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23rd OSCE Ministerial Council

**Speech by Chairperson-in-Office and Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs
Frank-Walter Steinmeier**

Opening session on 8 December 2016
Hamburg

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the 23rd Ministerial Council of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. It is no coincidence that we are meeting in the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg. More than almost anywhere else in Germany, this city stands for openness, tolerance and diversity. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the people of Hamburg for their hospitality. I hope that the spirit of this city will serve to inspire our talks.

Esteemed colleagues,

Our year at the helm of the OSCE ship is coming to an end. We set off in turbulent times in January – and the seas have not become any calmer since then. On the contrary, they have become even rougher when one thinks of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The crisis mode seems to be the current state of matter in the world.

I firmly believe that we need structures for dialogue and cooperation at turbulent times like these in particular. More than ever, we need the OSCE as a lighthouse to guide our course.

Our aim as OSCE Chair was and is clearly defined. We want to help rebuild lost trust through renewed dialogue in order to restore security between Vancouver and Vladivostok.

To achieve this goal, we used tried and tested methods, but also took new approaches, such as our informal meeting in Potsdam. Our discussions were often heated, but always constructive.

However, the OSCE is not just the Chair, the participating States or Lamberto Zannier's team in the Secretariat. The OSCE family is far more than that. It includes the independent institutions, whose constructive criticism and input guide us every day in implementing our voluntary commitments in the fields of human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law. It includes the field missions, which play a valuable role in providing concrete support that meets the particular needs of individual participating States. And it includes the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, which is very

highly regarded as the democratic backbone of our system, especially as regards election observation.

At the same time, a strong OSCE needs to think beyond the confines of state structures. By this, I mean civil society and academia, which look closely at our day-to-day work. I had a chance to speak with representatives of the Civic Solidarity Platform yesterday. Day in, day out, courageous men and women fight for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in our countries, often under difficult conditions. Thank you very much for your hard work!

I am also thinking of the business sector, which plays a key role in improving connectivity in the OSCE area and beyond. Whether we are talking about local border traffic or Europe-wide infrastructure projects, we need to make use of this potential in order to bring about greater security.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In signing the Helsinki Final Act over 40 years ago, we pledged to uphold the joint principles and undertakings that form the foundation of our cooperation. But this foundation is crumbling. Relativism, a veritable arbitrary interpretation of our principles, is spreading in our ranks. In some cases, we are also seeing indifference when it comes to standing up for and defending our common standards.

Esteemed colleagues, I say here and now that this development is dangerous. And we share responsibility for taking a decisive stand against it.

Sometimes I ask myself what our continent would look like without the OSCE. For example, what would this mean for the people in conflict regions in our common area? No matter how different the individual conflict regions may be, they have one thing in common – and that is our organisation's will and work to contain these conflicts and to prevent escalation. We need a functional and resolute OSCE in order to be able to help bring about lasting solutions for a breakthrough.

Allow me to first address the topic of Ukraine. The Minsk agreements, which were signed two years ago now, paved the way to a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Donbas. But this path must now be followed by all sides. Progress is slow – far too slow. There are still outbreaks of violence and the civilian population is suffering.

Agreements on ceasefires are regarded more as recommendations – and are breached on a daily basis. This state of play is more than sobering. I find it unacceptable. I would like to take this opportunity to express my particular gratitude to the entire team of the Special Monitoring Mission. It observes developments on the ground every day, often working under dangerous conditions. It is regularly hindered in its work or even attacked. We must not put up with this treatment of the SMM.

I believe that no mission – no matter how big it is – will be able to enforce a ceasefire if the political will is lacking. What we urgently need is new impetus for a withdrawal of the heavy arms and further disengagement. The SMM stands ready and willing to guide this process. It needs sufficient staff and technical resources for this – and that includes next year. We must do justice to this in the forthcoming budget talks. That is why I call on you to play a constructive part in these talks.

Despite all our efforts in eastern Ukraine, we won't forget Crimea. It was annexed in violation of international law, and to this very day OSCE institutions aren't being granted access.

Developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict give cause for concern: the renewed outbreak of hostilities in early April brought home to us all how dangerous this conflict remains. My many talks have reaffirmed my belief that consolidating the ceasefire and finally launching genuine negotiations to find a political solution are of pressing importance. We will continue to steadfastly support the efforts of the Minsk Group and its co-chairs. During the talks in Geneva, we at least succeeded through the combined efforts of the OSCE, United Nations and EU to revive this format somewhat. However, I feel that more has to be done to enhance confidence-building, to ensure greater security and, not least, to improve the humanitarian situation.

The sides in the Transdnistria conflict have taken an astute step forward: after a break of more than two years, they came together once more in Berlin for 5+2 negotiations. Even more importantly, they're now prepared to adopt a results-oriented approach to the negotiations – to the benefit of people on both sides of the Dniester River. I saw that for myself during my trip to Chisinau and Tiraspol. Let us show our appreciation of the work done by mediators and observers by setting forth what we've achieved here in Hamburg in a joint declaration!

Ladies and gentlemen,

Germany will resolutely continue to pursue this course of multilateralism in action. We shouldn't delude ourselves: it'll take a while before we can bring about a major step forward and overcome what divides people. However, we can refuse to be despondent and work steadfastly on realistic solutions. I'm pleased that we're being followed by Austria and Italy, two committed partners who share our vision of a future with a strong OSCE for a secure Europe.

We're all aware that the OSCE must equip itself for new tasks and challenges. We see five fields of action:

First of all, we have to keep open and expand channels of communication across political divides. This includes innovative dialogue formats as well as a conscious decision to refrain from a ritualised exchange of blows. That was why we hosted an *informal* foreign ministers' meeting in Potsdam in September. And my impression was that our meeting was welcomed for that very reason.

Second, we have to do more to pool our resources more effectively in order to make possible substantial and durable progress in conflict resolution. I have great faith in women, who can bring a different perspective to such processes. When debates on the fundamentals lead into a dead-end, we should at least focus on improving the quality of life of those concerned.

Third, for a long time, our arms control architecture was a guarantor for security and stability. Recently, however, this predictability has evaporated. Traditional mechanisms have been increasingly ineffective because they're no longer fit to deal with the security, military and technological realities of today's world. We have to counter this trend - by modernising the Vienna Document, a task which has progressed well in the course of this year. What's more, my proposal calling for an urgently needed relaunch of conventional arms control has met with broad approval. But that in itself is not enough. We now have to begin the hard slog – the experts call it structured dialogue – and work towards crisis-proof arms control for Europe geared to the challenges of this day and age. No-one can want a new arms race to be triggered, which could ultimately result in us losing political control. We have to halt it in good time – to ensure that our Europe doesn't become even more dangerous.

Fourth, we have to look at new challenges and threats. Terrorism, radicalisation, cyber issues, migration, discrimination of any kind and hate – I'm thinking here in particular of anti-Semitism and intolerance towards Sinti and Roma. We're too small and too ineffective to successfully tackle these phenomena as individual states. That's why we should anchor this more firmly in the OSCE!

And let me make one last point: on my trips to the trouble spots in the OSCE area, I've seen for myself our organisation's wealth of experience – from conflict prevention to crisis management and post-conflict peacebuilding. However, we're still not good enough to deal with the increasingly complex conflicts of the present day.

Efforts to genuinely and durably strengthen our organisation mustn't remain mere lip service. The Ministerial Council cannot be the only time this year when we remember the OSCE. We need to modernise and expand our organisation's capabilities throughout the conflict cycle. For that we need money. For that we need more qualified personnel. For that we need a clear legal framework. All of this is only possible with the sustained political will of us all!

Esteemed colleagues,

Without keeping a close eye on the compass – and by that I mean our values compass – we won't achieve our aims in these turbulent times. There can be no comprehensive security without democracy, without the rule of law, without respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms!

With this compass in our hands, let us start our consultations here in Hamburg. I hope that in the coming days we'll all have the courage and readiness to engage in dialogue, to enter into compromises and – wherever possible – to find pragmatic solutions.

Thank you very much.