Address delivered by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the German-Russian Forum/Potsdam Encounters

2016-05-30

Ladies and gentlemen,

I shall have to disappoint anyone who came here today in the expectation of yet another dose of Kremlin astrology. Nor do I intend to speak exclusively about German-Russian relations. On the contrary, my speech will focus primarily on the West’s relationship with Russia in a conflict-ridden world. What keeps us apart, and what drives us together?

I would like to begin, however, by looking at two different places that are more than 2,000 kilometres apart.

The first place is in the Tiergarten district of Berlin and is the area in front of the Soviet War Memorial. In a month’s time, Germans and Russians will gather together to commemorate Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union 75 years ago. The event is being hosted by a non-partisan voluntary association dedicated to the effort to come to terms with our difficult common history. The Federal Foreign Office is supporting this project, but the chief architects of this bridge of remembrance are committed people from all parts of civil society.

The second place on which I wish to focus is further to the east, in Volgograd. That is where I was invited last year to commemorate the end of the war together with thousands of veterans on the parade square.

My focal point there is Volgograd Middle School No 106, one of our partner schools abroad. Ilya Pondin is a pupil there. He recently won a competition in his school on seeking traces of the Second World War. In his thought-provoking essay on places of remembrance in Volgograd, he clearly emphasised how important it is to come to terms with our own history and that of others.

Why am I telling you this, ladies and gentlemen?

I am telling you this because, for me, these glimpses illustrate how profoundly our common history binds Russians and Germans together. And they also show the enduring strength of

the desire on both sides to examine it in detail – even, and indeed especially, in these difficult times.

Ladies and gentlemen, last year on the parade square in Volgograd, when we remembered the horrors of the Second World War, I was deeply moved.

Not only because the veterans, the representatives of the victims, welcomed the German guest and representative of the perpetrating nation, with warm applause, but also because not a word of accusation was addressed to today's generation of Germans. All the more urgent, however, was the request – no, the admonition – of the survivors that we must exercise our joint responsibility for peace in Europe.

An age of peace – we in Europe thought we were already on the threshold of such an age when the Cold War ended. The 'end of history' was one phrase employed at that time. And in the Charter of Paris the States of Europe declared that the era of confrontation and division had ended. A new era of democracy, peace and unity had been opened.

And indeed, in the 1990s and the following decade, the convergence of the world – of East and West – seemed to have taken on a momentum of its own.

You will also remember that, twelve years ago, we were still talking about the possibility of Russia's accession to

NATO

. Many people, myself included, had pinned great hopes on the modernisation of Russia and on a growing partnership within a common European architecture of peace. One need only re-read Vladimir Putin's address to the Bundestag of 2001 to see these hopes being very clearly mirrored on the Russian side.

And now? Today it is impossible to overlook the emergence of splits, centrifugal forces and counter-movements.

By annexing the Crimea and destabilising eastern Ukraine, a signatory state of the Helsinki Final Act has, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, openly challenged one of the main principles of the

OSCE

, namely the inviolability of borders, and the sovereignty of another State.

The supposed certainties, the hopes we attached to the end of the Cold War, suddenly seem to have lost their impact. But what is appearing in their place? What is our response? How do we treat Russia in these times of crisis?

I believe that a look at the heritage of Willy Brandt’s

Ostpolitik

and his pursuit of détente can help us to find our answers, not least because the starting point of those policies was his very simple observation, which still applies today:

“Russia is our biggest European neighbour”.

Or, as Egon Bahr once said, “America is indispensable. Russia is irremovable”. And this means that lasting security for Europe cannot be achieved without Russia and certainly not against Russia.

Willy Brandt, who helped to break the silence of the Cold War in the 1960s, knew that we need both firm roots in the Western Alliance and receptiveness to channels of communication with Russia.

Then as now, it was not easy to focus foreign policy on both of these fixed points. And there could be no guarantee of success either then or now. Nor does foreign policy depend on self-assured promises but on persistence and stamina. Or, as Willy Brandt put it in a speech to the Protestant Academy in Tutzing, foreign policy is “the illusion-free attempt to solve problems peacefully”.

With regard to Russia, I believe this means that we must be resolute when our common principles are compromised. And at the same time we must strive to relax tension and engage in dialogue.

As you said, Mr Mehren, silence must not be an option. Arguments and disputes are options if there are good reasons for them. And there is more than one such reason at the present time.

At the top of the list must be the annexation of the Crimea and the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine, gross breaches of international law which we can neither ignore nor accept. But how are we to respond?

It has always been clear that there can be no question of recognising the annexation. It is equally clear, and will remain the case, that a military solution to the Ukraine conflict is not an option.

This twofold assessment of the situation, however, fell far short of identifying a third approach. Possible alternatives to military solutions had to be thrashed out. In order to create scope for negotiation where none existed, we opted for political and economic pressure, which was later exercised through sanctions too.

To my mind, sanctions are never the first choice of instrument. The danger that sanctions will lead to counter-sanctions and escalation spirals is all too apparent.

Sanctions are not an end in themselves.

Nor, moreover, are sanctions in any way a means of forcing a partner country into submission. No one can have any interest in a total economic collapse of Russia. That would most certainly not contribute to greater security in Europe.

Sanctions must serve to maintain incentives for a form of political behaviour that is designed to end the underlying conflict.

In the present situation, this means that it remains right and proper, from our point of view, to maintain the pressure but, at the same time – as I said last week – to make intelligent use of the range of available sanctions.

An all-or-nothing approach will not bring us any closer to our objective. At least it never has done before. This is why I proposed that an incentive factor for both sides should be built into the mechanism. What I mean is that there must also be scope to scale down the sanctions regime whenever substantive progress is made.

What I personally find irritating, ladies and gentlemen, is the tone of the debate in the last few weeks and months.

Whenever the Ukraine conflict is discussed, the only question I seem to be hearing is “Are you sure that the sanctions will be extended?” It is not as though that were not a legitimate question. Nevertheless, apart from the fact that I cannot answer it today, what irritates me is that it reflects a failure to understand the yardstick for the success of our efforts.

In many people’s eyes, the yardstick appears not to be whether we make progress towards ending and, as we hope, resolving the conflict but whether European unity is being maintained on the rollover of the sanctions.

I believe this is a matter of confusing the means with the end, a failure to recognise the actual goal, which must surely be progress in the implementation of the Minsk package. Only then, as a second step, do we consider the implications of that progress, or lack of it, for the sanctions.

What of that progress? The situation in eastern Ukraine remains tense. Only last Friday a convoy of the

OSCE

Special Monitoring Mission came under fire. One of the Mission's drones was shot down and destroyed. In the political process too, many questions remain unanswered. All in all, progress in the implementation of the Minsk package, it must be clearly said, is unsatisfactory.

What does this lead us to conclude? Must we recognise that all these efforts are futile?

I refute with equal vigour the claims of those who maintain that Minsk was a mistake and those who say that Minsk was right but has had no consequences.

This is because both groups totally underestimate the potential impact of the conflict.

- It seems to be forgotten today that, little more than a year ago, people were speculating that the hostilities would spill over to Mariupol or that a land bridge to Transnistria would be forcibly established.

- The fact that the conflict over eastern Ukraine is taking place is dangerous enough; however, its confinement to the Donbass region would not have been possible without the Minsk agreement.

- The recurring outbreaks of violence and ceasefire infringements are irresponsible. But the fact that there is a ceasefire, which we repeatedly labour to restore, is due to Minsk.

Nevertheless, even if things remain as they are, I will not gloss over the fact that the security situation as a whole is still unsatisfactory. The progress made in the political process has been totally inadequate. I make no secret of my disappointment.

But is that any reason to abandon our efforts? In my talks in Eastern Europe last week, that question resurfaced: why don't you finally give up? Can't you see that the antagonists don't want to stop?

It almost seems as though some in Europe would regard it as a success if someone finally came out and said that Minsk had failed.

What counts for me, however, are the answers I receive from the parties to the conflict when I ask them, "Do you still want the Minsk package, or are you pursuing other options? It would save me a lot of time and work!"

As long as the parties tell me that Minsk remains the only option, I will continue my efforts. I cannot see into the minds of the protagonists; I can only trust that they mean what they say and that they know we must return to a common European security architecture, to which end we need a resolution of the Ukraine conflict. And if it is to be resolved, we need contributions from both sides.

Sadly, I have to state most emphatically here that these contributions are not forthcoming at the present time. On two of the main subjects of negotiation – security and the law governing local elections in the Donbass region – we are finding that, as soon as instructions are handed down from the political level, obstruction and delays begin. Here you have people who want nothing more to do with political agreements and refuse to second the competent experts; there you have long-established meeting venues being contested and parties not briefing their military leaders.

I will not burden you with details of the day-to-day negotiations. But to be honest, there have been many moments in recent months when the conflicting parties' willingness to reach agreement, which the media are often keen to highlight, has been utterly invisible to the naked eye.

Some things are annoying, and there are many disappointments, but the task is too important and the responsibility too great to allow any relapse into escalating armed conflicts.

That would have more violent and dangerous repercussions for the whole of Europe than was the case two years ago.

That is why I am taking the opportunity, in the presence of so many representatives from Russia, and presumably from Ukraine too, to urge everyone forcefully to embark at last on the path to vigorous implementation of the Minsk agreement.

Ukraine and the ending of the open conflict over Ukraine between Russia and the West will be crucial in determining whether we succeed in returning to a common European security architecture.

For this reason we must devote our strength and creativity to resolving the Ukraine conflict. No effort should be spared.

At the same time, we all know that the security of Europe is no longer threatened exclusively by conflicts in Europe. Iraq, Libya, Syria – the list is long. Never in my lifetime, and certainly not in my seven years as a Foreign Minister, have I experienced such a large number of dangerous conflicts in the neighbourhood of Europe.

We have had to learn, moreover, that there is no longer such a thing as a truly distant conflict. Wars have long since arrived within our borders – in our reception centres, our sports halls and our schools.

And there is a second lesson we have had to learn, namely that there is no single player, no single superpower, that will put an end to such conflicts for us. We need new constellations, alliances of regional and global players, to assume joint responsibility, which does not mean that they must have the same interests.

If we look more closely at the structure of conflicts and the conflicting parties, we become aware that there is no resolution without Russia. But success is sometimes achieved with Russia.

One example is the Iran agreement. Following negotiations which I followed for more than ten years and which were on the brink of collapse on more than one occasion, I know how valuable cooperation with Russia was in ending that conflict.

It was this experience that finally brought us to Vienna last November, after five years and 300,000 deaths, to seek ways of ending the bloody war in Syria. Fully aware that the United States and Russia alone could not end the conflict, we nevertheless tried to persuade them to cooperate in Syria.

We did so because the fact is that all peace efforts will be in vain as long as there is confrontation between the United States and Russia in Syria. Not until that persuasion worked did we start to take Syria's regional neighbours on board, countries with such divergent interests as those of Saudi Arabia and Turkey or Qatar and Iran. All of that does not guarantee success or even progress in the negotiations. But without that constellation there would have been no agreement on a ceasefire and humanitarian access. Conditions remain far from satisfactory; all the same, humanitarian aid is now reaching 800,000 people who had previously been entirely cut off. And in Amman, US and Russian military personnel are cooperating more closely to maintain and extend the ceasefire than in any other conflict.

Let us hope that we succeed together in bringing the representatives of the regime and the opposition to the next round of negotiations in Geneva. The withdrawal of the chief negotiator for the opposition need not be an obstacle to the resumption of the talks.

What applies to Syria does not yet apply to the same extent to Libya, but a solution there is no less urgent if the entire Maghreb is not to be sucked into the vortex of the crumbling Libyan state and the accompanying radicalisation. On Whit Monday we held our most recent meeting with Russia, the United States, some European representatives and Libya's Arab neighbours.

In this case, the process is still in its infancy. Yes, we have a Government of National Accord. Yes, it has now begun its advance from Tunis to Tripoli. It will not win power in Libya, however, unless we bridge the gulf that divides the two rival power bases in Tobruk and Tripoli and threatens to split the country.

We need the influence of Egypt and, once again, of Russia, to persuade Tobruk, the President of the House of Representatives there and the country's strong man, General Haftar, to toe the line.

We all recall 2011 and the global controversy regarding military intervention. Many were sceptical and voiced their doubts, as I did. It was, unfortunately, to be feared that eliminating an autocrat would not create a new Libya – certainly not if no precautions were taken to preserve and build state structures. Now Libya's statehood has been completely eroded, and the weapons from Gaddafi's arms depots are flooding the whole of North Africa.

Russia co-sponsored the Security Council resolution of that time but was sharply critical of intervention. I hope that, five years later and in a dangerous global environment, we can enlist everyone, including Russia, to curb the collapse of Libya in the first instance and jointly seek ways to end the conflict.

As if Iraq, Syria and Libya were not enough in the way of live conflicts, one of the frozen conflicts is rearing its head again – to the surprise of most observers. Not many people other than connoisseurs of foreign affairs were familiar with the name of Nagorno-Karabakh, but events of recent weeks have reminded us of it. Allowing conflicts to freeze is seldom, if ever, a solution – not in Transnistria, not in Abkhazia and, of course, not in Nagorno-Karabakh either, where efforts to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan have been going on for 20 years. These areas, too, are part of Europe's neighbourhood, being in a region separated from Europe only by the Black Sea.

Our world, whether considered from near or far, has an uncomfortable feel to it. And the temptation is to close our eyes to the images that are beamed into our living rooms every evening.

In these times it is doubly difficult to take responsibility, especially as regards our immediate neighbourhood.

The dream of security and peace in an area stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok seems more distant than it has been for many a year. But ignoring and dodging the issues simply does not help, let alone change anything.

If everyone hides away and only discouragement and despair govern our thinking in the field of foreign policy, dangers are likely to become more acute.

That is why – apparently in the face of all reason but actually after very careful consideration – we decided to take over the chairmanship of the

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in this very year and in this global environment.

It is not as if we did so because the

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was a powerful organisation with a strong arm that could adjust the wheels of history and make them run more smoothly.

No one can do that at the present time, least of all an organisation such as the

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that acts by consensus and requires unanimity for each of its decisions.

But it is the institution in which the spirit of Helsinki is still embodied. Apart from the Council of the Baltic Sea States, it is ultimately the only European institution in which the

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countries, Russia and the other eastern neighbours of the

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are all still represented.

My aim, in this exceptional situation, is to preserve at least a minimum scope for dialogue. I am not naively overestimating our potential – quite the reverse. It is precisely because the realisation of those great dreams is not on the current agenda that we need forums in which we can highlight the narrowed bounds of the possible, for the reduction of our freedom of action does not make that action any less necessary.

And with these modest means we are currently guiding the monitoring mission in eastern Ukraine though the

OSCE

, drafting proposals for the preparation of local elections there and working on measures to improve the security situation.

And since I began with Nagorno-Karabakh, another conflict that has yet to be resolved, I should say that, through the

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and cooperation with Russia, the escalation of the past few weeks has at least been checked. I shall shortly be going there to see the situation for myself, and then I hope that, through the

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and the Minsk Group, we can again engage the neighbouring countries of Armenia and Azerbaijan in talks on permanent political solutions.

I can sense that one or other of you might be saying, ‘Why is he talking about Russia but focusing on Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh? Is he stressing the importance of Russia in these contexts so as to divert our attention from Ukraine and Russian domestic policy?’

That is roughly the constant tenor of the debate in Germany. But that is not my intention. On the contrary, my purpose is simply to call to mind that it is not a matter of one single problem that awaits a solution or of one single principle being disputed. In other words, as a Foreign Minister I cannot simply select one issue – be it Syria or Libya or Nagorno-Karabakh or Ukraine – and describe the role of Russia and relations between the West and Russia on the basis of that one issue.

Accordingly, it is not a matter of playing down what we criticise or reject in these numerous links with Russia. Nothing can play down the accusation of having violated international law by annexing the Crimea. My criticism of Russia’s role in the Ukraine conflict still stands. As does my criticism of government-sponsored illiberal nationalism and restriction of the freedom of civil society.

And when a member of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation staff is arrested, we find it just as unacceptable as when the Hansebüro in Kaliningrad is classed as a foreign agent; the Hansebüro is an institution of the federal state of Schleswig-Holstein which devotes itself to activities such as youth work.

And I have been somewhat flabbergasted by the activities of public institutions, including the Foreign Ministry and embassies, in connection with the case of Lisa F.

I could add to this list. These and other cases stand for the things that divide us in our understanding of democracy and cooperative partnership.

At the same time – and so many people find this hard to grasp – Russia and Europe need each other.

Following a natural inclination to respond to disappointments and insults by pulling down the shutters may not always be the wisest thing for next-door neighbours to do in everyday life, but it can be done without seriously harming anyone else.

In a complex world, however, with a tight web of foreign relations in which we encounter each other in various conflicts with varying interests, those shutters cannot be pulled down without harming other parties.

And what is true in general terms is also true of

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, in my view.

Yes, the security landscape has changed. Some may have overstated these changes as a return to the Cold War, which they are not. But I would also caution anyone against denial of these changes. Anyone who seeks to preserve any credibility must recognise that principles underlying the European security architecture have been challenged, and not only by the forcible redrawing of borders.

Even more concerns were raised by the accompanying Russian explanation that the annexation of the Crimea and the support given to the separatists were necessary to protect Russian-speaking minorities outside Russia. What that is triggering in countries like Estonia and Latvia, where Russian-speaking minorities account for almost a third of the respective populations, needs no further elucidation. The internal crisis that the Donbass separatists have provoked in Ukraine would threaten the very existence of those two small Baltic States.

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had to respond to that.

It did so with the reassurance measures, as they are known, in which we are participating and with the implementation of the decisions taken at the

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summit in Wales.

What I have opposed from the outset, however, is a relapse into a

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philosophy that is wholly and entirely confined to strengthening military capabilities.

Scarcely anyone knows that, when the Ukraine conflict began, not only was the

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-Russia Council suspended, but all transparency arrangements, including the mutual provision of information on troop manoeuvres, as well as the ‘red phone’ linking the two military high commands, were also discontinued.

It must be borne in mind that these arrangements dated from the Cold War era and that their only purpose was to minimise the risks that might arise from a lack of information from one side and the consequent misunderstandings and overreaction on the other side.

It took a great deal of effort to convince our

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allies that the resumption of direct military contacts was not a unilateral concession to Russia but was in our own interests too.

Even more difficult is the issue of the

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-Russia Council, the political arm of the

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-Russian dialogue. In this case even more fundamental reservations were expressed. At the December meeting of the

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Council, my arguments for reactivation were still being met with bitter reproaches and opposition on the part of many

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Foreign Ministers. But in this case too, I was asking where we should conduct our political wrangling if not in the

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-Russia Council. There now seems to be a growing realisation that we need such a body, and on 20 April the

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-Russia Council held its first meeting at ambassadorial level. And only last week, a majority of the

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allies backed our proposal for another meeting with Russia in the

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-Russia Council before the

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summit and also for briefing the Russian side on which decisions were on the agenda and which were not.

No one need tell me how difficult the talks with Russia are at the present time. The twelve Normandy-format meetings of foreign ministers on Ukraine are adequate evidence. None the less, it remains my view that, particularly when differences come to a head and stances harden, particularly when it is not yet clear whether an escalating crisis has peaked, direct contact is indispensable. And fruitless talks are no evidence that a dialogue

per se

is superfluous.

Even though it is a poor comparison in every respect, we negotiated with Iran for ten years, and many of those sessions were fruitless, but – as John Kerry says – “We avoided a war”.

I do not mean to suggest that it will take ten years to improve relations with Russia – heaven forbid! All I am saying is that we need forms of dialogue if we are to dispel a doomsday mood in German-Russian relations and not simply cast ourselves on either side as the victims of accusations and assumptions but openly and vigorously debate our differing perceptions of reality. The idea is not to paper over the disruptive factors or sweep controversial matters under the carpet. Only if we are clear with one another about the gulfs that divide us can we set about bridging them.

So much for politics.

At a time when political rifts are conspicuous and deep, interpersonal ties are all the more vital. We need to counteract the estrangement that threatens to divide our societies.

· To that end, I have agreed with my Russian counterpart that we will launch a German-Russian year of youth exchanges this summer.

· We intend to expand cooperation between German and Russian universities.

· And, to enhance our understanding of Russia, we will inaugurate a new research institute in Berlin this year: the Centre for East European and International Studies.

It is right and important to maintain all these ties – but we do depend on Russians actually making use of them.

The economy also plays an prominent role in creating channels of dialogue.

Granted, it is not as if good economic relations automatically led to good political relations. That seems to have been an illusion, or at least a hope, nurtured in respect of this and other international relationships and not borne out by experience. These things do not happen automatically.

None the less, the ties that grow between businesses are needed, as they do help significantly to interconnect countries and their societies. I make use of them myself, in regular meetings with representatives of the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations and its Russian partners.

We needs contacts like these; we need experiments and forums – particularly now. We need the Potsdam Encounters, the German-Russian Forum, a Petersburg dialogue – forums which, rather than shy away from the difficulties of the present time, are driven by the prospect of a brighter future for German-Russian relations.

A future without conflicts is not one of the available options, and it would be naive to hope for that – whether in politics or in normal life.

But the idea that we might regenerate the trust which has been destroyed is a realistic hope, I believe, if both sides work towards that goal. Thank you very much.

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