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**Speech**  
**by Federal President Joachim Gauck**  
**“Europe: The Legacy and the Future”**  
**on 6 March 2014**  
**in Athens/Greece**

Efcharisto! Thank you so much for inviting me to this very special place. Anyone who would like to speak about Europe here at the foot of the Acropolis simply must begin with ancient Greece. Here at the very wellspring of democracy, here at the cradle of kalokagathia, the ancient Greek ideal of goodness and beauty that had such a defining influence on the German classics. Here, where we find the roots of the civilisation that we contemporary Europeans invoke as if it were self-evident.

No other art, no other philosophy, has ever remained fresh and relevant over the course of millennia as the works of Greek antiquity have. No European finishes school without Pythagoras, no student of the humanities graduates without reading Plato, Socrates and Sophocles. No German literature, no German poetry, exists apart from the legacy of ancient Greece. What would Friedrich Hölderlin have been without the spiritual home that Greece offered him? What would our architecture be without its Hellenic elements? Just look at the Doric columns and attic of the Brandenburg Gate – all inspired by your Acropolis.

These are more than citations of historic works. They are testaments to our enduring ties that have spanned thousands of kilometres and thousands of years. Theodor Heuss, our first Federal President, described his state visit to Greece as “return migration to my spiritual home”, for Greece lives not just here but everywhere in

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Europe – and in all of us. And so I stand before you now, certain that our shared cultural history is a strong bond that unites all of us in Europe. And this place is a good vantage point for observing not only the past, but also the present and the future.

Allow me to begin with what is most frequently invoked: our shared values. These values feature so heavily in speeches about Europe that they sometimes sound nearly formulaic, but in reality they are anything but self-evident. I would like to affirm once more that our Europe today would be as unimaginable without ancient Greece as without Christianity that joined to classical antiquity or without the jurisprudence that arose from ancient Rome to influence our civil law up to the present day.

At times in European history these values have been trampled underfoot and perverted dreadfully. Freedom was scarce during the Religious Wars of the Early Modern Age. Communism abused the human longing for justice. And nationalism corrupted the human sense of community. But despite all these aberrations, our shared values have been rediscovered and reinvigorated time and time again. This has been keenly evident in the relationship between our two countries.

Greece was one of the first countries to extend a hand of reconciliation to the German people after the Second World War. Greece did this even though the country – your country – had suffered immensely under the Nazi occupation. Greece had been forced to loan money to Berlin and had been economically exploited. Tens of thousands were murdered; like everywhere in Europe, countless Jews were among them. And despite all of this, it was thanks to an invitation extended by Greece that Theodor Heuss's first state visit as the first Federal President of the Federal Republic of Germany led him to Athens in 1956.

When the Berlin Wall fell, Greece once again demonstrated its trust in the German people. Some of our European neighbours showed concern about whether the united Federal Republic would strive to dominate Europe once again. But Greece did not. Your country transcended all its domestic differences to accord the German people the right to self-determination, placing its hope in European policy that advanced European integration.

It is important to me to point out here that Germany has also shown trust in the Greek people and helped the country to return to democracy. In the era of the military dictatorship, the Federal Republic of Germany stood on the side of the Greek opposition, offered a second home to refugees and at times acted as a mediator, at times as a spokesperson. Konstantinos Simitis, a member of the opposition to the military dictatorship who later became Prime Minister of a democratic Greece, found political asylum in West Germany, as did current President Karolos Papoulias, who studied law in Munich and Cologne.

If I ask us now to recall these relationships between our two countries, it is not because I am trying to give a history lesson. On the contrary. What is at stake is the present situation of European countries. Becoming aware of how these countries became the societies they are can help us to understand our togetherness and commonality better.

Long before I embarked on this journey it was clear to me that I would be visiting a country in the midst of dramatic changes – including all sorts of hopes and all sorts of hardships. Greece has begun a programme of reform that entails immense political efforts as well as painful cuts for large parts of the public. For the distant observer, the commentary on this process seems highly varied, from profound scepticism in view of figures and deficits to a deliberate calculated optimism. When one speaks to people who are experiencing the current changes at first hand, one sees the everyday dimensions of the crisis as well as its existential side.

It saddens me greatly to hear what so many Greeks are having to endure and go through with in this seventh year of crisis, how those who did nothing to cause the crisis are the ones suffering the most from its consequences. To hear how dire the impoverishment of the already unemployed has been and how greatly those who are still employed fear losing their jobs. To hear how many people must live in fear of no longer having the money for their children's education, for the pair of shoes they need, for their next lunch, for their own health care. And to hear how much families and personal relationships suffer under these pressures.

Many people are making sacrifices, enormous sacrifices, to climb back out of these depths. And many sense that the reforms, although painful, are necessary. Here in Athens, I would like to pay my respects to this attitude. Even at the most precarious moments, chaos and anarchy have never prevailed. As a democrat and a European, I would like to offer my thanks to all of the Greek people who have remained sober and prudent despite such difficult circumstances. I am especially thankful to those who have pointed out in the heated public debate that these painful reforms are occurring not in order to meet European, let alone German demands, but in order for Greece to set itself on the path to a better future.

I spent a lot of time mulling over whether I should mention the topic of crisis management at all and whether it isn't presumptuous for a guest to speak about such a subject. I do come with experience from other regions of Europe. But above all I have come for another reason: I would like to proclaim my solidarity with you. This solidarity starts with being able to perceive the other's situation in the first place in order to offer support where it is wanted.

High unemployment among young people is an especially pressing problem – not only for the young people affected, but also for the local and national governments that are urgently seeking solutions, both here in Greece and in other countries. People who are unable to gain a foothold in working life remain on the sidelines of life – financially and often socially as well. They put off starting families of their own. Many of them have only the support of their families to turn to. The longer they lack job prospects, the more they lose trust in the state and the market economy.

What ties us all together is the insight that Europe cannot afford to – and must not – condemn an entire generation to passivity. If the shared culture, the shared values, the shared interests and goals of Europe are to have any future, young people cannot be allowed to feel forsaken by society. We should all strive for concrete results soon in the battle against youth unemployment. We would be happy to share with Greece and other countries our positive experiences with the dual system of vocational training, which has proven highly effective in Germany. Tomorrow I will be visiting a hotel training apprentices here in Athens to see for myself that such forms of cooperation are possible and sensible, and to learn more about how we can advance them.

Here in Athens, Aristotle once pondered the *zoon politikon*, the human being as a social creature. People, he said, were beings oriented towards community. By forming states, he thought, people were realising their search for happiness. According to Aristotle, the order that fulfilled longings for law and justice could only assert itself within a state.

People have now been struggling for centuries with the question of which form of political order is best able to serve the common good. We in Europe are rightfully proud of the system based on parliamentary democracy and the rule of law that prevailed after the Second World War and again after the fall of Eastern Bloc Communism. But even democracy has no simple answers on hand for crisis situations such as those we have experienced in recent years.

I think the most important thing that one can wish for a country in a situation like Greece's is that it find the strength not to succumb to depression or fatalism. Both the government and the public have already achieved a lot. But persistence, resolve and patience are still needed. It will take time for the positive effects of the reforms to show themselves in everyday life, for job prospects and material conditions to improve. But I am certain that the path will lead to the goal if you stick to the direction you have taken.

Permit me to explain that my confidence about this is rooted in the transformative experience that so many people in post-Communist

states lived through after 1990. Experiences cannot, of course, be applied one-to-one to a different situation, but at some points there are similarities in terms of certain measures as well as the feeling about life that goes along with major changes in a society.

I share the memories of many central and eastern Europeans who – like me – once lived on the other side of the Iron Curtain. For us, Europe was a stroke of good fortune, but our rapid entry into economic competition and the internal market also brought pressure and insecurity.

I remember well the transition from a planned to a market economy: not all of us were winners. To some, the cage that had previously confined us came to seem almost comforting in retrospect. Those were bitter times. They brought unemployment, anxiety about the future, and even emigration – sometimes permanent, sometimes separating families for years. But then came the liberating experience of realising that we were at last no longer dependent on paternalistic authorities and their “protective” management of our lives, and that the new freedom really did offer new opportunities for us to shape our own lives. We saw the first small successes, then larger ones, then the economic revival that even drew back some of those who had emigrated from our countries. These days when I am in my hometown, Rostock, or in Warsaw or Riga, I often meet people who say the same thing, almost word for word: the transition was hard, but it was necessary and for the majority of people it was worth it.

But wherever and whenever they may occur, processes of transformation always bring fear and mistrust in their wake. Prophets of doom, populists and all those who lack the powers of imagination to envision a better future are then sometimes able to sway parts of the public to their positions. I know that there are more than a few Greeks who feel unjustly treated by Europe and Germany. But we should remember that the rules for the way out of the crisis are not random despotism and are, above all, not dictated by external players. Rather, they lead back to the foundations of our co-existence, which we decided together. They remind us all of the voluntary commitments that we have made. So let's not allow an us-versus-them mentality to be rekindled. Let's not allow the settling of old scores to stir up old grudges again. The only option for a promising future is for us – also with German financial support – to develop projects and build new bridges across our old divides.

Let's look for the kind of solutions that are found in dialogue. Let's all pull together to find our way back up from the bottom. What can also happen then is that people will recognise the opportunities in the things they had long shied away from because of the disintegration of old structures or the vanishing of privileges dear to them.

Europe showed its strength in the crisis. Our community is highly complex, but it is also resilient. We have readjusted and will most likely keep readjusting, both in terms of our responsibilities and in terms of our institutions. Europe can learn from experience, and it is capable of reform.

If something merits criticism, then, it is not the European institutions on the whole, but rather the fact that we all failed to take our shared rules and institutions seriously enough, and we did not develop them quickly enough. We turned a blind eye or looked the other way entirely if it seemed politically expedient – in some cases, in the West too. Rather than cultivating the appearance of tranquillity or of prosperity, we should genuinely strive for new, viable solutions.

There is no doubt that in the past few years the European Union has experienced the greatest crisis since its founding: a debt, financial and economic crisis, plus a crisis of growth, all at the same time. One could also see it as a crisis of leadership and trust. Yes, it was a grave error to found a monetary union without sufficient harmonisation of financial policies. Yes, there was a misguided tendency to let Brussels decide about things that would have been better decided at a local, regional or national level. And yes, there are justified calls for the EU to behave more legitimately, more democratically and more efficiently.

At the same time, it is also true that this crisis hit Europe with a force that demanded efforts of historical proportion from the people of Europe. We have shown mutual solidarity in a way that is unprecedented not only in the history of Europe but also in all the history of international relations. During the crisis we Europeans also created new institutions in order to remain capable of acting, such as the European Stability Mechanism, ESM. German political leaders contributed too, although some politicians had previously rejected the notion of such rescue mechanisms.

It seems to me that the EU's core purpose is not only indisputable but has also proved itself ever more justified in light of recent developments: we need shared institutions and shared policies in order to govern the matters that individual states can no longer sensibly govern alone. In terms of the globalised economy and climate protection, we have known this for a long time. But we are now also becoming increasingly and urgently aware of this fact in regard to security, data protection and foreign and refugee policy.

It has now become virtually a dictum that solidarity and solidity belong together like two sides of the same coin – a euro coin, let's say, befitting the theme at hand. Despite all the difficulties we have experienced in recent years, I am thankful for the important progress that has been made in stabilising our common currency. I can scarcely imagine – and indeed do not want to imagine – what turmoil would have occurred in Greece and throughout the European Union if the

Europeans hadn't helped. But what I do imagine is that a reform-minded Greece will also experience European solidarity if the recovery process takes longer than anticipated.

I had originally thought that I would speak about solidarity primarily in terms of bilateral and European solidarity. But the more conversations I held in the run-up to this visit, the clearer it became to me that the solidarity expressed within Greece is also an important issue for a modern Greece. I am thinking, for example, of the young Greek entrepreneur abroad who is investing a share of his profits in his home country right now – for Greece. I am thinking of the civil servant in his late fifties who starts afresh in his attitude and says, “I want to help end corruption and build up effective administration – for Greece.” I am thinking of the trade unionist who does not push the limits of her powers of obstruction, but rather opens up to compromises – for Greece. And I am thinking of all the citizens who have enough troubles of their own, but still ask their mayor what their town can do – for Greece.

I appreciate all of these people profoundly. The strength to fuel a new start is something that arises from the heart of a society. Greece needs a strong sense of community, now perhaps more than ever. The social cohesion that I have in mind for the future of civil society can best be compared with a Greek family: lively, helpful, committed to cooperating well with one another. Many other countries envy you this family tradition. My wish for you is for these positive models to become applicable to a larger societal framework, for Greek people actively to contribute their own values and ideas to their community. This will give rise to a new relationship to the state and to its institutions and representatives.

Yes, that is how a powerful image takes shape before my eyes: the Grecovery, borne and shaped by the citizens of this country, measuring itself not only by economic figures but also by things like the number of associations and initiatives that are founded, the many projects through which Greek people work for their interests.

And with this thought we find ourselves unexpectedly back at Aristotle and his concept of humanity, the *zoon politikon*.

In today's world, only a person who publicly commits to the common good can uphold economic recovery, security, legal certainty and a democratic state. I am noting this here in Greece and for Greece, but I know that it holds true for all of Europe. Prosperous communities bonded by solidarity cannot endure without citizens prepared to take on responsibility, without the civil societies of individual European countries. Europe can only have a future if we want it. And we should want it, for it is to all our benefit. It is a space

that offers greater opportunities for prosperity and peace than any nation-state can.