

Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the debate in the German Bundestag on Germany's OSCE Chairmanship in 2016

12.11.2015

Mr President,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Please could I ask you to bear with me for a moment while I read you an extract from a very old Federal Foreign Office file. I hope this doesn't make me overrun my allotted time today ... We found a copy of minutes written 40 years ago and I would like to quote from them now: "Following introductory remarks, H. said it was important to allow the spirit of Helsinki to play a greater role in our mutual relations ... [and] despite all the ongoing difficulties, to consolidate what had been achieved and overcome problems."

His interlocutor him gave a brief answer: "Right. We shouldn't throw anything into the Elbe now."

And perhaps you can now guess who this was – yes, it was that native of the city on the Elbe, the great German statesman whose death we are mourning at this time. Forty years ago in Helsinki, in the summer of 1975, Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt did not only meet the person quoted above for the first time (H. stood for Erich Honecker), he also signed the Helsinki Final Act on 1 August on behalf of the Federal Republic of Germany following lengthy negotiations with all sides, including the Soviet Union. The Helsinki Final Act laid the foundation for dialogue and cooperation beyond the rifts of the Cold War. It created a bridge that finally overcame these rifts and led to a new institutional level – the OSCE – 25 years ago in the Charter of Paris, which remains the cornerstone of our security architecture in Europe to this day. Germany will take on the OSCE Chairmanship in 2016 in memory of and in tribute to this great legacy, including Helmut Schmidt's legacy, which Willy Brandt, Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Egon Bahr helped to bring about. And I am certain that not only the Foreign Minister and the German Government, but also the entire House, are aware of the responsibility for peace and for Europe that this role entails.

On the evening before the signature of the Helsinki Final Act, Helmut Schmidt appeared on television. He said: "Here in Helsinki Europe, together with the states of North America, is reaffirming and putting on record a new step towards the stabilisation of peace: This is a road along which we must continue step for step, with patience and perseverance, and without being deterred by set-backs." That was 40 years ago – but doesn't it sound like words of encouragement to those in positions of responsibility today?

After all, we know that we are taking on the OSCE Chairmanship in turbulent times. Twenty-five years after the signature of the Charter of Paris, Europe's security architecture is certainly being put to the test. One of the OSCE's founding states has not merely called one of the most

important principles, namely the inviolability of borders, into question – it has violated this principle. Just a few months ago, heavy fighting was still raging in eastern Ukraine, with regular reports of fatalities and injuries. And with each violation of the ceasefire, with each new provocation and with each death, the fronts became ever more entrenched. At the time, quite a few people called for weapons to be sent to Ukraine to counter Russian aggression, while others said, “What’s the point of diplomatic efforts? They don’t get us anywhere! Stick to sanctions!”

We did not do that. We adhered to the political process and the spirit of Helsinki, despite all the setbacks – and believe me, there were plenty of them!

And now? We are certainly nowhere near satisfied with the situation. For one thing, we are way behind schedule as regards implementing the Minsk agreements. However, the ceasefire has held in eastern Ukraine for a good two months now. People are no longer being killed there every day. On Friday, Laurent Fabius and I met our Ukrainian and Russian counterparts in Berlin. We discussed how we can safeguard the ceasefire and implement the other voluntary commitments in the Minsk Agreement, namely

- better access for humanitarian aid;
- clearing of mines and munition;
- reconstruction of infrastructure;
- and the next steps towards local elections.

Of course, there is no guarantee that these will be successful, but at least we have got so far! And the fact that we have got so far, ladies and gentlemen, is not because of a few foreign ministers. This progress would never have been possible without the OSCE and the courageous women and men in the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine and the Trilateral Contact Group. We would not have achieved anything without them! My dear Lamberto Zannier, we in this House would also like to thank you and the staff of the OSCE most sincerely for this!

The monitoring mission, verification, Contact Group – the example of Ukraine shows that the OSCE provides us with concrete instruments and forums (and Ambassador Ischinger and his expert group have made further suggestions on how these could be extended) that allow us not only to keep the spirit of Helsinki alive, but perhaps even to renew it, even under the completely changed circumstances since the end of the Cold War, in the new types of conflict situations we are experiencing both in Europe and the Middle East. The spirit of Helsinki means cooperation rather than confrontation, dialogue rather than a lack of communication and discourse rather than isolation. In this spirit, we want to strengthen the OSCE’s instruments and discussion forums under our Chairmanship.

During our Chairmanship, we will offer all participating States opportunities for dialogue on the basis of the wide range of topics anchored in the Organization. One key OSCE area plays a special role here, that is, conventional arms control and confidence-building measures.

Trust does not come about on its own, but rather develops through cooperation on very concrete topics. This is the only way to recreate the shared awareness that has been lost – the

awareness of common threats, but also of common interests. The spirit of Helsinki can grow out of this in new, and perhaps even unexpected ways. I deliberately scheduled my visit to the OSCE, that is, to the OSCE Mediterranean Conference in Jordan, at the end of my trip to Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two bitterest enemies in a profoundly troubled region. Why? Because after visiting these two countries and trying to establish common ground among them on Syria, it was important to us to say that our experience in Europe shows that bridges of cooperation are possible across even the deepest of rifts. Of course, we ourselves only realised this painfully late in Europe after centuries of war. But I hope that similar ideas will win through in other conflict regions, particularly the Middle East. And we will work towards this. Ladies and gentlemen, this will also be a task of our OSCE Chairmanship.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my colleagues here that all parliamentary groups in the German Bundestag support Germany's OSCE Chairmanship next year according to the contents of their motions. I will need your help – your ideas, the exchange between parliaments in the OSCE's participating States, and the work of members of parliament in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. As Foreign Minister, I know only too well that our options are limited, particularly in conflict situations, if we do not have equal exchange on both the parliamentary and civil society levels.

There are high expectations of Germany's OSCE Chairmanship. However, in such turbulent times no one can predict what and how much we will achieve. But one thing is certain – because of our own history, we Germans feel a particular commitment to the spirit of Helsinki. And even back then, in the midst of the Cold War, rapprochement began with many small concrete steps. No one could tell where they would lead.

If you will allow me to conclude by quoting once again from the historic minutes of 40 years ago, Honecker complained to Schmidt that far too many people in West Germany talked about “so-called reunification”, although as “sensible people” they both knew there were two sovereign states. “Exactly,” Helmut Schmidt said wisely – and we can imagine the smile on his face, even if it was not recorded for posterity. He asked why the two of them should discuss this as, and I quote, “no one knows how the 20th century will end”.

It is the same for us in the 21st century. We don't know what the future holds, but we know it is open. Let us work with and in the OSCE for a more peaceful future! Thank you very much.