Speech by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at the 18th Petersburg dialogue in Königswinter

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I am delighted to be here on the Petersberg today.

I just got back from holiday yesterday and haven't even really been in Berlin yet, so I'm already in the best of spirits. And I am especially pleased that the two of us, Sergey – Germany's and Russia's foreign ministers – are speaking together at the Petersburg dialogue for the first time. It shows not only what importance we attach to this forum but also what importance we attach to German-Russian relations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The great variety of ties that make up those relations, and the closeness that exists between the people of our countries, is something I see evidence of all the time. Last year, for example, when we brought to a close a year celebrating German-Russian town twinnings, almost a thousand representatives of twinned German and Russian towns gathered in the Weltsaal at the Federal Foreign Office. There was a palpable sense of community among people who shared a particularly keen and indeed heartfelt interest in bringing the people of our societies closer together.

I'm from Saarland, a small Land in the far southwest of Germany which may now be producing more and more cabinet members for the federal government but which, at least geographically, did not exactly give me a feeling of closeness to Russia growing up.

But I've been working on that in recent years. I have lived in Charlottenburg, a district of Berlin that the locals call Charlottengrad because of its high proportion of inhabitants with Russian roots. There were moments when I felt closer to Moscow than to Saarbrücken. Lots of very normal connections developed without hindrance among the people of our neighbourhood.

I often wondered what my neighbours must think if they primarily associate Germany with discipline and order, and then end up in Berlin of all places. Based on my own contact with my neighbours, I'd say that, in matters of discipline and order, plenty of those with Russian roots were more "German" than many Germans.

Surely, ladies and gentlemen, that exemplifies how wrong the stereotypes we ascribe to one another can be.

But I doubt you need me to tell you that.

You are the people who nurture our German-Russian relations on a daily basis, who experience how close our ties really are – and, above all, how important they are.

You are not alone in these feelings. A survey last year found that 94% of Germans thought good relations with Russia were important.

I find that a really impressive statistic.

It is an encouraging statistic, showing that the relations we have had at the political level in recent years are seemingly not what the electorate would like to see.

You all know what I'm referring to:

the illegal annexation of Crimea

the situation in eastern Ukraine

sanctions imposed by both sides

concerns about rearmament, especially right now

I think the list could go on.

But, ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to focus on something else today, namely this question: where can we find common ground in spite of all these difficulties? And where can we make progress?

This endeavour is in the interests of our countries' people. We also have a responsibility as Germans and Russians, not least considering our histories, to foster peace, security and stability in Europe.

In envisaging cooperation as the means to preserving peace in Europe, the title of our meeting here is well chosen and incredibly timely. It reflects a very simple truth, namely that lasting peace in Europe is something we can only achieve together.

So, for all our differences, let's look for the common ground that Germans and Russians share. I'd like to give you three not entirely unproblematic points to demonstrate what I mean.

Firstly, we should all be in agreement that the current situation in eastern Ukraine is untenable. It cannot continue indefinitely.

At the initiative of Ukraine’s President Zelensky, a very new and promising development has just been achieved with regard to the disengagement of troops in a conflict flashpoint in Stanytsia Luhanska. We can take it as a hopeful sign, not least in light of the many times we, Sergey, have talked about that situation in the Normandy format these past months without making any progress.

It is also promising that a ceasefire is to take effect on Sunday that is unconnected to any particular holiday or season. We have had several ceasefires recently which were, however, constantly violated.

The fact that both these developments have been made possible so soon after the election of Ukraine’s new president gives me hope for the talks to come. We spoke bilaterally today about continuing in the Normandy format to looking for ways to resurrect the Minsk agreement and implement more aspects of it. That will require constructive moves – by the Ukrainian and the Russian sides.

And we, together with our French partners in the Normandy format, are on stand-by day and night to negotiate and make progress. I believe there is fresh momentum in this almost forgotten crisis right now, and we need to make use of it. Let us remember that there is a war, and that war is still claiming human lives.

My second point is about Syria, which we have also talked about today. In that conflict, Germany and Russia are on two different, opposing sides. We do not think the Assad regime should have a future in Syria – not after all that has happened there and what the Assad regime has done to Syria’s people.

But what we can both agree on now is that the conflict in Syria cannot be resolved by military means, and that a stable Syria will be impossible without a viable political process. That, therefore, is precisely what we should now concentrate on.

Russia has done a lot to try and persuade the government in Damascus to participate in such a process. That much is obvious and incredibly positive.

It seems, however, that the regime is less susceptible to outside influence than is often assumed and widely reported.

I want to raise something else that is causing us particularly great concern at the moment. The situation in Idlib, where intense fighting has been taking place, must not be allowed to escalate further. We do not want another Aleppo.

The convention of a constitutional committee, which has been identified at the

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as the first step in the political process, is long overdue. And there are currently several signs indicating that we might actually achieve that first step, that door opener for the political process.

If we cross that threshold, then a more stable future for Syria will be, though not a certainty, at least a possibility. Only then can there be a prospect of, step by step, reconstructing the country that has suffered so much. We should make every possible effort to bring that about. This is a subject that will continue to keep us very busy on the world stage.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me mention a third and final area in which our interests diverge less than the rhetoric may imply: disarmament in Europe. It's not an easy subject either.

As we see it, if Russia doesn't return to compliance, the INF Treaty banning ground-launched intermediate-range missiles will be history in less than two weeks. But do we really believe that Europe will be one whit safer without that cornerstone of our disarmament architecture?

I am afraid it will be quite the opposite. After all, nothing that one side perceives as a threat can ultimately add to the other side's security.

We should therefore remember what formed the basis of all the disarmament measures that were undertaken even at the height of the Cold War – namely trust.

Trust isn't something that appears overnight. The trust that has been lost in recent years won't come back overnight either. It can only grow if we talk to one another openly and honestly; if we can rely on one another when something has been agreed; if we try to understand one another's concerns, or at least take them seriously, however unjustified they may appear to us.

That is one of the reasons why I proposed a structured dialogue on security in Europe between Russia, the US, and the countries of Western and Central Europe last year.

I have also stressed again that Germany, particularly now with our seat on the

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Security Council, is putting the arms-control architecture back on the international agenda. A few weeks ago, we and our French friends initiated a debate on the subject within the Security Council. Personally, I was surprised that this was the first time the Security Council had discussed nuclear disarmament in years.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Where there is trust, shared interests can translate into joint action. You can see it happening. Just look at Arctic policy, or the Iran nuclear deal, on which Germany and Russia – despite some differing interests – are collaborating constructively.

And that is why we are working to generate new trust in other areas too.

Last year, we reinstituted our two governments' High Level Working Group on Security to that end.

And just to consider the two of us, Sergey, we have now met seven times since I took office – not bad for a year and a half – and I've lost count of how many times we've spoken on the phone.

That said, important though close political ties undoubtedly are, the breadth and depth of our relations really comes from connections between people, from our societies themselves.

That's where the trust we so urgently need really comes from.

One of the proponents of such connections is the Petersburg dialogue, and that's just the kind of thing our governments want to encourage and support. We are doing a lot on that front too, even though it's sometimes outside the media spotlight.

One of the things we have done is run a German-Russian Year of University Collaboration, enabling young people to come into contact and study together.

The research roadmap we have with Russia, believe it or not, is unparalleled.

In making our humanitarian gesture benefiting the survivors of the Siege of Leningrad, we finally sent a landmark message acknowledging the victims of one of the darkest chapters of German history. I know that this matter is particularly close to your own heart, Sergey.

We also remain closely linked at the economic level, in spite of all the difficulties and sanctions. More than 4,500 German companies have a presence in Russia and have invested large sums of money in recent years.

Of equal importance is cooperation at a local level, which is another pillar of our relations. That much was clear at the German-Russian town-twinning conference in Aachen and Düren just three weeks ago. We will continue to support it.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We need something like bottom-up foreign policy, particularly in difficult times. We need civil society in our two countries to be vibrant and foster a dense network of ties. We need things like the Petersburg dialogue.

That’s why we’re here today: to say, on behalf of our governments, that you have our full political backing for your work.

We want to make an effort to promote dialogue between Germans and Russians.

That will require one thing above all, namely openness. And that is why we will continue to openly discuss even those subjects that appear most difficult, though we will keep looking for positive examples too.

I know that there is one topic which interests many of you particularly: visa facilitation, especially for young people from Russia. This is a matter we want to pursue further. We may not be able to decide it alone, but we intend to sit down with our Schengen partners to see what can be done.

We firmly believe that dialogue and openness strengthen our relations. Only with dialogue and openness can there be room for creativity, new ideas and new ways of getting along. And that is something we badly need.

“Freedom of thought is the greatest freedom we can attain.” That’s a quote from a Charlottenburg-dwelling Russian whom I was sadly too late to have as a neighbour, namely Maxim Gorki.

Let us use that freedom to think – to think openly, without blinkers and without stereotypes.

We will certainly see differences; there’s no denying that. But we will also notice commonalities – common ground from which joint action can grow. That’s what we want to keep working on.

Thank you very much.

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