

Foundations are a new power in Europe

by Wilhelm Krull

There are over 60,000 foundations in Europe, although only a few are large and famous. What these foundations have in common is a willingness to take on projects to help build a better society that the official bureaucracies don't have an interest in or time for. Small-scale as their operations may be, says Wilhelm Krull of the Volkswagen Foundation, they can still make a difference

When the European Union began to enlarge eastwards, the Volkswagen Foundation launched a new funding initiative for research about how the new member states, most of them erstwhile satellites of the Soviet Union, were settling in. It has turned out to be a thoughtful investment that continues to yield results. Last autumn a conference in Bremen saw a well-informed discussion on "The fate of democracy in the new Europe – stumbling blocks on the paths towards a democratic European order." Timely subjects.

There are at least 60,000 endowed foundations in Europe. Making a reliable count is difficult. Some are called funds, or trusts, others foundations. What in fact is a foundation? The main ingredients seem to be that it seeks to help build a better society, and has a reliable source of income. The wealthiest in the world, with \$35.9bn spending assets, is run by technology tycoon Bill Gates and his wife Melinda. The largest in Europe is the Wellcome Trust (with a capital stock of €20 bn) But the great multitude of foundations are small, even tiny, with a small staff of volunteers. Institutions with the resources of the Volkswagen Foundation (assets of € 2.6bn) are in the minority. But however small foundations may be, they can still make an impact.

It is indeed often not the amount of money spent that makes the difference, but rather the approach taken. Foundations have the capacity to be reliable partners, willing to foster risky projects. Their autonomy, alertness, and flexibility enable them to operate effectively as facilitators of change. They strive to give insights, to develop new ideas, and to find solutions where politicians cannot, or do not want to embark upon such endeavours.

European foundations are active in many areas that are concerned with establishing a more coherent civil society. Although the process of European integration involves social and cultural exchange, the funding activities of the EU do not include programmes fostering the social engagement of its citizens. Such initiatives by foundations can hardly be overestimated in their relevance for enhancing European integration.

The development of the European Union has been characterised by ups and downs, and many obstacles still have to be overcome to achieve a political, legal, and economic as well as a stronger social and cultural integration of Europe. The rejection of the proposed constitutional treaty by the French and Dutch in 2005, and the Irish vote against the Lisbon treaty in 2008 clearly illustrate the difficulties the EU has to face. It is a challenge for all responsible agents to support activities to vitalise European citizens' commitment to our common cause. Institutions belonging to the non-profit-sector, such as foundations, can contribute to this process. As part of civil

society their activities can be considered as a reliable building block for a strong democracy.

I have mentioned the support the Volkswagen Foundation is giving to research on the EU's new members. Let me offer some other examples of the contributions that foundations are making to the success of EU enlargement.

Britain's Barrow Cadbury Trust has provided initial funding to establish a Migrants' Rights Network (MRN) through which grassroots groups can intervene in policy debates. More than 100 migrant organisations have already signed up to the initiative.

In a contribution towards greater justice, democracy and respect for diversity, the King Baudouin Foundation of Belgium supports hundreds of projects that are set up by citizens seeking to build a better society; for example, giving help to local initiatives, or tracking down new forms of social injustice and poverty.

The European Cultural Foundation provides what it calls a civil society platform for intercultural dialogue, helping people to cope with diversity in the EU and how this diversity is of benefit to the Union.

The Mercator Fund's mission, and also a project of the Network of European Foundations, is to support innovative philanthropy. The fund often works as a catalyst for programmes and initiatives in areas where European foundations and international partners can cooperate on pressing global issues.

Each of these examples demonstrates that, as the EU develops, even relatively small-scale institutions and networking initiatives can have an impact not only on our ways of thinking about politics, but also on the more practical aim of bringing Europe to life for its citizens.

For many Europeans the main concern of their lives is migration. More people are on the move today than at any other point in human history. They are either migrants themselves or migrants in settled communities, communities that are feeling the impact of these new arrivals on their own cultures. How do you manage migration so as to enhance its positive and reduce its negative impacts? The solution cannot simply consist of a demand that migrants should assimilate. It is important to foster mutual learning and sensible adaptation on the part of European societies. Many initiatives, pilot projects, and grant programmes seek to ensure that immigrants are treated humanely. This not only means trying to positively influence the everyday life of the immigrants, but also to change administrative practices, perhaps even the legislation on the rights of migrants in order to enable them to participate in shaping their new environment.

I have mentioned the Barrow Cadbury Trust's work with immigrants. Other foundations doing pioneering work in this field include the Portuguese Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. It is helping some 150 immigrant doctors who want to work in the Portuguese national health service. This initiative is characterised by a positive approach to the migrants.

The European Programme for Integration and Migration (EPIM) is another initiative of the Network of European Foundations. Ten European foundations are seeking a

commitment to the development of integration policies at the EU level.

In October 2008 a new Council of Integration and Migration was launched by eight German foundations. This council is an independent, research-based advisory board which will take a stand on issues concerning integration and migration.

The Hertie Foundation has initiated a programme called START, consisting of scholarships for gifted pupils with an immigration background. It is widely supported by other foundations, in particular newly established community foundations, and helps children to cope with secondary schooling, thus paving the way to higher education, and an academic career.

These examples illustrate at least two important points. Firstly, by providing substantial and proven data, foundations – and especially those focusing on education and research – can help to support public debate and to provide recommendations based on experience. Secondly, with shared goals, foundations cooperate closely in order to reach the critical mass of expertise and financial power to really make a difference.

The tasks we have to cope with today are not confined to national or even European borders. They are global challenges. In its relationship with developing countries Europe needs to look beyond traditional financial and technical assistance and has to focus on knowledge transfer and capacity building, especially in the area of research. Kofi Annan, the former UN secretary-general, noted that 95% of new science is created in countries comprising only 20% of the world's population. The South and the North need to work together and develop a common research agenda and explore common ways to solve common problems. Several European and American foundations have already begun to change their strategies and funding policies in order to improve on North-South as well as South-South cooperation. Europe's experience in social and cultural integration will be valuable elsewhere in the world. The foundations in Europe are already contributing their mite.

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