

Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the Eastern Westphalian Business Forum in Bielefeld

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02.11.2015 - Speech 

Mr Meier-Scheuven,

Mr Zinkann,

Mr Mayor,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I don't know if you thought it through before inviting me here today. I say that most especially to those hoping for a relaxed evening. Looking at the world, or even just at this morning's newspapers, you will realise that anyone who invites a foreign minister at a time like this can't expect a fun-packed evening! I, at least, can do little to improve the mood this evening if I'm to talk about this evening's agreed topic: "The world is out of joint".

I'm delighted that you've invited me. That's not only because it gives me an opportunity to visit my home region: Eastern Westphalia-Lippe. Nor is it because I'm hoping to enjoy a few pork sausages and a good pilsner beer afterwards. No, I'm pleased for another reason: during the last few months I have, as it were, been engaged in non-stop talks – with the Iranians, the Saudis, the Lebanese as well as the Jordanians, Libyans and Egyptians. There have been tussles about diplomatic nuances, vanities have been cultivated and there have been debates on saving face. This has dominated the last few weeks. And now? Here? I finally have an opportunity to talk to people who believe in straightforward thinking and straightforward talking and don't take themselves more seriously than the rest of the world. That's why I'm so glad to be here. Thank you very much for this invitation!

As a neighbour from Lippe and as Foreign Minister, I'm glad that you're showing so much interest in my views on the state of the world.

But I'm not surprised. For few other regions are as successful and as outward-looking as this, when I look at its enterprises and economy. The Eastern Westphalian economy and its companies are not only top of the league in North Rhine-Westphalia and Germany. For many of you enjoy international success. Some of you are very well-known and very big. However, there are also many – mostly family businesses – which have found their niches in the world economy and have developed into international market leaders.

Mr Zinkann won't like the term "hidden champions". A company like his has to be well-known, not hidden. Many others from this region which are suppliers for the mechanical engineering or car industries are successful, even though their companies' names aren't known throughout Germany. In my view, therefore, the term "hidden champions" has more to do with Westphalian modesty than reality.

There's no need, ladies and gentlemen, for this modesty. The weekly Die Wirtschaftswoche only recently described the success of this region in an impressive fashion: "Far from elite universities and large cities, there are more companies generating sales worth billions, international market leaders and top researchers in Eastern Westphalia-Lippe than anywhere else in Germany".

You have something in this region which is still lacking in many other parts of our country: really strong and dynamic networks. The research community and industry, as well as associations and companies, in Eastern Westphalia-Lippe have traditionally worked so closely and effectively that everyone evidently benefits. That's what has made the Eastern Westphalian business community so successful.

And it's not only the business community which is enjoying success! Things are also looking up in the world of football: Arminia Bielefeld has just defeated Kaiserslautern 2:0 at home. And not far from here, Paderborn had the courage to hire a coaching team which has caused quite a public stir and, hopefully, will also ensure sporting success.

Joking aside, many of your companies are clearly focused on the international market, and I can therefore imagine that foreign policy matters to many of you. It matters because you need to know what happens next. Where are the safe places in this world? Where can I invest? The fact that foreign policy is important is therefore not new. What is perhaps new is that the state of the world is not only relevant to your business activities out in the world but that it's now affecting business at home.

And that brings me to our topic this evening, the refugee crisis, or perhaps I should say the flow of migrants, which has reached a magnitude which none of us could have imagined.

That's having an impact on Germany's domestic policy. It's having an impact on your companies, whether they be here in Bielefeld, Gütersloh or elsewhere in Eastern Westphalia. I'm overwhelmed by the willingness to help we're seeing. Naturally, the Red Cross, the National Society for Worker Welfare and the Federal Agency for Technical Relief are all involved in this work. However, there are also now tens of thousands of volunteers all over Germany.

Your companies have also shown an impressive willingness to help. I've heard that Schüco has offered refugees free German courses. That Phönix Kontakt in Blomberg has provided internships for refugees. That Böllhoff here in Bielefeld has made its production plant available free of cost for refugees. These examples are but a few of countless others here in the region and throughout Germany. I want to express my sincere thanks to everyone who has provided a helping hand.

That deserves respect. I'm pleased about all the work that's being put in. However, we can't simply focus on the positive aspects of this issue. If I were to ask the mayor, he would tell me where the capacities of individual communities have already been exceeded. And alongside the questions as to where help can usefully be provided, I'm currently also hearing questions tinged with concern and scepticism. For example, how many more refugees will come in the coming weeks, months and years? What's going to happen in the long term?

We have to deal with these questions responsibly. It sometimes seems to me that ordinary citizens are doing that much more wisely than some in the media or in politics. For when you look at the papers, you get the impression that there are only two extreme positions. One extreme is: "We can do it no matter what happens". The other extreme is: "The boat is full, and has been for a long time".

I'm certain that many people are very well aware that the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes. For we have to be prepared to find many answers to a very complex question. At the same time, we have to know that there isn't ONE right answer and that there isn't ONE solution which will change everything overnight.

That's why I say to you: we won't find a sensible solution if we focus on these two extreme positions.

That's why I'm not only against extreme right-wing rabble-rousing but also completely reject simplistic slogans and ultimatums. For ultimatums, such as those we occasionally hear from southern Germany, won't help us to find the better solution we need!

Anyone who's seriously interested in this issue has to deal with the reality. Unfortunately, it's more complex than "Open the borders!" or "Close the borders!".

If we're committed to finding realistic solutions, then we have to accept that we cannot take in and integrate more than a million refugees year after year. Despite the exemplary readiness to help Germans have shown, despite the tremendous commitment of companies and despite the outstanding work done by communities, we cannot manage that in the long term. What we need are answers which will bring about a sizeable reduction in the number of those arriving here in the coming months and years.

For me as Foreign Minister, it's clear that we here in Germany cannot resolve the refugee crisis on our own. No European country can do it alone, not even the continent's largest economy.

At national level we have to do what's possible. We have to speed up processes. We're trying to do that at present and I hope that agreement will be reached on Thursday with the Minister-Presidents. We have to ensure that those whose application for asylum has been turned down or is unlikely to be approved are deported more quickly. 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. We need centres where refugees arrive and are assessed as quickly as possible: is this someone who may have a right to asylum and can submit an application or is it someone who has no chance of being recognised, who comes from a safe country of origin and therefore has to return home?

However, alongside these national measures we also have to act together at European level. It's not Brussels which is obstructing progress at the moment. On the contrary, Brussels supports us whenever we look to the European asylum and migration policy for answers. It's individual member states which are preventing laws or legal provisions being initiated in Brussels which could actually help us to bring the number of refugees back down.

I believe we need more, not less Europe. Securing Europe's external borders shouldn't only be the responsibility of countries like Greece. We have to undertake to work together in order to strengthen the European maritime border between Turkey and Greece with European border police officers from all member states. We also need a single process, a single asylum system.

And we need a fair distribution of refugees in Europe. It's unacceptable that four countries have taken in 80 per cent of the refugees on our continent. EU (European Union) Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker wholeheartedly supports our demand for a fairer distribution of refugees. Juncker is the one who's saying: you're right in Austria, Germany and Sweden; we can only get through this crisis if the other eastern and western European countries take in their share of the refugees. That has to be our goal.

We have to take a series of national measures and we need a uniform European process, uniform standards as well as a fairer distribution.

We haven't achieved that yet. However, let's assume we did manage all of this. And we even ultimately succeeded in reaching an agreement with Turkey so that fewer people were pushed over the border from Turkey to Greece.

We would have achieved a lot. But we would still only be dealing with the symptoms! We have to get to the root of the problem. We have to ask what actually prompts people to leave their homes.

We have to address the causes of flight in the regions where war and violence force people to set off on an unimaginably dangerous journey.

Those who are my age or a bit older will remember the whole debate about refugees in the 1990s. At that time, we spoke of “economic refugees” from Africa. They still exist. However, they currently make up less than 20 per cent of the refugees arriving here. The large majority come from the Middle East, Syria or countries neighbouring Syria. These people are at direct risk as a result of war and violence and that’s why they’re heading for Europe.

I can’t think of any time during my political career when we had so many dangerous conflicts in the world all at once. Why is that so? Is it a coincidence that so many crises have erupted in recent times?

We don’t have time to look at the reasons in great depth today. However, I want to at least tell you where I see a link. It seems that we no longer have order in our world. Let’s look back to 1990. Something changed for all of us that year. For us Germans things changed for the better with the demise of the Soviet Union, the end of the East-West conflict and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. All of that was wonderful. The old decades-long division of the world into two blocs was suddenly over, as was an order which brought with it cynical certainties. We always knew how the other side would react. This order is over. Its collapse gave rise to many hopes. The hope that responsibility in the world would no longer be on two pairs of shoulders, but would be distributed among many. Or the hope that the demise of the Soviet Union would mean that the only remaining superpower, the US, would be able to shape this order on its own in future. These hopes haven’t been realised. An order has broken down and hasn’t been replaced by another.

We currently find ourselves in a phase in which the world is looking for a new order. And this search has been very violent, not only in Eastern Europe but also in the Middle East and in North Africa, where new powers are fighting each other for influence and dominance and the new order hasn’t been established yet. That has led to war and violence. And war and violence produce flows of refugees.

The worst example is Syria. The civil war there is now in its fifth year. 250,000 people have died. 12 million people have lost their homes. 4 million of them have left Syria, mainly for Lebanon and Jordan.

These are countries whose economies aren’t nearly as strong as ours. Countries that will reach their limits far more quickly. Lebanon has 4.5 million inhabitants. At present it is putting up an additional 1.5 million refugees from Syria. If Germany were to take in the same proportion of people, we would have to take in 25 million Syrian refugees.

I have been to Lebanon several times. I have been to the refugee camps. People are living not in containers, not in tents, but under scraps of plastic sheeting. These are people who have lost everything apart from their lives. Many of them have relatives who have been killed. These people are only just getting by. In part because there is an international High Commissioner for Refugees helping them.

But, in the middle of this year, the aid and financial support on which this High Commissioner relies was so limited that food rations for these refugees had to be halved. From 28 dollars a month to 13 dollars a month. You can work out how many calories a day that will buy you.

And that's the real scandal! That with so many rich countries in the world, we aren't in a position to ensure people's survival in the regions near the conflicts. Simply because we haven't put up the necessary money.

We therefore called the G7 countries and other partners together in New York four weeks ago and said that things can't go on this way. We managed to raise 1.8 billion dollars. That will be enough to more or less provide for the refugees in these camps until roughly the end of February.

It's a start. An important start. For the worse the humanitarian situation in these refugee camps becomes, the more likely people are to leave them, to travel on.

That is why improving the humanitarian assistance provided in the region – in the refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan – is a matter of such urgency.

But even so we haven't got to the root of the problem. To tackle the problem at its roots, we have to help resolve the conflict in Syria. Sure, after five years of civil war in which all groupings are entangled with each other, the situation is complicated. Genuinely resolving this conflict has not got any easier.

There is one solution advocated loudly by the newspapers on a daily basis: "Talk to Assad!" And I say, if only you'd listened to us ten years ago, when we were in Syria in 2005. Back then we warned our American friends to be careful about classifying Syria as part of the axis of evil. It's too soon, we said. Let's engage Syria politically. That wasn't possible back then. Back then everyone was saying you couldn't talk to Assad. And now, ten years on, after five years of civil war, after 250,000 deaths, now everybody's saying we've got to talk to Assad?

I am enough of a realist to know that in the end there will of course have to be talks with the Assad regime, there's no doubt about that. However, I want to make one thing clear. In these ten years, nothing has got easier. Now that there are so many families who have lost relatives because of Assad, just talking to Assad is not going to be the solution.

There is a different solution. It will only be achieved with perseverance and patience. And I hope that we have demonstrated these qualities over the past few days.

I think this is where we are now. We, the external actors, have to offer Syria a solution that it cannot ultimately refuse. To do this, we need Russia and the US. You will have seen that in the past four weeks, Russia has decided to put the Ukraine conflict somewhat lower on its agenda, and instead to significantly increase its military involvement in Syria. This has not made things easier. Not least because there is reason to believe that Russia is not primarily targeting the most radical terrorist groups, but simply any opponents of the

Assad regime. It has always been clear to us that we can't resolve the Syrian conflict with Russia and the US alone. But as long as those two were at loggerheads, we couldn't even begin!

That's why we spent the past months trying to persuade the Russians and Americans to take a few steps in each other's direction. As you've seen, steps have been taken. Russia and the US are not close friends, but they seem to have bridged a few divides as regards their policy on Syria.

The next move was to turn our attention to the next, yet more difficult partners – Iran and Saudi Arabia. These are countries that have not maintained diplomatic relations for years, countries whose relations have long been marked by deep enmity. They had to be encouraged to change their spots and to move in each other's direction. That's why we went to Tehran and Riyadh last month. 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 partners and parties vital to a resolution of the Syria conflict sat down at the same table.

Just four weeks ago I didn't think we would get the Russians and Americans together. And four days before last Friday I didn't think we would get Saudi Arabia and Iran to the table. The fact that this succeeded is an important first step!

I am not here to spread optimism. It doesn't come naturally to us sober types in Eastern Westphalia. But it is an important first step and we should not underestimate its significance.

It is not the substantive breakthrough we need – we've got to keep working on that – but it's the start of something which will hopefully help us end the spiral of ever-worsening violence in Syria and give direction to the political process.

Not only because we got everyone around the table, but because, notwithstanding all the different positions, common interests do exist. Everybody at the table agreed that steps had to be taken to remove the canker that is ISIS. Everyone agreed that we need humanitarian access to Syria. Everyone agreed that we should not allow the state of Syria to fail. And that Syria should become a state which offers a genuine home to all religious and ethnic groups.

Ultimately, the most important thing to come out of this meeting was the universal recognition that as vital as it was to continue fighting ISIS with military means, in the end the solution was not going to be a military one. That is why we need a process which will lead to a political solution.

In other words, our next step is to try to identify places where local ceasefires could hold. Perhaps these will become places, regions, in which we can help to restore normal life, to which people can return from the refugee camps. The next step would then be to establish a transitional administration in Syria. That means we have to start the process of talking about potential office bearers, of bringing together individuals from the present Syrian

leadership and the present Syrian opposition to form a government. This should be followed by the drafting of a new constitution. Then elections should be held. Elections in which the Syrians who have fled the country also have a vote.

That's basically the process we envisage. We are now at the very beginning of it, and we hope that it will allow Syria to rise above the dilemma which has stymied it these past years. It is not something we will complete in the next 24 or 48 hours. Nor will we be finished in a few weeks or months. The road ahead is long and stony. And I can't rule out the possibility that some tricky partner or other try to abandon ship.

But it remains my experience as Foreign Minister that once you have actually got all the parties to the table, it is difficult for any one party to get up and leave. We will meet again in Vienna in 14 days time to continue our negotiations on this process.

Nevertheless, I fully understand anyone who has doubts. If you consider the number and the brutality of the conflicts today – not just in Syria, but also in Libya, Iraq, Ukraine and Yemen – you have to ask, what are the talks actually for? Is there any point in talking?

I can understand this question, because in foreign policy, in diplomacy, it's relatively rare for there to be proof that what we do is really worth it. But there is proof sometimes!

10 years ago we started negotiating with Iran on its nuclear programme. It was in 2005 that I first sat down at a table with the Iranian negotiators. The negotiations continued for 10 long years. Sometimes they were suspended. Sometimes they were broken off. And many, many times we were on the brink of a military conflict. What makes me cite this example? Because it shows that you sometimes need strategic patience in order not to let go, that it can be worth taking the arduous political route.

Much the same is true with regard to Ukraine.

How often have our European partners told us: "There is no point. Just stick to sanctions. The rest will sort itself out." We said that political pressure was vital. If it's not enough, it has to be backed up with economic pressure – of course it does. But at the end of the day we have to return to the negotiating table. And as a result we have had a ceasefire for some nine weeks now, which is holding to some degree.

All this is doable if foreign policy does not look the other way, if it is willing to assume responsibility and is not afraid to risk failure some of the time. There is no guarantee of success in foreign policy. But there is a chance of getting things done more often than many people think. There's a chance if people don't start thinking in terms of black or white, if people don't accept the categories of good and evil. Experience shows that responsibility for war is seldom to be found on one side alone. Wars are normally the result of and part of the course of history – and you have to know the history before you start negotiating.

That's all abstract. So let me conclude by telling you how mediation really works. To this end I will take an example of a conflict we haven't resolved yet. A conflict still awaiting a solution. Libya. A country at Europe's gates. A country that hasn't really existed as a state since the death of Gaddafi, a country where state structures have collapsed entirely. Libya, which has become a transit country for refugees on their way to Europe, which is firmly in the hands of organised crime and competing militias.

We had to ask ourselves how could we help the United Nations, which holds the negotiating mandate for Libya, find a solution?

We decided to invite the main parties to the conflict 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.

What am I trying to say with all this? Regardless of whether we talk about the refugee crisis, and how we are managing it here in Germany, or whether we discuss the root causes of the crisis, which are to be found in conflicts like that in Syria, I think we all know that solutions will not be found overnight. We will need stamina. We will need patience. And we must steer clear of panic-mongering, of knee-jerk reactions, and of putting things in too rosy a light.

We need circumspection. We need realism. We need perseverance and pragmatism. And I'd say that those are all Westphalian qualities! They're good to have – in your companies as in foreign politics.

Thank you.

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