

Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the ZEIT Business Forum in Hamburg

 auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/151106-hamburg-zeitwirtschaftsforum/276230

Welcome

Breadcrumbs

1. [Federal Foreign Office](#) ›
2. [News](#) ›
3. [Newsroom](#) ›
4. **Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the ZEIT Business Forum in Hamburg**

06.11.2015 - Speech 

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very glad to have been invited here and of course to have the opportunity of speaking to you today – and not just anywhere in Hamburg but in this wonderful place, the Hamburg ‘Michel’: the emblem of your beautiful city! For many years, the bell-tower of St Michael’s gave intercontinental seafarers their first and last glimpses of Hamburg. When setting sail, it was traditional to take a last look back at that ‘Michel’ bell-tower.

I travel quite a lot myself – though when I set off from an international destination, my last look back rarely falls on an imposing church tower. It usually shows me one of the world’s futuristic airport buildings. Except in Berlin, of course. Until recently, a new airport there seemed not so much futuristic as utopian!

But you didn’t invite me here to talk about architecture but about the foreign-policy challenges of our times. That was brave of you. One glance at the world and the crises and conflicts besetting it is enough to see that this is not going to be a cheerful chat. If you invite a foreign minister these days, make other arrangements for good moods.

It goes without saying, though, that the business community has to show an interest in foreign policy. Your predecessors trading here in Hamburg could only succeed if shipping routes were safe, treaties were upheld and war didn’t get in the way of business – and that hasn’t changed much.

Today, anyone who opens a newspaper can find out about the conflicts in our world, their force and their ramifications. But they are no longer just confined to the papers. With the thousands upon thousands of people seeking refuge in Germany and across Europe, these crises have well and truly reached us: our borders, our gym halls, our schools and nurseries – the very heart of Germany.

It is impressive to see the great readiness to help with which the Germans have responded to the influx of refugees. We have police officers doing overtime, pensioners giving German lessons. Here in Hamburg the other day, the Chamber of Commerce hosted an 'encounters market' where employers and refugees met to discuss prospects for internships and jobs. These are important initiatives, not least because they show that this Germany belongs not to the screamers and the hate mongers but to people who help where help is needed. And without wanting to sweep the risks and burdens under the carpet, I thank everyone for those impressive efforts.

But those helpers are among those asking me how we are going to go on from here. How many more refugees will come?

These are sincere and important questions to which we must provide equally sincere answers.

It is that sincerity which I all too often find lacking in the current discourse. Read the papers, including those published here in Hamburg, and you might end up thinking there are only two extremes – one lot shouting, "We'll manage this, come what may," and the other shouting, "The country's full up." Bald statements like that won't help us solve the problems. Neither, I might add, will ultimatums.

What we need is an honest discussion on realistic answers and the awareness that there is no one right answer, no magic wand that will change the situation overnight.

What we need now are sensible answers at three levels: firstly, national answers here in Germany; secondly, joint answers in and for Europe; and thirdly – and this is the pivotal point for me – answers that get to the root of the problem, to the places where flight and displacement are chiefly being generated – namely the trouble spots of the Middle East.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We in Germany must be clear that it is not realistic to imagine we can take in and integrate over a million refugees year after year – despite Germans' unprecedented willingness to help, and despite the outstanding work by the business community and our municipalities.

This means we have to speed up the procedures. Registration, distribution and decision-making all need to be quicker. Last night's meeting with the Minister-Presidents of the Länder reached important decisions on that score. It is also a fact that we need quicker deportation too. I myself have conducted negotiations with the Western Balkan states and with Afghanistan on this and reached agreement on procedures to ensure that the individuals in question really are repatriated. Just yesterday, I spoke about that to my opposite numbers in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

As I have said right from the start, Germany cannot solve the refugee crisis by itself. No European country can, not even the continent's largest economy. This brings me to my second point: Europe.

We need to have the courage to commit to more Europe, and I mean Europe in the form of the solidarity that makes this community what it is. We need to display it in guarding our external borders, developing a joint asylum system and ensuring burdens are equitably shared.

We can't have less than a handful of countries taking in all the refugees in Europe!

Germany, Austria, Sweden and Italy. Surely European solidarity, so heavily leaned on during the financial crisis, cannot restrict itself to financial aid. European solidarity also means sharing burdens fairly among all member states.

This shouldn't lead us to lay the blame chiefly at Brussels' door. It's not Brussels which is obstructing progress. Quite the contrary – Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker demonstrated great courage in presenting his proposal for a fairer distribution system in the face of opposition from many member states. The problem lies in those European capitals which are all for solidarity when European funds are being distributed but look the other way when the going gets tough.

Fair distribution must be accompanied by better security on our external borders. A reminder: when we set up the Schengen system, our philosophy was that, if we did away with Europe's internal borders, we would need effective protection of its external borders. But that has been neglected. The reason was that no-one expected Europe to suddenly become the goal of such a vast movement of people. We have to make up for that neglect now, as quickly as possible.

Our European institutions are not prepared for the current onslaught. We therefore must have the political courage now to move towards a European border control authority that can step in when a member state is overwhelmed.

On the subject of border control, one of our neighbours particularly stands out, namely Turkey. Turkey is the key country for migration in Europe. This isn't something we can decide; it's quite simply the reality.

And so I do find it difficult to understand when I hear voices calling for us not to talk to President Erdoğan. Let me ask you this: how would you solve the problem then? It's clear to me that we need to reach an agreement with Turkey in order to manage the stream of refugees.

And this brings me to the transit countries, those countries directly bordering the trouble spots in the Middle East, which are currently bearing the worst of the strain caused by the refugee crisis: Lebanon and Jordan. The more difficult the political and humanitarian

situation in those countries, the greater the pressure on refugees to travel onwards to Europe.

Lebanon has a total population of around 4.5 million – plus 1.5 million refugees from Syria. I met a number of those refugees in the camps there. The situation is bleak. People are living under scraps of plastic. It is cold and damp – and now the winter is coming on.

But that's not all. In these circumstances, it is horrendous that the aid agencies there had to reduce monthly food rations by more than half during the summer, from 28 to 13 dollars – because the international community was not able to provide the resources! This is nothing short of grotesque.

That was why we rounded up the G7 nations and other important partner countries for a meeting in New York a few weeks ago aimed at increasing our support to the international aid organisations. We raised 1.8 billion dollars.

That was important, but it cannot stop there. That's why I invited the heads of the top aid agencies to Berlin the day before yesterday to see how we might improve international crisis management. Humanitarian funding needs reform. One thing is for sure: the misery of the summer must not be repeated. At my request, the Budget Committee decided yesterday to authorise another significant increase in this year's funds for emergency aid in the region.

All these measures, at the national and European levels and in the transit countries, are important. At the same time, though, they do nothing more than treat the symptoms – whereas we need to get right to the causes. And that brings me to foreign policy.

Why are so many people coming to us at the moment? It isn't hardship and poverty that they're fleeing. The vast majority of them are fleeing trouble spots, fleeing war and violence. And until we can put an end to those crises, until we can stop the violence, there will be streams of refugees!

This is most pressing in Syria.

Sure, five years of civil war in which the various groupings have become entangled with each other have not made it easier to resolve the conflict.

What annoys me a bit is the clever tip we keep hearing now that we ought to talk to Assad. It annoys me because, ten years ago, I was in Syria several times and told our American friends to be careful about hastily including Syria in the axis of evil – I said I found it premature. Instead, I advised engaging with Syria politically rather than isolating it and driving it into the arms of Iran. But back then, that was simply not to be considered. Today – ten years down the line, after five years of civil war, 250,000 deaths, 12 million people forced to leave their homes – everyone's suddenly saying we need to talk to Assad.

But time changes things. Now that every family bears the wounds of this civil war, Assad is no longer the key, no longer the central pivot on which a solution to the whole problem might turn.

Of course, the coming steps will involve talking to representatives of the regime. But the clever-clever tip that talking to Assad will solve the problem – that ship has sailed. It was a possibility once, but that was long ago.

The solution is sadly a different one and will require a good deal more patience and perseverance than many currently imagine. We will need to put that solution to Syria and make it so watertight as to be unavoidable – and that will take all the international players who have a role in the region.

On the subject of Syria, Josef Joffe has written of a “chaos of interests”. He’s right and could have gone further. Just look at the differences between the US and Russia, seemingly insurmountable until recently – and, above all, those between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Russia’s military intervention in Syria has not made the situation easier. Nonetheless, in our analysis Russia remains crucial to a solution in Syria. The fact is no conflict in the Middle East will ever be resolved by Washington and Moscow alone, including Syria’s – but while the two of them oppose one another, we won’t see even the beginnings of a solution.

That’s why we spent the past months trying to persuade the Russians and Americans to start to approach one another.

The next stage was to turn our attention to the next, yet more difficult partners – Iran and Saudi Arabia.

This was helped by the fact that the Iran negotiations had generated a little trust. The journey I made from Tehran to Riyadh a few weeks back would not have been possible at all some time ago. We urgently called on those two countries – having for years maintained not diplomatic but extremely hostile relations – to step out of their comfort zones and engage positively with one another.

All of this preparatory work was needed to pave the way for what happened last Friday in Vienna: for the first time ever, all the key international parties vital to a resolution of the Syria conflict sat down at the same table.

Maybe you don’t think that’s much to write home about. But for a foreign minister who, in spite of all the talks and telephone calls, didn’t think four weeks ago that we would bring the Russians and Americans together – not to mention Saudi Arabia and Iran! – it’s really very significant!

I'm not here to spread optimism. It's not in my nature, as a down-to-earth East Westphalian. I believe exuberant euphoria isn't the first thing one would associate with the Hanseatic mindset here in Hamburg either ...

Certainly, the talks in Vienna were not a breakthrough – but they were a start. Joint interests have been identified. Everyone wants to combat the cancer of ISIS, which increasingly poses a threat to everyone in the region. Everyone fears that Syria collapsing could bring down its neighbours, such as Lebanon, too.

We managed in Vienna to agree a paper containing important principles which are now to form the basis of ongoing cooperation. Syria is to be preserved as a unified state, and a secular state in which all religious and ethnic groups can live side by side. And we are now to attempt a route starting with negotiations for local and regional ceasefires and later leading to the process of establishing a transition government, a new constitution and fresh elections.

This may seem utopian given what's happening on the ground, but now at least that roadmap forms the basis of our joint endeavours.

I can well understand many people looking at the mass of conflicts in the world and asking, "Is there any point to all this?"

And it's true, far too seldom does diplomacy show us proof that it's worth not giving up. But there is proof sometimes!

Take Ukraine. How many people criticised us? "Stick to sanctions!" they said. "The rest will take care of itself!" I am for exerting political pressure when international law is blatantly violated. If that doesn't work, economic pressure can help. But since Iraq, we have learned the dangers of a self-perpetuating spiral of sanctions that no-one can find their way back out of. Politics is called for!

The objective of sanctions must not be to crush their targets. Too many people, among the general public as well as the policy-makers, see deciding sanctions as an excuse to feel self-righteous and lean back. But in terms of responsible diplomacy, sanctions only make sense if they reestablish the possibility of political negotiations. And that's exactly how we did it.

That was, as it always is, difficult, slow and often frustrating due to the setbacks involved. And when I land back in Berlin later today, Laurent Fabius and I will yet again meet our fellow foreign ministers from Ukraine and Russia, Pavlo Klimkin and Sergey Lavrov – because things don't just take care of themselves and everything, really every single millimetre of the way to implementation of Minsk, needs to be worked for.

But thanks to our efforts, we have had a ceasefire for some ten weeks now, which is holding to some degree. This journey may not make for great headlines, nor has it returned Crimea to Ukraine. But limiting the conflict to the Donbas region, preventing its spread, preserving the unity of Ukraine and preventing more thousands of deaths – that's not nothing either!

I might also point out, to those saying policy-makers should do more to combat the causes of refugee movements, that Ukraine is a country with more than 45 million inhabitants right on our doorstep.

Iran is another good example of what diplomacy in its proper sense can achieve. We were able to sign an agreement on the nuclear programme after years of difficult negotiations – even after standing on the verge of military conflict several times. Strategic patience was the crucial factor in achieving an outcome.

I'll give you one final example: Libya. This is a country located at the gates of Europe and governed by violence. The country is falling apart – and it is one of the most important transit countries for refugees heading for Europe. In that situation, with tribal structures disintegrating and everyone apparently fighting everyone else, how do you find the starting point for a political process?

You do it practically!

So what did we do?

We decided to invite the main conflict parties to Berlin. We sent an aeroplane to Tripoli to pick up their negotiators. But they refused to board the same aircraft and demanded a second aeroplane. We said that's not happening. That was the first test. And hey presto, in they all get. And when they arrived here, they wanted to go to their hotel. But we said, we've organised a dinner for you. And not just anywhere, but on a steamboat on the Spree! So they were all stuck on the boat and sailed along the Spree for several hours talking to one another.

That broke the ice, and as a result the political talks the following day went really well. Four weeks later agreement was reached on a joint constitutional text, and we hope that the road to a government of national unity in Libya is still clear.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As one glance at the world shows, merely restricting ourselves to peaceful crisis prevention does not relieve us from the current conflicts. Diplomacy that refrains from exerting pressure will in all probability have only limited success. But in the right dose and guided by experienced awareness of the opportunities and risks inherent in military escalation, diplomacy can prove worthwhile. Strategic patience and perseverance can bear fruit. That route is rarely quick and never comfortable. Above all, it doesn't seem to fit

into a world of quick soundbites and Twitter, which no longer has any tolerance for complexity amidst the talk of black and white, good and evil. In the political sphere, however, we cannot sidestep the “chaos of interests”. It’s the reality – in Ukraine, in Libya, and especially in Syria!

If we bow to media expectations and ignore or disregard that reality, we will never get to a solution beyond the military – and that wasn’t really a solution in Iraq, nor was it in Libya. When you choose other routes, you have no guarantee of success, they are regularly long and arduous, and the wind tends to be against you.

But this place, this church, stands as a reminder that when seafarers left Hamburg harbour and looked back at the ‘Michel’, it was the first major landmark of a long journey. It was a reminder that every journey starts with the first step, or the first wave, the first nautical mile – and that the destination will not be reached, not ever, by staying in port and howling into the wind.

Thank you very much.

[Overview "Newsroom"](#)

Related content

© 1995 – 2022 Federal Foreign Office