

Speech by Federal Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the presentation of the Emperor Otto Prize to the OSCE in Magdeburg Cathedral

19.09.2015

Mr Mayor,
Minister-President,
Ivica Dačić,
Didier Burkhalter,
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

This year's Emperor Otto Prize is being awarded to an important European institution, the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

And I am particularly pleased that we have been permitted to hold this award ceremony here in the cathedral in Magdeburg, for – as many of you are perhaps unaware – this beautiful cathedral has close links with the history and values of the OSCE.

Let's step back 40 years. It was then, in the summer of 1975, that the states participating in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) signed the Helsinki Final Act. Just two weeks later, doctor Karl-Heinz Nitschke from Riesa near Dresden was the first GDR citizen to cite this Final Act, in which all signatories had affirmed the principle of freedom of travel, in his application to leave East Germany. His application was, of course, rejected.

But it was the first application of many. Thousands of people from across the GDR sought to assert the rights guaranteed them by the Helsinki Document. In Magdeburg, this cathedral became a focal point for gatherings and protest. It was here, Mr Quast, in the years of peaceful revolution, that you gave encouragement and called for calm and dialogue. It was from here that the events of 1989 played out in Magdeburg, bringing political change that also owed something to the Helsinki Process.

The Helsinki Final Act is thus not, as its name suggests, a final step. On the contrary, after the end of the East-West confrontation, it became the foundation on which today's OSCE was established and which underpins that Organization to this very day.

Just like this cathedral, the OSCE is built on strong pillars. But unlike this cathedral, the OSCE has only three main pillars. Three – that would have been too much of an engineering feat for any Gothic master builder!

The three pillars of the OSCE are

– politico-military security,

- cooperation in economic and environmental matters, and
- the protection of human rights and basic freedoms.

Over the years since 1989, the OSCE has, to continue with the architectural metaphor, been equipped with new buttresses and pillars: the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights was added, as were the Representative on Freedom of the Media, the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the field missions on the ground.

These multiple extensions have resulted in a complex and even somewhat mystifying edifice. Its appearance is perhaps now more reminiscent of the Rococo style than of the simple lines of Gothic architecture ...

But the Organization remains firmly rooted in the Helsinki principles.

The current crises tragically show that the key Helsinki tenets are today just as topical as ever. These include the principle of the inviolability of frontiers, territorial integrity and the peaceful settlement of disputes between states, as well as non-intervention in internal affairs and respect for human rights.

The crisis in Eastern Ukraine has made this all too clear. It underscores just how much we need the OSCE today!

The OSCE was quick to establish a substantial monitoring mission in Ukraine. For the past year, OSCE monitors have been verifying the ceasefire negotiated in Minsk. That is no easy task! But you don't need me to tell you that. Making progress is hard work. We have to fight against repeated setbacks. But one thing is for sure: I do not care to imagine where we would be if the OSCE and its courageous staff were not keeping an eye on this conflict.

The OSCE edifice will never be completed. It is a constant work-in-progress, adapting to the times and the challenges they bring. You know that Magdeburg Cathedral, too, was worked on for more than 150 years ... It is in this metamorphosis that the OSCE's strength lies, in this flexibility to adapt whilst adhering to basic principles. It was forced to demonstrate this ability already in the early 1990s, shortly after its members had ushered in a "new era of democracy, peace and unity" with the Charter of Paris. That vision was to be shattered by the wars in Yugoslavia. And even then – when it was still the CSCE – the organization resolutely rose to the challenge. And it proved to be a master of improvisation! These first monitoring missions were based on procedures that had only been invented a few months earlier. Some of them had not even officially entered into effect.

Since then, the OSCE has been active in numerous crises – in the Republic of Moldova, in the Southern Caucasus, in Central Asia and now in Ukraine.

It is the OSCE's fate that its successes often go unseen. Let me give just one example. May I take you back to the year 2010, to the change of leadership in Kyrgyzstan and the massive ethnic clashes that took place. Back then, stability was quickly restored by the OSCE working

together with the United Nations and the EU. Tens of thousands of refugees were able to return to their homes. A political reconciliation process could begin.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Two years ago another great champion of reconciliation and of Europe was presented with the Emperor Otto Prize here in this cathedral. I am speaking of Egon Bahr, whose funeral I attended a few days ago. Bahr once stated that his policies were based on the core axiom that “people have to come first” and that “every conceivable and responsible attempt” must be made to improve their lives and their prospects for the future.

Since its inception, the OSCE has improved the lives of many people – by preserving their security and their rights, as well as by promoting good governance. Its success is due to the countless men and women who have worked for the Organization over the past decades, be it as advisers, monitors or mediators, in Vienna, Warsaw, or Donetsk. The Emperor Otto Prize is for you, my ladies and gentlemen. And I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your dedication.

This Prize also honours the work of the Swiss OSCE Chairmanship over the past year – and thus particularly your efforts, Didier Burkhalter – and those of the present Serbian Chairmanship, led by you, Ivica Dačić. You have stood at the helm of the OSCE during the tempest and have kept it on course. You deserve great thanks for this, for your actions have strengthened the OSCE.

The present crisis has left cracks in the foundations of Europe’s security architecture. But it has also shown that the principles of construction applied in Helsinki and the Charter of Paris were and remain the right ones. The edifice is structurally sound!

A reason for optimism, in my view, is the interest expressed by states from outside the OSCE area, who want to learn more about our experiences of the past decades. The OSCE’s partnerships in Asia and the Mediterranean illustrate this nicely. And this is of tremendous importance in particular in view of the current refugee crisis. Most refugees are fleeing political conflicts which also need political solutions. These are needed so that the refugees can do what most of them so yearn to – to return to their homes and live there in security and with hope for the future. In a month’s time we will, in our capacity as OSCE participating States, meet with our Mediterranean partners in Amman. One of the issues we should discuss whilst there is which instruments of dialogue, understanding and confidence-building could we use jointly to lay the groundwork for solutions to the conflicts in the region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Magdeburg Cathedral stands testimony to the durability of stable foundations and solid pillars. I thank you, Ms Junkermann and Mr Quast, for making us feel welcome in this beautiful house of God.

I am certain that the OSCE is built on just as strong a foundation. Even if the events in Ukraine are doing their best to shake it, we should keep up our work on the OSCE's pillars and capabilities. We want to use our Chairmanship next year to this end. We don't need a new building. What we need are concerted efforts to repair the cracks that have appeared, so that many more generations can live in Europe under the protective roof provided by joint security, cooperation and understanding.

Thank you very much.