Speech by Minister of State Maria Böhmer at the conference on prospects for cross-border cooperation in world heritage held in Berlin

2016-12-12

Dr Kaiser,

Dr Bernecker,

Mr Verdaas,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It’s a great pleasure for me to welcome you to Berlin. I’d like to express my special thanks to the representatives of transboundary and transnational world heritage sites: you work with great dedication to preserve our shared cultural heritage and you’re here today to give us an insight into your work.

To me, working with world heritage sites is one of the loveliest tasks in the

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sphere. I experienced this first-hand last year as the Chairperson of the

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World Heritage Committee. You work to ensure that the world heritage sites are maintained and protected. And you do so across borders. That culture transcends borders is both an important message and a wonderful opportunity.

Based on the 1972 Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage,

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has now granted world heritage status to more than 1000 sites in 165 countries.

World heritage sites are the pride and joy of every country. They attract attention far beyond a country’s borders. They bring together people in their faith, their traditions and their history. We want to foster this. Indeed, we have to preserve it.

World heritage status is also of great importance to tourism and is thus a major economic factor.

Ladies and gentlemen,

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’s World Heritage Programme and the world heritage sites are in the headlines almost every day. Often, the news isn’t good.

The destruction of cultural property due to terror and war, illicit excavations and illegal trading, poses a threat to humankind’s cultural heritage.

The destruction of our past also endangers our present and our future. We have a shared responsibility to protect our cultural heritage.

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Security Council has adopted several resolutions condemning the deliberate destruction of cultural property. Furthermore, the International Criminal Court in The Hague made another ground-breaking contribution in the form of a landmark first conviction for cultural destruction in Mali as a war crime. Protecting, preserving and rebuilding cultural heritage is a pressing issue of our time.

Two weeks ago I represented the Federal Republic of Germany at a conference in Abu Dhabi hosted by the French President and the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi.

The conference focused on how to safeguard cultural heritage in conflict areas. At this conference, the international community sent a strong message on the protection of cultural heritage. An international fund for safeguarding cultural property was established and a network of safe havens for endangered cultural objects was initiated. When it comes to implementing these measures, Germany will contribute expertise and concrete projects.

In early June, the Federal Foreign Office hosted a

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international expert meeting on protecting and preserving Syria’s cultural heritage. We organised the conference in conjunction with the

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World Heritage Centre and with the support of the German Commission for

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, the German Archaeological Institute and the Gerda Henkel Foundation.

I was impressed by how young Syrians traumatised by war and terror found the will to plan their country’s future. The shared responsibility and joint protection of cultural heritage forms a bond beyond political differences.

When a Syrian participant asked a fellow countryman which of the many political groups he belonged to, he replied: I belong to Syria. I was moved by this spirit of unity.

We want to pass on our experience and show how cooperation functions in practice, also across borders.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In April, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier appointed me as Special Representative for

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World Heritage. During my tenure, I’d like to strengthen

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as an institution and improve the protection of world heritage sites. The Federal Foreign Office has an extensive programme on cultural preservation which has to be further strengthened. This includes emergency measures for endangered cultural heritage, such as the “Stunde Null” project.

The networking of national and international players is of key importance here. Through the Archaeological Heritage Network project or initiatives such as the international expert meeting on Syria in June, we bring together those in positions of responsibility and decision-makers.

Such a networking of players is also one of the main objectives of today’s conference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

All of these activities show that Germany stands ready as a strategic partner to work on new initiatives, to make its expertise available and to help support projects. Bringing together resources, know-how and networks is our shared goal.

We can also describe the objective of today’s conference using the same words: bringing together resources, know-how and networks.

Preserving cultural heritage, especially when it transcends borders, is a task which also brings people closer together – irrespective of their political views or origin.

Europe's borders, which separated our nations for a long time, link us today. Germany alone has nine direct neighbouring countries. That's why we have so many transboundary and transnational World Heritage sites. This has enriched us and we have gained valuable experience.

These sites oblige us to engage in international cooperation with our neighbours and partners from overseas. We've willingly and actively lived up to this obligation.

We know that the transboundary nature of at least one site is the result of the conflicts initiated by Germany in the last century. Owing to our history, the Federal Republic of Germany thus has a special responsibility.

The inscription of Muskauer Park as the first transboundary world heritage site in 2004 was of special, indeed of crucial, importance to us. This site on both sides of the River Neisse shows that borders and reservations about each other can be overcome through a commitment to shared heritage.

Cultural heritage can be the key to reconciliation and dialogue among all partners in conflict regions. Political will is needed to seize these opportunities across borders.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The protection of world heritage also has a considerable political importance in our European political context.

At present, we see that some political constants on our continent seem to be faltering. People are asking what is keeping the

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together. The

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is an economic and prosperity project and thus a European peace project. I believe that the cultural dimension is often not paid enough attention. The diversity of European culture is unique – and this includes world heritage.

Cultural policy is sometimes seen as a form of competition or rivalry – but in the European context we see that the opposite is the case: we work together to safeguard cultural property, thus revitalising our shared values. Our common cultural heritage can only be protected if we work with and not against one another.

In September, I hosted an evening of literature here at the Federal Foreign Office to mark the Frankfurt Book Fair. Writers from Flanders and the Netherlands – this year’s Guests of Honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair – presented their works.

Literature is an important key to exploring the mentality of a language area. Literature brings people closer together. The same applies to the work to preserve our common cultural heritage.

The European Union would like to “aim at generating a new spirit of dialogue, mutual listening and learning, joint capacity-building and global solidarity”, as it says in the

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Strategy for International Cultural Relations.

By promoting cooperation beyond Germany’s borders, you’re sending an important message. I thank you for that.

For the conference, I wish you many inspiring encounters, good discussions and successful networking.

Overview "Newsroom"

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