

German worries over 'Brexit' laid bare

Steinmeier says Europe faces 'crisis' if UK leaves

by David Marsh in Berlin

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The full extent of Germany's worries about a possible British departure from the European Union was laid bare in Berlin today when Franz-Walter Steinmeier, the German foreign minister, said Europe would plunge into a 'deep crisis' if the UK left.

Steinmeier's warning, in a speech to around 300 top representatives of large German family-owned companies, marks the strongest German statement so far about the dangers to European cohesion of a British No to the EU on 23 June.

The foreign minister's remarks stand in contrast to the much more cautious statements by many senior European politicians, who have made clear in recent weeks that they wish Britain to stay in the EU but leave open the path to greater European integration if the UK exits. Steinmeier, whose Social Democrat party is the junior partner to Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats in the Berlin coalition, departed conspicuously from such diplomatic language.

Steinmeier is saying on a wider stage what many German officials and company representatives are expressing in private – in particular regarding a possible coalition of economic policy interests against Germany that could gain ground in France, Italy and Spain if the UK leaves.

Speaking to the annual meeting of the Family Company Foundation, Steinmeier said it was 'not very realistic' to think that EU integration would simply go on as before with remaining members if Britain stepped away. 'One reason why the integration process would be likely to falter is because the arguments we hear in Britain [by Brexit supporters] are also those heard in other parts of the EU,' Steinmeier said.

In past decades, the foreign minister added, echoing the celebrated slogan of post-war European diplomat Jean Monnet, Europe always managed to develop in a positive way through crises. However, he said he was no longer sure whether this would be the same in the future.

Steinmeier's words went much further than the more cautious Merkel, who in earlier remarks to the conference said she hoped Britain would stay in the EU to continue co-operation over many European and international questions, including trade liberalisation to bring down unemployment. However, the German chancellor stopped short of saying what she thought would happen if Britain decided to leave.

The foreign minister said Britain would also be weakened by Brexit and highlighted a threat to the Northern Irish peace process if the land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland was reimposed. He said that David Cameron, the British prime minister, had gained concessions, including on immigration, in the February renegotiation. But he complained that diehard eurosceptics were treating the issue above all emotionally and not listening to reasoned facts and arguments.

David Marsh is Managing Director of OMFIF. This is No.88 in the series – the 100th article will appear on 23 June.

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