

Message from the Goethe-Institut: Cultural diplomacy versus intercultural exchange and dialogue

German foreign cultural policy derives its key motivation and its valid shape and form from the defeat and total destruction as a consequence of National Socialism and the lost war – to this day. It is not only that by 1945 at the latest Germany's reputation as a cultural nation was completely destroyed, but that the nation had also inflicted the most grievous cultural destruction on itself, and was thus traumatised. The task was thus simple and clear.

When, a few years after the end of the war, it slowly became possible to consider an international presence for this destroyed nation, then the focus had to be repair work on the seriously damaged steamer known as German culture. The two main aims of regaining reputation as a democratic and civilian state and of competing in the Cold War were the starting points, not only in foreign cultural policy. Since then, German culture has been shaped by cultural diversity and heterogeneity, by a great distance between the political and cultural elites. This includes a specific structural polycentralism and a corresponding number of institutions both in competition with and inspiring each other, as we see for example in Germany's unique landscape of theatres.

It was out of the question to leave culture in one centralised pair of hands. More than that – state influence over culture was seen with deep scepticism, no matter at what level. This state of affairs led to – among others- the Goethe Institute, which works as an independent association and plays a key role to this day in shaping German foreign cultural policy with a public remit but free of any direct power of government authority. Never again should culture be instrumentalised by politics, and certainly not abroad – this was the lesson that had been learned. It quickly became evident that lost credibility could be best regained via methods that were not directed by the state, and that were not diplomatic.

In this context, diplomatic stands for state and political interests, which diplomacy by necessity always entails. This does not mean that politics and diplomacy are something bad or unpleasant, but simply that diplomacy is diplomacy and that it follows its own rules that themselves represent a high culture (such as diplomatic language), but which seem to be completely inappropriate for international cultural dialogue. Here “not diplomatic” means not as part of interest-driven politics of any kind, but rather as a serious player in various cultural public spheres at the places where we operate, where we do not just present glossy toe-the-line projects, people and themes, but also a self-critical image of Germany, in which confrontation with our own history has occupied an important place. When it really is a dialogue, in which people, their cultures and artefacts from their intellectual, artistic and everyday lives encounter each other, then this requires a kind of mutual power-free space where the protagonists can meet each other freely, openly and on a par with each other.

In short: cultural exchange without the broad absence of interests is no cultural exchange. If you want to facilitate exchange of this kind, then you must create the possibility for encounters free of interests and free of power, and also always assume that this possibility exists, so as to achieve the true liberation of the potential that is held within the concept of intercultural dialogue.

(Excerpts from a lecture by Berthold Franke, director of the Goethe-Institut Brussels, held on 19th of April this year at the EUNIC conference CULTURE+ in Prague)