

BULLETIN DER BUNDESREGIERUNG

Nr. 41-5 vom 24. Mai 2025

Rede von Bundeskanzler Friedrich Merz

beim feierlichen Aufstellungsappell der Panzerbrigade 45 „Litauen“
am 22. Mai 2025 in Vilnius:

Mr President Nausėda,

Minister Šakalienė,

General Vaikšnoras,

Mister President,

Inspector General Breuer,

Esteemed servicemen and women - Liebe Soldatinnen und Soldaten,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am glad to be in Vilnius today. Because it is right here, in Lithuania, where we are taking the defense of Nato's eastern flank into our own hands. It is right here where we - Lithuanians and Germans together - show that we are ready to defend Europe's freedom against any aggressor.

And I could not think of a better place for today's roll call than Cathedral Square here in the heart of Vilnius. From here, the Baltic Way set out on its march on August 23 in 1989. Hand in hand, stretching for more than 650 km from Vilnius via Riga to Tallinn, over two million people stood up for freedom. From here, citizens of the Baltic states set out to finally regain the independence of their homelands after almost 50 years of Soviet oppression. Despite all threats and personal risks.

This square reminds us of the courage, efforts and sacrifices made by the Lithuanian people on their path to freedom. This square tells a story of resistance. And it tells of the confidence that a better life in freedom is possible.

Today, we have come together in this special place for more than just a military roll call. This gathering is a sign of our solidarity and our friendship, for which I'm all the more grateful in view of the suffering that National Socialist Germany brought to this country.

Ladies and gentlemen, more than ever before, we depend on solidarity and friendship among liberal democracies. Peace in Europe has been broken. Each and every day, Russia is violating the order that we collectively adopted as a lesson from the horrors of the Second World War. With a criminal war of aggression against Ukraine, but also with attacks and murders in numerous European cities, with acts of espionage and sabotage, with cyber-attacks, with systematic disinformation.

We must be able to defend ourselves against such attacks at all times. Freedom is not for free. The Baltic states understood this long ago, at a time when some in Germany still had illusions about Putin's regime. I know that these illusions have caused a lot of irritation in the Baltic countries in the past. I assure you – that time is over. We are aware of the seriousness of the situation. And we are aware of our own responsibility.

Ladies and gentlemen, just over 70 years ago, on 6 May 1955, the Federal Republic of Germany joined Nato. Since then, the solidarity of the North Atlantic Treaty – in particular Article 5 – has been the immovable foundation of our German and our common transatlantic security. Throughout the years of the Cold War, Germany could rely on our allies standing by our side at any emergency.

Today, we are here the ones who have a duty. Lithuania has asked for support – and Germany stands ready. Not just with words, but with servicemen and women, with large-scale equipment, with infrastructure, with reliability in the long term and with a promise:

Anyone who challenges Nato must know that we are prepared. Anyone who threatens any ally must know that the entire Alliance will jointly defend every inch of Nato territory. We must be ready to do everything to defend ourselves – so that we never have to. That is the principle that guides our actions. Credible deterrence. That is what this brigade stands for.

Mr President, You and your government have welcomed our servicemen and women with open arms. You have placed your trust in us, and we will not disappoint you. Thank you for this - also on behalf of the entire Federal Government.

I would also like to thank the Lithuanian citizens who have welcomed our servicemen and women with respect and great hospitality. Hosting foreign troops on one's own soil is not something to be taken for granted - especially here in Lithuania.

For us, too, and for the Bundeswehr in particular, today marks a step into a new era. Never before have we permanently stationed a large military unit abroad. There is still much to be resolved, but I am confident that we will overcome all challenges together. What's more, I'm certain that we will grow even closer - as friends and as partners.

In this context, I welcome the fact that Lithuania placed an order for 44 Leopard 2 main battle tanks under a Bundeswehr framework contract last year. And that Rheinmetall will build a modern production facility for artillery ammunition in Lithuania. These projects are models for European armaments cooperation and make a significant contribution to interoperability between our armed forces. In the years ahead, we intend to further expand this cooperation.

I will now briefly switch to German to address the servicemen and women directly:

Liebe Soldatinnen und Soldaten, was Sie leisten, verdient höchste Anerkennung. Sie stehen hier im Dienst für unser Land, im Dienst für Frieden, Freiheit und Sicherheit in ganz Europa. Sie stehen für eine Bundeswehr, die sich den Herausforderungen unserer Zeit stellt – mit Professionalität, mit Mut und mit tiefem Bewusstsein der Verantwortung, die Sie tragen. Ihr Dienst ist nicht einfach. Er bedeutet Verzicht. Er verlangt Disziplin. Und er bringt Risiken mit sich. Aber er ist unverzichtbar – denn ohne Sie, ohne Ihr tägliches Engagement, wäre unser Bündnis nur eine politische Idee. Sie machen es lebendig, glaubwürdig, verteidigungsfähig.

Ich möchte auch den Familien danken – den Partnerinnen und Partnern, den Eltern, den Kindern. Sie tragen eine Last, die oft unsichtbar bleibt. Aber sie ist darum nicht weniger groß. Auch Sie übernehmen Verantwortung. Ich danke Ihnen dafür.

Gleichzeitig ist klar: Einsatz und Mut allein reichen nicht. Die Soldatinnen und Soldaten der Bundeswehr brauchen eine moderne Ausstattung, die es ihnen ermöglicht, ihren Dienst erfolgreich zu tun, und Fähigkeiten, die sich an den Fähigkeiten und Bedrohungen durch Russland orientieren. Um das zu ermöglichen, haben wir bereits eine wesentliche Entscheidung getroffen: Wir haben unsere Verfassung geändert, um sicherzustellen, dass wir ausreichend in unsere Verteidigungsfähigkeiten investieren und eine angemessene, bedrohungsorientierte Ausstattung unserer Streitkräfte sicherstellen. Unser Ziel ist, zukünftig alle finanziellen Mittel zur Verfügung zu stellen, die die Bundeswehr braucht, um konventionell zur stärksten Armee Europas zu werden. Das ist dem bevölkerungsreichsten und wirtschaftsstärksten Land Europas angemessen. Und das erwarten auch zu Recht unsere Alliierten von uns – mehr noch, sie fordern es geradezu ein.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Armoured Brigade “Lithuania” isn’t just a military unit. It sets an example. For the unity of the Alliance. And for our willingness to actively defend freedom and peace in Europe.

I extend my gratitude to all those who helped implementing this major project so quickly. The main burden of the brigade is borne by the Army. But we can see here today that such a mission can only be accomplished through the cooperation of all forces in our Bundeswehr.

Nato can rely on Germany. We know that security doesn’t begin at our borders. It begins where our allies and partners have to defend it. That’s why Lithuania’s security is also our security. The protection of Vilnius is the protection of Berlin. And our common freedom does not end at a geopolitical line – it ends where we stop defending it.

That is why we are here today. That is why we are staying. Germany stands by its responsibility – in word and deed. Today. Tomorrow. For as long as it takes.

Thank you very much. And on behalf of the Federal Republic of Germany all the best to you and your families. Take care of yourselves and take care of your families.