

**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier gave an interview to the Deutsche Welle which was published at 31 October, 2020.**

**Mr President, you just spent two weeks in quarantine. How are you feeling now?**

Everything was fine, I'm well, I wasn't infected. But after 14 days I can say: If at all possible, one should avoid quarantine. I'm glad I can meet people face to face again.

**Brutal crimes have been committed again in France. How is it possible, that this can happen in the centre of Europe?**

Of course our thoughts are, above all, with the relatives who have our sympathy. But I believe what we must do now in Europe, not only in France, is to stand up to this act of brutality and the Islamist motives behind it. We should do that. Many people in Europe have done that. And it's good that representatives of Muslim states also joined in this condemnation.

**Do you fear that could be attacks in Germany?**

Most recently we had an attack in Dresden where one person was wounded and another died. So we cannot pretend that we are immune to such attacks here in Germany. On the contrary, we have to remain vigilant. Indeed, the security services are vigilant. But in our democratic societies, we shouldn't base the response of the state on a course determined by hate and xenophobia. Acceptance and mutual respect are a part of our society. And so, standing up to such acts of brutal violence and to Islamist motives is one thing, the other is trying to maintain the openness of our society. That's the other challenge.

**You were speaking about the role of Muslim associations. What role do the verbal attacks of President Erdogan play in the escalation?**

They are not helpful at all, that's beyond doubt. I hope that this escalation, which we've noticed, this noticeably harsher rhetoric, didn't lead to possible perpetrators feeling encouraged.

**We are in the middle of the pandemic. Germany is facing a partial lockdown. Have we lost control?**

We certainly are in a critical phase. That is true for many states in Europe, but also for Germany. We are in a situation where the number of infections is rising every day, reaching new records. This is also a practical test for democracy in Germany. Either we manage to reduce the number of infections significantly with the means at our disposal, or the situation will get out of control. I am confident that we will succeed in pushing back the rate of infection.

**Still, the question remains, faced with such heavy measures – what is more important, the health of the population or their basic freedoms?**

I'm convinced that most people realize that these burdens are necessary at this point, so we don't have to experience what some of our neighbors have experienced – hospitals overflowing, highly infectious patients having to lie in corridors, or who can't be admitted at all. We must avoid

pushing the health system beyond its limits, that is the central goal now. I think that people understand that.

**Even so, resistance to these measures is growing across Europe, and also in Germany. We can expect a long, hard winter. Are politicians not driving more and more people into the arms of conspiracy theorists and radicals?**

Of course, we know this from health emergencies in the past – the longer such a pandemic lasts, the greater the strains are – and the stronger the criticism of restrictions. But the number of people who consider the restrictions to be correct or are demanding stricter measures is currently growing faster than the number of critics. In this respect, it's not so much the numbers that worry me, but the abrasiveness of the argument. There is hardly a bridge between those who say, yes, that is correct – and those who either don't consider coronavirus a danger or completely reject restrictions. I've tried myself to bring supporters and opponents together. This can be done in smaller groups. But on a larger scale, the conversation has indeed become more difficult.

**Those people who are now abandoning dialogue, that are changing to the side of the radicals, how can they be brought back to a democratic discourse?**

You cannot force someone into a democratic discourse. Politicians constantly have to take on the task of explaining in a transparent manner what they're doing and why certain measures are required. With the number of infections rising, those that assert that we are dealing with a simple flu, that we politicians are cooking up a storm, are themselves increasingly under pressure.

**Mr President – in a few days, a new president is being elected in the United States. How important is that election?**

Of course, this is, first of all, important for the U.S. itself. But the election on November 3 will have a global impact. Regardless of who wins – I hope that afterwards the United States will again develop the ability to have a shared idea about the future of their country. What's important for us as Europeans, is to also understand that the European project, with European integration and cooperation, is invested in the transatlantic relationship. This has not been the case recently. But I hope that new understanding for Europe will grow.

**Supposing that there's a change of president in the White House. Will the transatlantic relationship be okay?**

I think we Europeans, and especially we Germans, must force ourselves to take a realistic look at the changed situation, one in which the U.S. also finds itself. With the end of the Cold War, with the realization that Russia is no longer the number one threat for the U.S., but that the security threats for the United States might come from other corners of the world, a reorientation has occurred. This political reorientation, or let's say this focus on China and East Asia, that's something that began before Trump – but not with the aggressiveness with which the dispute with China is being sought now.

**What does that mean for German policy?**

I am firmly convinced that what first of all needs to happen is to recognize that our national interest is Europe. But perhaps this coronavirus crisis has shown how important European cooperation is. There was a really, perhaps unexpected, but courageous decision by the European heads of government in July regarding a substantial European reconstruction fund. I see that there are joint European efforts, for example, in the development, production and distribution of a vaccine. And just recently, decisions were made to enable cross-border aid when hospitals in border areas overflow and capacities are still available on the other side. That means that Europe is learning, even in the crisis, and I hope that this attitude of learning from one another will continue. But investing in Europe is one of the tasks I think Germany will continue to face.

**The relationship with Russia is at its lowest point – most recently due to the poisoning of Alexej Navalny. Are you concerned?**

I'm concerned about Navalny being poisoned, but my concern actually dates back a long time. Of course, one should mention the illegal annexation of Crimea, where I fear that Moscow has not properly understood the shock that it caused in Europe – and not just in Eastern Europe. What followed didn't change things for the better. Members of the opposition in Russia came increasingly under pressure. Some have to fear for their lives. Some have lost them, right up to the Tiergarten murder and Navalny. This has put us in a situation where the distance has grown, without a doubt. I believe we shouldn't just let this process of alienation continue. Our history in Europe, but also the geographical location, with Russia as a neighbor, makes it necessary to look for opportunities, again and again, to counter that. But, as I say, you cannot change this unilaterally. This also requires the will and understanding of the Russian side.

**It sounds as though they aren't giving enough?**

In my opinion, it's too little, yes.

**Developments in the U.S., Russia and China show how important it is for Germany to take on a leadership role. How much is Germany ready for?**

We need an understanding in Germany that this country is important in Europe. If we invest in Europe, others will too. Due to our geographical location and history, we have the task of building bridges that need to be built in Europe between East and West. Bridges across some of the misunderstandings and cracks that have appeared in the past years. But what's more important still, is understanding that we also have to invest in Europe in terms of security policy. On the one hand, this means making Europe stronger and, on the other hand, as I said recently, it also means significantly strengthening the European pillar in NATO. Both are necessary.

**Next year we have federal elections in Germany. This also marks the end of Angela Merkel's political era. Isn't Germany losing influence with the Chancellor, both internationally and in Europe?**

First of all, it is quite natural that if someone had the opportunity to gain political experience after so many years in government office, and even more importantly, had the opportunity to expand a political network in all European countries and far beyond – whoever becomes a successor will start differently. In this respect, these are big shoes to fill, but that doesn't mean that the

successor is denied the opportunity to develop a similar influence over the years. But, that's not that easy, you're right, the shoes are big.

**Thank you for the interview.**

I thank you.

The questions asked: Rosalia Romaniec