Statement by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in the debate on the 19th Federal Government Report on Cultural Relations and Education Policy in the German Bundestag

2016-09-29

Mr President, honoured colleagues,

At present the German Bundestag and its committees discuss Syria on a daily basis, taking note of the military situation, new bombardments and the humanitarian suffering they bring. Germany is also busy hosting expert-level meetings on measures to protect Syria’s cultural heritage and organising exhibitions by Syrian artists in exile in Berlin.

These two approaches have more in common than may be apparent at first glance, ladies and gentlemen.

Cultural relations and education policy, the subject of our debate today, is not a nice add-on, but an indispensable part of foreign policy, particularly when times are difficult and our partners even more so.

Indisputable, too, is the fact that domestic and foreign affairs can no longer be clearly divided from one another along national borders as they were in the 19th century and for much of the 20th century. Every day we see that political crises and economic conflicts of interest are increasingly accompanied by religious and ethnic conflicts, be it in Ukraine, Syria or around the East African Great Lakes – and these are by no means the only examples.

That is why, if we want any chance of reconciliation in any of these conflicts, cultural and educational work has a crucial role to play, as does cooperation with civil society in other countries, especially in crisis regions.

We have therefore adapted and extended our efforts to promote culture and education abroad on two key points. Before going further, let me thank you, honoured colleagues, for your support which has made this possible.

Firstly, we want to facilitate access to culture and education abroad.

Helping to protect cultural heritage is one aspect of this. IS murderers and robbers in the Middle East are taking radical steps in an attempt to annihilate cultural identities. To counter this, we have made international and national rules considerably more rigorous, with a particular focus on legislation on the destruction of cultural property and trade in stolen cultural objects. Minister of State Böhmer has made a particularly noteworthy contribution in this field as Chair of the World Heritage Committee.

That is not all we are doing. The Syrian Heritage Archive Project run by the German Archaeological Institute and the Berlin Museum of Islamic Art is creating the first ever digital archive of archaeological sites in Syria. German, Syrian and international academics are collaborating on this project. More than 100,000 data sets have been compiled so far. These will form the basis for restoration work in Syria at a later date, when it will hopefully be possible.

Others now seek to emulate our example. Calls for closer cooperation have now come from France, the US, Russia and Turkey. I can assure you that the German Archaeological Institute and the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation are working out how our concerted efforts could help preserve cultural heritage throughout the crisis region even better.

Honoured colleagues, our cultural work does not stand alone.

We do not lock ourselves away and contemplate the restoration of damaged temples day by day, while people continue to die. Our cultural work is an indispensable part of a comprehensive political approach. Our efforts encompass the tiring wrangling for a political settlement to the conflict, emergency humanitarian assistance and a multitude of specific measures such as training courses for Syrian refugees that focus on more than language learning.

For example, last year 20 organisations, including the German-Jordanian University,

UNHCR

and the German Archaeological Institute, joined forces on “Stunde Null”, a project to prepare for reconstruction in Syria. Even if this “Stunde Null” currently appears a distant prospect, it is important to work towards it, e.g. by taking in academics and students whose careers in Syria have been interrupted by the war, or by means of events such as “Goethe-Institut Damaskus | Im Exil” which is about to be launched here in Berlin.

All of these measures illustrate that cultural work is all about hope, but it also provides real opportunities for the people involved.

This principle comes to the fore in the initiatives organised by our scientific organisations, the German Academic Exchange Service and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and it

applies well beyond Syria's borders. In this spirit, some of the larger German foundations are endeavouring to establish a university of applied sciences in East Africa to close the gap between school and university education and to provide more practical training. By providing access to education, we are also improving peoples' prospects in their home countries, something which is also of relevance to the refugee crisis. Accessing culture and education is the only way to escape poverty and a dead-end existence in large parts of Africa and Asia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The second important change in our work concerns freedom. We must act wherever the freedom to engage in culture and education is threatened, where incomprehension gives rise to false ideas, where ideologies undermine understanding. The only way to fight the rise of ideology is differentiation, and that requires cultural freedom. For it is only through debate, where we permit it and encourage it, that understanding can ultimately emerge.

Protecting this space outside the realm of politics, giving people the means to grasp the mindsets and models of perception that prevail within a society, is precisely our goal

when, for example, we organise a German-Russian year of youth exchange,

when we engage in cultural and linguistic work in Saudi Arabia,

when we struggle to negotiate an agreement on cultural cooperation with Cuba and when we work with Ms Grütters and the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation to help bring an exhibition project with the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art to fruition.

It is not the goal of cultural exchange to accept the other party's position or qualify our own. But experience has shown, in diplomacy as well, that it is unwise to determine one's own course of action without knowing how it will be perceived by the other side.

That's why we need this cultural intelligence, that's why we come out of our conference rooms and, wherever possible, listen to what artists, culture professionals and civil society activists have to say.

We seek to create not only freedom for culture, but also quite literally space for culture. Every Goethe-Institut and every PASCH school is part of our cultural infrastructure which connects us with partners worldwide. I am quite prepared to admit that this costs money. But it costs far less than transport infrastructure, and keeping ideas circulating is just as important as keeping traffic moving.

We therefore have to maintain, support and expand this cultural infrastructure, these spaces, as we hope to do soon by acquiring Thomas Mann's house in California and by working together with the Villa Aurora. In this connection let me thank Ms Grütters and this House and

everyone who helped prevent – as we hope – the sale of Thomas Mann’s erstwhile residence to a private purchaser.

I think that anyone looking at the US today can see how urgent and vital it is for us to increase our presence and raise our profile there. We are therefore also working to fill the empty Goethe House in New York with fresh life and cultural events from Germany.

But we are also seeking to cooperate with our European partners. That’s why we have joined forces with France to find ways of coordinating our cultural work, especially in African countries in which only one of us has a base, and ensuring that we can work together – or even at times for each other.

It is however equally vital for us to create room for debate at home, on our continent – debate on the new challenges facing us in Europe. By “room”, I don’t just mean meeting rooms in Brussels and the German Bundestag, but also rooms in which Europe’s citizens can argue about what kind of Europe they want – at town hall meetings or civic fora. We want to create such rooms in conjunction with the Stiftung Mercator. We are pursuing joint research projects with the VW Foundation and the Robert Bosch Stiftung to analyse precisely where and why euro-scepticism arises in the population and where politics must perhaps do more to counter this trend than it has in the past.

All of this work is important, ladies and gentlemen, if we are to hold Europe together in times of difficulty.Thank you. And thank you to the Subcommittee on Cultural and Education Policy Abroad for this truly important and wise motion, which constitutes the basis for today’s debate.

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