

Beyond High Politics: German Organisations in Belarus

As a result of the Belarus-Sweden diplomatic conflict, many media stated once again that Belarus is now “even more isolated” than it was before. Last Tuesday, the Belarusian ambassador to Berlin, Andrei Giro, was ordered to come to the German Foreign Ministry as a reaction to the diplomatic conflict between Belarus and Sweden.

German authorities often criticise Belarus for disrespect of human rights. In return, the Belarusian president personally attacked the German foreign minister in March 2012 by saying "It is better to be a dictator than a gay".

While on the high political level relations have been badly strained, particularly after the 2010 presidential elections, at grassroots level Belarus does not look so desperately isolated.

Belarusians See Germany as the Most Attractive Country

Despite cold relations on the higher level, Germany is one of the most active countries in Belarus on a lower level. German expatriates constitute one of the biggest communities of Western foreigners in Belarus. Several hundred German citizens officially live in Minsk. Moreover, a whole variety of German institutions work in Belarus.



The International Educational Centre Johannes Rau Minsk (known as IBB) is a German- Belarusian joint-venture and has been the embodiment of German- Belarusian relations since the very beginning of Belarusian independence. It is a joint-venture between a German

association, the Belarusian city executive committee, the tourist agency Sputnik and Belarusbank.

Apart from a hotel and a conference-centre, the IBB has various fields of activity. In one of the few preserved buildings of the former Jewish ghetto in Minsk is now the History Workshop. Since 2003 it serves as a place for historical research with scholars and witnesses.

Another focus of the IBB is the Belarusian media landscape. In its Media Academy, the IBB offers seminars for Belarusian journalists- aiming at bringing together state and non-state journalists. In a country where training for journalists is provided by state universities only, using teaching methods dating back to Soviet times, this is a good opportunity for many journalists. The IBB hopes to make reporting more professional and enhance the number of investigative and well-researched articles in the Belarusian media.

Hundreds of Initiatives under the Belarus Support Program

The most important task for the IBB is, however, to implement the German government's Belarus Support Programme for Belarus. Since 2002, the government has supported small projects co-organised by German and Belarusian parties with a budget of over €13m. The aim of these projects – and overall the German support program – is to achieve the objectives of the "National strategy for sustainable socio- economic development of the Republic of Belarus" approved by the Ministry of Economy in 2003.

Through this programme, the IBB manages to bring together several hundred German and Belarusian initiatives. The impressive number of partnerships as well as the fact that most of them have been cooperating since the early 1990s shows that Belarus is by no means isolated at grass-roots level.

Moreover, the vast majority of initiatives financed by the Belarus Support Program are officially registered, as they do

not aiming at political but social and economic change. For the IBB, which also hosts the renowned [Minsk Forum Conference](#), it is crucial to prevent Belarus from becoming more insolated. The Minsk Forum has taken place since 1997 and assembles politicians, scientists and entrepreneurs in Minsk.

Apart from IBB, there are several other institutions working in Belarus. Among the most important of the German-Belarusian partnerships are two organisations working in the economic and social fields: The German- Belarusian Economic Club (*Deutsch-Belarussischer Wirtschaftsclub*) and the Representative Office of the German Economy in Belarus (*Repräsentanz der deutschen Wirtschaft in Belarus*).

The aim of these two organisations is to improve conditions for enterprises and to help firms that want to establish economic relations with Belarus. The German- Belarusian trade turnover was USD4.438bn in 2011, which constitutes 5.1 per cent of the overall external trade of Belarus.

Germany is in 6th place for direct foreign investment in Belarus. Despite the fact that working in Belarus is often difficult because of the economic situation and administrative barriers, about 350 German enterprises work in Belarus. Almost one hundred of them have a representative office in Belarus.

One example is the German waste management company Remondis that has been working in Minsk since 2010 as a joint venture with the City of Minsk. Well-known German companies such as Bosch and Henkel are present in Belarus, while others (such as Zeiss) have joint ventures with Belarusian firms.

Cultural Cooperation Projects

The last major area in which German institutions are active in Belarus is cultural cooperation. While the British Council and the US culture centre had to close their offices in Belarus, the Goethe Institute is very active. Not only does it offer German-language classes but also a big variety of projects for

teachers, cultural managers and other people interested in German language and culture. Moreover, it has been organising cultural events since its opening in 1993.

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) also has an office in Belarus. Hardly any other institution would maintain a whole office in order to foster academic exchange with Belarus. The number of students going from Belarus to Germany with a DAAD scholarship is – not surprisingly- by far higher than the number of incoming German students.



Apart from the DAAD, there is also an office for German teachers working in Belarusian institutions, an office of the German Adult Education Association, fostering lifelong learning in Belarus and cultural managers sent by German foundations that are working in different institutions all over the country.

This impressive list of activities shows that bilateral relations are much more than the statements and warnings issued by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Even if official bilateral relations seem to be bad, many initiatives at grass-roots level continue working. They ensure the people-to-people contact.

A possible answer to the question of why German organisations in particular are so active in Belarus is that Germany as a big country has a large network of organisations working abroad, both state and non-state institutions. Because of the relative closeness of Belarus to Germany, Germany feels that the country is its business more than does, say, France.

In any event, it is good to see that Belarus is by no means as isolated as one might think when reading various newspaper articles these days.