

6<sup>th</sup> July 2016**“Defend Europe by Making It Better”***By Frank-Walter Steinmeier, German Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs*

Anyone following the debate in its hottest phase could tell that the referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union would not have a happy ending. What wasn’t said or written about Europe... and believed by so many. But I too am still shocked to the core. The British people’s decision to leave the European Union was met with regret, puzzlement and disappointment across Europe. It is a turning point, a historic watershed.

That said, we must not allow ourselves to be paralyzed by shock or to rush into action for action’s sake. We must now work together to draw the right conclusions for the European Union.

First of all, we have to assess the situation honestly. Many EU citizens do not currently hold the European Union in high esteem. Many people are disappointed, and some are even turned off, because they think the European Union has not made good on its central promises of prosperity, democracy and peace, or has made good only in part. The economic and financial crisis opened up deep wounds that are far from healed. The influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants to Europe has brought to light more than just differences of opinion. Many people have the impression that European decisions are far removed from their own wishes and ideas and from the world they live in. Even peace and security in Europe have become more fragile — just think of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the appalling terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels.

And yet, there are many things that are working well in Europe. We must not allow our self-critical impulses to blind us to the fact that we have survived the worst and most dangerous phase of the economic and financial crisis. The eurozone has held together and has indeed expanded. Europe can make the world a safer and more peaceful place, as demonstrated by the agreement on the Iranian nuclear program, negotiated with the participation of European foreign policy-makers. Europe exports stability and security, for example to the Western Balkans, where faith in Europe and the desire to develop closer ties is still strong. We have shown at international level what the EU can achieve if it speaks with a single voice. And even in the migration crisis we have made significant progress — even if it did take too long.

Nonetheless, the European Union of today has lost its attraction for many. We cannot afford to be indifferent to this development. We are now looking back on an unprecedented 70 years of peace and stability. More than 25 years have passed since we brought an end to the division of our continent. The process of European unification is an unparalleled success story. At its core is an agreed political framework under which the member states come to the Council building in Brussels to manage their relations and settle their conflicts, and do not head off to the battlefield. This core agreement has lost none of its utility or significance. We must not jeopardize it. The European peace project must be passed on intact. That we owe to the generations who will follow us.

Many people criticize Europe because they feel powerless and feel they are losing control. Even if this is understandable in a world that seems out of joint, at a time when globalization is encroaching into many areas of our lives, fear is not a good counsellor. And withdrawing into a national shell does not provide any lasting protection from the risks and dangers of a world perceived to be threatening.

What is to be done? — We have to show the people that the European Union is not the cause of this feeling, but rather the best instrument available to us to actively shape the world around us, to actively shape globalization in our European interests. If we in Europe play as a team, coordinate closely and act dynamically, we can overcome conflicts and surmount many obstacles. By contrast, no member state, not even Germany or France — or even the United Kingdom — can assert its interests as successfully on the international stage as we can together as a powerful Community bound together by solidarity.

It is a fact today that anyone who seeks to abolish Europe will not thereby solve their problems. They will aggravate them. The political and economic turmoil the UK is currently experiencing shows this clearly. And it also shows that the very people who screamed “leave”, who shouted, “down with the EU”, have no answer to the question “what next” when the country leaves or the EU is abolished. That is not only foolish and irresponsible, it is also playing with fire. As François Mitterrand said at the end of his politically full life, which was so profoundly influenced by his experience of war and suffering: “Le nationalisme, c’est la guerre!” [“Nationalism means war!”].

People whose conduct is destructive, who instrumentalize voters’ yearning for putative safety in all things national — they must be revealed for what they are and their arguments countered by putting forward genuine solutions.

We are committed to making Europe better, and to making it listen more to the needs of its citizens. This is the direction taken by the proposals put forward by the French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault and myself last week. We have some specific ideas which are intentionally focused on areas where people rightly expect more of us: ideas on improved internal and external security, an active migration policy and a policy for growth and employment. And we are looking forward to receiving lots of other good and constructive ideas.

Listening to the citizens also means that we in Europe will have to find a new way of working. A better, more flexible European Union will respect differing views on the further progress of Europe and will allow for different speeds, without excluding anyone or leaving anyone behind. Instead of arguing about what the ultimate goal of European integration should be, we should work towards tangible results — today!

Everyone is welcome to join this quest! Let us all join together to defend Europe by making it better.

It is only by working together that we will make progress. That is why it is so important for us to consult each other in the group of 27, to listen carefully to each other, and then to take joint action.

*This op-ed has been published in leading European newspapers such as El País, Le Monde, Rzeczpospolita and the Huffington Post.*