



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the official event to mark the anniversary of the  
Russian attack against Ukraine  
on 24 February 2023  
in Schloss Bellevue**

Yahidne is a one-street village somewhere between Chernihiv and Kyiv, a village like many others in northern Ukraine – small, inconspicuous, without any military significance. I will never forget this place. I was there in October and what people told me about their terrible ordeal will remain etched in my memory for ever.

Just a few days after the attack against Ukraine began, Russian army soldiers occupied the village. They rounded up the inhabitants and locked them up in the basement of the little village school: more than 300 people crammed into a tiny space, including the sick, the elderly and 20 children – the youngest only six weeks old. They crouched on the ground, in darkness and cold, with almost nothing to eat, with no toilets. 28 long days and nights. The first of the elderly villagers died. In all, 13 of them did not survive the basement. However, it was forbidden to carry the dead away for several days and so the children had to play in the basement among the bodies of the deceased.

There were tears in the eyes of the men in the village as they told this story – as they remembered the suffering and the humiliations. The women were even unable to talk about what had been done to them outside the basement.

I know that is just one example, but it was and is the daily reality in many parts of Ukraine. Every day, innocent people die, mothers are widowed and children are orphaned. Every day, Russia inflicts immeasurable suffering on Ukraine. Even one year after Russia's attack against Ukraine began, this war continues with unrelenting intensity.

There are no words to describe the pain and cruelty which millions of Ukrainians are experiencing. When they mourn their loved ones. When they fear for their lives every time they hear an air raid siren. When they endure ice and snow in the trenches.

Today, on the anniversary of the Russian invasion, here at this joint event with Ukraine, there are people among us who have experienced the unimaginable. Ms Polishchuk, you said, "The hell I went through cannot be dreamed by anyone", after surviving the desperate fight for Mariupol and the siege in the catacombs of Azovstal. We all remember the short video from the catacombs which shows you sitting there with so many women and men, without food and medicine, and by the end without ammunition. And then we hear your voice and you are singing. You are singing of the fight for your country's freedom.

Many millions of Ukrainians stand up to their Russian attackers every single day. Their courage, the courage to defend their freedom and their independence is there, and it is a very powerful force. These men and women fear for their lives and for their loved ones every day. But they also fight for their country and for their freedom every day.

We Germans admire the courage, the strength and the will of the people of Ukraine and we stand in solidarity with them. We are helping them to defend themselves. We share in the suffering of millions. And we mourn their dead.

Honoured guests, I would like to ask you to pause with me for a moment to remember the victims of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Please stand.

(minute of silence)

Thank you very much.

Ladies and gentlemen, war is back in Europe! For the first time since the Second World War, a campaign of conquest is again unfolding at the heart of Europe. Russia denies Ukraine its right to exist, it wants to destroy Ukraine as an independent nation. The inviolability of borders, the sovereignty and self-determination of a country, human dignity and peace, respect for rules and the law – this means nothing to Putin. Everything on which our co-existence in Europe is built, does not count for anything with him.

But it counts for something with us.

Although Germany is not at war, this war most certainly concerns us. The Russian attack has plunged us back into a time we thought we had left behind us. Russia's war of aggression has reduced the European security order to ashes. It is an attack on all of the lessons that the world learned from two World Wars. It is an attack on everything that we too stand for. All of this has contributed to the epochal shift we are currently experiencing.

This new era raises new questions. And we will not find all the answers in the past, nor in the routines of the last few decades. For us, for the countries of the European Union, they have been decades of

stability and growth. And that has shaped both our thinking and our actions. Today we have to think differently and to act differently.

It goes without saying that we are providing financial and economic assistance for this country under attack. That more than one million Ukrainians have found refuge here with us. I am grateful to all Germans, to everyone in our country. For such a large number of people are working to help the victims of this war, to support refugees from Ukraine and to provide assistance to partner communities in Ukraine – and will continue to do so.

Thinking differently and acting differently in this new era means that we now have to make decisions we would have perhaps considered inconceivable one or two years ago. We are supplying weapons to a theatre of war, heavy weapons, and we are providing Ukraine with unprecedented military support, with great effort and in all earnestness.

Of course, every decision brings with it major, and sometimes emotional, debates. Some are concerned about an escalation, while others are impatient. There is one thing I know for sure: the political decision-makers sitting in front of me here, both in the Government and in the opposition, are well aware of the great implications that each and every decision has. They assess the situation and make decisions as part of their responsibility for our country, for our alliance and for Ukraine. I believe they deserve our respect and trust for that.

Today, Germany is Ukraine's largest supporter on the European continent, also in military terms. And despite all the heated, indeed sometimes strident debates, I am certain that we will remain so. I therefore say, also in view of what still lies ahead of us: you can rely on Germany. Nimechchyna nadiynny soyuznyk!

We have seen over the last year that our democracy is strong – much stronger than Putin imagined. And also stronger than we ourselves have perhaps sometimes believed. Putin is counting on Ukraine's allies becoming tired at some point. He hopes we will become jaded and look away from the horrors, horrors which are extremely difficult for us to bear, too.

We will not do him that favour. We will not do Putin that favour!

Yes, our resolve and our solidarity will be needed for a long time to come. We are supporting Ukraine on its path towards the European Union – a path which is closely linked to the reconstruction of this war-torn country. And we know that in the long term, even after this war, Ukraine will need a strong defence and effective security guarantees. And here, too, we stand by your side, Mr Makeiev!

Ukraine is fighting for its country, its freedom, its future in Europe. It is fighting against land grab and occupation. It is fighting for what every country in this world claims for itself. In other words, it is fighting for what is required for a just and lasting peace.

Many people are longing for peace at this time – in our country, around the world, but nowhere more than in Ukraine itself. Yet a sham peace which simply seals Putin's land grab and leaves people at the mercy of the arbitrary actions of their occupiers will not be a real peace.

An overwhelming majority of the states in the United Nations reaffirmed yesterday that if peace is to be established, it must be a just and lasting peace. Every constructive proposal which brings us closer to a just peace is very welcome. It is still questionable whether the superpower China wants to play a constructive role to this end.

But if it does, then China should certainly talk not only with Moscow but also with Kyiv. If it does, then China should join the overwhelming majority of states and work for peace under the auspices of the United Nations. If it does, then we must join together and insist that the principles of the United Nations be respected by the country which is violating them on a daily basis: it is Russia that has brutally attacked its neighbouring country! It is Russia that keeps sending new troops to the front! It is not the defence aid from the West that is prolonging the war – it is Russia. It is not Ukraine and its allies that are an obstacle to peace – it is Russia.

Putin knows very well what he would have to do if he was serious about wanting to end the war: not until Russian troops withdraw will it be possible to negotiate. That is what yesterday's United Nations resolution calls for.

Russia must fully realise that there can be no victory in its criminal war. Putin wants victory and is doing everything in his power to achieve his goal. However, the truth is that anyone who orders murder and killings, who orders Ukraine to be destroyed by bombs, cities to be devastated and children abducted, anyone who allows their own soldiers to senselessly bleed to death day after day will never go down in history as a victor. They have already lost!

Ladies and gentlemen, you will all have seen the photos in the gallery downstairs before you entered this room: the ruins of a flat in Kharkiv, a house in the Donbas which were once home to the people who lived there. A little boy at his mother's grave in Bucha. And you saw the last, the central photo in this exhibition. It portrays a soldier in a village near Kherson, with his arms around a woman. The two of them are simply glad to see that the other is alive. They feel exhausted but liberated. Here we catch a brief glimpse of peace.

I hope we will see many more pictures like this one.