Building bridges between Ukraine and Germany

Stronger structures enable Ukraine’s German minority to create a shared cultural identity, better living conditions and enhanced prospects.

The challenge: Tangible consequences of oppression and expulsion

From the end of the 18th century until the Second World War around 400,000 Germans lived in what is today Ukraine. The area along the Black Sea coast was home to one of the largest ethnic German minorities in the Russian Empire and subsequently in the Soviet Union – second only to the Volga region. Immediately after the outbreak of the Second World War, the majority of Germans were deported to Siberia or Central Asia. As a direct consequence of the Second World War they were subject to oppression, were stripped of their rights and displaced. For many years they were not allowed either to choose where to live or to obtain higher education. They were also banned from keeping the German language and their traditions alive.

Some of the Germans who had been deported returned to Ukraine from the Russian Federation and the Central Asian states following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today the German minority in Ukraine numbers some 33,000.

Our approach: Stronger structures offer a wide range of services

Against the background of Germany’s shared responsibility, the Federal Republic of Germany supports Ukraine’s German minority in their efforts to come to terms with the fate they suffered as a result of the war. On behalf of the German Government, GIZ is engaged in helping the German minority independently voice its interests, develop its ethnic and cultural identity and build a bridge between Germany and Ukraine. With its project partner, Rat der Deutschen der Ukraine (RDU) and its implementing organisation, the welfare fund Gesellschaft für Entwicklung, GIZ has established a nationwide network of over 60 public-benefit organisations operated by ethnic Germans in Ukraine. Throughout Ukraine, the project partners are organising events designed to strengthen German culture, youth and language. Youth projects including language academies, youth forums and family language schools enable young people to learn more about their own cultural identity and become familiar with the German language.
With the support of the German Government I have been able to contribute to reviving and preserving German culture in Ukraine. We have managed to discuss the important role played by ethnic Germans in the economic, cultural and academic development of the city of Odessa and indeed the entire region, thus restoring their good reputation in Ukraine.

The members of RDU represent the interests of ethnic Germans from all parts of Ukraine. Seminars teach them to manage their own organisations – with success. Today RDU plans support measures itself and implements them independently. GIZ continues to provide advice on organisational processes and implementation of the success control and is responsible for the financial control for ongoing projects.

Our results: Hundreds of events bringing German culture to the people

Within the framework of promotion measures to strengthen German cultural identity, numerous language courses are available to ethnic Germans in Ukraine. In 2017, more than 800 attended one of the 60 courses on offer. Since 2013 the number of courses held has quadrupled.

In 2017 almost 300 ethnic and cultural events were staged, including the opening of the travelling exhibition Germans in Ukraine: History and Culture in Kyiv, a competition for young people on German architects and their contribution to the architecture of the city of Odessa, cycle tours through the historic towns of the German community in Volhynia and a day of German culture in Mariupol. Young ethnic Germans organised 22 of these events.

Prominent members of the German community in Ukraine play a particularly important part in strengthening its cultural identity. Fifty ethnic German women and men from various parts of society represent the German community to the outside world and work for its interests. GIZ and its partners support them in their scientific, cultural, artistic and social activities, through which they present themselves and the German minority to mainstream Ukrainian society.

Elvira Plesskaja: “My contribution to reviving and preserving German culture in Ukraine”

Elvira Plesskaja is a historian, an academic who represents the Rat der Deutschen der Ukraine (RDU) in and around Odessa. The German Government’s promotion measures have enabled her to publish several books that explore the history of the German community in Ukraine. A documentary entitled Wir sind keine Fremden (We are not outsiders) has also been produced. Plesskaja reports:

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