“We want to invest more money in a better Europe”

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Interview with Michael Roth, Minister of State for Europe, on the future of Europe, the situation in Syria and Deniz Yücel’s detention in Turkey. Published in “Die Welt” newspaper on 13 April 2017.

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Minister of State, you are responsible for Europe at the Federal Foreign Office. Do you still have a free hand? In stark contrast to his predecessor Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel is highly involved in European policy.

Europe was also a key issue for Frank-Walter Steinmeier. I am pleased that Foreign Minister Gabriel is also very keen to spell out that Germany’s place is in the heart of Europe.

Gabriel wants to do something “unheard of” and pay more to the

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. Can a majority be won over to this position in Germany?

Sigmar Gabriel is absolutely right in seeking a change in mentality among the political elite. I think this is long overdue. Many politicians talk about Europe from a business, accounting or small-minded point of view. The debate on net contributors doesn’t get us anywhere. We want to invest more money, but in a better Europe. Everyone says that Europe should do more as regards defence, development cooperation, migration policy and jobs. That won’t be possible with today’s budget. The entire

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needs to contribute more. Germany should lead the way because it benefits enormously from a capable Europe.

[...]

According to a survey, independent presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron and right-wing extremist Marine Le Pen are neck and neck again in the first election round in France. What would it mean if Le Pen got through to the run-off as the strongest candidate?

Anything is possible, as we unfortunately saw with Brexit. It would be bad enough if a right-wing extremist, who angles for votes in the anti-Semitic cesspool, won the first round. But I remain optimistic that the French want to continue being part of the centre of the united Europe. The

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would be in great danger if France were no longer pro-European.

If Le Pen won, would this be a death sentence for the

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National elections in the

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member states always have an impact on Europe as a whole and on all partners. Like the German Chancellor, the French President is a major player in European policy. Almost nothing can be achieved without the French President.

People are always invoking the “Franco-German engine”. How do you find this cooperation? France is in an economic slump and has a weak president, while things in Germany are largely going well as regards the economy and politics.

France has been, and will remain, our closest partner. Speaking self-critically, I would say we could have achieved more. We did not fully exploit the political potential of our cooperation in recent years. One reason was that some parts of the German Government were not particularly interested in an overhaul. And for its part, France needed a lot of energy on the domestic front in order to carry out its reforms in the face of massive protests. The pedantic attitude of some German politicians towards France didn’t go down well there.

Former Economics Affairs Ministers Gabriel and Macron wanted a social union in Europe...

... Germany and France must become role models and driving forces in the

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once again. The good cooperation in our border regions on the labour market and training, which we explored again during our Franco-German meeting in Hambach Castle last week, is an outstanding example.

Is the UK Government still deluding itself as regards Brexit?

Yes. Too many politicians in London believe that the UK can continue to benefit in full from the advantages of the

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as a non-member. But there can be absolutely no question of cherry-picking. We want close and friendly relations with the British, but the priority is cohesion among the EU27. Brexit is a major watershed, both for the

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and the British. We need to see how we can now make the best out of it.

Would Scotland be “most welcome” as a member of the

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, as 50 European politicians recently wrote in a letter to the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh?

There are generations and nations – as Scotland describes itself – in the UK that have a clear pro-European stance. I am very happy about that. They have my support.

Is Scotland “most welcome” in the

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The UK would be most welcome if it remained in the

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. Unfortunately, it decided differently. I do not want to interfere in domestic discussions in the UK and Scotland.

The situation in Syria is escalating with the recent chemical bombing and the US military attack against a Syrian airbase. The tone between the West and Russia is also becoming harsher. Are we facing a war, including outside Syria?

The message sent by the G7 Foreign Ministers Meeting in Lucca is key – our interest lies clearly in a political settlement and not in military escalation. The

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is called on to speak with one voice in this conflict, as we are part of the West and maintain dialogue with Moscow, especially when this is difficult. And although it really goes against the grain for some people, there will be no solution for Syria without Russia and Iran. That is why the renewed attempt to include Russia is the right approach.

Luxembourg's Foreign Minister is calling for tougher

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sanctions against Syrian President Assad. However, sanctions do not seem to have changed anything so far. Is the

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able to do anything at all?

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needs to play an active role in the talks on Syria. And there is consensus among us that neither sanctions alone nor military action will automatically bring about a solution. We are also well advised to base our actions on the firm foundations of the findings of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, for instance. Ultimately, a lasting solution will only be achieved via an orderly political process. This brutal civil war must be stopped. And let's not forget that Germany and the Europeans are doing a great deal as regards humanitarian aid.

US President Trump is suddenly getting involved in international affairs. However, he seems to be doing so without prior agreements. He acted in Syria without a Security Council mandate. How predictable is Trump's foreign policy?

Three months after Donald Trump's inauguration, the US seems to be keen on playing its role as a global force for order to a greater extent once again. I am relieved if President Trump recognises that a complete withdrawal from the international arena does not make anything better. However, the opposite of isolationism is not national dominance, but rather multilateralism and close cooperation with all partners. The

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and Germany have repeatedly reached out to the US in this regard.

“Die Welt” correspondent Deniz Yücel has been in prison in Turkey since 27 February. Last week, he received his first consular visit. Is a further visit likely?

The first step has been achieved, and I am glad about that. However, we will not content ourselves with this. Our aim is that Deniz Yücel be released in line with due process. But Deniz Yücel is not the only concern. Turkey must respect freedom of opinion and freedom of the press. This is what we are trying to achieve.

What are the chances of Yücel being released?

I hope he will be released because Turkey is aware that a fair trial will mean he has to be released. The accusations that he is an agent or a terrorist are untenable and absurd. Deniz Yücel is a journalist.

When do you expect him to be released?

We will continue working on Deniz Yücel’s behalf until he is released. Like many other people, I am deeply moved by his situation.

Interview conducted by Sonja Gillert and Daniel Friedrich Sturm

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