“We can sense that nothing is irreversible”

2017-01-27

The outgoing Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in an interview with the Süddeutsche Zeitung (interview published on 27 January 2017).

The outgoing Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in an interview with the Süddeutsche Zeitung (interview published on 27 January 2017).

***

Minister, a man whom you called a “preacher of hate” is now President of the United States. Did you have to call him that?

Notwithstanding my long years in politics and my experience of many campaigns, I was appalled by this American election campaign. And I don’t seem to have been the only one. An African head of state asked me quite openly, referring to the campaign, “Mr Steinmeier”, he said, “is that your idea of the democracy you seek to convince us of?” And indeed, never before have we seen such a polarisation in US domestic politics, and nobody, not even Donald Trump, can deny that as a candidate he played a considerable role in that. We have to hope that the President will act differently from the candidate. It’s not just nuances that are in contention, but fundamental, defining standards, such as our position on torture.

You can’t rely on that.

He’s only just been inaugurated. His inaugural address did not reveal as much about his chosen course as we had hoped. The first press conference showed that he has not yet laid his campaign persona to rest. The battle with the media could go on for a while. However, the first statements by his ministerial appointees sound far more constructive. But we cannot yet tell which of the announced changes will be made, and what they will mean for Germany. The only thing that is certain is that we are entering a phase of uncertainty. I hope that we will find individuals on the other side of the Atlantic who share our conviction that transatlantic relations are the foundation of the Western world. This foundation is only strong if it is maintained and supported by both sides.

But the speech is a first tough message. Doesn’t it worry you?

If I wasn’t worried, I wouldn't be talking about it. People are concerned, not just here, but also in the US. However, I would caution against too much alarm. “America First” is first and

foremost a message to his own voters. We are still awaiting a sign that Trump wants to unite the country as a whole behind him. “America First” hopefully does not mean that the US will disengage from international responsibility. I hope that Trump and his advisers come to realise that even a great country like the US needs partners and friends in the world.

The trend towards nationalisation and a denial of complexity can be seen everywhere. The message is clear: We’re better off alone. How can you respond to that?

By explaining more. We’re living a paradox. The world is getting smaller. We have managed to reduce poverty, improve health and education, and raise living standards around the globe. But all this is apparently belied by the images of war, plight and suffering that are published every day. Both narratives are part of a complex reality. Disconnected from one another, these narratives and news of crises and disasters are sweeping over us in an ever faster torrent. Many people are overwhelmed by this flood. The speed with which old certainties are disappearing, without being replaced by new certainties, makes people fearful of what they are losing and worried about their identity. This creates fertile ground for populist movements.

The analysis may be pertinent, but it doesn’t help us ward off nationalists and those with simplistic slogans.

Politicians have the job of explaining that the answers cannot become simpler when the problems are becoming ever more complex. This requires people to have trust in democratic institutions. We can only keep these institutions strong if we refuse to enter into some fantasy world where the distinction between truth and lies is being stealthily eroded. Democracy is the bed rock on which we can debate all controversial issues. We should argue about what to do and how – but with respect for each other, without poisonous lies and comments that defame and undermine the other’s legitimacy. We should not however despair. For where and when did populism ever reign successfully? Where are its achievements?

Trump has expressed great scepticism as regards the

EU

. How do you want to counter that?

We must above all find out what has sparked the new US President’s criticism of Europe. I don’t naively hope to be able to explain to him in detail how the European Union grew from the ruins of World War II. But the fact that the US will not benefit if Europe is weakened should get through. It cannot be in the interest of the US for other

EU

member states to follow the UK’s lead.

The US President has specified certain shortcomings, including the Europeans' failure to contribute sufficiently to their own security. Is he right?

The call for Europe to contribute more to international security is nothing new. Europe has not ignored it, but has responded long since. This was set out at the Warsaw

NATO

Summit. The corner has been turned, in Germany too. Besides, security policy is more than military spending. Conflict prevention and defusing conflicts are part of it, as is active mediation and endeavouring to restore peace. I cannot recall any time in the past when Germany has done more to solve crises and end conflicts than today.

And yet Europe looks on helplessly.

Would the nuclear deal with Iran have been reached without Europe? Definitely not! And without the agreement, the region would have headed towards war with Iran. But in diplomacy, there are no full stops, only commas. Solutions are rarely conclusive. Iran still has to show that it is not only prepared to refrain from developing nuclear weapons, but also willing to play a constructive role in the wider conflict-ridden region. This would involve improving relations with Saudi Arabia, which feels threatened by Iran's hegemonic aspirations. There, too, Europe can and must help.

If he keeps his word, Trump will revoke precisely that nuclear agreement. How dangerous would that be?

Terminating the agreement would let Iran out of its commitments. I don't understand why that should be in America's or Israel's interest. Israel's worries about Iran's growing influence in the region I understand full well. But letting Iran resume work on developing nuclear weapons is hardly going to diminish Israeli fears.

Preventing something even worse from happening – that also applies to the second major conflict during your term in office, the war in Ukraine. Why can't more be done?

There is no question about who is responsible for the Ukraine conflict. It is Russia who has to answer for the illegal annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine. However, we have not stood idly by. We stopped the troubles in eastern Ukraine from becoming a military conflagration consuming the entire country and inflaming the region – with dangerous consequences for Europe as a whole. The conflict has not been stopped, but the Minsk agreement has contained it. The speed with which the agreement is being implemented is often frustratingly slow. But I cannot advise giving up in frustration and disappointment. The conflict could become very violent again more quickly than we imagine today.

You repeatedly stated that there could be no military solution for Syria. At the moment it looks like you are being proven wrong. What has happened?

Not even Russia believes that there is a military solution for Syria. It is my impression that Moscow is well aware of the fragility of the ceasefire and its limited scope.

Nonetheless, Russia has almost won on the battlefield.

Russia's military operations have of course helped bring about the fall of Aleppo and have assisted the Assad regime. But that is far from being a solution for Syria. Even Russia and Turkey know that the conflict can only be settled if all actors involved in the war from the start are at the table. The Turkish-Russian efforts in Astana will remain no more than an intermediate step. Both parties will want to share responsibility for a political settlement between more shoulders; they will thus have an interest in returning the process to the

UN

.

You're still a professional optimist. In truth, the West has achieved nothing in Syria. What does this mean for the world?

I don't want to spread false cheer. Above all, Syria has illustrated the Security Council's inability to act. The question is where and when did things start to go wrong. In my opinion, the Syria crisis has been a catalogue of missed chances from day one.

What chances?

The first chances were missed long before the civil war erupted. I was truly not an Assad sympathiser, but I thought it was necessary to point the young President on the path towards cooperation with the West. In pursuit of this aim, I also travelled to Damascus. That brought forth a flood of criticism from Washington as well as Paris. People preferred to view Syria as part of an imaginary axis of evil. Then, after the civil war had started, many people found Kofi Annan's proposed plan unacceptable because it did not envisage an immediate end to Assad's reign. With a bit more realism the first two conferences on Syria would not have been doomed to failure.

Do you not have to conclude that Putin has got the world he wanted? Soldiers, arms and armies are major currencies once again.

Russia's high stakes game in Syria was no doubt partly driven by the desire to rebut its provocative categorisation by the United States as a regional power. The gambit seems to have succeeded, at least from Russia's point of view – it is now taken seriously as a military

force and as a political actor. That might satisfy many Russians in the short term. However, Russia shouldn’t deceive itself. No path leads back to the old world of Yalta.

Why not?

Russia cannot find partners solely on the basis of its regained military strength. Finding partners through political channels will remain a matter of necessity to Moscow if it wants to play an influential role in the international community.

Why is the idea of an outward-looking liberal democracy currently not attractive to so many countries such as Russia, China, Turkey and the US?

I hope you are wrong, at least in the medium term. At present, there is a widespread naive belief that authoritarian leaders are quicker and better at taking decisions in an increasingly complex world. We democrats must prove time and again that that is simply not true. Our country is a good example. Germany has certainly not always done the right thing. But when faced with great economic challenges, we have found the strength to adapt and change. Without laying the blame at anyone else’s door.

Why is that important?

Democracy needs experiences like that. It needs to be able to deal with serious, even existential threats. And it has to explain that national solutions are no longer available for some problems, especially when it comes to the major challenges of our times, such as poverty and inequality, as well as trade and commerce, the climate and the environment. Solutions can perhaps be thwarted by a country acting alone, but any country that wants to solve these problems needs partners. Even authoritarian rulers will be forced to come to this conclusion.

Since the financial crisis in 2008, more and more people have questioned the existence of the

EU

– a trend that led to the Brexit vote in the UK referendum. How can this momentum be halted?

I am most firmly convinced that Europe has not outlived its purpose as a project for peace, freedom and prosperity. Europe is our future. Europe has a future. Nowhere else is it as clear that partnership and cooperation are not zero-sum games, but strategies that benefit all parties involved. A space of wondrous diversity, unknown tolerance and peaceful coexistence has emerged on and from the ruins of a war that almost destroyed Europe. We can be proud of this space. It is an example to the world.

The new nationalists call for a simpler world for Europe. Why not have a large free trade zone for everyone – but no more than that? We've managed that with Canada, too.

Until a few days ago, I would, with the best will in the world, never have imagined that a French and a Chinese President would have to expound the benefits of an open world and free trade to their new US counterpart. The European single market, with its 500 million well-to-do and demanding consumers is much more than a free trade zone. It is our strongest trade-policy argument on the international stage. It would be a grotesque mistake to give up what we have achieved in almost 60 years of growth and progress in the

EU

. Free trade zones with other states and regions are well and good, but they always leave scope for indirect trade barriers and dumping. A return to that level would be a wrong turn for Europe.

How much nation state can the

EU

cope with? And how much does it need to survive?

Identities will always be forged in the national sphere, in people's own languages, with their own customs and history. What is crucial, however, is that national identities are used to provide inner meaning, and not to distance one group from another. When patriotism becomes nationalism, that's serious, that's dangerous. We can sense that nothing is irreversible and that peace, even in Europe, must be constantly reasserted and defended.

You will arrive in Schloss Bellevue with your perfected diplomatic turn of phrase. Conciliatory. Balanced. But that's not the way to give definitive, stirring speeches. Will you have to reinvent yourself?

Just so you don't forget – you started this interview by criticising me for a lack of diplomacy! But seriously, do you want me to repeat the ritualised promise of every presidential candidate, that I will speak uncomfortable truths? The potential for speaking uncomfortable truths is embedded in the constitutional description of the Federal President's role. A president should not be too liberal in making use of this privilege, but should use it wisely if he wants to be heard. Public oratory is not the only instrument available. At times when the world order is changing, in historic periods of transition, with all the crises and uncertainties these bring, we need to position ourselves with consideration, to reflect jointly with others, and to define what is important to us – orientation is required.

Interview conducted by Stefan Braun and Stefan Kornelius

Overview "Newsroom"

Source : https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/170127-bm-sz-de-287562