

Steinmeier, re-elected as German president, talks war

Peter Schwarz
15 February 2022

The word “democracy” appeared a total of 23 times in the 22-minute speech in which Frank-Walter Steinmeier thanked parliamentarians for his re-election as federal president on Sunday. While Steinmeier made much play of the term “democracy,” the reality is obviously very different. The presidential election revealed a ruling class closing ranks in the face of growing social and political opposition and pulling together against the majority of the population.

Steinmeier’s election by the Federal Assembly, half of which consists of members of the Bundestag (federal parliament) and half of representatives of the Länder (federal states), was a foregone conclusion. It had been fixed beforehand by the establishment parties. The social democrat Steinmeier was supported not only by the governing parties—Social Democratic Party (SPD), Greens and Liberal Democrats (FDP)—but also by the opposition parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU). Only the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Left Party and the Free Voters put up their own token candidates who had not the slightest chance of success.

Steinmeier’s speech made clear what a deep gulf separates official politics from the vast majority of the population. His focus was on fierce threats of war against Russia, for which there is no support, let alone democratic consensus. No one was asked or could vote on whether they want to risk a war in the middle of Europe that can only end in disaster.

Steinmeier attacked Russia and President Vladimir Putin with a sharpness that is extremely unusual for the highest representative of state, who is usually obliged to exercise diplomatic restraint. “We are in the midst of the danger of a military conflict, a war in Eastern Europe. And Russia bears responsibility for that!” he asserted. “Russia’s troop build-up cannot be misunderstood; that is a threat to Ukraine and is meant as such.”

“The people there have a right to live without fear and threat and to self-determination and sovereignty,” Steinmeier continued. “No country in the world has the right to destroy that—and whoever tries to do so, we will answer decisively!” He then appealed to Putin personally: “Relax the noose around Ukraine’s neck!”

Steinmeier also assured the Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians,

Poles, Slovaks and Romanians: “You can rely on us.” Germany, he said, was part of NATO and the European Union. “Without any ambiguity, we are committed to the obligations in this alliance.”

Steinmeier knows better than any other German politician that this is mendacious war propaganda. As German foreign minister, he was in Kiev in February 2014 when paramilitary fascist militias drove out the elected president Viktor Yanukovych, who had refused to sign an association agreement with the EU. And Steinmeier had prepared and enabled this right-wing coup.

Steinmeier worked closely with two right-wing nationalist parties, Yulia Tymoshenko’s Fatherland and Vitali Klitschko’s UDAR, as well as with Oleh Tyahnybok’s fascist Svoboda. The latter uses neo-fascist symbols, agitates against foreigners, Jews, Hungarians and Poles, and maintains close relations with far-right parties in Europe.

After the Maidan demonstrations supported by the US and Germany failed to force Yanukovych to step down, paramilitary fascist militias were mobilised to escalate the conflict and drive the country to the brink of civil war. The leading role was played by the neo-fascist Right Sector, whose masked fighters, equipped with helmets, batons, firebombs and guns, soon dominated the centre of Kiev and brutally attacked the security forces.

Under these circumstances, Steinmeier, seconded by the Polish and French foreign ministers, persuaded Yanukovych to sign a transitional agreement with Tymoshenko, Klitschko and Tyahnybok. Immediately afterwards, the Right Sector drove Yanukovych to flee. The result of this supposed revolution was not a thriving democracy, but an authoritarian and corrupt regime based on rival oligarchic cliques and maintaining fascist militias such as the Azov Battalion.

With the regime change in Kiev, Steinmeier put into practice a great power policy that he had presented shortly before at the Munich Security Conference together with Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen and then Federal President Joachim Gauck. Germany must be “prepared to become involved earlier, more decisively and more substantially in foreign and security policy,” he had announced there. “Germany is too big to comment on world politics only from the side-lines.”

Since then, NATO has systematically armed Ukraine, making it a bulwark against Russia. A recent study by the government-affiliated Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), says: “The Ukrainian armed forces are far more combat-ready today than in 2014.”

At that time, it was “not material equipment gaps” that inhibited the defensive readiness of Europe’s nominally third-strongest army, “but its lack of fighting morale,” the study says. About two-thirds of the Ukrainian land and naval forces in Crimea had defected to the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Against the pro-Russian rebels in the Donbas, the new Kiev leadership had only been able to muster 6,000 soldiers.

“In the meantime, Kiev’s armed forces have grown to a good 250,000 active soldiers and over 900,000 reservists,” the SWP notes. “NATO is helping to improve command and control capabilities; the US provided reconnaissance assets, artillery radars and—as did the UK—anti-tank missile systems. From Turkey, Kiev received Bayraktar TB2 combat drones. ... Canada, Britain, Poland, Lithuania and the US have stationed 470 trainers in the western Ukrainian region of Lviv.”

Under these conditions, the US and its NATO allies have now begun to instigate a war with Russia, using the claim of an imminent invasion of Ukraine as a pretext. Steinmeier’s speech on Sunday served to reassure Washington and NATO of Germany’s unqualified support in this, about which doubts had been expressed time and again.

The cross-party support Steinmeier enjoys—the Left Party, AfD and Free Voters also warmly congratulated him after his election—is because he has defended the international interests of German imperialism and supported all attacks on social achievements over the last 25 years like no other politician.

Joining the SPD in 1975 at the age of 19, he headed the office of Gerhard Schröder, Prime Minister of Lower Saxony, from 1993. When Schröder was elected chancellor, Steinmeier moved with him to Berlin and headed the Chancellery from 1999 to 2005.

In this capacity, Steinmeier was the real architect of “Agenda 2010,” the most comprehensive social counterrevolution since the founding of the post-war Federal Republic, which created a huge low-wage sector. He also led the “reform” of the pension and health care systems, which has dramatically reduced old-age pensions and health care provisions.

As head of the Chancellery, Steinmeier was also responsible for the secret services. Under him, the Federal Intelligence Service (BND) signed an agreement on the intensive exchange of data with the US intelligence agency NSA, which was revealed by whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013. Steinmeier was also responsible for the BND supplying the US with important information for the war in Iraq, even though Germany officially opposed the war.

It was also Steinmeier, in cooperation with Hans-Georg Maassen, then head of division in the Ministry of the Interior and later president of the Office for the Protection of the

Constitution (as Germany’s domestic secret service is called), who ensured that Murat Kurnaz, who grew up in Bremen, was not allowed to return to Germany and sat, innocent, in the Guantánamo prison camp for five years.

After the premature end of the Schröder government, Steinmeier became foreign minister in Angela Merkel’s first administration. In 2009, he ran as the SPD’s candidate for chancellor in the Bundestag elections and had to go into opposition for four years after losing. From 2013 to 2017 he was again Foreign Minister under Merkel.

In 2017, Steinmeier was elected federal president, as Joachim Gauck’s successor. Even then, he was supported not only by the governing parties of the grand coalition of the SPD and CDU/CSU, but also by the FDP and the Greens. The office, which mainly fulfils representational tasks, took on ever greater political significance in view of the decline of the political parties.

In 2017, it was Steinmeier who persuaded the SPD and the CDU/CSU to continue the hated grand coalition after an election defeat and months of fruitless negotiations. The result was that the AfD, as leader of the official opposition, received enormous media exposure and was systematically strengthened.

In his speech on Sunday, Steinmeier behaved as a presidential figure standing above the parties and holding the nation together. “The office of the Federal President is a non-partisan one, and I promise you: that is how I will continue to lead it,” he declared. He spoke about the “deep wounds” that the pandemic had inflicted on society, which now needed to be “healed,” but did not spare a word about the government’s coronavirus policy and its victims—the 120,000 people who have died from COVID-19 so far in Germany alone, and their relatives.

Steinmeier’s speech was somewhat reminiscent of Kaiser Wilhelm, who at the beginning of World War I said he no longer recognised any parties, only Germans. Four years later, Germany was shaken by the November Revolution, the greatest revolution in its history.



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