

Speech by Prime Minister Mark Rutte at the presentation of the International Four Freedoms Medal to Angela Merkel, Middelburg, 21 April 2016

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highness, Your Excellencies, Esteemed laureates, Members of the Roosevelt family, ladies and gentlemen,

And above all, Chancellor Merkel - dear Angela,

For 35 years, the freedoms that we champion today were unattainable for you. So you know what it means to be denied freedom of belief and freedom of speech. You know what it is to live under a repressive regime that controls lives and creates a climate of fear. But you have also 'experienced what the urge for freedom can achieve' – as you yourself once put it.

You have always linked that urge for freedom to a great sense of responsibility. After the fall of the Berlin Wall you embraced a political mission and helped build a new political movement – Democratic Awakening – which later merged with the Christian Democratic Union. And you have served for over a decade as Chancellor of Germany, currently leading your third government.

You are driven by the inner conviction that Germany and Europe should set an international example as a source of freedom, stability and progress. I'd like to illustrate this by quoting your own words: 'We have achieved something that was once almost unthinkable: a peaceful and friendly union in Europe. Why should it not be possible to do the same in other regions of the world? I don't see that as a Utopian dream. No, I see it as a vision – one that manifests itself in a concrete mission. And that's why I whole-heartedly believe that it is worth every effort to strive for peaceful resolutions to conflicts.'

These words are all the more significant because you put them into practice on a daily basis. You are the Chancellor of all Germans, whatever their belief or ethnic background. You proved that during the tumult surrounding the anti-Islam demonstrations in various German cities.

In Europe, you played a decisive role in the Union's firm approach to the euro crisis. At the same time you were instrumental in negotiations to reach a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Ukraine and de-escalate the situation.

And now you show your commitment to Europe's humanitarian duty on a daily basis by tirelessly working to tackle the causes of the refugee crisis. Every day you are striving to help bring about peace in Syria and the region, and stability in other refugee-producing regions.

You do it with determination and purpose. Any solution is preceded by a thorough analysis of the problem. You always proceed step by step to the final goal – always showing respect and genuine concern. Your integrity, charm and decency are universally lauded.

You always remain calm and composed, even when you are tested to the limit. Like the time when, after a long night of negotiations, we were forced to improvise a meal of Turkish pizzas – a dish we both cordially dislike. But I only found that out later – you seemed imperturbable at the time. I cherish our close working ties, which I see as a personal friendship, precisely because we can sometimes disagree quite vehemently.

The extraordinary combination of your moral compass and your character make you extremely effective as a politician and inspiring as a leader. Your dedication and optimism can be summed up in the following words by Franklin Delano Roosevelt: 'Never have free men been satisfied with the mere maintenance of any status quo, however comfortable or secure it may have seemed at the moment. We have always held to the hope, the belief, the conviction, that there is a better life, a better world, beyond the horizon.'

These words are most fitting in your case, because you have lived them and put them into practice. They inform your every action and inspire millions of others, who join you and us in fighting for a better life and a better world. A world with greater freedom, peace and prosperity for all.

Angela, I regard it as a great honour to be present at this ceremony today, on 21 April 2016, as you are awarded the International Four Freedoms Medal.