



**Leipzig Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter
Steinmeier: 35 Years On From The Peaceful Revolution,
75 Years On From The Birth Of The Basic Law – How Is Our
Democracy Faring?
at “Leipzig Reads” during the Leipzig Book Fair
on 21 March 2024**

“The memories of the country that certified my birth are dim. In 1986 East Germany was nearing its end, but I, lying in my child’s cot, was unaware. [...] I was four when ‘Germany, one fatherland’ finally came to be.”

I am sure that many of our German-speaking guests are familiar with these lines. They are from the novel *Die Möglichkeit von Glück, The Possibility of Happiness*, by Anne Rabe, who is here with us today. In your novel, Ms Rabe, the protagonist Stine gradually uncovers her history and that of her family, a painful history spanning several generations; she traces the scars left by two German dictatorships and by violence within the family as well as without. “Where do we come from?” It is this question that haunts Stine in your novel, in a narrative as brilliant as it is brutal. What narrative power unfolds in this tale. A power that we can find in many recent novels by authors who come from the east of our country. A power that is palpable here in Leipzig at the Book Fair in particular.

It is a great pleasure, and truly very important to me, to be here in Leipzig today. I bid you all a very warm welcome to the Old Stock Exchange! And I am especially pleased to be able to welcome you, Anne Rabe, and you, Ingo Schulze. Later on you will join a panel discussion up here with Marcel Beyer, whom I also feel very honoured to welcome today. And it is wonderful that we are able to have you, Peter Müller, as our moderator. Three strong voices in German literature, I can assure you of that, three very different life stories – I am as intrigued by the prospect of this discussion as you are.

The Book Fair each year lends Leipzig a very special atmosphere. This has always been a cosmopolitan university city, a city of the people

and not just of the elite. One that has thrived on exchange and flourished through trade, a city with a proud cultural tradition – I say this with Bach in mind, of course, the St Thomas Boys' Choir, of course, the Gewandhausorchester, the Academy of Fine Arts. But equally I have in mind the Leipzig of the burghers who championed democratic ideals, the city of the 1848 revolutionary Robert Blum, a great mind who wanted to win freedom through reason. I am pleased that the Leipzig Robert Blum Award is now being presented by the city for the first time. And I am pleased that the Moldovan President Maia Sandu is the first winner. This Award is a reflection of the deep roots that democratic courage has in Leipzig to this day.

Leipzig has for centuries also been a city of books and of literature. Major publishing houses and important booksellers were based here, while outstanding typographers, typesetters, designers and printers carried out their craft. A craft without which the development of the book in our country would have been inconceivable. And the Leipzig Book Fair too has a long history. In the reunified Germany, it draws attention from far beyond the borders of our country, from every direction. The future of this very special place of debate is overwhelmingly important for our whole country, I would say for Europe. I have seen it firsthand today. This is not just a meeting point for German-language publishing houses and authors – the Book Fair is also a unique showcase and a wonderful place of encounter. A place to encounter Flemish and Dutch literature, of course, thanks to this year's guest of honour, but traditionally also, here in Leipzig in particular, literature from Central and Eastern Europe. It is, not that I need to tell anyone in this room, a festival of reading, and it is celebrated across the city; it fascinates many people, not least me.

[Interruption by an activist]

Thank you, we have heard what you have to say, and I can assure you ...

[Interruption by an activist]

Could I possibly suggest – you have got your message across; we do not share your opinion, but we have heard you.

[Interruption by an activist]

We have understood, we have understood ...

[Interruption by an activist]

We have understood. All I will say to you is that without 7 October this war would not have happened.

[Interruption by an activist]

Do excuse this. It is something we encounter at almost all events at the moment. We live in a democracy. We are capable of withstanding this, and we will return to the topics that ...

[Interruption by an activist]

I do not know if you still recall, but I had arrived at the festival of reading. I was talking about the power of literature that is palpable here in Leipzig and most particularly at the Book Fair. A power...

[Interruption by an activist]

Is there anybody else who has a message to share? Otherwise I would in fact attempt to return to my text. So, we were talking about the festival of reading, we were talking about the power of literature, about the power of literature that of course only becomes visible ...

[Interruption by an activist]

The people who have simple explanations for the complexity of the world – that is a topic I will come to later. But I fear the messages we have just heard belong in that category.

Once again, on the power of literature, a power that only truly shines, not that I need to tell you, when a book finds readers ...

[Interruption by an activist]

I am happy to ask again – is there anybody else who has messages to deliver concerning the Middle East? This is not something I wish to trivialise. It is of course a serious issue, one that we are discussing in this country, not only during the Book Fair. I also understand that there are differing perspectives. But the thing is that there is no simple perspective on this issue. And nor can it be dealt with on the sidelines, with lists of signatures. I very much hope, and like you I expect, that the intensive talks currently being held on the release of hostages will be a success and that this agreement, if it comes to be, will be accompanied by a ceasefire.

[Interruption by an activist]

Yes, you clearly have no other answer than to drive Israel into the sea – that is not our answer.

[Interruption by an activist]

Let me take a different approach – I have spoken about books, but one of the truly great intellectuals of the city of Leipzig was the Romance scholar Werner Krauss. He once said that literature is the “inner side of world history”. It is literature that can spirit us away to another time; that can expose something, put something into words and into motion, which cannot be expressed or perhaps cannot yet be discussed in any other way. And literature can highlight contradictions without having to resolve them.

It is precisely here, I believe, that the strength of the new generation of eastern German writers lies. It is precisely this that they do so well – highlighting contradictions, and enduring them. When the Berlin Wall fell, they were either still children, these young writers, or not yet born. And this new generation includes you, Anne Rabe, it includes Manja Präkels, Lukas Rietzschel, Julia Schoch, Matthias Jügler, and many more – far too many for me to list them all. And then there are authors who write autobiographical books. Often books brimming with anger and ferocity. All of them carry out excavations. Excavations of recent history, of the history of the former East Germany, of the upheaval and pain of the turbulent 1990s and the time that followed. What is important for him, Lukas Rietzschel has said, is how we deal with these experiences and our own past. “Experience was gained in those days that could be valuable for our present. And this is something that we must engage with.” He said this without rage, without dogmatism, and yet firmly. And that sets an example for many other young authors.

Here in the east of our country a voice rings out loud and clear. A voice that is diverse and multifaceted. A voice that tells stories in a new and different way.

And this voice is a source of enrichment for us all. I remember it well. Five years ago, as we celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the Peaceful Revolution, we talked about placing more importance on stories from the east, because they are, after all, a part of our shared history – or at least, we said at the time, they must become a part of it. We have come a long way since then. The eastern German voices are not only there but they are heard, read, their books are on bestseller lists, they do a great deal to shape public debate in Germany, about Germany. And they have long recounted more than simply individual life portraits and experiences. They generate impetus, controversies, reflections that can help us all to move forward. I believe that this is one positive aspect of our present. We can all draw new strength, too, from this new self-positioning of the younger generation, this quest to understand their place in the world.

This year, in 2024, we are taking a very particular look at our recent history and at the lessons that it holds for the present. A year in which we recall how our Basic Law came into being 75 years ago. A year, too, in which we look back at what happened 35 years ago here in Leipzig and in many other cities of the former East Germany.

Here in Leipzig, the memory of the Peaceful Revolution, of that pivotal 9 October 1989, is more alive than almost anywhere else. At the time, in October 1989, it is nonetheless likely that hardly anyone would have thought it possible for 70,000 protesters to march around the city-centre ring road – two days after the fortieth anniversary of the founding of East Germany, which saw brutal police tactics deployed, and just a

few weeks after the massacre in Beijing. I have been told that some people carried on for a second lap of the ring road out of joy and sheer disbelief. It was this courage, this power of the people, that brought down the Wall. Because of course it did not fall, as is so commonly said today. We owe it to the courageous people back then that we have now been reunified for almost 34 years. We cannot be grateful enough for this. And sometimes, sometimes I wish I could see a little of that sense of new beginnings, of that solidarity, of that courage now. I wish this in particular when I travel through our country. At the same time, I am very certain that all of this lives on in our country, all of this lives on in its people.

For two years, I have regularly moved my office out of the capital for three days at a time, into smaller communities that are otherwise not necessarily in the public eye. Places such as Altenburg and Quedlinburg, Rottweil and Neustrelitz, Freiberg and Völklingen, Senftenberg and Eckernförde, Meiningen and most recently Espelkamp.

During these trips, I see a country where people are taking action, getting involved, refusing to lose heart in the face of the enormous tasks that they face, that we all face.

However, I also see a country in which many people feel increasingly uncertain, increasingly exhausted by never-ending crises – and have become increasingly drawn to seemingly simple solutions.

I see a country in which angry farmers and hauliers are blocking roads with tractors and lorries. A country in which public debate quickly becomes strident and implacable, and hatred and hate speech poison many discussions, particularly online. I see a country in which political events are blocked, politicians are threatened and attacked, in which time and again people close themselves off to discussion.

But that is not the whole truth. Because I also see hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life taking to the streets – not to decry politics but to stand up for freedom and democracy.

I see a country in which, in the east, the deep-seated experiences of the years of upheaval still resonate; the memory of this, of this time, is passed down from generation to generation. I see that the pace of change remains relentless and that many people fear losing their hard-won prosperity as a result. There is no question that many people here in the east bore the brunt of the repercussions of the fall of the Wall and reunification. Many lost their jobs, many had to retrain, many had to begin entirely from scratch. And above all, many young people left – for the west. In some regions, an entire generation is missing.

In the west, meanwhile, many people thought that reunification would not change anything at all, and were likely too certain that our democracy will remain unchallenged and is forever guaranteed.

However, I also meet many people who are proud of what they have achieved and of what we have together done well. People who are open to discussion and debate, even if they by no means share the same opinions. I have often seen this during my travels – at the round table in Senftenberg, the Kaffeetafel kontrovers, or the large public debate a few weeks ago in Meiningen with over a hundred people.

Something has changed in the way that social issues and political aspirations are discussed in eastern Germany. In the old east-west debate, it was said that eastern Germans deserved greater recognition. There is of course an element of truth in that – that every individual in our country has the same right to respect. But there was at once always something wrong with this argument, I felt – that respect is something that a higher authority from the west deigns to bestow. In public debate today, eastern German voices are confident not just when it comes to their own affairs; they also play a crucial role in helping to determine what makes up Germany as a whole and in what direction our country as a whole should develop. That is a highly important step, in particular on the issues where we argue, where we struggle. Because democracy can only find its form in the struggle to choose the right path.

Yes, there is – particularly in times of change – always at once a desire to hold on to what is familiar or seems familiar. But I can also see that people have long since set off into the future, in the east as in the west. And when we speak of the future, then with regard to the climate we of course mean a post-fossil future. It astonishes me time and again that, everywhere in the towns that I visit on my Ortszeit trips, people are seizing the opportunity offered by this huge and necessary restructuring to combine the established with the new, tradition with modernity.

In Lusatia for example, where coal mining has shaped people's lives, new technologies are already being developed and will be developed in the coming years for the energy transition. And Freiberg, for centuries a mining and smelting town, is on the way to becoming a modern industrial hub. Zwickau, the birthplace of Saxony's automobile industry, where the emblematic East German car the Trabi was produced until 1991, is today home to the first factory belonging to a German automobile company where only fully electric vehicles are produced. Or Zeiss in Jena, semiconductor production around Dresden, fibre-optic technology from Thuringia – there is no shortage of examples. However, a great deal remains to be done. And a great deal remains to be done perhaps in particular in rural areas.

We are not as far as we could be, but we are further than we sometimes think – that is more or less how the Minister of State put it elsewhere, if I recall correctly. I believe that all of this is grounds for optimism. Optimism not just for the east, but optimism for the whole of our country!

Why do I say this? Because for me, it comes down to something utterly crucial. Today we are a country that is much more than east or west. And for us to really understand this, a view from the outside can sometimes help a little. "Today's east-west divide pales in comparison to the gulf between the poor north and the rich south in England, let alone between northern and southern Italy," writes the historian Frank Trentmann, whose new book I have just seen at the Book Fair. And I know, too, that Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Saxony in the east are as different as Schleswig-Holstein and Bavaria in the west. And it is precisely this that makes up the diversity of our country.

The extent to which we have achieved national unity between east and west is in fact now, 35 years after the Peaceful Revolution, no longer the sole crucial question. In a society that is as diverse as ours, there will always be different experiences, different shared spaces, depending on where people live, where they grew up. That goes for east and west, that goes for immigrated or born here, that goes for young or old, and that goes all the more for city or countryside. I found it exciting to see that last year two very different non-fiction books stormed the bestseller lists. One was *The East: A West German Invention*; the other, *A Farm and Eleven Siblings*. The target audiences of these two books, I believe, could hardly be more different. There are probably few bookcases in the whole country where both books can be found at all, let alone side by side. And both are successful because, most likely, they address very different experiences that people identify with in very different ways. And that is not a bad thing. It is in principle good.

There is just one thing that must not be permitted to happen. These different lived realities must not be permitted to become isolated refuges with walls thrown up around them. Our society needs, and I firmly believe this, curiosity instead of narcissism, openness instead of withdrawal, trust instead of mistrust, suggestions instead of accusations. I say that because I am convinced that it is only as a community that we have political power, something that we need now in these times of challenges, and not when we see ourselves first and foremost as victims of differences. This cannot be allowed to happen. What we need is in fact dynamism to tackle the major challenges that we face together – east and west, north and south. What we need is confidence in ourselves, and what we need is a common narrative of our democracy. We are a strong country that has overcome crises in the past – with dynamism and ideas, we know that! Let us trust in our ability to do so in the future, too!

When we look back this year on the last few decades, we can absolutely, I believe, look at many things with a feeling of confidence, despite the difficulties we currently face. A great deal has gone well in our democracy. But of course, nonetheless, we cannot sit back and relax in this double anniversary year. We are living in times in which our democracy is under greater threat from within and without than ever

before; in which in our country, too, forces are gaining strength that not only call democracy into question but attack it, disdain its institutions, brand its representatives – as you can read in the comments on their Instagram pages – “scum”.

This double anniversary year – 1949, 1989 – is therefore a year of celebrating but also, above all, a year of proving oneself. Protecting our democracy, strengthening it, making it more robust, that is precisely what we must prove we can do in these times! And so we must strengthen everything that brings our country together, that we have in common, that unites us.

And in my view this includes – without a shadow of a doubt – our constitution, our Basic Law, which in a few short weeks will be 75 years old. I am a little concerned, if you will allow me to put it quite candidly, by the observation that many eastern Germans in particular feel that this is not their anniversary. Do not misunderstand me – there is no state expectation to celebrate the constitution. That may be a duty for the Federal President, but not for anyone else who lives here. That is not the point.

For me, it is more about whether we can really consider our constitution a shared achievement. It is of course true that for the first 40 years it applied only to one part of our country, but still, for 34 years now it has been our common foundation. And, more than that, can those first 40 years too not mean the same to eastern Germans, many of whom yearned for precisely the freedoms and values that the Basic Law sets out? Freedom of opinion, of assembly, of the press, the freedom to believe or not to believe, the protection of human dignity, those are the fundamental rights that our constitution guarantees. The many women and men who fought for these rights, for these freedoms, in the former East Germany, all of them carried this experience forward into our modern democracy.

I hope in any case that we can celebrate this double anniversary together – with a clear awareness that the freedom promised by the Basic Law has only been delivered for all Germans since 1989; but with an equally clear understanding that we are called upon at all times, not least today, to deliver on the promises of the Basic Law anew. The Basic Law has long since ceased to be merely a Bonn constitution. It is the foundation and guarantee for the peaceful coexistence of all of the different people in the whole of our country. Democracy, freedom and the rule of law, as laid down by the Basic Law, are a precious common good. Let us preserve and protect them together!

“We want free, self-confident citizens who nevertheless behave responsibly,” read the founding appeal of the New Forum in the autumn of 1989. This sentence, too, has become part of our shared history. Even today it has lost none of its power. We strive to carry on its legacy. Free, self-confident citizens who behave responsibly, in the interest of the

common good, that is exactly what our democracy needs today in particular. It needs all democrats who live in this country to stand shoulder to shoulder – following the example of the millions who took to the streets in recent months. It has made me, in any case, very proud and pleased to see the democratic core of our country put on such a show of strength, not least in the many smaller towns where it often takes courage to stand up for one's convictions. Let us not forget, despite all of the difficulties we face – in connection with opinion polls, too – that it is not the extremists but the democrats who are the overwhelming majority in our country. And this majority, this broad democratic core of our society, will no longer, and I am very pleased to see this, allow extremists alone to set the tone and dominate the subjects of debate in the media. This is a good thing.

And this majority can not only protest, they can also decide. Specifically, when they participate in elections and vote for democracy, for peaceful coexistence, for the freedom-based order and against extremism and hatred. That is, when they make a firm commitment to our democracy.

A commitment, if you will allow me, that is visible and palpable everywhere here in Leipzig during the Book Fair, this truly important place of debate for our entire country, this important place of encounter and exchange. Including here this evening at the Old Stock Exchange.

Thank you very much for listening. I look forward to the discussion that will follow.