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OSCE Chairmanship Conference on Tolerance and Diversity

**Speech by OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and Foreign Minister  
Dr. Frank-Walter Steinmeier**

20 October 2016

Federal Foreign Office, Berlin

Ministers, Nikola Poposki, Andrei Galbur,  
Ms Mijatovic  
Mr Link,  
Mr Muiznieks,  
Mr Barenboim,  
Ms Demirkan,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

‘Discrimination and intolerance have never worked before, and won’t work now. “Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it,” the saying goes.’

These are words that a major Canadian newspaper recently used to describe its great concern vis-à-vis the situation here in Europe, and especially in Germany.

What on earth is going on here right now?

On the one hand, we are currently witnessing the incredible willingness on the part of countless Germans to help their fellow human beings, people who have sought refuge here in Germany – from war and violence. They are teaching German, training refugees in their companies, looking after their new neighbours – with openness, a thirst for knowledge and empathy.

However, at the same time, we are also hearing very different sentiments on Germany’s streets and squares. We are witnessing nastiness against anything that is foreign and insults against people with a darker skin colour or foreign appearance, and where those who have different opinions or beliefs are being shouted down with mindless slogans. Isolation is being called for, a return to nationalist policies, and “an end to tolerance” for other cultures and religions. The Internet is being used to issue threats, harass people and stir up fears. And, yes, we are even seeing stones being thrown in Germany. Incendiary devices are being hurled at religious buildings and refugee accommodations.

It seems to me that my country still has a great deal to learn in the search for responses to intolerance, hate and hate speech.

And it is also for this reason that I am delighted that you have all accepted our invitation to discuss the topic of tolerance and diversity with us here today.

I am looking forward to your views, your insights and your experiences and to as enriching a discussion as possible – that is also part and parcel of diversity. After all, I strongly believe that the question as to how we promote tolerance and diversity, but also how we handle growing intolerance, concerns all of us – from Vancouver to Berlin and further to Vladivostok.

The philosopher Rainer Forst emphasises that tolerance requires us to consciously endure and respect especially those ways of life, practices and opinions that we consider to be wrong – up to a point that marks the limits of tolerance. However, this point must, Forst contends, neither be determined by religious norms nor by the “house rules” of the majority of a society, but by principles of justice, especially human rights.

One thing is clear to me personally, which is that we need a framework of principles in order to identify and stake out the limits of tolerance. And, to my mind, this framework stands on firm and tried and tested foundations, namely our Basic Law in Germany and the principle that is the rule of law. These are our fundamental rights, with human dignity at the forefront.

I cannot and will not tolerate actions or attitudes that violate or jeopardise people’s lives, freedom or equality. We must stand up to such behaviour across the board. And this goes for each and every one of us – the rule of law, we who shoulder responsibility as politicians, and also civil society.

This, ladies and gentlemen, has to do with how we coexist within our society.

However, I believe there is also a clear system of principles and values at the international level that regulates our coexistence within the international community. These are the comprehensive bodies of rules of international law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and all of the agreements and treaties to which we have committed ourselves both nationally and internationally.

Moreover, the principles and obligations that we have elaborated in the OSCE for over four decades are an integral part of this system of values.

The OSCE’s security order based on the Helsinki Final Act has made it possible for countries with different political systems and interests to coexist peacefully for decades. This is founded on our shared rules and principles, the principle of non violence and mutual recognition that we are equals and with equal rights.

In international affairs, too, tolerance should not be misunderstood as mere endurance or disinterest. We also need to make a special effort to communicate with people whose opinions we do not share. We must stand up for tolerance also in our capacity as participating States of the OSCE. But at the same time it is important that we must not tolerate any actions that compromise our common principles and threaten our common order.

Back in the 1990s, we created institutions at the OSCE in order to support our mutual efforts to combat intolerance, including the High Commissioner on National Minorities, the Representative on Freedom of the Media and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

And, together with these institutions, we have made the fight against intolerance and discrimination a key focus of our Chairmanship.

This is, ladies and gentlemen, what this conference is all about. And I am looking forward to our discussions.

Before we do that, allow me to make two further points.

Firstly, about the breeding ground of populism and intolerance, and secondly about the role of foreign policy.

There is no doubt in my mind that if we intend to oppose attitudes and actions that we cannot tolerate, then we must watch and listen carefully to establish how and why such attitudes spread.

What are the concerns of the people who are susceptible to the temptations of crude populists?

We can see that monster of nationalism that is rearing its ugly head once more feeds on only one thing: fear. Whether Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Marine Le Pen in France, the AfD in Germany or Donald Trump, these people play on people's fears. They are turning fear into policies.

And what is particularly unsettling is the fact that the rules of political debate appear to be turned on their heads here. Indeed, debate no longer seems to be desirable. People no longer aspire to convince others with facts and arguments. Instead, fears and emotions are played upon that have nothing, literally nothing, to do with facts.

How else can we explain the fact that voters are so vehemently opposed to refugees precisely in regions where scarcely any refugees live? How else can we explain the fact that political solutions or demands are often absent from political demonstrations these days, with demonstrators contenting themselves with mindless slogans and attacks on the so-called establishment instead, be it in the political arena, church or other institutions.

It is enough to drive us to despair. But that won't help us. Complaining about this so-called "post-factual world" won't help us. We must instead devote ourselves to tackling this phenomenon.

We must be steadfast in our arguments against simplifications and twisting of facts. We must come up with better answers for how we can master the great challenges of the present in the long term.

And, ladies and gentlemen – and this is my second point – I believe that foreign policy in particular has a special obligation here.

For if people are afraid of the future,

- if they are afraid that the political leaders are losing control,
- if they feel that they are not sufficiently protected against the risks of globalisation,
- if they are no longer able to cope in the face of an increasingly confusing world with many different conflicts,

Then the call for isolation might appear to be advisable. However, we must be even more passionate and patient when explaining why it is that isolating ourselves from each other is actually not the solution.

And then we must be even better at explaining that we will only be able to find solutions to precisely those problems that worry so many people right now by working together.

What we need on this path is multilateralism, taking responsibility together and a plurality of voices and experiences.

This applies to seeking solutions to crises and conflicts:

This is demonstrated by the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme, which we were able to conclude in 2015 after years of negotiations. It was thanks to the success of an international negotiating team – the US, Russia, China, the UK, France and Germany – that we managed to arrive at a solution here and avoid a war.

And, turning our focus to Ukraine, I would like to say that, even though we are still far from a solution right now, the OSCE in particular continues to bring a measure of stability to the situation in the region through its Special Monitoring Mission.

The fact that we can only get ahead when we work together also applies to the fight for greater justice. I am well aware of the fact that many people feel “abandoned”, that they sense that the promise of greater prosperity driven by globalisation just does not ring true for them. However, if we intend to create a more just world, then we must also work together here. We took an important step in this direction last year with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Agenda is a global pact on the world’s future that sets out concrete objectives. It is the focal point, the point of convergence for our joint actions. It will be the benchmark for our success.

The fact that we can only make progress by working together applies to the great challenges of the 21st century – the climate, water, energy and migration. We are increasingly powerless to address these issues by ourselves and must cooperate with other partners ever more often.

Populism and isolationism are not the answer, nor is pulling up the drawbridge. They are a threat.

- Isolationism poses a threat to our societies – because it stokes intolerance, racism and discrimination.
- Isolationism poses a threat to our economy as it fuels protectionism.

- And isolationism has the potential to wreck our foreign policy because going it alone prevents us from making any progress at all – with the great global challenges of our age.

Let us therefore point to the better solutions – and approach them together by allowing our diversity and the richness of our experiences and traditions to come to the fore, not seeing these as a threat, but as an opportunity.

I am extremely delighted that we now have an opportunity to listen to someone who has taken these words more profoundly to heart than scarcely anyone else: Daniel Barenboim.

Welcome!