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+++ The spoken word counts! +++

Speech by Lars Klingbeil, FES Tiergarten Conference 2022

‘Watershed Moment – The Start of a New Era’

Salutation,

a famous definition of crisis goes back to the Italian writer and intellectual Antonio Gramsci. The gist of what he says is that in a crisis, the old has ceased to exist, but the new has not yet begun.

Today we are living in a time of multiple crises: war, climate change, the pandemic, inflation, social division. Each of these crises in itself represents an enormous challenge for our society. But the crises are occurring simultaneously. They are interconnected and are reinforcing one another.

These crises confront us with very fundamental questions. My claim is that we provide answers to these questions, that we shape the future – and that we do so together.

Sometimes history is written and it only transpires many years later what times of epochal upheaval they were. But there are also moments in which it is immediately clear: this moment is historic. This moment will change the course of history. This moment will have a direct, immediate and lasting impact on our lives.

When I was 11 years old, the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War was over. That was one of those moments. The idea of communism was dead and there was only this one path to the future: the path of liberal democracy. The clash of ideologies seemed to have been resolved. I never understood the insane idea of suppressing freedom behind walls. But that this attempt had been made left a deep impression on me.

When I was 23 and in New York for an internship, I witnessed the 9/11 attacks firsthand in that great city. The attacks changed my view of the world in many respects. They politicised me, shaped my relationship with the Bundeswehr and reinforced my interest in security policy.

And now: February 24, 2022. The beginning of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine. A

caesura for the European peace order. A 'watershed moment'.

We are facing a huge political task. The old has ceased to exist, but the new has not yet begun.

Today I am no longer 11 or 23 years old. Today I am 44 years old. As party chairperson of the SPD, I bear responsibility.

On the morning of February 24, I did not have comprehensive answers to this historic watershed moment. Nobody did. But I was fully aware that this moment changed everything, and that the major task that falls to my generation is to draw the right conclusions from this watershed moment.

This watershed moment will demand a lot from us. It marks a caesura. The upheavals have implications for our social relations and for the political agenda for the next 20 years.

Russian President Vladimir Putin started this war. He bears the responsibility for the brutal killings, for the suffering inflicted on Ukrainians. It is his attack on the sovereignty of a European country.

We are not to blame for Putin's war, but we must ask ourselves self-critically what we could have done differently before February 24. Above all, however, we must ask ourselves what we can now do better with a view to the future. And then we must actually do this.

Filling our responsibility with life and providing answers to questions posed by the watershed moment is the goal of this conference.

A major vote of thanks goes to the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and especially to Martin Schulz for creating the space for this debate. Especially in times of upheaval, it is important to have a space for discussion, debate and reflection.

The Tiergarten Conference is such a place, a place where we begin to provide basic answers. I spoke at the beginning about Gramsci and his famous definition of crises. We are in the traditional phase between old and new.

I have been on the road a lot over the past days and months. In the last week I was in Brussels, Stockholm, Bommersvik, Lisbon and Madrid. I had intensive discussions there on the watershed moment and its meaning. In recent weeks, I have welcomed representatives from

other countries here to Berlin, and have held discussions with think tanks and journalists throughout Europe.

In the last few days, I have been trying to pull my thoughts together and formulate them. My thoughts and theses have flowed into this speech. I make no claim that they are complete. I invite you to disagree, to discuss, to think further. I want to engage in a debate.

Where are we coming from? After the mass murder of European Jews and the two world wars started by the German Reich, we were readmitted into the international family of states. It was miraculous that first the Federal Republic and later the united Germany once again became a cherished partner of the international community. Our history dictates that we must exercise restraint. Our integration in Europe became part of our new self-understanding.

The end of the Second World War led to the emergence a bipolar world order, we experienced the formation of blocs and competition between systems. Either West or East, capitalism or communism: we lived in this world order for decades. It came to an abrupt end in 1989.

There followed the reunification and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The direction was clear: the Western model had demonstrated its superiority; the West had won.

For many, it was only a matter of time until the whole world consisted exclusively of liberal democracies. Samuel Huntington wrote about the waves of democratisation. Francis Fukuyama even proclaimed the end of history. Today we know better: history had never come to an end.

I firmly believe that our social model of a liberal democratic society is the best. But just because I see it this way, because we see it this way, doesn't mean that this is how things are seen all over the world.

The West felt too certain that this one end is all the future has in store. A war between states in Europe seemed unimaginable. Our peace order was based for many decades on belief in the inalterability of borders, in state sovereignty, all cast in treaties and international law.

We made ourselves comfortable in this world. When it was jolted here or there, we were convinced that everything would settle down again in the end. We believed that in the end our political model would prevail, that the rules-based order would prevail.

We failed to recognise that things had long since begun to take a different course. We should have interpreted the signals from Russia differently – at the latest with the annexation of Crimea in violation of international law.

Russia became increasingly authoritarian and is now a dictatorship. China also has a completely different vision from ours. And the truth is that many countries in the global South have been disappointed by the promises of liberal democracies.

Until now, the major global players have secured global political influence through pressure and allegiance. I firmly believe that the world will be organised differently in the future. In future, the world will no longer be organized in different poles, but in centres exercising power in different ways. Allegiance, pressure and oppression are no longer decisive for alignment, but instead convictions and interests. These power centres are attractive; they create ties, dependencies and cooperation. They are dynamic and joining them is in one's own interest. Thus, power is exercised differently today.

This world order has major advantages for states that as yet do not constitute a strong centre but have great economic and political potential, because they no longer have to align themselves with a bloc. They can choose which issues they want to cooperate on and with whom. The world order is becoming more flexible and dynamic. Negotiations between states are becoming even more important, but equally important are resilient and trusting relationships.

China is taking a very strategic approach to expanding its influence and binding states to itself. China is primarily using its economic power and is investing strategically, for example in the new Silk Road.

Russia has also been cultivating relations with emerging countries for years, thereby binding them to itself.

In this way, alternatives to the Western model of development have grown. For many years, Russia and China have also been courting democratic states such as South Africa, India and Brazil, giving them a voice at the international level through the BRICS initiative, for example. They have seen the interests of these countries and have treated their governments with respect. That has built trust.

We are currently seeing the effects of this when many states are rejecting our path of sanctions against Russia. The votes in the United Nations General Assembly show that half of the world's population does not support our policy. This must give us pause for thought.

While it should not affect the substance and severity of our decisions, it should influence our activities in other regions of the world.

If the new world order is organised around centres, then we can deduce from this what needs to be done. We must devote ourselves to cultivating binding power, forging new political alliances, concluding partnership agreements and offering open structures such as the international climate club proposed by Chancellor Olaf Scholz. We need structures that are inclusive and not exclusive, that have added value for all sides.

We must build and expand these strategic partnerships. More specifically, this must already happen in the coming months when it comes to confronting food shortages. There will be famines in Africa, Latin America and many countries in Asia, also as a consequence of Putin's war. We must now work together to counteract this.

We need new strategic alliances based on economic interests and political orientation.

We must engage more intensively with the countries of the global South and make them offers of cooperation. They are no less affected by unresolved global issues than we are. In doing so, we should seek new partnerships, for example, in the areas of health, technology, alternative fuels such as hydrogen and climate change.

Our ambition in Europe must be to become the world's first climate-neutral continent, to create innovations and standards to achieve this and to ensure that the transformation is socially just. We want to show that climate protection *and* prosperity can go hand in hand. If we succeed in this, other countries will take their cue from us and also follow the same path. It is clear that in doing so we will also have to deal with countries that do not share our values or even reject our social order. Nevertheless, we have to work with them. It is always a matter of weighing up how deep our cooperation should go and at what point such cooperation might violate our principles and values. Our inner compass must be unwavering. We must address injustice. We must not give up on change. There cannot be cooperation without taking a stance. Change through rapprochement must never be reduced to change through trade. We must never again become as dependent as we became on Russia regarding energy policy. Europe must develop its strategic autonomy. Critical goods and critical infrastructure must be produced and supported here in Europe. With regard to China, this means, for example, reducing dependencies in the areas of medicine and technology. It does not mean that we

should no longer trade with countries like China, as some are proposing – but it does mean that we must adopt strategically clever and resilient courses of action.

We are now facing several years of ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the future world order. The coming years will be marked by competition for relationships, dependencies, ties, collaborations and influence. We must brace ourselves for this competition.

I am convinced that no state can master the challenges of the globalised world alone. Therefore, we need, as described at the beginning, strong centres working in a single direction. The European Union is such a centre, but it must in addition develop geopolitical significance.

It remains enormously important in this respect that we as the West stand shoulder to shoulder: a strong Europe at the core, but in close alliance with the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan and others. There must be no doubt about this. To achieve this, we Europeans need to do our homework. Our aspiration must be to become the most attractive centre.

A great deal depends on Germany in this regard. Germany must aspire to be a leading power. After almost 80 years of restraint, Germany now has a new role in the international coordinate system. Germany has built up a high level of trust over the past decades. But with this trust come expectations. We have just seen that in the discussions over the past weeks. Germany is increasingly the centre of attention. We should fulfil these expectations.

By the way, leadership does not mean adopting an aggressive, macho posture. Hopefully, smart leadership cultures will also prevail in international politics – just as they do in domestic politics. Incidentally, this also includes the idea of a feminist foreign policy. Leadership means being aware of your role: not shirking challenges or confrontation, taking others with you; never being arrogant, but acting thoughtfully, with conviction and consistently. A collaborative leadership style is a smart leadership style. It must also be respectful, even in cases of disagreement.

It must always be clear what our motivation is. We conduct foreign policy so that people can live in security, peace and prosperity. U.S. President Biden speaks of ‘foreign policy for the middle class’. I think this is exactly the right approach. Foreign policy engagement is never an end in itself; it always has an impact on our concrete social conditions.

We are currently witnessing the enormous cost of an unstable international order, war and disrupted supply chains for life here at home. In the end, international conflicts also have an enormous explosive potential for our democracy and the cohesion of our society. This is precisely why foreign policy engagement is so important. Internal and external conditions are becoming more closely interconnected.

Yes, this new role as a leading power will require Germany to make tough decisions – financial as well as political. We need to change structures, and renegotiate budgets. I think we need a completely different debate about security policy in Germany. We also need new places and more places in which to conduct this debate.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the German government have had to rethink and change some basic principles of German foreign policy in recent weeks – in some cases in very far-reaching ways. We stand in solidarity with Ukraine. We are supplying weapons, including heavy artillery. We are imposing tough sanctions whose effects Russia will feel for decades. And we are exerting tough political pressure together with our partners in the U.S. and Europe. It is right that we are taking these steps. This is also bound up Germany's new role.

In recent years, we all went along with the mainstream approach in security policy of neglecting national and alliance defence. I recently had a visit from my social democratic colleagues from Lithuania. They told me about their fear that Putin will attack their country as well. My first reflex was to say: 'Nonsense, Putin won't do that.' But then I realised that precisely this reflex was and is the mistake.

In mid-February, more than 2,000 security experts gathered at the Munich Security Conference. Only a handful of them assumed that Putin would attack Ukraine. A few days later, Putin launched his attack. It still bothers me today that we saw none of that coming. Therefore, we have to think in scenarios and prepare ourselves for these scenarios. When we hear from the Baltic States or Poland that they are afraid of being Russia's next targets, then we must take this seriously.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz has repeatedly made it clear that we will defend every inch of NATO territory. I welcome his decision to station more German troops on NATO's eastern flank and to step up the protection of our Eastern European partners. Better equipment for the Bundeswehr is also urgently needed for this purpose.

We have made mistakes in our dealings with our Eastern and Central European partners. It is therefore personally important to me that we engage in closer dialogue with them and move Europe forward together. This is something that I will also be doing in conversations next week in Lithuania and Poland.

I think we as a society need to develop a different way of dealing with the Bundeswehr. It is good that we have launched the 100 billion euro special fund for the Bundeswehr. This will enable us to close capability gaps and place national and alliance defence back in the spotlight. In doing so, we also underscore our promise of protection to our own citizens and our alliance partners.

Our army was progressively reduced in size, bases were closed, compulsory military service was abolished. The Bundeswehr was increasingly pushed to the sidelines in public debates. Often it only received attention when there were scandals. One almost had the impression that some people believed that the less Bundeswehr there was, the less likely there would be a war. But the opposite is the case.

I have been experiencing this contradiction up close for some time – as the son of a soldier, as someone whose home town is Munster, also home to the largest army garrison, as someone who knows what it means to lose an acquaintance in the Afghanistan mission and as someone who has been a member of the Defense Committee of the Bundestag for 12 years. Standing up for the Bundeswehr in society was often viewed critically.

I hope that we as a society will develop a new normality with the Bundeswehr. I hope that it will become a matter of course to show respect and recognition to those who perform their service for our country and are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice if Parliament so decides. I would like us to include the Bundeswehr in our talk about peace and security as a matter of course. It is not talking about war that leads to war. Closing one's eyes to reality is what leads to war.

For me, peace policy also means seeing military force as a legitimate means of politics. Incidentally, this is also envisaged in the Charter of the United Nations. It is always the last resort, but it must also be clear that it is a means. We are seeing this now in Ukraine.

I suspect some of you are now alarmed. The chairperson of the SPD is speaking of Germany

as a leading power, about the Bundeswehr, about military force. I can imagine what course some debates will now take. But my claim is that we should be realistic. Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt already knew that military strength and capability are also among the foundations for a powerful peace policy. At that time, the defence budget represented more than three percent of our GDP.

The hand we extend must be strong. Brandt and Schmidt understood that one can only stand up for peace and human rights from a position of strength. We should not conduct debates in a truncated manner.

I am proud of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik. After all, it won him the Nobel Peace Prize. Brandt's Ostpolitik was the basis for reunification, overcoming systemic contradictions and the democratisation of many former Eastern Bloc states.

The values that guide social democratic foreign, security and development policy have provided a solid foundation of our policies for more than a century. Peace, freedom, international justice and solidarity remain our guiding principles, and human rights, democracy and the rule of law our goals.

When I say that the watershed moment requires us to take leave of certainties, this does not mean throwing everything overboard that was right. Diplomacy, agreements, international disarmament initiatives, international law, development policy, multilateralism and fair international financial policy – these are and will remain the most successful means of conflict resolution and, above all, conflict prevention. They are part of a comprehensive security policy, and we must strengthen them. That remains a matter of course for social democrats.

For me, the most important project of social democratic foreign and security policy is Europe. When I was in Bommersvik last week, I learned that exactly 50 years ago, former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme had invited Willy Brandt and Bruno Kreisky there to discuss cooperation between the social democratic parties in Europe. The result was a new departure in Europe shaped by social democrats.

My firm conviction is that we need such a departure again today. Social democrats lead eight governments in Europe. We are involved in thirteen governments. We are the largest party family. Together, we have an opportunity to shape Europe.

As a leading power, Germany must massively promote a sovereign Europe. Germany can

only be strong if Europe is strong. We have seen in the history of the EU what is possible when there was sufficient political will and initiative.

Schengen, the introduction of the euro, the historic treaties of Maastricht and Lisbon, or more recently the recovery plan for Europe following Corona: these were all decisions of great moment that have improved our lives in Europe.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz has been in the Balkans in recent weeks and has promised North Macedonia and Albania to start accession negotiations to the European Union soon. He also delivered an important message during his trip to Kiev in the company of other heads of government: You, Ukraine, belong to Europe. You are fighting for European values. With you, Europe is stronger. Moldova also needs candidate status.

I think that these signs are extremely important. The watershed moment is an epochal upheaval. The European peace and security order is undergoing reorganisation. The fact that states are taking their cue from the European Union and want to be part of us shows the attractiveness we already possess as a centre. But this attractiveness also goes hand in hand with political responsibility.

This includes the enlargement policy. Europe must acquire greater weight as a geopolitical player. After the end of the Cold War, the EU already showed once that it is capable of acting geopolitically and strategically. It was a political objective to enable the former Eastern Bloc countries to quickly join the EU.

I want the EU to push ahead with the next accession negotiations with political pressure now as well. That does not mean any discount or fast track for the candidate countries. The Copenhagen criteria apply. But this means that we will not allow the accession processes to become bogged down in the mills of Brussels bureaucracy, but will actively drive them forward as a geopolitical project.

But of course, when we talk about enlargement, we also have to talk about internal reforms. Only in this way will the EU also become capable of admitting new members. Here, too, I was in agreement with my interlocutors in Europe.

Even with more members, the European Union must be able to act quickly. We must therefore abolish the principle of unanimity, for example in foreign policy and in financial and fiscal policy. That would make the EU more adroit, quicker to act and more democratic.

And there will be no compromises on the rule of law and democracy. Therefore, we need a

new mechanism to effectively defend the Copenhagen criteria even after a country has been admitted.

As I was working on this speech, I thought long and hard about what new ideas for Europe I want to bring to the conversation. But then I realised that there is no shortage of ideas. Everything is actually on the table. Many ambitious ideas have been discussed in recent years and then shuffled back and forth in the corridors of bureaucracy until they eventually petered out. So it is not necessarily a matter of new ideas, but of politicising the future of Europe once again.

I am firmly convinced, for example, that now is the right time to finally forge ahead with a European defence and security policy. 27 countries that maintain their own procurement systems, have their own defence contractors and negotiate individually with these contractors – it is impossible to explain why we are not finally bundling these resources at European level.

I know the arguments, but now we should finally get down to work. In the end, the goal must be for us to effectively pool resources and build a strong European pillar in NATO. The European states in NATO should in future be able to jointly defend European territory. This is not a policy against the transatlantic alliance, but one that strengthens the alliance.

In addition to foreign and security policy, it is also a matter of strengthening Europe internally, of investing in social cohesion. All over Europe, people are struggling with increased prices. The war is also endangering social peace in our country. This is part of Putin's strategy. He is waging a war against the European democracies; he wants to subvert and divide them.

We need to hold our societies together in this crisis. With the Corona reconstruction fund and the SURE program, a European protective shield against unemployment, we have demonstrated this in recent times. This has provided security throughout Europe. Just recently I became very aware of this again in Portugal and Spain.

Now the task is to ensure that this progress is firmly anchored. This includes allowing flexibility in a reform of the Stability and Growth Pact to invest in future-related issues such as the ecological and digital transformation.

After all, transformation is the topic of the future par excellence. It has an ecological and an economic dimension; but, at the latest with this war, it also has a security policy dimension. We have already set ambitious targets in the coalition agreement: climate neutrality by 2045, a massive expansion of renewable energy sources, the development of a hydrogen energy economy and the promotion of innovative technologies. The transformation has acquired a new urgency as a result of the watershed moment. We do not want to achieve this against industry, but with industry.

We must now make rapid progress with investments in renewables and new energy sources. This will require considerable investment for a number of years. But they are investments in our long-term prosperity. In this way, we are laying the foundations for good jobs and good wages in Europe. When I consider that the German wind industry alone has the potential to create 400,000 new jobs, it becomes clear what an opportunity this represents for us. I want us to promote climate-friendly innovations in Europe and thereby also to set global standards. In the long term, renewable energy is the cheapest source of energy we can tap. And these are investments in our independence and thus investments in our security.

The old is no longer, the new is not yet here.

Before I end my speech, I would like to quote from Willy Brandt's last address to the Congress of the Socialist International. That was in 1992. At the time he was already too ill to deliver his speech himself. Hans Jochen Vogel delivered his words. And he read out what Brandt wanted to give to all future generations:

'Nothing happens automatically. And only few things last. Therefore – be mindful of your strength, and of the fact that every era wants its own answers, and you have to be up to its speed in order to be able to do good.'

This was how Willy Brandt summed up what social democracy has always understood throughout its history: assessing new challenges, disasters and crises and then drawing conclusions from them that make the future better.

I believe in the unique power of Europe. I believe in the power of social democratic convictions for a life in freedom, security and solidarity. And I believe in the creative power of our democracy, the power of politics to grow through crises and to shape a better future. In my speech, I have outlined approaches that I believe will lead to a better future. I look forward to today's discussion!