

THE ROLE OF CITY PARTNERSHIPS IN THE RECONSTRUCTION OF UKRAINE

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In 2015, there were around 80 city partnerships between Germany and Ukraine. In addition to the major partnerships between Berlin, Munich, and Leipzig with Kyiv or Berlin and Nuremberg with Kharkiv¹, these were mostly partnerships between smaller municipalities with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants. Many of these partnerships were very old and had their basis in the old structures between the Soviet Union and the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Only a few new partnerships were formed after the fall of the Berlin Wall and Ukraine's independence in 1991. Others resulted from the old peace movement in the West, which organized active support after the Chernobyl accident with vacation stays for Ukrainian children in Germany in conjunction with direct humanitarian and medical support.

This resulted in very different approaches and structures of cooperation. While many of the old partnerships were based on personal friendships that had developed over many years and focused on personal exchange, others were based on structural cooperation, such as the "German House" in Kharkiv, where the city partnership with Nuremberg found a home, but where culture and language courses were also anchored. Others, such as the city partnership between Munich and Kyiv, had a thematic focus (e.g. LGBT).

The situation changed abruptly after the Maidan Uprising and the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2014. Ukraine suddenly became the focus of European and German institutions. Support programs were launched in almost all policy areas. The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) rediscovered Ukraine, as did the Federal Foreign Office (AA). It was not uncommon for city partnership activists to meet twice within one month, once at an AA congress and then at a BMZ congress. And this was not only the case in Germany but also in other Western European countries. However, things did not go as smoothly as desired: in 2015 the BMZ launched a city partnership support program that required the signature of the Ukrainian city administration. This represented the old structures rather than the awakening of civil society after the Maidan. As a result, it was not always clear whether the newly emerging projects were really promoting democratization or merely offering old wine in new bottles.

At the same time, however, there were, of course, many programs that directly addressed civil society in Ukraine and very quickly overwhelmed the activists there. Not only did the various projects need to be structured and organized, but the many groups of visitors also had to be accompanied, senior experts came and tried to explain how the world works, and many things came to nothing.

The situation changed abruptly with the Russian invasion in February 2022. In 2022, 80 city partnerships were active, and after the outbreak of war, 41 more announced their interest.² Suddenly, everyone was needed. The organization of humanitarian and medical transports and the accommodation of refugees were all new fields of activity for the existing town twinning partnerships. It was not always easy to reconcile the expectations of the Ukrainian partners and the German associations and municipalities. The Ukrainian side also asked for weapons and protective clothing and could not understand why many town-twinning activists did not see this as their task.

At the same time, the interest of German municipalities grew, and many new town-twinning partnerships were established to support the new partners in the war situation. However, it is slowly becoming clear that there must be permanent, functioning structures that plan the strategic reconstruction of Ukraine together. Even though the war is still ongoing, there are first discussions about how to rebuild the destroyed infrastructure and the role of town twinning in this. These are often conducted between the municipalities involved.

National governments controlling these processes is not yet apparent and would indeed be unusual. However, some foundations need to be laid at this level. A good example is the funding programs offered by the BMZ as part of the Service Agency Communities in One World (SKEW). Since 2015, a network of formalized and non-formalized municipal partnerships has been promoted. The city of Berlin and its districts have formed eight municipal and two operator partnerships, such as, for example, Berlin Steglitz-Zehlendorf with Kharkiv-Industrialnyi.³ The program can be used to finance vehicles and technical equipment for municipalities in Ukraine. The individual projects are handled by the respective city partnerships, which are also responsible for transportation and logistics.

It must be clarified what role the existing town-twinning arrangements should play in reconstruction and what role civil society structures can play in this. It must also be clarified what is being funded and the framework conditions for funding.

These questions naturally arise when rebuilding the many destroyed buildings and the transport infrastructure. Of particular interest here is the tension between the largely original reconstruction of the cities, which have often drawn their atmosphere and uniqueness from their architectural substance. Or is it about modernity, the digital and climate-neutral city? Reconstruction can be an opportunity to build one of the most modern urban structures in Europe—analogue to the constructivist project of the mid-1920s. But must that also mean that the cities will look completely different? What is the model for reconstruction? Does each city decide for itself, perhaps in exchange with the partner cities, or will there be national guidelines and specifications? This discussion must be held, and funding programs and partnership projects must be aligned with it.

The beauty, uniqueness and radical nature of many Ukrainian cities make it worth taking a closer look at the future image of the city. One aim of the Russian invasion was to wipe out Ukrainian culture, including urban development and building culture. This may not succeed.

ENDNOTES

- 1 BMZ country list of partnerships. Intermunicipal relations between Germany and Ukraine (Status: February 23, 2024). <https://skew.engagement-global.de/Liste-deutsch-ukrainischer-kommunalbeziehungen.html>.
- 2 Schulze, S. (July 6, 2022). Speech by Federal Minister Svenja Schulze at the networking meeting with German and Ukrainian municipalities in Berlin. <https://www.bmz.de/de/aktuelles/reden/ministerin-svenja-schulze/220706-rede-schulze-kommunen-116616>.
- 3 Crawford, C. E. (2018). From Tractors to Territory: Socialist Urbanization through Standardization. *Journal of Urban History*, 44(1), 54-77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144217710233>

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European Cooperation with BHROX bauhaus reuse and New European Bauhaus

— The District Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf department for urban development, building, and the environment is supporting and cooperating partner of the “BHROX bauhaus reuse” center and laboratory for sustainable urban development in Berlin. With BHROX as official member of the “New European Bauhaus” (NEB), the district is engaged in the newly founded NEB-Lab on the transnational development and heritage of Modernism, with special focus on Central and Eastern Europe, called “ETOM NEB Lab”. The Lab is based on the initiative “ETOM – European Triennial of Modernism”, aiming to foster the cross-sectoral collaboration between NGOs, cultural institutions, municipal and governmental organizations, especially to maintain the awareness and protection of the modern built heritage.



BHROX at Ernst Reuter Platz, Berlin.
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