

U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

“German Chairmanship of the OSCE: Priorities and Challenges”

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Testimony of H.E. Frank-Walter Steinmeier

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Chairman Smith,

Co Chairman Wicker,

Distinguished members of the Helsinki Commission,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to address you today as Chairman-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

And it is a particular honor to do this as a German, because we Germans know how much we owe to this institution and to the CSCE process – looking back on the path to détente between East and West, the end of the Cold War and finally the reunification of my country.

The Helsinki Commission, created almost forty years ago, was instrumental in that endeavor.

My country will never forget the unequivocal support of your country, ladies and gentlemen! We will not forget the United States' steadfast commitment to regarding European security as inseparable from its own security. That was the decisive factor in ending the Cold War peacefully!

However, our hopes that the end of the Cold War would herald an era of peace have not come true. The vision of the Charter of Paris, of a Europe “whole and free”, has not yet materialized.

Yet again we find ourselves facing violent crises and conflicts - even on our own continent. Russian aggression in Ukraine has brought the devastation of war right back to the heart of Europe – violating central provisions of international law, the Helsinki Final Act and OSCE commitments.

At the same time, violence has spiked in regions of the Middle East and Northern Africa. Terror, religious radicalism and regional rivalries have led to immeasurable human suffering.

That is particularly true for Syria. I hope that the recent diplomatic initiative for a cessation of hostilities – that is being tirelessly promoted by Secretary Kerry and others – will bring the violence to a halt and pave the way for urgently needed political negotiations.

The brutal conflicts in the Middle East have also reached the European continent. Hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes and are seeking shelter in Europe – many of them in Germany.

We live in turbulent times, ladies and gentlemen. I believe that in the light of these enormous challenges, we should remember the crucial lessons we learned in overcoming the Cold War.

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The first lesson is simple but critical: we are only strong if we stand together. Secretary Kerry just reminded us in Munich that the transatlantic community has faced numerous challenges before. But we stood together to overcome them, and we will continue do so – not only because there is only one common transatlantic security, but also because we are a community of shared values and of shared beliefs.

Another lesson I see is this: we need to make the best possible use of our existing tools to help solve conflicts and to promote peace and security. In fact, we must strengthen these instruments!

The OSCE is one of these tools – a crucial one. With its unique and inclusive membership, its operational capacities and its established formats for dialogue, it is a central pillar of our common security.

To me, strengthening the OSCE and using its full potential as a platform for dialogue is imperative – particularly in these challenging times, with trust at a low ebb.

This is why

“renewing dialogue, rebuilding trust, restoring security”

is the motto we have chosen for our OSCE Chairmanship in 2016.

The dialogue we want to renew is not one that sugarcoats our differences, nor is it dialogue for its own sake – it is dialogue to engage one another substantively, to face our differences and to really effect change.

In the conflict in and around Ukraine, we have condemned Russian violations of international law and of OSCE principles and commitments, and we have exerted political and economic pressure in response.

At the same time, however, we have established formats for dialogue – to avoid further bloodshed and to help find a political solution. I agree with many of you that the results of this – the Minsk agreements – are far from perfect. We are still awaiting the complete implementation of their provisions by all sides. But I remain convinced that the Minsk agreements are still the best chance we have to overcome this conflict!

And the OSCE has been instrumental in bringing that chance about!

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the midst of the Cold War in the 1970s, in the face of the real danger of military confrontation between East and West, we put special emphasis on the implementation of human rights standards in the whole Euro-Atlantic area.

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It is my firm conviction that safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedoms is a crucial and direct contribution to a more stable international system and to comprehensive security.

That is why we will place a special focus on the Human Dimension during our OSCE Chairmanship. I would like to name just a few of our priorities:

Freedom of the media is of particular importance to us. Our societies should be able to communicate freely and without interference from state propaganda.

We also need to intensify our fight against discrimination, racism, xenophobia and intolerance. We need to address it throughout Europe, including in my own country! In Germany, people's overwhelming readiness to help arriving refugees has recently been overshadowed by xenophobic assaults and demonstrations. These are despicable acts that we must not and will not tolerate!

We will also place a special focus on combating Anti-Semitism. I have re-appointed Rabbi Andrew Baker as my Personal Representative on Combating Anti-Semitism and thank him for his valuable work in this regard. We will support the work of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). And we will also host a number of events in Berlin on combating Anti-Semitism, building on the OSCE conferences of 2004 and 2014.

Another emphasis will be on gender equality, as well as on dialogue with civil society.

And finally, the pressing issue of migration should figure more prominently and comprehensively on the OSCE's agenda. There is a lot of expertise that the OSCE can bring to the table: on human rights standards, on best practices in labor migration and on combatting human trafficking. We support the efforts of the Special Representative for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Despite all the differences in the OSCE area, we have to work on real solutions to the crises and challenges we face in these turbulent times.

In the long term, we will need to return to a broader dialogue on European security, and we should adhere to the vision of renewed arms control and more cooperative security in Europe. The OSCE provides a platform for such dialogue, and we should make use of it.

Ladies and gentlemen,

the OSCE is a unique organization. But my hope is that its principles can provide a glimmer of hope to other regions – particularly in the Middle East.

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Let us remember that the road to Helsinki began when the Cold War was at its coldest. At the start of the negotiations, who would have dared to hope that at the end of it, the Berlin Wall would fall?

Of course, you can't transfer a security architecture to another region. But perhaps our experiences can highlight useful principles and processes. And maybe they can encourage the parties in the Middle East to live up to their responsibility and explore new paths to political settlements.

This is a discussion that we started at the OSCE conference in Jordan last year and which we would like to build on.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In 1977, Ambassador Arthur J. Goldberg, Chairman of the US Delegation at the CSCE follow up meeting in Belgrade, held that – and I quote –

“a healing of the divisions in Europe[,] cannot be divorced from progress in humanitarian matters and human rights.

The pursuit of human rights does not put detente in jeopardy. Rather it can strengthen detente, and provide a firmer basis for both security and cooperation.”

It is in this spirit that we will pursue our Chairmanship and hope to make a contribution to peace and stability in the OSCE area in 2016.

Of course, rebuilding trust will not be easy, and there will not be a quick fix in 2016.

But in my view we have no alternative but to make every effort to do so if we want to be able to look future generations in the eye and hold that we did everything possible to return to peace in Europe!

Thank you.