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**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
at Theater aan het Vrijthof, Maastricht,
on 7 February 2017**

How wonderful it is to be here with you in Maastricht on this historic day. Today we are celebrating the anniversary of your university, but also a milestone in the process of European integration that was achieved here exactly 25 years ago with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. I am happy that so many young people from all over Europe are celebrating this occasion here at Vrijthof in the heart of the Old Town and in the Sphinx district, with its modern architecture. What an impressive picture this is of a vibrant and united Europe! It is a testament to our shared past and present and gives us hope for the future.

Twenty-five years ago, Europe moved even closer together here in Maastricht. And visitors to this city are reminded once again that we Europeans have long since been united by far more than treaties. Maastricht is a cosmopolitan meeting place shaped by its location between Belgium and Germany, Flanders and Wallonia, and its proximity to Luxembourg. Thousands of students from abroad make it a culturally diverse city, where a unique blend of languages can be heard on the streets and squares. There are extremely close cross-border ties in politics and business, but also between societies, in the Meuse-Rhine region.

The spirit of European integration can be felt here, including in times of great challenges. A German graduate of your university once put it like this: "Maastricht is at the heart of Europe, but Europe is also in Maastricht, perhaps more than anywhere else. (...) The idea of Europe has become reality here (...)."

Your university, too, is committed to the idea of Europe in a special way. Its graduates often remain dedicated to the united Europe. I am very grateful that of all universities, this institution is

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awarding me an honorary doctorate today. I was particularly happy when I heard that the students had suggested I be granted this honour. I see this as an important sign that the European project and European values can unite us across generations.

Your generation and mine look at Europe from very different perspectives. That is why it is so important that we take an interest in each other and discuss our experiences, hopes and fears. Allow me to describe briefly what the European Union means for me.

I was born in 1940, at the start of the Second World War, which was unleashed by Germany and brought untold suffering to our continent, including to the Netherlands. Following the liberation of Europe from National Socialism and the division of my homeland, I grew up in the part of Germany that its communist rulers had named the "German Democratic Republic". In reality, it was a dictatorship by the grace of the Soviet Union. At the time, and certainly after the building of the Berlin Wall, a longing lodged in my heart – the longing for a united and free Europe. I still remember clearly how I stood with my sons at the shore of the Baltic Sea. Behind us lay the guarded country, in front of us the guarded sea. We watched a large white ship setting off to sea – a ferry to Denmark. And we knew that we could not travel on it because we were incarcerated. Grief, pain, rage and fury were the other side of my longing for a united Europe.

Years later, after countless disappointments, I suddenly felt a sense of hope when the liberation movement was formed in Poland. During the peaceful revolutions, I dreamt of being part of a Europe characterised by freedom and justice. I dreamt that the European tradition of the Enlightenment would prevail once and for all following the terrible experiences with the totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century. And I experienced how dreams came true – not least because countless people in Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, Leipzig and many other places in Central and Eastern Europe took to the streets to speak out against injustice and oppression.

As we know from the past, dreams are often the driving force behind historic changes. But we also know that we cannot simply content ourselves with dreaming. We need to make our visions a political reality, for example by signing treaties. This is precisely what was achieved here in this city. As the historian Heinrich August Winkler said, the Maastricht Treaty is a "qualitative leap in the history of Western European integration". However, I do not merely see it as a treaty or an important document, but also as a symbol of a Europe united in peace and freedom; a Europe that stands for the Enlightenment values of the West, that is, for democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, recognition of the separation of powers, the protection of minorities and gender equality. With the deepening, but also the enlargement of the Union, not least through the admission

of Central and Eastern European states, the vision of an undivided continent, where democratic countries and their citizens enjoy close ties in business, politics and society, has become reality.

However, I also regard the Maastricht Treaty as a symbol of a project that has not been completed and must also cope with setbacks. It stands for a project to which we, the people of Europe, must continue to actively commit ourselves. In its preamble, it refers to "the process of creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe", thus tying in with the Treaty of Rome signed in 1957. This wording does not bind us to a particular type of union or to an institutional goal. It serves to remind and inspire us to shape our Europe step by step. The European Union is a work in progress. It is thus an ongoing process informed by the idea that people in Europe belong together and that a European spirit of solidarity can grow.

We know that the Maastricht Treaty is a historic compromise. It was controversial for many different reasons, and it remains contentious. It has also been amended several times by subsequent treaties. The Member States created a complex architecture *sui generis*, for which Germany's Federal Constitutional Court coined the term "union of states" to distinguish it both from a confederation of states and a federal state. We also know that the Treaty laid the foundation for the economic and monetary union, while leaving economic and fiscal policy to be decided primarily at national level. It was also this construct that led the European Union to become dangerously unbalanced. The effects of the economic and financial crisis, and in particular of dramatically increased national debt levels in the eurozone, can still be felt today and will continue to occupy us.

But the Treaty also provides the basis of much that works well in Europe today and from which we Europeans benefit on a daily basis. One reason I underline this is because many people are completely unaware of it. The European Union runs smoothly in countless fields and offers its citizens very tangible benefits. For example, it creates freedom of movement, something that young people in particular take for granted. No one wants to do without this freedom any more. Within the Union, we Europeans can live, work and study wherever we want. The European Union provides us with economic opportunities. Manufacturers can use the potential of the single market in the knowledge that there is a level playing field, while consumers enjoy a wider range of products and services, often at lower prices. Examples of this include telephone and internet services.

The European Union does not only create scope and opportunities – it also offers its citizens protection. The norms and standards agreed by the Member States increase safety in the workplace, protect consumers' health and preserve the environment. Global climate protection would not make much headway without the influential voice

of the European Union. Many European regulations extend to non-member countries, in part because the Union is sought after as a trade partner. I am also thinking of targeted structural aid, which helps regions to thrive thanks to creative and innovative projects. People who travel through Europe can enjoy historic architecture and nature reserves that have been restored or preserved by European Union funding in many places. And they can visit companies and universities in which people from all over Europe are working together on the innovations of the future.

I am aware that all of this is now clouded by the enormous challenges confronting the European Union and its Member States today, 25 years after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. The economic and financial crisis, wars and conflicts in our neighbourhood, appalling terrorist attacks, the arrival of refugees, the upcoming Brexit and the future of the transatlantic partnership – all of this requires a strong and united Europe. But what we are experiencing in this situation is a European Union shaken by crises and doubts. Conflicting interests are emerging more clearly, the limits of solidarity are becoming visible, nationalist and populist forces are gaining ground, and anti-rationalist thinking is in fashion. Our cohesion and our common values have come under pressure, not only in Europe, but also in other parts of the world.

In view of this, I do not want to speak about the details of the Maastricht Treaty this afternoon. In these times of uncertainty, my priority is something else. Ultimately, the crucial question is how those who hold political responsibility can enhance confidence in the European Union. And what can we, the people, do together to breathe new life into the European project, which met with such enthusiasm during the watershed of 1989 to 1990?

We have witnessed growing alienation between political elites and the public in Europe for years now. The first signs of this development emerged as early as the start of the 1990s when the Maastricht Treaty was supposed to be ratified in the Member States. In many countries, and for many different reasons, people harboured doubts and fears about the project. In my country, too, the consensus in society on European policy that had been a hallmark of West Germany for decades began to disintegrate. The fact that the Danish initially rejected the Treaty in a referendum expressed most clearly what could be felt in many European countries. The public had reservations about what governments had agreed. Many people had the impression that the executive powers had pushed ahead with integration behind their backs and that what was now being put forward actually went too far for them.

The history of the Maastricht Treaty and further integration steps show that on the path to ever closer union, the political elites

sometimes made decisions that some parts of the public were not able to accept and other parts were not willing to accept. Today, in the greatest crisis of confidence facing the European project since its foundation, we can see even more clearly that the European Union cannot be shaped unilaterally by the elites. The united Europe cannot be established against the will of the people, but only with their support.

This means that one of the most important tasks of governments is to inform the public about decisions made at European level. It is important that politicians explain European plans in clear and accessible language, without creating exaggerated expectations. But it is also important that the governments of Member States do not play a double game by agreeing to decisions in Brussels that they then criticise or even counteract at national level, as only the populists benefit from this in the end, because in this way anti-European arguments are handed to them on a plate. And finally, we must not overload the European Union. Things that can be dealt with better at national level should be dealt with there. We should think about how we can make even greater use of the principle of subsidiary enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty.

All of this is essential, but it will not be enough to put an end to the crisis of confidence, as the doubts and fears occupying the minds of many people in Europe today are more deeply rooted.

Now, in the age of globalisation, we live in a world where we have ever greater scope for action. This creates freedom and many opportunities, particularly for those who are well educated, speak foreign languages, and are able and willing to cross borders. The cosmopolitan elites, citizens of the world like you here in this room, are among the beneficiaries of this development. However, there are also groups of people – and not only in Europe – who take a sceptical view of globalisation and the rapid speed of change because they do not benefit or are actually adversely affected. These people are experiencing a deterioration in their social position or an increasing feeling of alienation in their environment. In this growing space, they long for a place where they feel at home.

I am certain that this railing against globalisation is a reason why people criticise or even reject the European Union. Luuk van Middelaar, a historian and philosopher from the Netherlands, summed it up well when he said that some people saw the Union as “an ally of globalisation with its flows of goods and people”, not as a bastion against its occasionally negative consequences. Many people see the European Union as a geographical space, but not as a place where they can feel they belong. As a result, some people long for a retreat to the nation state and are susceptible to the siren call of isolationism. Some people are more willing to punish the elites than they are to engage in

debates on the actual issues, let alone to develop sustainable projects for the future. And at times, fear and uncertainty also turn into xenophobia.

The need to belong is fundamentally human. One cannot merely dismiss it as reactionary. We need to realise that a desire to feel at home, to feel a sense of belonging, is often behind euroscepticism. People need a home. They want to belong somewhere. For a long time, many people in my country, especially intellectuals, found it difficult to accept this view. It is thus all the more important that we now say one can still feel at home in our united, open and diverse Europe. Let us also use this fact to promote the European Union!

Along with one's own region, the nation is, and will remain, an important source of identity. After the betrayal of all civilised values that was National Socialism, many Germans had difficulties admitting this to themselves. As an inhuman and aggressive form of nationalism had led Europe and large parts of the world to catastrophe, the German nation state was regarded per se as morally discredited. Some people therefore wanted European integration as a means of superseding this nation state, which was regarded as destructive, once and for all. The word "post-national", which first appeared in Germany in the 1970s, reflected this longing.

But regardless of how justified the criticism of exaggerated nationalism was and how self-evident the idea of overcoming the nation state may have appeared to some, the aim of close cooperation between countries and close union among the peoples of Europe is not to erase national identities. And although some may have wished for a different outcome, even the great step of deeper cooperation, as agreed in Maastricht 25 years ago, did not create a post-national, but rather a supra-national alliance. The reason for this is both simple and profound – a united Europe cannot grow in opposition to the nation states, but only with their consent and in agreement with them.

Different cultures, experiences and traditions continue to have a home under the roof of the European Union. Our Europe remains an ensemble of different identities, but a common feeling of unity can grow out of the ground of regional and national identities. We can be Limburgers and Netherlanders, Bavarians and Germans – and at the same time feel that we are all Europeans. We often only become aware of the fact that Europe offers us a common home when we move in other cultural spheres and look at our continent from the outside or when we meet people from other cultural spheres in our continent, as is the case every day here in Maastricht.

The people of Europe are all children of the same cultural heritage – of antiquity, the Reformation and Enlightenment, the Renaissance and humanism, and the republican ideas of the revolutions of 1789 and 1848. They are also children of the historic

integration project following the Second World War and the East and Central Europeans' liberation movement of 1989 and 1990 – with the latter resembling a renewal of vows to the values of democracy and a necessarily delayed expression of commitment to the united Europe by the people of Eastern Europe who had been kept outside the Union by force until then.

In view of the crisis of confidence in Europe, however, we cannot continue the project of European integration by stubbornly declaring “just try and stop us!” When I took office, I still saw “ever closer union” as the indubitable goal. But now it is no longer a matter of simply bringing the European Union Member States ever closer together, but rather of preventing the Union from drifting apart, as has been seen most blatantly to date in Brexit. In other words, those who want to preserve the Union must also look out for new ways of working together.

A self-critical look shows that responsible politicians at European and national level also made mistakes. For example, the EU Member States did not adhere to the budget deficit rules. And they stuck to the Dublin Regulation for too long, although they were aware of its shortcomings. The European Union dragged its heels on some problems – for example, the monetary union is still not stable enough. At the same time, it developed rescue mechanisms whose scope it did not always explain sufficiently to the public. The problem of different rates of development in Europe, for example in wealth, various social standards and change in mentalities, also remains unsolved. And the more it seemed that the European Union was out of its depth, the more influence was gained by populists, who fundamentally oppose the allegedly opaque and complicated regulations.

The European project is facing opposition – and not only from the inside, but also from the outside. For quite some time now, we have been experiencing attempts to destabilise the Union, for example through cyber-attacks, fake news and activities in support of eurosceptic governments and parties within the European Union, as carried out by Russia. In recent times, we have now also been hearing some people in the United States express a wish for further countries to leave the European Union after the United Kingdom.

Yes, I think the European Union is at an important parting of the ways. Europe is in crisis. But what direction should it take? Should it return to a system of nation states, with each country jostling for its economic, political and security position on the continent and in the world? To a system in which a number of states might look for new allies to deal with the competition with their neighbours, thus increasing tensions on the continent?

Or should we decide to renew the European project, as seems sensible and necessary today, to leave behind the superfluous

regulations on minor details and instead focus on more resolute cooperation in the fields that no nation state in Europe can manage on its own either through its political importance or geographical location?

There are good reasons – indeed, greater reasons – for European cooperation. In view of the fact that only a continental player can prevail on the global market in the age of digital technology and rapid technological change, we need to join forces. In view of the ongoing pressure of migration, as well as international terrorism and an unstable world order with wars on our doorstep, we need to stand together.

Sometimes a shock is needed to open people's eyes. A shock can have a healing effect. And it seems to me that the pressure created by the new circumstances is activating the European Union. When we see what is happening in some countries as a result of new nationalist and authoritarian appeal and the uncertainty that has arisen in our transatlantic partner under its new president, then we know what we as citizens have to defend in Europe. We know what principles remain binding for us if we want to preserve democracy and peace on this continent.

We can now argue passionately once again for what we believed we could already take for granted, that is, for representative democracy, the rule of law, the separation of powers and universal human rights. We want to preserve what was achieved through hard work in the past, something that is an integral part of democracy – the idea that no power is above the law and that power is bound to the law.

The time has come for European countries and in particular for Germany, which for many years took their lead from the United States, to become more self-confident and autonomous. We have a special responsibility to stabilise the international order. We are rightfully discussing how Europe can increase its defence capabilities because we must not abandon the values on which the European project is based. However, we also need to look for intelligent solutions that do justice both to the differences in the European Union and to the new challenges.

European democracy does not need timidity or escapism. It needs hard work and untiring efforts on our part. European democracy is also a project that has never been completed.

In particular, I would like to encourage the young generation – Generation Maastricht – gathered here in this city today. In the United Kingdom, the vast majority of 18 to 34-year-olds were in favour of their country remaining in the European Union. But far fewer younger people voted in the referendum than older people. I would therefore like to appeal to all young Europeans, not only you here in this room,

to get involved in politics. Do not hand your future to others. Now in particular, I urge you to champion the idea of a united Europe and to play an active role in the debate on what sort of Europe we want to live in. Not only your future, but also that of your children and grandchildren, is at stake here.

Part of this debate also involves stating clearly that Europe, like all democratic politics, is a project on which we must constantly work. Perhaps things will not always move forward in a linear process as regards the European Union of the future. But we need to think about the European Union of the more distant future. Cees Nooteboom, the great Netherlands and European author, once wrote: "As long as someone does not do something himself, his life will be determined by the people and things that appear in it." Let us make Europe a project of ours once again, a project of the people. The European Union that was founded here in Maastricht is worth our getting involved in its fate.

Let us look back at history once again. Seventy years ago, Winston Churchill, one of the most outstanding figures of the time, gave a speech at another European university in which he called on his contemporaries to "let Europe arise". Our answer to him today from Maastricht is that we are giving Europe a future.