

Germany's Soft Power – Desiderius Erasmus Foundation: Political Outlook

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Abstract

This article deals with some of the fundamental aspects of Germany's soft power. [1] The author sets out to examine the activities of German political foundations and the emergence of the youngest one among them, i.e. the right-wing Desiderius Erasmus Foundation (DES – Desiderius-Erasmus-Stiftung) which has close ties to the Alternative for Germany (AfD – Alternative für Deutschland) party. The main point of this article is the need to elaborate future strategies of interaction with the Desiderius Erasmus Foundation and define possible risks of the influence that the foundation's activities may exert on Russian politics.

Keywords: Germany's 'soft power', political foundations in Germany, Alternative for Germany, Desiderius Erasmus Foundation

Main body

Political foundations form an important component of soft power in German politics. Each party that has a faction in the country's parliament (Bundestag) is entitled to pursue political activities and engage in socio-political education. This is actually the way soft politics is done. The participation of the foundations in Germany's domestic politics has to be differentiated from public education projects implemented in other countries. In Germany, there are seven party-affiliated "think-tanks" which do the analytics and make suggestions for subsequent discussions in the appropriate party and faction. This is how political agenda is directly shaped: from political action through initiative to draft law. The foundations form the basis of the corresponding parties' political agendas. [2]

The Desiderius Erasmus Foundation is the youngest political foundation in Germany; its activities align with the ideology of the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany. The foundation acts as a de jure and de facto independent organization based on the principles of openness and self-governance in accordance with the Statute.

¹ Nye, Joseph S. Jr. *Soft Power : The Means To Success In World Politics.* – 1st ed. New York : Public Affairs, 2004. – 208 p. – ISBN 1-58648-225-4.

² Politicheskoe prosveshchenie po-nemetski. – Political education in German. - Vesti FM. - [Online] 08 27, 2018. — [Cited: 04 06, 2020]. — URL : <https://radiovesti.ru/brand/62139/episode/1891093/>

The Chair of the foundation's board is Erika Steinbach, a former member of the Bundestag for the Christian-Democratic Party. In 2017 she retired from her position and left the party due to disagreement with Chancellor Angela Merkel's policies toward refugees as well as other acute political differences.

The affiliation of the DES with the AfD party was officially confirmed at a party congress in Augsburg in the summer of 2018. [3]

The foundation attracts new supporters and potential voters for the AfD by working towards a positive public perception of the party and spreading the right-wing populist ideology through various projects, notably discussion platforms dedicated to Germany's current domestic policy agenda. During these events the participants talk about fully legitimate matters such as culture and education, which enables the organizers to convey the acceptability of right-wing ideas to wide audiences. All this means that the foundation is an ideological superstructure on top of the AfD party.

It is noteworthy that the AfD strongly opposes the "old" parties and defines itself as an anti-system party. In its election program of 2016, the AfD presented its view of the party foundations affiliated with its political rivals as anti-constitutional organizations, stating that those are funded by way of taxpayer-sponsored governmental subsidies which are allocated to them on the annual basis directly from the federal budget [4] and which recently amounted to almost 600 million euros; this is three times the funding of the parties themselves. [5]

From the subsidies that they receive, the foundations are able to sponsor political education, promote scholarly research and award grants and scholarships. At present, the budget subsidizes the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Christian Democratic Union), Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Social Democratic Party of Germany), Friedrich Naumann Foundation (Free Democratic Party), Hans Seidel

³ Die AfD schafft sich eine rechte Kaderschmiede. - The AfD creates a right-wing talent factory. – Sueddeutsche Zeitung. – [Online] 06 30, 2018. – [Cited: 04 06, 2020]. – URL : <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/rechtspopulisten-die-afd-schafft-sich-eine-rechte-kaderschmiede-1.4035412>

⁴ Programm Für Deutschland. Das Grundsatzprogramm Der Alternative Für Deutschland. – The Programme for Germany. The Basic Programme Of The Alternative For Germany.- [Online] 2018. – p. 11. - [Cited: 04 10, 2020]. – URL : https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2018/01/Programm_AfD_Online-PDF_150616.pdf

⁵ 581 Millionen Euro für parteinahe Stiftungen. - 581 Million Euros For Party-Related Foundations. – Die Stiftung. – [Online] 02 13, 2018. - [Cited: 04 08, 2020]. – URL : <https://www.die-stiftung.de/nachrichten-service/kurzmeldungen/581-millionen-euro-fuer-partainahe-stiftungen-76063/>

Foundation (Christian Social Union), Heinrich Böll Foundation (Die Grünen / The Greens), and Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (Die Linke / Left Party). [6]

The AfD used to adhere to this stance; however, after the party received over 5 per cent of votes in the 2017 Bundestag elections, the party leadership deemed it possible to have a like-minded public organization at hand. Prior to that, the AfD aimed at the final abolition of party foundations altogether. Nonetheless, now it is willing to benefit from an additional institutional support of its ideas. The party insists that the “equality of arms” principle has to be observed until the “old” parties give up this tool of influence. [7]

After the AfD’s comeback to the Bundestag that is expected to take place in 2021, the DES will be entitled to obtain legitimate funding in proportion to the number of votes cast for the party, just like the party foundations of the Greens and the Left Party.

The mission of the DES also bears mentioning; it goes as follows:

We strive to promote democratic governance and contribute to civic education.

1. It is our aim to foster clarity and transparency by means of civic education: according to Hannah Arendt, power becomes dangerous exactly where the public ends.

2. Promoting democratic governance also implies that we should resort to the Basic Law which refers to voting as another source (i.e. along with elections) of state authority and judicial power.

3. Research initiatives as well as scholarly education for talented young men and women. International approach, mutual understanding between peoples, tolerance in all domains of culture and thought based on mutual understanding between peoples. [8]

It seems very appropriate to study the ideological and political focus of the DES as well as decipher and decode its metamessage to both the public and Russian diplomatic experts and analysts in order to understand the DES’s key stances as

⁶ Desiderius-Erasmus-Stiftung : AfD-Nahe Stiftung Will Staatliche Förderung Gerichtlich Erzwingen. - Desiderius-Erasmus-Foundation : AfD-Affiliated Foundation Wants To Enforce State Funding In Court. – DIE ZEIT. - [Online] 03 25, 2019. - [Cited: 04 09, 2020]. – URL : <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2019-03/esiderius-erasmus-stiftung-afd-bundesmittel-foerderung-klage-bundesverfassungsgericht>

⁷ AfD erkennt Stiftung von Erika Steinbach als parteinah an. - AfD considers the Foundation of Erika Steinbach close to party. – Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. – [Online] 06 30, 2018. – [Cited: 04 06, 2020]. – URL : <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/stiftung-von-erika-steinbach-gilt-jetzt-als-afd-parteinah-15668298.html>

⁸ Desiderius-Erasmus-Stiftung. – [Online]. - [Cited: 04 09, 2020]. – URL : <https://erasmus-stiftung.de/>

well as possible cooperation with the foundation in the context of overall relationships between Russia and Germany.

In the DES' newsletter # 01 we can read what follows: "In the long-term prospect, political education will have a deeper and stronger impact on the shaping of public opinion than any electoral campaign or any campaign promotion". [9]

As part of its projects implemented in Germany, the DES offers trainings in "public speaking and debating, using social media, working with mass media"; thus, new highly skilled members can be recruited into the AfD. [10]

Initially the DES, unlike other party foundations, didn't have any plans to operate at the international level. The primary goal of the AfD and DES was to develop close ties with each other. [11]

However, the DES's website lists five domains of the foundation's activities: create an educational center and a political academy, render political consultations, provide financial support and, among others, develop international projects.

It has to be noted that the federal budget expenses for the international offices of the Bundestag party foundations, with the exception of the DES which was founded in 2017, made up about 2.5 billion euros between the years 2010 and 2021. [12]

Cooperation between the civil societies of Russia and Germany plays an important role in the development of relationships between the two countries. [13]

⁹ Desiderius-Erasmus-Stiftung. Rundbrief Nr. 01. – [Online] 05 03, 2018. – [Cited: 04 06, 2020]. – URL : <https://mailchi.mp/6412f20f4226/die-erasmus-stiftung-informiert>

¹⁰ «Ideenschmiede» Der AfD. – «Reservoir Of Ideas» Of AfD. - Magazin «Der Rechte Rand». Ausgabe 174. – [Online] 9 / 10 2018. – [Cited: 04 06, 2020]. – URL : <https://www.der-rechte-rand.de/archive/4067/ideenschmiede-der-afd/>

¹¹ Wie Die AfD Ihren Stallgeruch In Der Gesellschaft Verbreiten Will. - How The AfD Wants To Spread Its Stable Smell In Society. - Sueddeutsche Zeitung. – [Online] 03 09, 2018. — [Cited: 04 09, 2020]. — URL : <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/parainahe-stiftung-wie-die-afd-ihren-stallgeruch-in-der-gesellschaft-verbreiten-will-1.3900272>

¹² Antwort Der Bundesregierung Auf Die Kleine Anfrage Des Abgeordneten Dr. Anton Friesen Und Der Fraktion Der AfD – Drucksache 19/3858 – Auslandsaktivitäten Politischer Stiftungen Aus Deutschland. - Answer Of The Federal Government To The Small Question Of The Deputy Dr. Anton Friesen And The Faction Of The AfD – Printed Edition 19/3858 - Foreign Activities Of Political Foundations From Germany. - Drucksache 19/4138. – [Online] 04 09, 2018. – [Cited : 04 07,2020]. – URL : <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/041/1904138.pdf>

¹³Instrumenty «Miagkoi Sily» Germanii I Ikh Rol' V Rossiisko-Germanskikh Otnosheniakh. - The Instruments Of German «Soft Power» And Their Role In Relations Between Russia And Germany. - Guliaev Egor Vladimirovich. - Advanced Science. Sbornik Statei III Mezhdunarodnoi Nauchno-Prakticheskoi Konferentsii: V 2 Ch. – Advanced Science. Collection Of Articles For The 3rd International Research Conference: In 2 Volumes. – 2018. - Penza. - Izdatel'stvo: "Nauka I Prosveshchenie". - pp. 272-276. – [Online] 04 23, 2018. - [Cited : 04 06,2020]. – URL : <https://naukaip.ru/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/%D0%9C%D0%9A-325-%D0%A1%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA-%D0%A7%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D1%8C-1.pdf>

In this connection I would like to draw the attention of Russian political experts to the fact that the AfD's political ideology differs substantially from Russia's own political course. A central theme in the AfD's historical policy is the call to put an end to the German cult of guilt. [¹⁴]

Conclusion

The fact that past events are being viewed in the DES's projects through the prism of historical revisionism makes us think seriously about elaborating a well-defined and detailed strategy of dealing with it, preferably before a first office of the DES opens up in Russia.

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¹⁴ Goldschleier Und „Schuld kult“: Zur Rolle Der Desiderius-Erasmus-Stiftung Im Neurechten Geschichtsdiskurs. - Gold Veil And "Guilt Cult": The Role Of Desiderius-Erasmus-Foundation In The New Historical Discourse. – Bell News Tower. Netz für Digitale Gesellschaft. – [Online] 02 06, 2020. – [Cited : 04 06, 2020]. – URL : <https://www.belltower.news/goldschleier-und-schuld kult-zur-rolle-der-desiderius-erasmus-stiftung-im-neurechten-geschichtsdiskurs-95639/>