense worry creeping into this gladness, can see that the human need to help the suffering is accompanied by fear at the magnitude of the task. That is our dilemma: We want to help. Our hearts are big. But our possibilities are finite.

The fact is: We are doing a great deal, a very great deal, to overcome the current emergency. But we will have to continue to discuss: What will the future bring? How do we want to steer the influx of refugees and other forms of immigration—next year, in two, three or ten years? How can we improve the integration of new arrivals in our society?

[...]

In this spirit, we now ask: What inner bond holds a country of immigration together? What binds and what should bind us together?

In an open society, what counts is not whether society is ethnically homogeneous, but whether it is founded on shared values. What matters is not where someone comes from, but where s/he is headed and which political order s/he identifies with.

Precisely because Germany is home to different cultures, religions and ways of life, precisely because Germany is becoming an increasingly diverse country, we all need to be linked by irrefutable values, a generally accepted codex.

I remember well the attraction that Western values held in the GDR and other states of the former Soviet bloc. We longed for freedom and human rights, the rule of law and democracy. Although they arose in the West, these values have become the hope of the oppressed and disadvantaged on all continents. While democracy has not seen a worldwide triumphal march since 1990, its values are present everywhere, and increasingly are no longer viewed and understood as Western but as universal. And that is a good thing.

Not everybody everywhere is convinced of these values, not here either, by the way. We know that our values were and occasionally still are violated even in the West. But this does not discredit the values, but those who betray them.

And these values of ours are not up for debate! They are what will and should connect us in our country. Here, the dignity of the individual is inviolate. Here, religious affiliations and influences do not prevent people from following the laws of the secular state. Here, achievements such as equal rights for women or homosexual individuals are not called into question and the inalienable rights of the individual are not restricted by collective norms, whether those of the family, the ethnic group or the religious community. Against this backdrop, the sentence familiar to all of us—there must be no tolerance for intolerance—acquires its human foundation. And something else: In our country there are also basic political decisions, apart from those just mentioned, that are also irrefutable. These include our firm rejection of any form of anti-Semitism and our acknowledgment of Israel’s right to exist.

We know of no other social order that affords the individual so much freedom, so much scope for

development and so many rights as democracy. It may be imperfect, but we know of no other social order capable of such extensive self-correction in the conflict between lifestyles, opinions and interests. We also know of no social order capable of adapting so quickly to new conditions and reforming itself, because, as Karl Popper once said, it relies on people *“for whom it is more important to learn than to be proved right.”*

It is for these values and this social order that the Federal Republic of Germany stands. We aim to promote them among newcomers as well, not complacently but self-confidently, because we are convinced that this understanding, codified in the Basic Law, is and remains the best precondition for the kind of life that refugees in particular aspire to. A life, as our national anthem puts it, in unity and law and freedom.

Source: Joachim Gauck, “Festakt zum 25. Jahrestag der Deutschen Einheit,“ October 3, 2015.
<http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Joachim-Gauck/Reden/2015/10/151003-Festakt-Deutsche-Einheit.html>

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