Closing speech by Federal Foreign Minister Steinmeier at the forum 'Menschen bewegen' / 'Inspiring People'

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Ladies and gentlemen,

The motto of our conference is “Menschen bewegen” / “Inspiring People”. And if what I hear is true, then there must have been lots of inspired people last night at the Tresor nightclub....

The last three days’ debates and workshops have shown how many individuals and institutions are enthusiastically, energetically and creatively shaping our cultural and educational landscape. For this, I would first and foremost like to thank everyone who opened their institutions’ doors for us – which in turn opened the hearts, eyes and ears of all participants! The list of venues ranged from the Games Museum and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt to the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, from the Gorki Theatre to Berlin Festival and Savvy Contemporary. There are many more – and I would like for us all to give them, including Andreas Görgen and his team, a big round of applause!

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Ladies and gentlemen,

This is the third forum of its kind, which previously convened in 2006 and 2008. I would like to highlight one initiative in particular that was created through these meetings, an initiative that has inspired countless people: the partner school initiative. During my first tenure as Foreign Minister, we redesigned and expanded our cultural and educational work abroad. The goal we set ourselves at that time, starting with schoolchildren, was to help create connections through cultural diversity and mutual respect. We wanted to give better access to our language and culture, also in places where children and parents did not have access to, or did not want, the full curriculum of our country.

During my most recent trip to Mozambique, we met with a graduate of Escolia Comercial de Maputo, one of two partner schools there. What this young woman said I take with me wherever I go: “Deutsch ist mein Partner geworden” – “German has become my partner”.

She learned German and found a job in a German company that plans infrastructural facilities in Mozambique. Now, she will most likely be travelling to Germany as part of the dual system of vocational training, so that she can learn even more and make an even better contribution to her country's growth and development. It is true: thanks to the partner school initiative, Germany did become her partner.

That is not just the case for this young woman: We have extended our reach from some 400 German schools abroad to an additional 1,800 partner schools. Several hundred of our partner school students, including many of their teachers and representatives from the education sector, are present here today. I am very pleased about this. A very warm welcome to you all!

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Ladies and gentlemen,

"Inspiring People": That's not just the motto of this conference. It also describes our foreign policy as a whole.

I am convinced that we must rethink the connections between national and foreign, between the events inside and outside of our national borders. Today more than ever, at a time when Germany is more globally interconnected than almost any other country. Today more than ever, at a time when work to promote peace is only feasible and achievable on a global scale. Most importantly: today more than ever, when we are witnessing more vehement and frequent crises and conflicts than ever before.

Why is culture and education so important, particularly in these crisis-stricken times? What does this have to do with foreign policy? Why are we investing so much energy into completely renewing the cultural profile of our foreign policy?

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I will begin with an example.

Dear Hiba Jaafil, I am delighted you are here today.

Ms Jaafil trains Lebanon's national women's football team. The parents of many of the women in her team were anything but pleased about what they were doing: "Football! That's not a women's sport! Not my daughter!" they said. Still, the girls joined up. And in Jaafil's team, these young women played alongside team-mates from a range of different backgrounds. Shiites, Sunnis, Druze, and Christians. On the field, they formed and competed as a team. What is more, they succeeded!

You should know that, before last year, Lebanon had never won an international football competition. But then along came Jaafil and her girls. They won the Arab Women's Cup! It was a triumph for her players. A triumph that certainly made proud even the most sceptical parents. Above all, it showed how culture and sport can help call into question social taboos, overcome differences, and create new ties – through cultural diversity.

That is precisely what we are working to achieve. I want to share with you some thoughts on these ties and their overall context.

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Up until 1989 and 1990, we lived in a world of apparent certainties. The globe was dominated by two large systems. One part was controlled by Washington, the other by Moscow. The confrontation between these blocs came to an end – and luckily so! But no new order took the old one's place. The world is seeking a new order. The struggle for influence and dominance, for control of various regions, far too often leads to violence. All too frequently, we witness how these conflicts are fought under the mantle of cultural and religious struggles – how ideologies take over, turning differences into bad blood.

I want to say that the only way to fight the rise of ideology is differentiation. The only weapon against this development is enlightenment.

And enlightenment means adopting a position. It means understanding and identifying differences. It means looking for and finding what we have in common. Wherever possible, we must create a basis for the dialogue that is needed, even if this is still a distant reality in many countries.

That highlights the importance of our joint cultural activities, and of ensuring access to education and culture, both here in our country and together with our partners in the world. But we should be under no illusion! If we succeed in doing this, then we've only created an opportunity, with no guarantees. There is no causal link between culture and education, on the one hand, and peace, on the other hand. Artists, philosophers and poets have upheld the greatest ideals, but they have also incited others to commit the worst crimes. The ties between culture and peace remain fragile. We Germans are probably more keenly aware of this than others.

But I will also say that, in Germany, it was only during the days of Martin Luther and the Enlightenment that the idea originated about how culture and education are essential to living a self-determined life. For decades, we were under the impression that fundamental tenets such as this would prevail – that it was only a matter of time. Today, taking into account local history, tradition and philosophy in many parts of the world, we realise: The entire world no longer looks towards European guidance. Democracy and human rights are by far not universally considered the ultimate aim of social development. In this environment, in which

such tenets no longer exist and in which we are competing with other models of society, we must again learn to explain ourselves and to stand up for the principles of the European Enlightenment with poise and conviction.

It is about nurturing humanity through culture and education. It is about a cultural relations policy that creates the conditions for this. We need a cultural relations policy that is fully convinced about, and that strengthens, culture's power in society.

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I would like to introduce you to the pupil Ilya Pondin. Dear Ilja, thank you for being here today. Ilya goes to School 106 in Volgograd. It is one of our partner schools. Ilya won the PASCH.net competition to uncover traces of the Second World War, with his presentation on places of remembrance in Volgograd.

I was in Volgograd myself last year, to commemorate the end of the Second World War 70 years ago. Several thousand veterans attended the commemoration. Together, we recalled the pain and suffering that has marked our history, the history of Germans and Russians. Bearing these scars, we are today working towards reconciliation.

You, too, Ilya, have closely examined these issues. And your project has shown how important it is to deal with both foreign and national history. By doing so, you come to understand both yourself and others. Our partner school initiative has paved the way for this – and is having an impact far beyond schools.

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Dear Ms Fless, Dear Mr Parzinger,

I want to point out your joint efforts as a further example of how engagement in the fields of culture and education are working to build a more peaceful and humane world.

You have entitled your project for rebuilding Syria "zero hour". It has a broad focus, ranging from specific restoration work to plans for rebuilding urban areas. The question you have asked is how we can best help to rebuild the cultural identity of the wonderfully diverse country of Syria, how we can give people the opportunity to reclaim and nurture their cultural heritage. For this, I would like to thank you very much.

Concerning Syria, I want to make two more points:

The first is related to Alaa Kanaieh, one of many young Syrian women who have come to us in recent months.

Ms Kanaieh is in her late twenties. She is from Damascus. For several months now, she has been studying Software Systems Engineering at RWTH Aachen University, with a scholarship of the German Academic Exchange Service.

Dear Ms Kanaieh, I am delighted you are here today. You have summed up the time you have spent in Germany as follows: “The main thing is to make the best of the opportunities of our scholarship programme. We want to get to work as soon as possible and build our country’s future, whether in or outside of Syria.”

By saying so, you, Ms Kanaieh, make perfectly clear why it is so important to think about and focus on “inside” and “outside” at the same time.

Together with the German Academic Exchange Service, dear Prof. Wintermantel, we last year increased the number of scholarships for Syrian refugees from some 20 to more than 200. This gives them the opportunity to be educated here in Germany – so that later, in their home country, they can again assume responsibility.

The Philipp Schwartz Initiative, which we established together with the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, has the same aim, dear Professor Schwarz.

Academics who have faced persecution, so-called “scholars at risk”, are able to freely continue their research in Germany. They can continue to play an active role in the international academic and scientific community.

The initiative is named after Philipp Schwartz, who himself was forced to flee Germany during the 1930s, to escape the Nazis. It is therefore absolutely right for us today to be helping persecuted academics. For this, I want to expressly thank all of you, and all of the foundations involved in the project!

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Ladies and gentlemen,

By promoting culture and education, we want to contribute to a humane society – particularly in regions that are currently faced with crises.

We are doing so by creating opportunities for, and by nurturing, open discussion. Spaces in which social topics can be addressed and described, also through images and sound. Where views can be exchanged about the dreams and traumatic experiences of societies.

When we speak of spaces, you can take this quite literally! Because what we need first of all is the cultural infrastructure of the Goethe-Institutes and the schools abroad, as well as the academic and cultural institutions.

Infrastructure is essential, but it is not the key prerequisite for successful interculteral exchange.

Leaving aside the domestic political controversy over Jan Böhmermann's poem, the debate does show how strongly our cultural identities and sensibilities diverge, and how differently we respond to cultural statements that involve irony and satire.

Although we must not ignore differences, we must be willing to discuss, and if necessary argue about, those differences, what they are based on, and why they may be justified. This is important not only at the level of state politics, but especially when our societies interact, when civil society and cultural representatives are working to promote mutual knowledge and understanding.

A more peaceful world order will not be created on a drawing board by state representatives, in the sealed-off conference rooms of red-carpeted hotels. The world's search for new order is a constant struggle that runs much deeper: It is a struggle to find truths, with the realisation that there is often more than one truth, and with a clear understanding that very different perceptions exist of one and the same reality. We must take all this into account if we want to remain in a position to promote peace in the world. In other words: We must get a better idea of the underlying narratives: We must think about the traditional stories, images and narratives that have formed, and continue to form, the actual foundation of the political, religious and social structures that are visible in our world. Although they normally do not cause political power struggles, they do play an overarching role. If you are not aware of them, or if you ignore them, you will fail time and again when trying to resolve such conflicts.

Politics must try hard to gain a clear picture. For politics is called on to act, and it does so often with great might and heavy equipment. So the danger is all the greater if action is based on false premises!

There's a wonderful story from Mozambique that I heard a few weeks ago when I was in Africa and which illustrates all this perfectly.

A monkey, the fable has it, was walking along the side of a river when it saw a fish in the water. The monkey said to itself, "The poor thing's underwater. It will drown. I must rescue it!" The monkey snatched the fish out of the water and the fish began to flap around in its hands. Then the monkey said, "Look how happy it is now!"

But of course the fish died out of water. Then the monkey said, "Oh, how sad. If only I'd got here a bit sooner, I'd have been able to save it."

So you can see: A perfect example of someone starting from completely false premises.

That is why we need culture. For culture sharpens one's perception, and good perception is where all diplomacy begins. That's why, to my mind, "cultural relations policy" is not just a policy of cultural relations, but also a culture of politics.

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Dear Mr Bonaventure and dear Hermann Parzinger, in your workshops yesterday, you addressed two very different aspects of how our perceptions can vary. Yet I have been told that, in the end, a strong unifying element emerged. Bonaventure called it "unlearning the given". The need to question, from an outside perspective, one's own fundamental assumptions.

It is true: we must not close our eyes to the fact that what we consider to be proper order may be viewed as disorderly in other countries and continents. True dialogue can only come about if we recognise and admit this fact – and I say so referring not only to our own colonial past.

I say it also regarding Germany as a country of immigration. Already prior to the current waves of refugees, we had a higher percentage of people in Germany of migrant origin than the classic country of immigration, the United States of America. When I mentioned that in the States, at first people looked at me disbelievingly, and then they wanted to see the statistics....

But it is true! All of these people have come to a democratic country, a country with an open society, a country that is assuming its international responsibility. And together with them, we want to ensure that it stays that way.

This includes seeing to it that people who have just arrived in our country can make it their home. We must help with that. Specifically through our efforts in the cultural field, and by giving people access to education and training. I am sure the experience you all have gained in cultural relations and education policy will be a big help.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

During the coming weeks and months, we will be focusing on Europe, also in terms of cultural relations policy. We will begin in only a few weeks, at the European Writers' Conference in Berlin.

More than three years ago, Nicol Ljubic, Mely Kiyak, Antje Rávic Strubel, Tilman Spengler and I talked about Europe, over a glass of red wine. What is it that still binds Europe together? What can today be described as the core of the European idea? Has Europe been reduced to a mere technocratic project, or does it remain a desirable ideal, in terms of its culture and civilisation?

We decided to continue our discussion – not merely between the five of us around a kitchen table, but at a European Writers' Conference. Tilman Spengler later put it in a nutshell: "What we are aiming for is not really a conference, but an ongoing conversation between authors, a conversation that will seemingly never end."

In a couple of weeks, in early May, we will continue the conversation – this time under the heading of "WritingAwayBorders".

This motto has multiple meanings. It is an invitation to identify all things that currently divide the people of Europe – whether they be barriers or barbed wire at the borders, or distrust and intolerance in people's minds. However, I believe it also refers to a fundamental European experience: Although it may at times be difficult, and resistance and setbacks will occur, borders can be overcome, spiritually, culturally – also in politics!

The conference is being prepared and accompanied by many other meetings, especially in the countries of the so-called Eastern Partnership. In connection with this, I want to mention a special event: The literature festival in Odessa, about which one newspaper wrote last year: "This literature festival has changed Ukraine".

Because it was through the authors' exchanges, readings and discussions at this event that it became clear what actual interests need to be balanced, and how this could be done. That is precisely the kind of essential cultural work literature can do, which Günter Grass described in "The Meeting at Telgte" and that guides our efforts to this very day.

However, we will only succeed – and here I am thinking primarily of you, friends from the world of culture – if we continue to write European stories. I am convinced that, particularly these days, the voices of European authors carry a special weight in and for Europe. A Europe that continues to break down borders, a Europe that does not rebuild borders that have already been done away with.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, we have presented our report on cultural relations policy. It gives you an idea of the work that is under way.

Namely, creating and maintaining access to and opportunities for education and culture, so that these may thrive.

Above all, we are working hard to convince partners around the world not to feel threatened by things that are foreign, as well as to be open for, and to enable, exchange.

Nevertheless, responsible cultural relations policy must make decisions about whether or not to provide funding, and what we will fund. We cannot support everything, and what we support must be useful. Overall, we are doing more, especially compared to several years ago, when the debate focused on how many Goethe-Institutes must close down, and how many excavation sites the German Archaeological Institute must abandon. Yes, that is why we are working hard to obtain funding, also within the Federal Government. Travelling, giving speeches, as well as doing the maths are everyday aspects of cultural relations policy. And yes, infrastructure costs money. According to a statistics website, building only one kilometre of motorway in Germany costs some ten million euro. That is certainly money well spent.

At the same time, we provide some 1.6 billion euro annually to Goethe-Institutes, schools, language instruction programmes, university projects, exhibitions and archaeology. Basically, in support of all cultural infrastructure everywhere in the world outside of Germany. In terms of German motorways, this is merely equivalent to the motorway that links Berlin and Leipzig!

I think that, in a country the future of which will be influenced by events in as far away places as America and China, or Moscow and Johannesburg, that is not too much money. Rather, we want to and must maintain and expand this cultural infrastructure.

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For this, we need strong and independent partners, partners that we do our utmost to support, as we have already done for the Goethe-Institutes and the German schools abroad in this legislative term, and as we will do next year for our research and academic relations policy, with its flagship organisations the German Academic Exchange Service, the German Archaeological Institute and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

We have significantly expanded the focus of this group of partners. In the long run, we want to move from a foreign policy of nations to a foreign policy of societies. The founder of our modern cultural relations and education policy, Ralf Dahrendorf, engraved this notion in all our minds, and we want to do an even better job of putting it into practice.

That is why we have refocused our policy, and the special funding we are providing ranges from funds for building civil society in the countries of the Eastern Partnership to expanding the international reach of the Federal Agency for Civic Education and establishing a strategic dialogue with the political foundations. I am deeply grateful to everyone involved in these efforts.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Culture and education give people hope that they can participate and play a shaping role. They offer the promise of freedom and humanity. We want to fulfil these hopes and keep these promises. We are convinced that strengthening the social power of culture and education is the best way to achieve a more peaceful world. A world in which differences do not generate misunderstandings, misunderstandings do not lead to conflicts, and conflicts do not turn into wars.

If we want to get an idea of how exactly this can work, then we need not look very far. We must only take a glance around this room. Living proof of successful cultural and educational work is right here in our midst.

People like the Syrian fellow Alaa Kanaieh, the Russian pupil Ilya Pondin, the Lebanese women’s football coach Hiba Jaafil, and so many others who are here today. You all are making a difference.

You are truly “Inspiring People”.

Thank you so much, and have a good evening!

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