Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the 5th Berlin Foreign Policy Forum

2015-11-10

Members of the German Bundestag,

Excellencies,

Esteemed colleagues,

Jean Asselborn,

Jan Hamáček,

Honoured guests from around the world,

Thank you, Mr Paulsen, for the Körber Foundation’s support in organising this important Policy Forum together with my ministry for the 5th time running. As usual, there’s no shortage of topics this year. The European Union is undergoing its greatest test in the sixty-year history of European integration. And in the process, the boundaries between home and abroad, between domestic and foreign policy, are blurring more obviously than ever before. The tests that the

EU

has to pass are tests for our internal cohesion and for our ability to respond effectively on the world stage.

This spring and summer, it was the crisis in Greece that kept us on the edge of our seats. Many people felt this was the greatest test Europe had ever faced. But that feeling didn’t last long. Only a few months later, we’re facing a far greater task still. More people around the world have been forced to flee their homes than ever recorded by the United Nations. And the question as to how we here in Europe should deal with those seeking refuge touches on the essence that makes our European community what it is – our solidarity and humanity.

Euro crisis and refugee crisis – two issues which lead us to one conclusion: Europe is at a crossroads. One road takes us back to a continent defined by a logic of barriers and national egoisms. The other to a continent of cohesion and joint action. Jean, yesterday you warned us in an interview – not without reason – that Europe was in danger of unravelling at this

crossroads. And you quite rightly said that what we need is not less but more Europe – especially now in this crisis.

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What does that mean in practice? Firstly, it means we must agree on where and how we receive those seeking protection here on our continent. The right to asylum is not only a fundamental right in Germany – it's also a fundamental European value. It cannot be that four or five member states take in 90% of the refugees on their own – at least that doesn't accord with my understanding of solidarity. What we need is a permanent mechanism to distribute those seeking refuge fairly across Europe.

Secondly, there can be no common asylum and migration policy unless we clearly agree on the relationship between internal borders and external borders. If I may remind you, when we set up the Schengen system, our philosophy was that, if we did away with Europe's internal borders, with the barriers that I and many of you remember from our younger days, we would have to make up for that by working together to effectively secure our external borders. That means that in this critical situation we must give Frontex the resources it needs. In addition, we must instigate a substantive discussion with our European colleagues on the capabilities and competences Frontex needs, now and in the longer term. Because, thirdly, I think we need a political discussion right now, one that looks beyond the present acute crisis, on how to create a joint European border protection agency – even if this debate will raise many difficult issues.

There is no other way to ultimately regain political control over access to Europe. Let me put it another way. It's easy to speak of "Fortress Europe". However, our aim is not to shut others out, but to restore order at the external borders so that we can guarantee the freedom and open borders of Schengen internally. By the way, I also think that if we go down this road, it will be easier for those who are still hesitating to agree to share the burden more fairly within Europe.

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All of this is important. But ultimately it's just dealing with the symptoms. It is far more important for us to tackle the causes where they arise, where war and violence force people to flee, above all in the arc of crisis from Libya to Afghanistan.

In Syria, after five years of civil war and more than 250,000 deaths, first steps are finally being taken to wrangle out a solution. Let me be clear. There are no grounds for optimism, let alone euphoria. But three weeks ago I was in Tehran and Riyadh, and even then what we have now achieved seemed a distant dream. In Vienna, the Friday before last, we managed to bring all the international actors needed for a solution to the table for the first time ever. For one, the US and Russia were there, even though they had threatened to drift further apart

following Russia's military intervention in Syria. But above all, the rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia were also at the table.

This shows that it is at least worth trying seriously to break the spiral of ever escalating violence and chaos. Of course, the meeting won't bring peace in Syria tomorrow. But some understandings were reached on how to proceed with a view to de-escalating the conflict in part, towards establishing local ceasefires and towards political agreements on a transitional administration. The next meeting has already been planned. Of course these are early days yet. But hopefully this will be the start of an effective process, which will finally manage to subdue the cynical bluster of proxy rivalries.

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This will require stamina and persistence – as always in diplomacy. But there are examples of persistence paying off. The first is Iran. After more than ten years of negotiating, or rather wrestling for a solution, during which we were repeatedly on the brink of war, this summer we finally concluded an agreement with Iran that not only prevents the country from gaining access to nuclear weapons, but also offers Iran the chance to abandon its destructive attitude in Middle Eastern politics and to adopt a new constructive role in the region. Whether it will do so remains to be seen, not least in the talks on Syria.

A second example of the rewards of persistence is – I remain convinced – Ukraine. Here, too, our stance has been much criticised. Many said we should impose sanctions and leave it at that. But we additionally used the political instruments of diplomacy. And now we can at least say that the ceasefire in eastern Ukraine has more or less held for two full months. On Friday I met with my French, Ukrainian and Russian counterparts again in Berlin. We continued our negotiations on how to secure the ceasefire and implement the other Minsk accords. This is detailed work and often tough-going. I certainly don't think the Minsk Process is perfect, but I do think that only this political process is pointing in the right direction, and that it still needs our active support to ensure that the parties to the conflict stick to it, step by step.

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Mr Paulsen, your survey has shown that Germans are highly interested in foreign policy – and ever more supportive of active German involvement. In this context, you also asked about our review process in the Federal Foreign Office, and whether it was necessary. My answer is yes, definitely. I think the review went well. I would like to thank the Policy Planning Staff and Thomas Bagger for this vital work. Of course we still can't foresee all the crises in this world, but as a result of the review we have established structures in the Federal Foreign Office to ensure that we can respond more quickly and better should a crisis arise. The review has also created forums in which Foreign Office staff entered into dialogue with the German public about our foreign policy.

This dialogue is still important. The Körber Foundation survey, the growing interest in foreign policy and the growing willingness to see Germany play an active role should spur us on. For the people in Germany are today sensing more immediately than ever before what I mentioned earlier – that home no longer exists in isolation from outside influence. The crises and conflicts of this world are not just getting closer. They have arrived – in our living rooms, which are flooded each evening by terrible images from the conflict zones, and yet more tangibly in our neighbourhoods, schools and gyms, where people are taking refuge from war and violence. Thank you very much.

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