

Speech by the President of Germany Joachim Gauck
on the occasion of the award of the title of Honorary Doctor of Vytautas Magnus
University,
Kaunas, Lithuania,
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Dear Professor Augutis,

Your Excellencies,

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to accept this special award from a university whose history is closely related to the history of free, democratic Lithuania. The origins of this university date back to the early days of the Republic of Lithuania. During the dark years of the Soviet occupation, the university was closed and restored only after the regaining of Lithuania's independence. Looking at your history, I see you as an institution that fosters openness, dialogue, justice and tolerance, as a stronghold of liberal and democratic values. Scientific excellence and international exchange are your priority, and the list of previous university Honorary Doctors is truly impressive. By joining them today, I feel deeply moved. Thank you very much, dear Rector, for your kind words of appreciation.

As the President of Germany, I never hid the fact that Lithuania and the other Baltic countries on the eastern border of the European Union are very close to me politically and emotionally. I had the opportunity to visit the region at the very beginning of my presidency, and I remember well the meetings and the topics of conversation at that time. [Dear Mrs Grybauskaitė, I am grateful that you have agreed to participate in this event. This speaks of the special relationship and friendship between our countries].

Dear Rector, when I received your invitation to come to Kaunas nine months ago, many of us in Europe were in a completely different mood. However, after the brutal war that broke out in Europe on 24 February 2022, a new chapter in Europe's security order was opened. Putin has dragged Ukraine into this bloody war, and today we see a victim which, thanks to international support, is defending itself from destruction – boldly, intelligently and with increasing success. Here in Lithuania, you realised very early on that Russia's war against Ukraine is an attack on Europe and on the entire Western world, an attack, in the true sense of the word, on democratic modernity, on human freedom and on the rule of law.

This morning I had the opportunity to meet with President Nausėda and I am grateful for this meeting. There is a very clear attitude on the eastern flank of NATO towards Putin's Russia and its neo-imperial ambitions. Therefore, it is not only important that Germany, as NATO partner, contributes to strengthening Lithuania's readiness for defence. It is not only a response to Russia's tangible military threat. It is an investment in the defence of common values, the importance of which has once again become apparent in the face of the threat of Russia.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I come to you from a country which, because of its history, is today committed to defending the values that unite the Western world – democracy, the rule of law, respect for human and civil rights, tolerance. This was not always the case. When I was born in 1940, Germany was ruled by a criminal regime that spread terror and hatred, waged war across Europe and perpetrated a Holocaust, during which millions of people were systematically murdered, and an unparalleled crime against humanity was committed. After the collapse of National Socialism, it took decades for most Germans to realise that the capitulation of 1945 and the subsequent deployment of British, American, French and Soviet troops was not a defeat, but a liberation – a liberation from a totalitarian, murderous regime.

However, today's Germany not only recognises its responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism, but also feels a special responsibility to defend freedom and the rights and dignity of all people. As a citizen and as the President of the country, I have always cared about spreading this message. Today, when I stand before you, you see not only a German, but also a kindred spirit, a friend of fate. The one who, after liberating himself from the dictatorship of the National Socialists, experienced the establishment of the new terror in the eastern part of his country, just like you in the Baltic States and in the other countries of Central Europe. Not

all Germans share this painful experience. The majority of German society has not known this new oppression, the constant arbitrariness and the resulting sense of helplessness. Meanwhile, you know exactly what I am talking about. Until 1989, we lived under the Soviet system, under constant surveillance, spying and persecution by the secret services. In this region, the democratic project of European modernity lost its power – the permanent impotence of the majority and the absolute power of the minority took hold. The so-called German Democratic Republic was also a state that demanded obedience and humility from its citizens. The state, which since 1961 imprisoned its people, barricaded itself behind the wall because it feared that its citizens would flee to the West. In this way, the state took seventeen million people hostage. It was the state that shot its own citizens who were trying to cross the border to get to their families or friends in the West.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

On a day like this, we can remember what made us feel humiliated and why many people became frustrated. Until 1989, all those who lived in the Soviet zone and longed for freedom suffered new painful defeats. In 1953, Soviet tanks suppressed a popular uprising in more than 700 areas of the GDR. We lived through the suppression of the uprising in Hungary and the unrest of 1956 in Poland, the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and the end of the Prague Spring in 1968. We saw how the leadership of the Polish Communist Party suppressed the workers' strikes in 1970 and how the free trade union *Solidarność* (*Solidarity*) was banned in 1981.

Countless experiences of brutal repression made people immune to the promises of communist propagandists, but at the same time, society fell into a state of long lethargy. Superficial, minimal loyalty, retreat into the private sphere and the circle of friends was for a long time the only way of life for those who longed for freedom, but could not yet grasp the meaning of Vaclav Havel's words: "the power of the powerful rests on the powerlessness of the powerless".

For a long time, we could not believe that the communist system of government would one day collapse. But that day came. The courageous Polish struggle for freedom, which began in the early summer of 1989, encouraged more and more people in Eastern and Central Europe to get rid of their fear. In the GDR, tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets, defying memories of Beijing's Tiananmen Square. All they held in their hands were

burning candles they had brought from the churches. They were confronted by armed officers, secret police and soldiers. And then the most beautiful sentence in the history of the politics of Germany was spoken: “We are a nation!” None of us could have imagined that a year later the oppressors would completely lose power, and Germany would be reunified. The support of our former enemies, the whole of Europe and the rest of the world contributed to this.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

The end of communism and the remarkable turn of German history were very different from the Lithuanian experience. Just a week before the elections on 18 March 1990 for the first free People’s Chamber of the GDR, Lithuania was the first of the Baltic States to declare its secession from the collapsing Soviet Union – almost half a century after the invasion of the Red Army in 1940. The recently deceased Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev saw this as an “illegal act” threatening the transformation of the centralised USSR into a federal state.

While still divided Germany was living in euphoria and moving towards reunification, the Moscow state apparatus showed its ugly face on the streets of Vilnius. The economic blockade, the rampage of the secret services and, finally, the deployment of tanks and special forces – all this was to help Moscow to abolish Lithuania’s Declaration of Independence. The attempt to carry out the coup failed thanks to the firm attitude of Vytautas Lansbergis, one of the founders of the Lithuanian Independence Movement and later the head of state and honorary doctor of this university. Unlike in the GDR, the struggle for freedom here was not without bloodshed, but it led to independence and Lithuania’s solid integration into the EU and NATO.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

What we learn from history is essential for our present. For many people in Germany, this is still a painful insight: the “end of history” associated with the unstoppable triumph of democracy, the rule of law and the market economy did not come after the Wende of 1989/1990, nor did the confrontation between East and West end. Here, in the eastern part of the European Union, this has been evident for some time. Today, no one can turn a blind eye to the fact that Putin’s regime is demonstrating its hostility towards us. The invasion of Ukraine and the brutal war crimes that we have witnessed since February this year have revealed Russia’s neo-imperialist ambitions.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the European Union, NATO and a group of major industrialised countries have forged a specific relationship with Russia and have tried to integrate it in different ways. A partnership with our great Eastern neighbour seemed possible, at least during the years of Yeltsin's rule. Think of the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 or the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. There have been some signals of a willingness to cooperate under Putin too.

For the latter, however, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a humiliation and an insult – “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”. A closer look at the history of Russia's expansion and quest for dominance – the wars in Chechnya, Georgia, Transnistria, Crimea – reveals that there is a certain continuity: both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union were based on an imperial self-perception. After a short period of opening up, this thinking has become more and more pronounced, replacing a relationship based on cooperation and equality. Thus, the idea of a common European security order including Russia has eventually proved to be an illusion.

Russia has decided to leave the path of partnership with the West and today defines itself as an antagonist. Democracy, freedom and human rights threaten a model for maintaining the power of kleptocratic elites. Communism as an ideology no longer exists, and Russia cannot offer an attractive alternative to liberal democracy.

In the face of Putin's war against Ukraine, the transatlantic community has reacted with one voice. Determination, not concessions, remains the guiding principle – history teaches us that territorial concessions often only whet the appetite of aggressors. The demand to restore the territorial integrity of Ukraine is therefore correct. We will continue to provide our financial, humanitarian and military support to Ukraine.

However, we must admit that Russia has decided to go to war not only in Ukraine. We, the liberal democracies in the European Union and NATO, have been implicitly declared enemies. The intention to fight against “Western hegemony” does not necessarily mean physical destruction, but the desire to weaken our strategic abilities, will and values. Awareness of this new dimension of the confrontation with Putin's Russia is growing. In Germany, we are talking about a “turning point”. And yet we feel that in many cases we still lack a common language to help cement this epochal turning point in people's minds. In addition, in some places, we

lack political tools and procedures to properly address this challenge. Russia has expanded its warfare in the 21st century through non-military methods – disinformation and propaganda, economic, cultural and humanitarian sabotage. Nuclear weapon threat should also be added to this.

As democracies capable of defending ourselves, we must adapt to these challenges and prove that we can act. We cannot freeze in fear. Understanding fear as an anthropological constant of human existence is one thing. Another thing is to realise that people can fight their fear and overcome it, that courage can be found where it has not been a part of life for a long time.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

We do not know how this war will end. But we do know what is at stake – not only for Ukraine, but for all free nations. In the 1990s, we rediscovered that Europe is a united space of freedom, with room for the small and the large; a space where the wounds of the past can be healed with the help of human rights, security, inclusion, solidarity and democracy.

In Western Europe, we should better appreciate the perspective of Eastern Europe. Western Europe needs the trust and the love of freedom that exist here. We will stand together for justice, because we want to strengthen it and not allow it to be superseded by the right of the stronger. Let us not forget that freedom, human rights and human dignity are the values that people all over the world yearn for.

Dear Rector,

I thank you once again for the award of the title of Honorary Doctor of Vytautas Magnus University. I consider this award as a sign of close ties and strong solidarity between Lithuania and Germany.