Speech by Foreign Minister Westerwelle at the conference marking the 20th anniversary of the German-Russian Forum

2013-05-15

– Translation of advance text –

***

Mr Lavrov, my friend Sergey,

Mr von Studnitz,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to be able to be here in the rotunda, the jewel in the crown of the Altes Museum, to celebrate with you the 20th anniversary of the German-Russian Forum.

The treasures of Antiquity which surround us remind us of our shared cultural roots. Just like the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, the Altes Museum was the fruit of the Humboldtian ideal of a seat of learning that was open to the public. Wilhelm von Humboldt realized that the people’s education, freedom and sense of responsibility needed to be supported in the interest of the state.

Getting to know one another, learning from one another and together learning something new is also the backbone of the German-Russian Forum. It was Alexandra Gräfin Lambsdorff who, twenty years ago, took the initiative to set up this key civil society forum.

Today, twenty years on, the contribution made by the German-Russian Forum to relations between our countries cannot be overestimated. You have built bridges and prepared the way – not just for politics and businesses. You bring together young people and other sections of society, young potentials, journalists and create a platform for exchanging views on important social and cultural issues.

Intensive exchange between different players in society is the best way to increase understanding, trust and consideration.

There is more to ensuring good relations between countries than good relations between governments. Friendship between people is the basis for good relations between countries. Political action encompasses more than what government does. It also takes in the whole spectrum of voluntary work undertaken by people in Germany and Russia. Without this commitment, our societies would be worse off. Promoting this commitment and not hampering it should be our common goal.

A vibrant civil society is more able to adapt to global change.

In a networked world, civil societies are active at regional, national and international level, just like governments and businesses.

Civil society is not confined by national borders.

The German-Russian Forum itself is a good example of transnational efforts.

However, the restrictions imposed on Russian NGOs now anchored in law impede their work considerably.

The German Government has made that clear to its Russian partners.

Germany and Russia are holding an open dialogue in a spirit of partnership. Our relations can weather differences of opinion. But we do not define our relationship by our differences.

What makes German-Russian relations special is what we share: our shared history, our shared culture, shared interests and also shared challenges. In our world of change, we will only thrive if we maintain close networks. For Germany as a major exporter, these networks are especially important.

The partnership with Russia is of strategic interest to Germany.

Russia and Germany can help ensure Europe becomes a continent with close social and economic networks. The ultimate vision is a huge economic area stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok. For some time now, this has been a vision, not an illusion.

Economic exchange will develop all the more strongly if the framework conditions for it are good. These are, first and foremost, the rule of law and transparent and consistent behaviour on the part of the authorities. I am pleased that German and Russian experts engage in regular exchange through our legal cooperation.

Promoting good investment conditions and strong civil society are not contradictory goals; they are two sides of the same coin. The principles of the Council of Europe, to which Germany and Russia have subscribed, form the foundation. These principles express a European consciousness, a pan-European identity.

Today, Russia’s economic links with Europe are closer than ever before. Last year, the volume of our bilateral trade reached a record high of more than 80 billion euros.

Russia is endeavouring to further diversify its economy. German SMEs can help Russia here. It is such businesses that combine the vitality and innovative power of a society with a country’s economic substance. A healthy SME sector is a major advantage on the global stage. Strong middle classes form the backbone of society.

That is why Sergey Lavrov and I have agreed to make the middle classes a topic in German-Russian cooperation. I am pleased that the German-Russian Forum, together with the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations and Russian partners, held the first German-Russian conference on this important topic just a few weeks ago.

Freedom to travel is part and parcel of a social and economic European area. Germany is committed to the long-term goal of visa-free travel in Europe. I will continue to work for progress in negotiations. I am personally convinced that this is vital.

The challenges of our time cannot be mastered without and certainly not against a huge nation like Russia, only together with it.

Trilateral cooperation between Russia, Poland and Germany plays an important role in confidence-building. Just last week, Sergey Lavrov and myself met with Radoslaw Sikorski in Warsaw. In the long term, this cooperation can serve as a core for broader European cooperation without artificial dividing lines.

We work closely together on key international questions.

In the E3+3, we are pulling in the same direction to prevent Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.

In Afghanistan, with regard to North Korea and in Mali, we share the same goal, namely that of combating international terrorism and preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

In the sphere of security policy, trust is of course a sine qua non for intensified cooperation. Trust is born of transparency. That is why in the

NATO

-Russia Council we advocate more transparency and reliability in military exercises. This also holds true for the difficult question of missile defence.

Turning to the Syria question, we had a different approach from the very outset on how to deal with the regime in Damascus. Despite the differences of opinion, our dialogue continued. That was always very important to me.

I thus very much welcome the agreement between the United States and Russia to hold an international conference on Syria. This can be an important step in building the foundations for a political solution to the conflict in Syria. It is crucial that all parties to the conflict accept a political process. The joint proposal presented by the United States and Russia is a clear signal to all to end the violence.

The potential inherent in cooperation with Russia remains huge. I would like to thank the German-Russian Forum for the important work it has performed.

Focusing on the strategic opportunities inherent in cooperation with Russia does not mean that we can’t engage in a frank and sometimes critical dialogue. What we need now is more openness and exchange, not less.

Overview "Newsroom"

Source : https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/130515-bm-forum-255916