Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier during the budget debate in the German Bundestag

2014-06-25

Alois Karl,

Allow me to extend a great thank you to you and the rapporteurs for the candid and friendly consultations of recent weeks and months. Thank you too for the humorous opening to your speech. I have to say I'm not an expert in bikinis but you told us this budget resembles one because it, like a bikini, covers just the bare minimum.

Well, on that note, if this is the bikini-budget, then I do hope, Mr Karl, that as we are about to negotiate the 2015 budget next winter's warm woollen tights will be delivered soon.

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Thank you all very much. Thank you all for the fact that, despite the football world cup, we were able to hold negotiations on plan number five of the budget – between two matches on German television.

I am pleased that, firstly, there is interest in the budget, and secondly, that we are discussing foreign policy seriously here. At the moment, the only thing that many people are thinking about is Brazil and the football and football has little to do with foreign policy – I'll readily admit that – although there are some connections.

After all in football there can be disputes. For example, disputes can arise over whether Greece's penalty last night was justified or not. Disputes can arise over whether that bite on the shoulder did actually break the rules. But why can disputes arise over such things, and why is this relevant to our topic today?

Disputes can arise because there are rules – rules of the game – which, in principle, are accepted and because there is an independent institution which can decide whether something is legitimate or not at the blow of a whistle.

That is something, ladies and gentlemen, which is to an increasing degree lacking within international relations. Even the word relations is practically a euphemism when referring to the developments in the Middle East. We are witnessing the state structures in Syria and Iraq falling apart before our eyes. We're also seeing that in the Sunni-Shia struggle for hegemony

in the Islamic world the daily bloodshed is not letting up and that the huge area between Baghdad and the Mediterranean Sea risks becoming a lawless and anarchic playground for mercenaries, terrorists and criminal clans.

Yet we still have a certain amount of responsibility, even in places where there is no black and white, where it is hard to differentiate between good and evil. A responsibility first of all to review the validity of the old proverb “The enemy of my enemy is my friend”. In Syria, this principle has bred monsters: groups who in the fight against Assad have started to destroy the moderate opposition and are pursuing claims to power with merciless brutality, including beyond the country itself. This in itself shows us that the enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend. This should be the lesson that we learn from this conflict.

The rapid advance of the ISIS groups has come as a surprise to many. We’ve all been following it on television over the past few days. I was in Turkey myself, where I observed the risk this poses to the neighbourhood. I spoke to Kurds in northern Iraq. We must be aware that as serious as the situation is, at the moment it is very difficult to provide help from outside. I think that we simply have to be honest with people. Right now, the solution really needs to come from within Iraq itself.

I was somewhat concerned when I heard the comments made by Maliki today. I think that there will only be a chance for a political solution in Iraq when the political elite in the country becomes willing to form a government which all religions and all regions have a real stake in. Only then will it be possible to break the current connection between ISIS and the many who are disappointed, above all amongst the Sunnis. Only then will it be possible to take the wind out of the ISIS groups’ sails. But that will not be enough. We must try, and we are currently doing so, to impress upon the neighbouring states that the disintegration of Iraq is in absolutely no one’s interest. It would make everything in this region of the Middle East even worse.

Indeed, we also have to be aware that at the end of the day nothing can be achieved without the neighbouring country Iran. This is indeed a taboo which we need to break. Therefore, at the moment – even though we lack the necessary influence in Iraq to put things on the right track, in my view in any case, – we still need to help from our side to neutralise the tremendously explosive force of this conflict, above all with regard to the neighbouring regions.

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Many here have said that the refugee crisis is a refugee crisis due to the number of people forced to become refugees, there is no denying this. Yet it also presents a risk to fragile neighbouring countries such as Lebanon or for instance Jordan. 1.4 million refugees in Jordan alone! If all Syrian refugees were to send their children to Lebanese schools then

there would be more Syrian than Lebanese pupils there. This would overwhelm the schooling system. Of course in reality most of their children are not going to school at all, leading to a situation in which a generation of children from Syrian refugee families is growing up in Lebanon with no education. That is also why it is a good thing, I want to stress this with the Länder in mind too, that together with the Interior Ministers of the Länder, the Federal Interior Minister has decided to take in more Syrian refugees. It is also good that Federal Minister Müller has earmarked an additional 50 million euros for refugees.

Nevertheless I believe that we must do more. Here in comparatively wealthy Europe, we must do more to alleviate their suffering on the ground. That is something which must be reflected in our financial planning, which is to a certain extent the case. Yet this issue concerns not only us but our European partner states too. In a joint letter with Mr de Maizière, I have just encouraged our European partner countries to do as we are, namely to take in substantial contingents of refugees on the basis of a specific scale. I know that 30,000 or 40,000 is not a lot in view of the 1.4 million refugees that Lebanon has already taken in. But if 28 European states did the same then at least the suffering in the region would be significantly alleviated. This is something that we should be prepared to do.

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I came back from Kyiv yesterday. I went to the region again because I think that we are now in a historic and decisive phase. I believe that only those who really get to grips with the conflict and consider its structure will properly appreciate how President Poroshenko has acted, in a situation in which the majority of the population wants something other than a peace plan. Most people want the state to actively combat the separatists in the East. Anyone who scratches under the surface of this conflict may get a sense of the courage it takes in such a situation, as newly elected president, to renounce the alternative of using police and military force in favour of a peace plan which holds out a hand to the very same people in whom there is currently no trust.

That is why, Mr Dehm, I find your performance up here so disgraceful. As in the past, none of us concealed anything. None of us claimed that there was no right-wing faction on the Maidan. None of us maintained that all crimes had been fully investigated. None of us said this. And yet, for goodness sake, you are, once again, conveniently oversimplifying things by declaring the entire political leadership of Ukraine to be fascists. I don’t wish to deny you your opinion, feel free to continue as you are. You won’t find anyone agreeing with you, neither in the German Bundestag or among the public. Let me just say one thing which you should perhaps reflect on: why is it that the separatists are supported by fascists all over Europe? From the Front National to Geert Wilders as well as neo-fascists from Germany to Italy? If you feel that there is fascism there then you must explain why it is in fact Europe’s fascists who are fighting this Ukrainian regime. In this regard I’ll say that what you’re doing here is an act of desperation because, purely and simply, you are unable to come up with a position on

the Ukraine crisis which takes into account the fact that the conflict is actually more complex and difficult to understand than the version of it which you have presented here.

Yesterday in Kyiv we had a long conversation with President Poroshenko. I must quite frankly say that I left Kyiv and drove to the airport thinking that whilst we had not yet managed to achieve a breakthrough, we had made some progress, and that we could help to de-escalate the situation. That is because during our conversation with Poroshenko the news came through that President Putin is willing to revoke the Council of the Federation's approval for intervention. That seemed to be a real détente in the situation as it was a first sign that the worst may be behind us. I started off with this impression. When I landed in Brussels yesterday afternoon, I heard that a helicopter had been shot down, killing nine people.

That goes to show just how fragile the current situation is. It also showed me however that we really have no other option than to try to repeatedly make efforts and to search for options – something which I still consider possible – to achieve a real de-escalation of the situation.

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I also want to sincerely thank you for the significant improvement in the funding for Cultural Relations Policy that this budget provides for. I am pleased that girls and boys from all over the world will be able to learn our damned difficult language, will perhaps go to German schools and will hopefully gain German scholarships.

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I would like to close with a personal message of great importance to me. My predecessor in office and colleague of many years, Guido Westerwelle, is as you know very ill. On behalf of all personnel at the Federal Foreign Office and without a doubt everyone here, I would like to wish Guido Westerwelle all the strength that he needs for the fight against his illness and I hope that he will make a full recovery.

Thank you very much.

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