

German Foundations in Belarus – the Soft Power of Foreign Policy

Last week, the German Boell Foundation invited the German Belarusian community to a Belarusian evening in Berlin. This event was organised by participants of a summer school who gathered all those who are interested in or dealing with Belarus in Germany.

In times of difficult official relations, German foundations maintain contact with Belarus and often can go further than the official diplomacy is able to. Thanks to them, contacts between Germany and Belarus remain strong despite the difficulties the foundations meet in their work with Belarus.

Foundations play an important role in German foreign policy. They constitute an instrument of soft power in terms of its non-formal foreign policy. The culture of foundations has been particularly well developed over the recent years. Over 90,000 foundations operate in Germany nowadays. However, all political parties in Germany have a foundation attached to them and they often wear names of important party leaders.

German Foundations Support Belarusian Counterparts

The foundations insist they act independently from parties, however, they agree with them on the main spheres in which they act. Moreover, the leading committees consist of party members and politicians. All of them have the legal form of an association and they receive by far the majority of their allocations (around 90%) through the German parliament and German ministries.

They have greater potential and possibilities in the realm of international cooperation than political parties because they

are not formally actors of state diplomacy. As an association, they can perform tasks that political parties cannot tackle due to their political nature.

This is why the foundations have proven to be important partners for independent Belarus during the last twenty years. [While the official German-Belarusian relations have been rather rocky](#), the foundations have tried to maintain relations between both sides.

Away from ministers' meetings, they address different group of actors according to their party's political positions: The Boell Foundation (Green party) addresses ecological issues while the Naumann Foundation focuses on topics related to their own liberalism and values. Many of the foundations have programmes for journalists, such as in those working on the freedom of the press and free information as a basis for democracy, which is one of the most important values that all parties and foundations share.

Most important of all, however, the foundation establish partnerships with those Belarusian parties are closest to their own policy preferences and positions. The Adenauer Foundation, for example, cooperates with Belarusian Christian democrats. Those contacts make it possible for isolated Belarusian opposition activists to cooperate with established parties, to profit from their experience in party work and establish the necessary structures within their party. As a democratic country, Belarus will need a functioning pluralistic system of people's parties.

For this reason, the Belarusian authorities eye the work of political foundations with suspicion. Unlike most countries where they work, it has proven impossible for German foundations to establish any representation offices in Belarus. Most foundations therefore have local offices in Kiev, while Konrad Adenauer Foundation (a party close to the conservative party CDU) has representation in Vilnius. This is

a wise decision, as most of the Belarusian opposition activists and think tanks have been forced to go into exile and meet there frequently.

Impossible to Establish Representative Offices in Belarus

Very often, the representatives of foundations have difficulties in securing a visa to travel to Belarus which makes work for them very difficult as they have to organise their projects from abroad- and they can rarely visit their project partners within the country.

This has become a general problem as far as cooperation with Belarus is concerned: After so many years of of a stand still in relations, most foundations have reduced their projects with Belarus to a minimum. As the authorities make cooperation more and more difficult, the funding for projects amounts typically only to small sums. Over the past years the media has often reported about the searches carried out in the offices of foundations or even their forced closure in other countries like Russian and Egypt.



In the end of 2011, the small office of Friedrich Ebert foundation (who politically is close to the social-democratic party SPD) had to be closed as the authorities did not extend its license. Up to then, the one-man office had the function of ensuring contact with their local partners.

One important, though a decidedly non-political organization, is the Robert Bosch Stiftung foundation, associated with the Bosch company and not financed by public funding. The foundation has long funded important projects with Belarus such as the Contact programme, a programme that has granted

funds to German-Belarusian grass root initiatives.

This project has made cooperation on the crucial [citizen-based level](#) possible for several years by granting micro-grants of \$4,000 to German and Belarusian non-profit projects. However, the foundation has discontinued this project in the light of its new priorities. As with many institutions, the focus seems to have shifted towards the countries of the so-called Arab spring. It seems like even the foundations have given up on their hope of seeing a process of real democratisation in Belarus.

Most of them now focus very specific aspects of political development. The Konrad Adenauer foundation recently organised a summer school for young political leaders. A group of young opposition activists met in Lithuania and received media training as well as practical tutorials on organisational development and negotiation techniques in preparation of the forthcoming municipal elections in Belarus. This seems to be a workable good approach as the old generation of opposition politicians seems to have lost stamina over the last years.

The end of the Minsk Forum as a blow to German-Belarusian relations

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation (close to the Liberal Party, FDP) writes on its website that the work of the foundation within the country is hindered by the authoritarian character of the Belarusian regime. The foundation therefore tries to invite Belarusian participants to its seminars and events and to include Belarusian actors in their activities. As soon as the situation improves, Friedrich Naumann and the other foundation will gladly intensify their project work with Belarus.

While the foundations certainly play an important role in keeping up contact with various actors of Belarusian civil society, they regrettably cannot tap their full potential.

Keeping in touch with their political counterparts in democratic countries is vital for Belarusian opposition politician. We can therefore only hope that the foundations will not give up on Belarus and keep funding the projects they have implemented at the moment, despite the difficulties they are encountering.