
GEOPOLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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GEOPOLITICS OF SMALL STEPS: GERMAN POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS IN BELARUS IN 2014–2020

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The article analyses the activities of German political foundations in Belarus between 2014 and 2020, using the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation as case studies. The study is grounded in the framework of neoclassical realism, which conceptualises foundations as actors capable of autonomous action while operating within the broader contours of German foreign policy. The study examines their public events, analytical publications, and interactions with Belarusian society and state institutions in the period leading up to the political crisis of 2020. The Ebert Foundation focused primarily on socio-economic reforms, emphasising what it characterised as the ‘obsolescence’ of the Belarusian economic model, an argument that, in its view, created a basis for seeking Western support. The Adenauer Foundation, by contrast, concentrated on security issues. The study concludes that only some activities of the foundations were directed at promoting internal change within the Belarusian political regime. In practice, the geopolitical logic came to the fore, as both foundations sought to influence the regional order, most notably by promoting the notion of Belarusian ‘neutrality’, which could contribute to weakening Russia’s military and political position in the Baltic region, including with regard to the Kaliningrad region. The research did not reveal sufficient public evidence to suggest that the foundations played a decisive role in the development of organisational structures within the Belarusian opposition during the 2020 crisis. Instead, their priorities often lay in building transnational expert networks aimed at advancing pro-Western geopolitical narratives in Belarus. These findings call into question the widespread assumption that German political foundations function primarily as ‘democratisation’ actors constrained by ideological templates, suggesting instead that they operate as flexible and pragmatic actors pursuing geopolitical objectives.

Keywords:

Belarus, humanitarian influence, German political foundations, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, geopolitics, neutrality

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In the context of the confrontation between Russia and NATO, developments in Belarus have had a significant impact on the geostrategic balance in the Baltic region. Following the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, Minsk sought to capitalise on its role as a negotiation platform in order to enhance its international standing and diversify its external relations. At a time when the position of the European Union remained largely inert, with cooperation with Belarus having been frozen after the end of the previous cycle of rapprochement between Belarus and the West in 2010, German political foundations assumed a more visible role. The largest among them, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, emerged as key actors in a new phase of rapprochement between Minsk, the Federal Republic of Germany and the EU. This process ultimately culminated in 2020 in the most significant political crisis in Belarus's modern history.

The Belarusian authorities drew their own conclusions regarding the causes of the 2020 crisis. In particular, in 2021, President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko stated that evidence had been found of funding by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation for "independent trade unions and destructive non-governmental organisations," and called on officials to "record where society is being destabilised under the guise of good deeds".¹

In 2021–2022, a 'cleansing' of Western influence infrastructure was carried out in the republic, yet Minsk's inclination towards establishing ties with the West has persisted. At the same time, there have been informal signals from Western actors indicating a possible abandonment of the policy of isolating Belarus and a return to a strategy of its 'engagement'.² Having lost official contacts in Minsk, German foundations actively work with the Belarusian opposition, supporting emigrant political centres. This work is oriented toward a longer term, aiming to exert influence through indirect methods, including promoting among target groups in Belarusian society narratives about Belarus as part of the 'European family', which allegedly has historically suffered from Russian oppression. These theses were reiterated in an article by the Director for Belarus at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Wallenstein, in 2023 [2].

Overall, events and publications from 2014 to 2020 constitute a substantial body of public material for analysing the operational practices of German foundations in Belarus, their interaction with local authorities, and their role in shaping and implementing the foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany. This article seeks to address the issues identified by contributing to the scholarly discussion on the effectiveness of foundation activities, the degree of coordination among them, and the broader mechanisms of indirect political influence in

¹ Meeting with local officials on current socio-political issues, 2021, *President of the Republic of Belarus*, URL: <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vstrecha-s-aktivom-mestnoy-vertikali-po-aktualnym-voprosam-obshchestvenno-politicheskoy-obstanovki> (accessed 20.05.2025).

² On contacts with the USA, see: Higgins, A., Dapkus, T. 2025, A Quick, Quiet Trip to Belarus Signals a Turn in U. S. Policy, *The New York Times*, 15.02.2025, URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/15/world/europe/belarus-us-prisoners-diplomacy.html> (accessed 20.05.2025).

international relations. The central research question examines whether German party-affiliated political foundations function primarily as ideologically driven agents of ‘democratisation’ or whether their actions are guided predominantly by geopolitical considerations.

The empirical basis of the article consists of official publications by Belarusian and German governmental bodies, reports and analytical documents of the German Friedrich Ebert and Konrad Adenauer Foundations, as well as media publications and public statements by foundation representatives and official figures.

The analysis of the empirical material employed a range of methods. Event analysis was used to organise the foundations’ activities in chronological sequence against the broader timeline of international political developments. Discourse analysis was applied to examine publications and speeches by representatives of the foundations, as well as by officials of the Republic of Belarus (RB). In addition, the comparative method was employed to identify the specific characteristics of the foundations’ activities in Belarus.

Theory of foundation studies

The causes of the crisis in Belarus in 2020 have become the subject of research [3],¹ but the problem of specific actors influencing the political process in the republic in the years preceding the crisis, as well as the factors constituting them, has been insufficiently studied. At the same time, German political foundations in the context of FRG foreign policy have long been in the focus of scholarly attention, both from a historical-political perspective [4; 5] and in a comparative context [6].

A substantial body of literature has emerged examining the regional presence of political foundations as key instruments of Germany’s ‘soft power’ in the Baltic States [7], as participants in ‘democratisation’ processes and promoters of German interests in Latin America [8], as well as in the Mediterranean region and Greece in the context of the Eurozone crisis [9], and in North Africa, particularly Tunisia during the Arab Spring [10]. Research on the Ukrainian case demonstrates that, over the long term, such foundations contribute to transformations of the political system by acting as agents of socialisation and as instruments for the diffusion of norms [11]. One of the few studies addressing the Belarusian case likewise identifies similarities between the approaches adopted by German political foundations and those employed by American non-governmental organisations in their activities in the Republic of Belarus [12].

There is considerable scholarly interest in examining the toolkit of political foundations as a means of advancing Germany’s geo-economic interests, particularly in relation to the transition to renewable energy [13; 14]. A substantial body of literature also focuses on assessing the successes and shortcomings of foundations in “democratising” other countries [15; 16]. However, the geopolitical dimension of foundation activity remains insufficiently explored. A number

¹ Sutyrin, V. V. 2020, *Perestroika po-belorusski: logika sistemnogo krizisa*, *RSMI*, URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/perestroyka-po-belorusski-logika-sistemnogo-krizisa/> (accessed 17.09.2020).

of studies, including recent contributions, proceed from the conventional assumption that German foundations are unable to operate fully in accordance with a geopolitical logic, as they are ideologically constrained and required to adapt both to their 'parent' parties in Germany and to local partners [17].

The marginalisation of the geopolitical perspective is evident even in broader analyses of political foundations. They are commonly conceptualised as instruments of societal and state development [18], as constructors of hegemony [19], or as actors involved in knowledge production and discourse management [20], rather than as agents operating within explicitly geopolitical frameworks. Overcoming this gap raises the issue of studying foundations as an instrument for the political appropriation and control by non-military means, including within the context of discursive and interstate competition. Belarus, despite lacking access to the sea, possesses significant geostrategic importance for the Baltic region. Given its proximity to the Kaliningrad region and its extensive border with Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic States, it can be argued that the 'Belarusian balcony' seriously influences strategic calculations in the region. Economically, until 2020 Belarus was deeply integrated into trade with the Baltic Sea countries, relying on land transit through Poland and seaports in the Baltic states for the export of its products. At the same time, the evolution of the political process in the republic remained conservative, marked by continuity in its interaction with Russia and the preservation of Soviet legacies in politics and culture, particularly when compared with its closest western neighbours. The juxtaposition of 'democratising' and geopolitical overtones in the work of German foundations in Belarus appears epistemically unproductive. There is no compelling reason to reject the thesis that 'democratisation' within EU policy has entailed an expansion of influence, including geopolitical influence, on the part of its sponsors, a point aptly captured in conceptualisations of the European Union as an empire [21; 22]. The conventional tendency to view the EU and Germany primarily as value-based or civilian actors [23] does not provide sufficient grounds for excluding geopolitical motivations from analytical frameworks.

Under these conditions, it is appropriate, alongside the prevailing leftist interpretations of the activities of German foundations as liberal modernisers or imperialist constructors of hegemony (depending on the observer's position), to examine the foundations through the lens of realism within the framework of neoclassical realism [24; 25]. In this regard, the theoretical framework of the analysis looks as follows. States remain the primary actors in international relations in conditions close to anarchic. However, their actions are determined not only by systemic (objective) factors such as the balance of forces on the international stage, the size and resource base of armed forces, economic power, and military expenditures, but also by geopolitical factors related to spatial positioning and subjective factors involving elites' perception of threats, decision-making systems, and the distribution of political forces within the state.

The interpretation of national interests and the international political environment is shaped by policy-forming circles operating within specific political, socio-cultural, and informational-psychological contexts. External influence on this environment, which the author conceptualises as cultural-humanitarian influence [26], can indirectly reshape a state's domestic and foreign

policy trajectory. In this context, non-governmental organisations, particularly political foundations, are capable of exerting influence by cultivating and coordinating elite-to-elite contacts, promoting specific narratives, and facilitating the ‘socialisation’ of elites. Regarding the mechanisms of such influence, it is worth noting that epistemic communities and transnational expert networks play a crucial role in shaping political discourse, including the discourse of threats and the identity of decision-makers [27; 28]. German foundations often prefer to work precisely with this audience, paying less attention to mass groups, and Belarus is no exception.

At the same time, accepting the optics of neoclassical realism at the theoretical level, one must resolve a contradiction. In the literature, there are numerous attempts to oppose foundations and the state (not only the ‘target’ state as an object of influence but also the ‘parent’ state), derived from the idea that foundations operate in the field of ‘civil society’. Such concepts were particularly popular in the previous two decades: foundations were cast in the roles of actors of ‘global civil society’ [29] or constructors of a ‘global agora’ [30].

However, empirical research indicates that German political foundations may diverge from the official state line at the tactical level while remaining strategically aligned with it [31]. Funded from the federal budget, these foundations play a systemic role in the foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany, complementing official diplomatic efforts. This role is enabled precisely by their formally non-state and ostensibly ‘civil’ legal status. As a result, their tolerance for the risks associated with intervention in sensitive areas of foreign states is higher, allowing them to operate with greater flexibility and speed than state bureaucracies.

These institutions also cultivate specific cadres characterised by an intermediary and ideological mindset, who tend to perceive themselves as less constrained than formal officials. Consequently, political foundations can engage with diverse segments of political elites and opposition groups, operate in countries where official diplomatic presence is limited, and establish pressure networks as well as channels for information gathering.

The roots of this established system of operation trace back to the denazification of West Germany. Party-affiliated political foundations were created for political education with the aim of democratisation in the context of a “semi-sovereign state” [32]. Foreign operations by the foundations began as early as the 1950s and were linked to the anti-communist agenda in Latin America [33], later evolving into the ‘democratisation’ of the Iberian Peninsula.

In the aftermath of the demise of the USSR, German political foundations began to explore the post-Soviet space, initially concentrating on the Baltic region. Their subsequent expansion, however, was not confined to areas of historical German presence along the Baltic Sea. It rapidly extended inland to Ukraine and Belarus, territories that have traditionally functioned as borderlands between the German and Russian geopolitical spheres.

Despite this, researchers continued to view foundations primarily through the prism of ‘democratisation’, following the dominant intellectual fashion. Subject-specific studies on the geopolitical shift in the activities of German foundations have only recently begun to appear. For example, surveys of foundation

employees have documented their geopolitical motivations [17]. Nevertheless, an ‘insider’ view is insufficient, and the ‘outsider’ view based on the analysis of the foundations’ main public theses and events is also essential.

Friedrich Ebert Foundation

In the first half of the 1990s, numerous German agencies and NGOs started their operation in Belarus: the DAAD, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Robert Bosch Foundation, the Carl Duisberg Centre, the Max Planck Institute, and others [34, p. 126]. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation (hereinafter FES) has been active in Belarus since 1993. In 2011, amidst another crisis in Minsk-EU relations, the Belarusian side refused to renew the registration of the foundation’s representative office in the republic. However, the foundation continued its work in Belarus from its office in Kyiv.

The main priorities declared by the FES in Belarus are democracy and the rule of law, workers’ rights, trade unions, the Belarusian economic model, political dialogue with Germany and other European countries based on European values of democracy and human rights, and strengthening peace and security in the region.¹

In October 2014, the Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs had a meeting with a member of the FES board, discussing, among other things, issues of regional security.² That same year, the Foundation published a report authored by two experts from Belarus and Ukraine [35]. This kind of ‘multilingualism’ is typical of FES events and publications on Belarus. The selection of experts, the setting of the agenda for events, and the editing of publications remain under the control of the Foundation staff, enabling them to orchestrate the public discourse while avoiding accusations of propaganda or interference in internal affairs. The ideology lies in providing a platform for diverse viewpoints, thereby securing the Foundation’s role as a moderator of discourse and the boundaries of what is permissible. Thus, the positions of both co-authors on sensitive issues, such as Crimea, were aligned and situated within broader Western political narratives. The report asserted that the “Russian factor has always weighed down normal political dialogue” between Ukraine and Belarus [35, p. 13]. Both authors discussed the topic of the Eastern Partnership as a platform for dialogue between Belarus and Ukraine. The idea of Ukraine as an “advocate for Belarus in relations with the West, and Belarus as a mediator in Ukrainian-Russian dialogue”, was put forward [35, p. 38].

The FES in Belarus paid considerable attention to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), particularly the nuances of its perception and concerns within Belarusian policy-forming circles. In 2015, the Foundation published a report

¹ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Belarus, 2025, URL: <https://belarus.fes.de/ru/index.html> (accessed 20.05.2025).

² Meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, U. Makey, and the former Chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, former Prime Minister of the federal state of Brandenburg, M. Platzeck Source, 2024, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 03.10.2024, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/be/press/news_mfa/ad0c1907d1218cee.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

on internal contradictions within the Union [36]. The authors noted divergences between the Russian view of the EAEU's future as a supposed 'geopolitical project' and the views of Belarus and Kazakhstan, focused on extracting concrete economic benefits. In the section written by the Belarusian co-author, it was claimed that Russian ideas of political integration are perceived in Belarus and Kazakhstan as a "direct threat to national sovereignty," but in the future, "the Kremlin will again turn to the idea of urgent political integration in the EAEU" [36, p. 16–17]. Furthermore, in the event of refusal to pursue further integration, the author forecast "the danger of destabilisation of Belarus due to pressure from Russia, as in Ukraine" [Ibid.].

In cooperation with the Centre for the Study of Foreign Policy and Security, the FES supported the holding of an international seminar "The Ukrainian Crisis — a Challenge to the European Security System" at the Belarusian State University in March 2015. During the event, Belarusian experts voiced theses that the negotiation platform in Minsk was a merit of Belarusian diplomacy, and that the neutral position of Belarus towards East and West was beneficial.¹

On 2 February 2016, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, held a meeting with the head of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's regional office in Kyiv, Stefan Meuser, and the Ambassador of Germany to Belarus, Peter Dettmar.² In the same month, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation published a report [37], co-authored by Meuser, which effectively outlined a programme for the Foundation's activities in the Belarusian direction up to the 2020 crisis. The report noted that Belarusian society displayed "modest enthusiasm for European experiments with an uncertain outcome". At the same time, it argued that regional dynamics and Minsk's economic interests rendered an EU "policy of small steps" both feasible and advisable. Rather than advocating maximalist strategies centred on regime change, the report proposed the construction of a "stable infrastructure of dialogue with Belarus", involving active engagement with civil society. This engagement was envisaged across specific issue areas, including the economy, the rule of law, social guarantees, education, and dialogue between the EU and the EAEU.

The analysis included several insightful observations, for instance, that "the search for material benefit from international cooperation" is the central idea of Belarusian foreign policy. The report contained a warning against overly ambitious EU policy towards Belarus, which would "awaken unfulfillable hopes in the progressive part of Belarusian society" (clearly referring to Belarusian Euro-integration, which Germany did not support, unlike Polish intentions within the Eastern Partnership [38]). The authors, in a spirit of pragmatism bordering on cynicism, characteristic more of private political analysis, stated that Belarus "lacks the critical mass and internal pressure for a revolutionary situation to

¹ The Ukrainian crisis as a threat to the national security of the Republic of Belarus, 2015, RISS, 20.03.2015, URL: <https://www.riss.ru/analitica/ukrainskiy-krizis-kak-ugroza-natsionalnoy-bezopasnosti-respubliki-belarus/> (accessed 20.05.2025).

² Meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs V. Makei with S. Meuser and P. Dettmar, 2016, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 02.02.2016, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/be/press/news_mfa/b3b140e62c94398b.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

arise” [37, p. 5]. Therefore, it was proposed to adopt a more moderate approach, creating conditions that increase the likelihood of ‘positive’ social and economic transformations towards democratisation.

A task was formulated to convince Minsk that the West is not an enemy, and that representatives of civil society are not agents of subversive activity, but rather partners of the state [37, p. 6].¹ More specifically, the report proposed establishing dialogue with selected segments of the Belarusian state apparatus around the issue of economic modernisation, on the grounds that the Belarusian economic model was allegedly “worn out”. The authors recommended supporting dialogue between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union, highlighting the potential of such a framework to constrain Russia’s capacity for unilateral action. It was further suggested that facilitating a shift in dialogue between Minsk and Moscow towards an EU—EAEU format could create opportunities to strengthen Minsk’s position in areas where its interests converge with those of the EU and the Federal Republic of Germany.

At the same time, from 2015 to 2020, the FES engaged experts and supported events organised by the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies, one of its main contractors in Belarus, known for radical anti-Russian outbursts. Reports prepared under the umbrella of the centre and presented in Minsk with the FES support were aimed at propagating the idea of an alleged ‘Russian military threat’ to Belarus, as well as discrediting Eurasian integration as disadvantageous and dangerous from Minsk’s perspective.²

In 2017, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation published a report by the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies on economic reforms in Belarus, which argued that “recession and currency shocks in the Russian economy and their consequences for Belarus have highlighted the need to diversify trade and economic ties”. The report was heavily framed around references to alleged pressure from Russia, which was said to compel Minsk to adopt protective measures. These measures were defined primarily in terms of economic liberalisation and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, objectives that, according to the authors, could not be achieved without Western financial and technical assistance [39, p. 4].

In April 2017, the FES, together with another Belarusian partner, the Centre for the Study of Foreign Policy and Security, held an international conference marking the 25th anniversary of the restoration of diplomatic relations between Belarus and Germany. The German party emphasised Belarus’s belonging to Europe and its potential to become a “bridge for interaction between the EAEU

¹ Given that a significant portion of organisations in the Belarusian civil society either received regular grants from Western foundations or operated in Belarus from the territories of the Baltic states, Poland, and the Czech Republic, such a task meant creating new entry points for foreign interests and narratives into the Belarusian state apparatus.

² Presentation of the report “Belarus in the EAEU: One Year Later,” 2016, *Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies*, 21.03.2016, URL: <https://www.forstrategy.org/ru/events/20160321> (accessed 20.05.2025); Presentation of the reports “EU and the East in 2030” and “The New Geopolitical Strategy of Russia,” 2015, *Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies*, 24.11.2015, URL: <https://www.forstrategy.org/ru/events/20151124> (accessed 20.05.2025).

and Germany".¹ In October, the Foundation, jointly with the Centre, organised a conference "The Eurasian Economic Union: Experience and Prospects of Regional Integration," where issues of EU-EAEU cooperation were again discussed.²

Meetings between Belarusian diplomats and representatives of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation became a de facto integral component of interministerial contacts and interparliamentary dialogue between Belarus and Germany. In February 2017, a working visit to Germany by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Oleg Kravchenko, took place within the framework of Belarusian-German interministerial consultations. During the visit, a meeting was held with Matthias Platzeck, a member of the FES Executive Board. Both parties considered possibilities for expanding Belarus's interaction with the Foundation, including in the economic and social spheres.³

In March 2018, a conference "Crisis of the European Security System and the Role of the OSCE" was held at the Austrian National Defence Academy, organised by the Academy and several Austrian analytical centres with the support of the FES. The Ambassador of Belarus to Austria, Alena Kupchina, was one of the main speakers.⁴ In September 2018, the programme of a visit to Berlin by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Oleg Kravchenko, conducted within the framework of Belarusian-German interministerial consultations, once again included a meeting with the Chairman of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Kurt Beck.⁵

In August 2019, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, received members of a parliamentary delegation from Germany during their visit to Belarus, organised by the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation.⁶ During the meeting, the parties discussed the state and prospects for the development of Belarusian-German cooperation, including its parliamentary dimension, the topic

¹ Belarus is a promising platform for negotiations of a new format for pan-European cooperation—Lindner, 2017, *BELTA*, 24.04.2017, URL: <https://belta.by/politics/view/belarus-javilaetsja-perspektivnoj-ploschadkoj-dlya-peregovorov-novogo-formata-obscheevropejskogo-244254-2017/> (accessed 20.05.2025).

² Prospects for the development of Eurasian integration discussed at an international conference in Minsk, 2017, *BELTA*, 24.10.2017, URL: <https://belta.by/politics/view/perspektivny-razvitiya-evrazijskoy-integratsii-rassmotreny-na-mezhdunarodnoj-konferentsii-v-minske-272872-2017/> (accessed 20.05.2025).

³ On the visit of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus O. Kravchenko to Germany, 2017, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 24.02.2017, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/b8746b9711031d6a.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

⁴ On the participation of Ambassador of Belarus Alena Kupchina in the discussion at the conference "Crisis of the European Security System and the Role of the OSCE", 2018, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 07.03.2018, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/em_news/a686b3c245e07ef15.html (accessed 20.05.2025)

⁵ On the visit of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus O. Kravchenko to Germany, 2018, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 07.03.2018, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/e3d5a86c17a51153.html (accessed 20.05.2025).]

⁶ On the meeting of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus V. Makei with members of the German parliamentary delegation, 2019, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 20.08.2019, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/e9b74fe6bb0ae3fd.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

of Belarus-EU interaction, and current regional agenda items. In October 2019, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, in cooperation with the Centre for the Study of Foreign Policy and Security, organised a conference “The Eurasian Economic Union in the Context of Regional Integration Processes: New Challenges and Opportunities.” A representative of the Foundation, Mikhail Litvin, emphasised the importance of this annual platform for discussing issues related to Eurasian integration, including the challenges facing the EAEU.¹

Thus, the main publicly visible activities of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Belarus were largely concentrated in the expert domain and aimed at shaping the agenda of Belarus’s participation in Russia-led integration initiatives, while simultaneously promoting narratives of economic and even military ‘threats’ emanating from Russia. This focus did not preclude engagement with the Belarusian authorities; on the contrary, such contacts became systematic and regular during the period under review. While the thematic orientation of the foundation’s core events formally corresponded to its profile and centred on socio-economic issues, a geopolitical subtext concerning relations with Moscow and Russia’s role in the region was consistently present and explicitly emphasised.

Konrad Adenauer Foundation

The officially declared objectives of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Belarus were to strengthen relations with Germany and the European Union and to facilitate Belarus’s engagement with the broader European community. The Foundation disseminated information among target groups within Belarusian society and supplied analytical materials to European decision-making centres. Its activities were directed at parliamentarians, government officials, entrepreneurs, the expert community, and youth.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation (hereinafter KAS) unsuccessfully attempted to register its representative office in Belarus in 2004², but, unlike the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, did not achieve even temporary success. Contacts between Belarusian officials and the KAS intensified in February 2016, one week before the EU announced on February 15 the lifting of a significant part of sanctions against Belarus. On 8 February, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, received the head of the Vilnius-based regional office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Volker Zender.³ On 11 February, speaking at a

¹ Belarus, as chair in the EAEU, will strive to create a full-fledged economic union—MFA, 2019, *BELTA*, 17.10.2019, URL: <https://belta.by/economics/view/belarus-kak-predsedatel-v-eaes-budet-dobivatsja-sozdaniya-polnoformatnogo-ekonomiceskogo-sojza-mid-366038-2019/> (accessed 20.05.2025).

² Konrad Adenauer Foundation denies Minsk’s accusations, 2005, *DW* (included in the Register of Foreign Mass Media Performing Functions of a Foreign Agent by the Ministry of Justice), 24.02.2005, URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/a-1500190> (accessed 20.05.2025).]

³ On the meeting of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Vladimir Makei with the head of the regional representation of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2016, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 08.02.2016, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/c6cf72b8035ab5ed.html (accessed 20.05.2025).]

conference in Minsk, Zender characterised Belarus as a “neutral territory, skilled at communicating with both the West and the East,” and encouraged the Belarusian authorities to act as a “moderator of negotiations” on Ukraine. According to his remarks, this role could position Minsk as a “new Vienna, Geneva, or Helsinki”.¹ The conference, supported by the KAS and the Minsk Dialogue initiative, was attended by Vladimir Makei, and the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office’s Special Representative in the Trilateral Contact Group for the implementation of the peace plan in eastern Ukraine, Martin Sajdik.² Thus, the initiative, backed by the KAS, ensured a high level from the outset, indicating a shared agenda between the German and Belarusian sides.

The arguments and metaphors articulated in Volker Zender’s speech effectively formed the basis of the argumentation strategy subsequently pursued by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) in Belarus over the following five years. During this period, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation supported several major events organised within the Minsk Dialogue expert platform, thereby contributing to the promotion of the concept of Belarusian ‘neutrality’. The KAS leadership correctly assumed that the Belarusian authorities were particularly receptive to this notion of “neutral positioning”. Indeed, head of Belarusian diplomacy, Vladimir Makei, repeatedly expressed his aspiration to transform Belarus into the “Switzerland of Eastern Europe”.³

Security issues became the starting point and leitmotif of the KAS’s most noticeable activities in Belarus. From 2015 to 2018, in cooperation with NATO’s Public Diplomacy Division and the Centre for the Study of Foreign Policy and Security, the Foundation supported annual international seminars “International Security and NATO”.⁴

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation continued its close cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus. On 9 March 2016, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, held a meeting in Minsk with the Chairman of the Foundation, Hans-Gert Pöttering.⁵ In April of the same year,

¹ Belarus could become a moderator of the dialogue on Ukraine—German expert, 2016, *BELTA*, 11.02.2016, URL: <https://belta.by/politics/view/belarus-mogla-by-stat-moderatorom-dialoga-po-ukraine-nemetskij-ekspert-181188-2016/> (accessed 20.05.2025).]

² On the participation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus V. Makei in the conference “Minsk Agreements One Year Later: Achievements, Challenges, Lessons,” 2016, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 08.02.2016, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/print/press/news_mfa/bae3960df32eb1ca.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

³ Makei dreams of seeing Belarus as the Switzerland of Eastern Europe, 2019, *Sputnik*, 13.11.2019, URL: <https://sputnik.by/20191113/Makey-mechtaet-videt-Belarus-Shveytsariy-Vostochnoy-Evropy-1043225111.html> (accessed 20.05.2025).

⁴ NATO and Belarus conduct dialogue and exchange views on security issues, 2018, *BELTA*, 13.12.2018, URL: <https://belta.by/politics/view/nato-i-belarus-vedut-dialog-i-obmenivatsja-videniem-problem-bezopasnosti-329218-2018/> (accessed 20.05.2025)

⁵ On the meeting of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, with the Chairman of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2016, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 08.02.2016, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/e12821b40e597043.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

the Foundation organised a working visit to Brussels of a Belarusian delegation of experts from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Secretariat of the Security Council, the Ministry of Defence, and Belarusian State University.¹ In September, with KAS support, Belarusian officials and representatives of non-governmental organisations visited German state institutions.²

The Foundation also facilitated visits by delegations from the youth wings of German political parties to Belarus, established contacts between the Young Union of Germany and the Belarusian Republican Youth Union,³ and actively promoted bilateral business dialogue⁴.

In its publications on Belarus, the KAS continued to give priority attention to Russia. In February 2017, an analytical report by the Foundation noted that Moscow allegedly hinders Minsk's plans to become a hub between West and East, and that Minsk is losing trust in Moscow [40]. It was noted that Minsk's gestures towards the West do not receive adequate response, and that liberal Belarusian elite groups need to attract investment to the country to gain arguments in favour of a pro-Western course. Recommendations included intensifying training programs for Belarusian managers, strengthening Belarus's role as a venue for negotiations on regional conflicts, and activating high-level German-Belarusian relations. Speaking at a foundation conference on 7 September 2017, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Oleg Kravchenko, called for moving beyond bloc-based thinking and proposed transforming Belarus's western border into a "meeting line between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union".⁵

Soon thereafter, the level of political contacts began to increase. In November 2017, Minsk was visited for the first time since 2010 by the German Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sigmar Gabriel, who participated in the fifteenth Minsk Forum

¹ Regional and military-political security discussed with Belarusian experts in Brussels, 2016, *BELTA*, 22.04.2016, URL: <https://belta.by/society/view/regionálnaja-i-voeno-politicheskaja-bezopasnost-obsuzhdala-s-belorusskimi-ekspertami-v-brussele-190672-2016/> (accessed 20.05.2025).

² Technology transfer is promising as a direction for cooperation between Belarus and Saxony—Landtag member, *BELTA*, 19.09.2016. URL: <https://belta.by/politics/view/transfer-tehnologij-perspektiven-v-kachestve-napravlenija-sotrudnichestva-belorusi-i-saksonii-chlen-210939-2016/> (accessed 20.05.2025).

³ Ibid.; Youth organizations of Belarus and Germany will implement a number of joint projects in the near future, *BELTA*, 19.02.2017, URL: <https://belta.by/society/view/molodezhnye-organizatsii-belorusi-i-germanii-v-blizhajshee-vremja-realizujut-rjad-sovmestnyh-proektov-233862-2017/> (accessed 20.05.2025).

⁴ Belarus considers Germany one of its most important economic partners—Ambassador, 2017, *BELTA*, 27.10.2017, URL: <https://belta.by/economics/view/beloruss-matrivaet-germaniju-kak-odnogo-iz-vazhnejshih-ekonomicheskikh-partnerov-posol-273525-2017/> (accessed 20.05.2025).

⁵ Belarus sees its western border as the meeting line of the EAEU and the EU—Kravchenko, 2017, *BELTA*, 07.09.2017, URL: <https://belta.by/politics/view/beloruss-vidit-svoju-zapadnuju-granitsu-liniej-vstrechi-eaes-i-es-kravchenko-265351-2017/> (accessed 20.05.2025).]

entitled “Belarus, Germany and the EU: ‘Eastern Partnership’, Civil Society and Economic Relations.” The event was organised with the support of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

In the Foundation’s subsequent report, published in December 2017, a positive shift in the attitude of the European Union towards Belarus was noted, reflected in heightened attention to the country. The report reiterated calls for expanding high-level contacts and enhancing the EU’s visibility within Belarusian society [41]. It also highlighted progress in incorporating opposition groups through non-governmental organisations within the framework of the EU-Belarus Coordination Group, a development attributed largely to the absence of direct communication channels between the European Union and Belarus. The signing of the Eastern Partnership summit declaration by Minsk in 2017 was assessed favourably, with particular emphasis placed on the statement by the Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs that Belarus is “European both geographically and politically”.¹

The KAS promoted the themes of Belarusian neutrality, the Eastern Partnership, and frozen conflicts, supporting events by the Minsk Dialogue expert initiative.² The KAS also funded expert events in Belarus with the participation of NATO representatives.³

In May 2018, a representative of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Volker Zender, appeared on the national television channel Belarus-1, where he argued that the Eastern Partnership was not directed against Russia but was intended to improve living standards in Belarus. The interview was conducted in the context of the forum “Eastern Europe: In Search of Security for All,” organised with KAS support and attended by the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko. Thus, within three years, the initiative reached the presidential level. According to official information, approximately 350 experts participated in the Forum in 2018, while in 2019 both the scale of the event and its media coverage expanded, with the organisers reporting participation by more than 500 experts.

A report published by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in June 2018 claimed that the Russian side allegedly demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm for Minsk’s initiative to launch a new European agreement, referred to as “Helsinki-2” [42]. The report recommended strengthening Western military and political engagement with Belarus to prevent the potential use of Belarusian territory by Russian forces for the defence of Kaliningrad. In this context, the authors warned that Belarus could otherwise “lose its sovereignty”.

¹ Makei: Soon the president’s participation in EU-related events will be a routine matter, 2017, *Radio Svaboda*, 08.12.2017, URL: <https://www.svaboda.org/a/28905463.html> (accessed 20.05.2025).

² The future of the Eastern Partnership initiative to be discussed in Minsk by international experts on September 7, 2017, *BELTA*, 06.09.2017, URL: <https://belta.by/society/view/buduschee-initiativy-vostochnoe-partnerstvo-obsudjat-v-minske-mezhdunarodnye-eksperty-7-sentjabrja-265169-2017/> (accessed 20.05.2025).

³ Belarus advocates resolving disputed issues solely through negotiations, 2018, *BELTA*, 13.12.2018, URL: <https://belta.by/politics/view/belarus-vystupaet-za-uregulirovanie-spornyh-voprosov-tolko-putem-peregovorov-329169-2018/> (accessed 20.05.2025).

The report further expressed concern that actors within the Belarusian state apparatus advocating closer relations with the West did not receive sufficient support from the European Union. It also highlighted the lack of personal contacts that could be mobilised in the event of a regional crisis. To address these shortcomings, the authors proposed expanding dialogue programmes with Belarus on security-related issues and establishing a NATO Information Office in the country. At the same time, it was explicitly emphasised that such initiatives should be framed under the banner of reducing regional tensions in order to avoid provoking concern on the part of Russia.

Numerous publications supporting KAS initiatives developed this argumentation, adapting it for the Belarusian audience. Concepts such as “neutral positioning” or “situational neutrality” were actively introduced into scientific and expert discourse [43]. Discussions on neutrality contributed to blurring the perception of Belarus’s role as a military-political ally of Russia with binding obligations, allowing the republic to be incorporated into a European context.

From the earliest stages of intensified activity in Belarus after 2016, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation emerged as a key organiser of large-scale expert and political forums involving high-level political figures. In contrast to the thematic focus of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation devoted comparatively little public attention to Belarus’s socio-economic conditions, instead placing explicit emphasis on geopolitical considerations, including issues related to the Kaliningrad region. While the Friedrich Ebert Foundation periodically addressed questions of “democratisation” and economic reform in Belarus in its reports and events, gradually linking domestic issues to the broader regional geopolitical configuration, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation tended to structure its activities along a different axis. It typically proceeded from questions of regional security and geopolitics, situating Belarus within this wider strategic context. Despite these differences in emphasis and framing, both foundations displayed a consistent convergence in promoting the notion of Belarus’s “neutralisation”, understood as the weakening of its alliance commitments to Moscow.

Alignment of priorities between the Belarusian authorities and the foundations

The German Foreign Ministry continued to promote the opening of foundation offices on Belarusian territory until the next crisis in relations in 2020.¹ Despite active interaction with the foundations after 2014, the Belarusian authorities did not satisfy this request.² Without a bureau on Belarusian territory, the foundations conducted events jointly with Belarusian partner organisations, which facilitated control and limited the foundations’ freedom of action within the country. The

¹ Korovenkova, T. 2019, Ambassador Manfred Hütterer: Germany is interested in a strong and independent Belarus, *BelaPAN*, 26.09.2019, URL: <https://minsk.diplo.de/resource/blob/2501618/54fc2731088e57c46994fe88caf2fbd0/interview-belapan-pdf-data.pdf> (accessed 20.05.2025).

² There are no agreements on opening the Adenauer Foundation in Belarus, 2016, *Sputnik Belarus*, 11.02.2016, URL: <https://sputnik.by/20160211/1020085109.html> (accessed 20.05.2025).

head of the KAS department for Belarus, Volker Zender, worked de jure from the Vilnius office but de facto was often present in Belarus, actively contacting the expert community and top-level officials.¹

Belarusian authorities actively engaged in dialogue with the foundations, participating in their initiatives to expand ties in the Western direction. The interests of the authorities partially coincided with those of the foundations, since both parties wanted to maintain and develop the negotiation platform in Minsk. For the Belarusian authorities, this provided a positive agenda in contacts with the EU and opportunities for a “multi-vector” policy.

In pursuing the task of strengthening contacts with Western partners, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus had a limited set of official instruments at its disposal, to which Western authorities were not always able to respond with sufficient flexibility. In this context, political foundations assumed their familiar role as intermediaries and facilitators of new connections for local elites. In its official review of activities for 2017, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus noted a “noticeable increase in interest” in the country on the part of external experts, who took part in events organised within the non-governmental expert and discussion platform Minsk Dialogue,² which received support from German foundations.

In the 2018 review, the MFA of Belarus reported that major international events, including the Minsk Dialogue Forum “Eastern Europe: In Search of Security for All,” provided “expert content for Belarus’s idea of non-confrontational cooperation and organising broad-format international dialogue” in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian contexts.³ In October 2019, the Head of the Department for Eurasian Integration at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Andrei Aleksandrovich, stated at a conference organised by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation that there was a need to establish dialogue between the Eurasian Economic Union and the European Commission. He suggested that “we are approaching this dialogue, possibly during Belarus’s presidency in the EAEU, given the warming of relations along the Belarus–EU line”.⁴ Thus, Minsk’s ambitions to act as a mediator in the Western direction for EAEU countries, including Russia, were declared.

¹ On the meeting of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus V. Makei with the head of the regional representation of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2016, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, 08.02.2016, URL: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/c6cf72b8035ab5ed.html (accessed 20.05.2025).

² Review of the Results of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus and the Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017, 2018, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, URL: <https://mfa.gov.by/publication/reports/a8a5169b6e487b3b.html> (accessed 20.05.2025).

³ Review of the Results of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus and the Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2018, 2019, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, URL: <https://mfa.gov.by/publication/reports/b7fe6b330b96c9b7.html> (accessed 20.05.2025).

⁴ Belarus, as chair in the EAEU, will strive to create a full-fledged economic union—MFA, 2019, *BELTA*, 17.10.2019, URL: <https://belta.by/economics/view/belarus-kak-predsedatel-v-eaes-budet-dobivatsja-sozdanija-polnoformatnogo-ekonomicheskogo-sojuza-mid-366038-2019/> (accessed 20.05.2025).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus viewed joint initiatives with political foundations as one of the key instruments of its foreign policy positioning. In its 2019 review, the second major expert forum organised within the Minsk Dialogue platform, entitled “European Security: Stepping Back from the Brink” and held with the support of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, was described as a “landmark event”. According to the review, the forum confirmed Minsk’s status as a “significant regional platform for inclusive dialogue involving all interested parties”.¹ Over the course of four years of intensified activity, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation succeeded in raising the status of its events in the republic to the presidential level. At the same time, in 2019, Alexander Lukashenko stated that the opposition “lives on foreign grants”, explicitly referring to the Ebert and Adenauer foundations, as well as to American foundations.²

From the perspective of the Belarusian authorities, the foundations remained an instrument that was partly useful but also potentially dangerous. Despite the lack of a permanent ‘residence’ in Belarus, the foundations operated according to the familiar scheme for contacts with “authoritarian governments”³ offering the promise of partial legitimacy bonuses and expanded contacts with German and European elites in exchange for access to civil society and local elites, and the promotion of their own agenda and narratives. However, the main rhetoric of the German foundations was concentrated on the foreign policy track, where the factor of Russia and the ‘Russian threat’ served as a constant refrain. Here, a compromise emerged: the foundations tried to avoid public discussion of domestic Belarusian topics to refrain from criticising the local authorities, but at the same time actively promoted criticism of Russia and the Eurasian integration project among the Belarusian audience.

Belarusian specialised agencies were under pressure to demonstrate tangible achievements in the Western direction and therefore required receptive and institutionally flexible counterparts, a role that political foundations effectively assumed. At the same time, attempts at rapprochement with the West increased the risks for Minsk of weakening its ties with Russia. Arguments in favour of diversifying external relations, rather than reducing these risks, in practice led to their amplification. The pursuit of a policy of “neutral positioning” raised questions about Belarus’s predictability as an ally of Russia, which remains Minsk’s primary security guarantor as well as its leading trade and economic partner.

¹ Review of the Results of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus and the Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2019, 2020, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, URL: <https://mfa.gov.by/publication/reports/d850d69242f0c67a.html> (accessed 20.05.2025).

² Lukashenko: I would like to see the opposition in parliament, but only 3.5 % voted for them, 2019, *BELTA*, 03.12.2019, URL: <https://belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-ja-by-hotel-videt-oppozitsiju-v-parlamente-no-za-nih-progolosovalo-tolko-35-371544-2019/> (accessed 20.05.2025).

³ See, for example, the widely researched case of foundation intervention in Tunisia in the 1990s and 2000s, within the framework of local elites’ bet on “authoritarian upgrading” through expanded ties with the West: [44].

With regard to the foundations' line of behaviour, the "policy of small steps" they advocated initially appeared to have failed. After 2020, Germany and the European Union suspended official contacts with Belarus, refused to recognise the election results, and imposed sanctions [45]. Much of the foundations' influence infrastructure in Belarus was dismantled, and a significant number of activists left the country. In both the EU and Germany, a policy of bloc confrontation towards Belarus came to dominate, leaving little room for nuance. Nevertheless, owing to their institutional flexibility and formally non-state status, the foundations were able to secure broad access to Belarusian policy-forming circles during the period from 2014 to 2020.

The German foundations did not cause the mass protests of 2020, but they contributed to the public promotion of narratives and network structures that helped create the preconditions for the political crisis.¹ By 2020, relations between Belarus and Russia had reached their lowest point in decades, against the backdrop of Minsk's 'multi-vector' policy, which the foundations actively encouraged.

Minsk's foreign policy manoeuvring contributed to the disorientation of the regime's supporters within the country. In this sense, the policy of small steps in building influence infrastructure in Belarus yielded results, albeit insufficient for regime change in 2020, unlike the Ukrainian case.

Nevertheless, the possibility of civil confrontation arising in the country was quite clear, prompting the Belarusian authorities to turn to Russia under alliance agreements and receive comprehensive support for normalisation. Of course, it is impossible to determine the exact extent of the foundations' contribution to creating the preconditions for mass protests in Belarus, as they were only part of a diverse front of non-governmental organisations in the country. However, the coverage of foundation events in state media and, most importantly, the level of political participation from Belarus ensured their significant, if not leading, role among foreign actors in the socio-political sphere of Belarus.

The foundations proved to be effective instruments in a context where local authorities were interested in improving their image in the West and consented to foundation access to Belarus, even in the absence of officially registered offices in the country. This process was reciprocal. The foundations successfully capitalised on the interests and self-perceptions of segments of the Belarusian policy-forming elite. At the same time, their discourse remained aligned with the official position of Germany, which did not envisage the prospect of Belarus joining the European Union.

Under these conditions, the foundations lacked strong levers for direct influence over local elites and therefore sought to pursue their objectives through the construction of transnational networks of influence. A form of functional division of labour emerged between the foundations. Rather than competing, they complemented one another as auxiliary actors in the implementation of Berlin's foreign policy interests. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation concentrated

¹ Indirect confirmation of this is the rapid 'cleansing' of the foundations' political infrastructure in Belarus.

primarily on security issues and relations with the West, while the Friedrich Ebert Foundation focused on socio-economic reforms and relations with the Eurasian Economic Union.

The public discourses of the foundations in Belarus, as revealed through analysis of their events, statements, and analytical publications, were grounded in two distinct Western European narrative frameworks. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation justified its activities through a ‘civilisational’ narrative articulated in the language of democratisation and human rights, framing internal transformation in Belarus as being in the interests of Germany and the European Union. By contrast, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation appealed to a narrative of “protecting Europe”, articulated in the language of European security and aimed at weakening the Belarus—Russia defence relationship through Minsk’s policy of “neutral positioning”.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation actively cultivated a second-track diplomacy platform in Minsk, while the Friedrich Ebert Foundation supported these efforts and embedded itself in interministerial contacts between Belarus and Germany. The foundations established a network of local partners in Belarus, with some degree of overlap among them. The independent agency of the foundations was expressed not through deviation from the official course of the Federal Republic of Germany, but rather through their capacity to act several steps ahead of formal diplomacy, effectively functioning as lobbyists for the expansion of German and broader European presence in Belarus.

A number of the foundations’ initiatives, primarily those of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, were formally oriented towards the internal transformation of the Belarusian political system. In practice, however, the geopolitical logic underpinning the foundations’ activities quickly came to the forefront. This logic was driven by the objective of influencing the regional order through the weakening of military and political ties between Minsk and Moscow, thereby undermining Russia’s position in the Baltic region. As a result, internal networks of influence within Belarus frequently became secondary, giving way to transnational networks designed to promote pro-Western narratives and specific threat perceptions among Belarusian policy-forming circles.

This conclusion calls into question the widespread view of German foundations as ‘democratisation’ actors burdened with ideological templates [15]. Alongside ‘background’ work (organising exchanges, visits, conferences, internships, educational and scholarship programmes), the foundations conducted targeted political work in the interests of Germany, reflected in their discursive strategy — a system of theses and arguments of predominantly geopolitical nature, which the foundations used to lobby their positions both in Belarus and in Germany.

As the analysis of events and publications showed, the geopolitical discourse on Minsk’s ‘neutrality’ became the main justification for the involvement of the examined German foundations in Belarusian affairs and for attracting attention to their initiatives in the EU and Germany. The idea of democratising Belarus effectively became auxiliary to the work of changing the regional order, in which a “neutral Belarus” would weaken Russian influence in the region, particularly concerning the security of the Kaliningrad region.

An explanation for this strategy can be found in spatial and resource-related factors. The proximity of Russia and the historical and geopolitical significance of the Kaliningrad region, combined with the limited availability of conventional military capabilities on the part of Germany, contributed to the fact that the foundations pursued not so much 'democratisation' as the 'neutralisation' of Belarus, using transnational expert networks as a geopolitical instrument. Although the foundations publicly framed their activities in terms of broad societal goals such as democratisation and human rights, in practice they acted, and analytically justified their actions, in accordance with a geopolitical logic of securitisation.

This apparent paradox is particularly revealing in light of the rapid, by historical standards, reassessment of the foreign policies of Germany and the European Union in the period from 2022 to 2024, namely the curtailment of democratisation and green economy agendas in favour of geopolitics and militarisation. The geopolitical 'core' of the foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany was already clearly discernible before 2022, albeit realised through different instruments and policy mechanisms.

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