

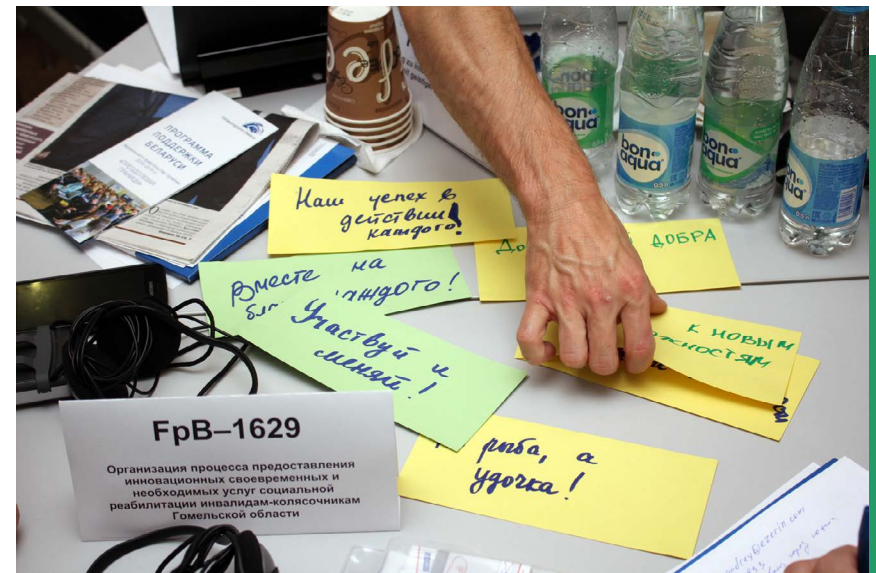
The Belarus Support Program: Two Decades of Belarusian- German Civil Society Cooperation

Strategies, Achievements and Lessons
Learned from 2002 to 2023



Origins and Objectives of the Belarus Support Program

The Belarus Support Program (BSP), referred to as Förderprogramm Belarus in German, was implemented from January 2002 to May 2023. Envisioned as a long-term partnership program fostering Belarusian-German cooperation within civil society, its overarching aim was to contribute to sustainable development across all regions of Belarus.



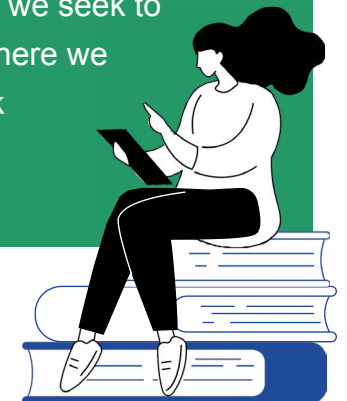
The program's core principle, "Overcoming Boundaries", embodies its philosophy. From its inception, the BSP has been rooted in the concept of a shared European home and the necessity of multilateral cooperation, which requires transcending physical and mental barriers in the broadest sense.

The program's origins trace back to the numerous humanitarian initiatives that emerged in the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. These initiatives eventually evolved into a long-term social partnership.

The program's implementation and conceptional evolution were guided by the International Centre for Education and Exchange (Internationales Bildungs- und Begegnungswerk gGmbH) in Dortmund (shortly IBB Dortmund). A key precondition of the program's success was the close cooperation with the Johannes Rau Minsk International Educational Centre (IBB Minsk) and a wide range of Belarusian and German partner organizations. Financial and institutional support was provided by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Society for International Cooperation, GIZ).

In its 22-year history, the BSP has supported the successful implementation of more than 270 projects. These initiatives have focused on bringing about positive changes in various areas, such as non-formal education, healthcare, inclusion, social assistance and social entrepreneurship, ecology, energy, and sustainable regional development.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the BSP was its collaborative approach to working with partners. Rather than simply providing ready-made solutions, the program emphasized the joint development of projects. The aim was to exchange valuable experience to prevent mistakes and promote successful transformations, facilitating to go beyond the mere replication of existing approaches. Managing director Astrid Sahn of IBB Dortmund, highlighted this approach, stating, "Our intention has never been to impose our ideas on others. Instead, we seek to foster a collaborative environment where we can learn from one another and work towards common goals."





To achieve its primary objective the BSP team was dedicated to creating an environment for collaboratively addressing pressing issues related to sustainable development.

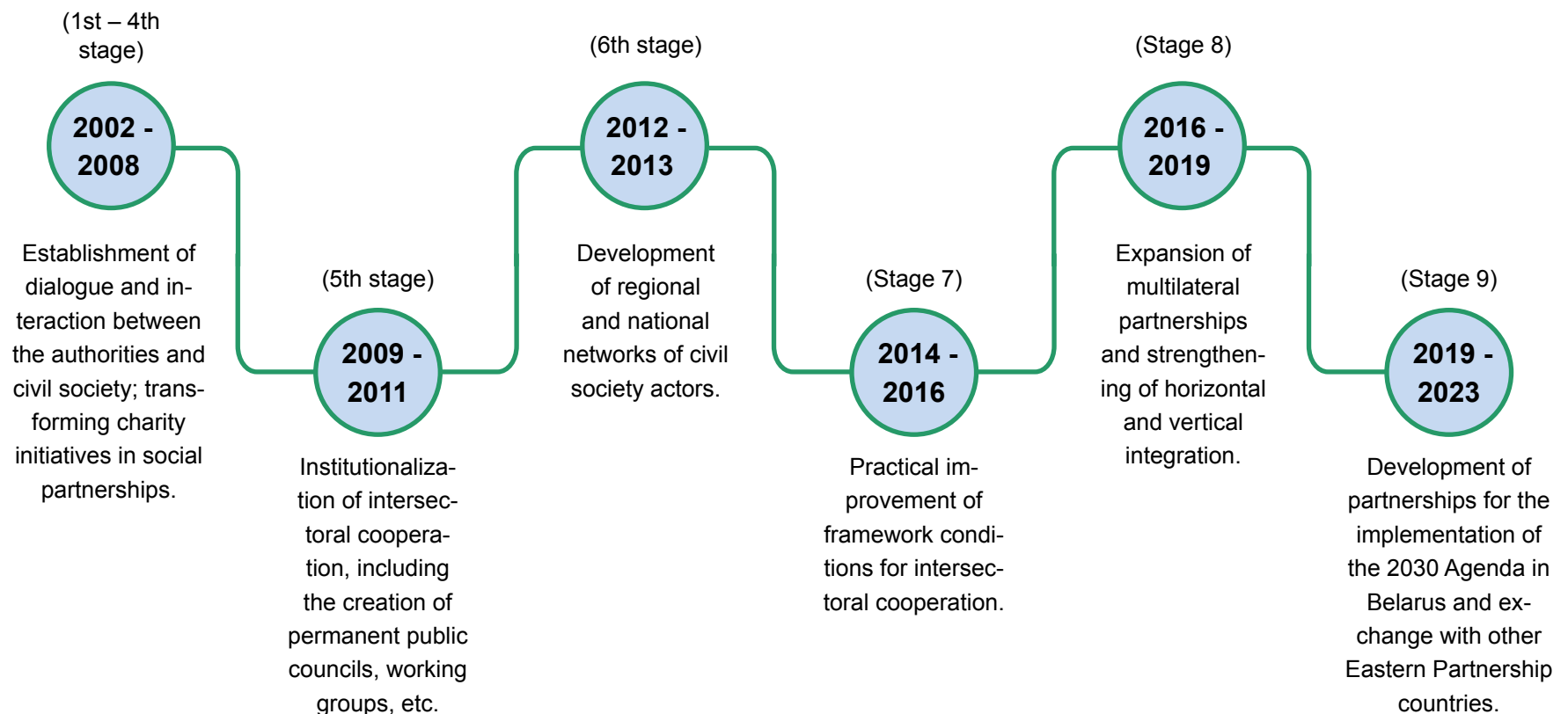
Throughout the entire program implementation period, the team focused on the following processes:

- enhancing the skills and capabilities of individual civil society actors and civil society organizations;
- establishing platforms for open communication between state agencies and civil society organizations (CSOs);
- promoting multilateral collaboration across different sectors and international boundaries.

The program aspired to empower its partners to competently utilize the resources of multilateral cooperation and discover hidden domestic resources, allowing to effectively tackle national and global challenges such as demographic shifts, climate change, and inclusivity.

Program Evolution: From Chernobyl to the 2030 Agenda

The Belarus Support Program was divided into **nine distinct stages**, each with specific objectives that reflect its progression:



The implementation of the BSP was guided by the following key approaches:

1

Building long-term partnerships. The program's distinctiveness is defined by its steadfast dedication to overarching goals throughout various stages. Emphasizing long-term impact over short-term results, achievable within the limited timeframe of each stage, has been a cornerstone of the program's success. This approach enabled the establishment of trusting partnerships while addressing specific focuses relevant to the challenges existing at each stage.

2

Creating networks and platforms. The program actively supported the establishment and growth of networks and platforms for dialogue at various levels, ranging from local to national. Implemented through project activities and support programs, this approach fosters interaction and dialogue among different stakeholders through forums, intersectoral working groups, and public councils, facilitating the interaction of different stakeholders and the exchange of information on diverse topics. The program's most prominent platforms for interregional, intersectoral, and international exchange were the "Weeks of Sustainable Development" and the "Republican Social Forum".

3

Consistent work across all regions. The program's work extended to all regions of the country, not solely relying on the capital and the expertise and resources concentrated there. Instead, it embraced flexibility and openness to bottom-up initiatives. This allowed the program to respond to the needs of project partners and local communities, ensuring consistent and impactful work throughout all regions of the country.

Exploring Impact: Metrics and Milestones

270

Over the program's duration from 2002 to 2023, more than 270 collaborative German-Belarusian projects were successfully implemented.

300

The program engaged more than 300 Belarusian and over 130 German partner organizations, creating a robust network of collaboration.

30

The program provided support to more than 30 public and advisory councils, being established at local, regional, and republican authorities. The program's experts assisted the council members in addressing various issues such as inclusion, rural ecotourism, social protection, and local sustainable development strategies.

25

The program participated in the development and implementation of over 25 local and regional sustainable development strategies, including the National Strategy for Sustainable Socio-Economic Development until 2030 and the National Strategy for Sustainable Development until 2035, as well as the Sustainable Development Strategy of the Mogilev Region until 2035.

15

The program offered consultative support for the development and revision of more than 15 laws and legislative acts, focusing on areas such as the social care models, inclusion support, social entrepreneurship, and the enhancement of the state social procurement system.

4

4 regional networks were established and thrived as result of the program's contributions.

4

Between 2010 and 2019, the program orchestrated and conducted 4 Republican Social Forums, 5 Republican Conferences on Sustainable Development, and 4 Sustainable Development Weeks, fostering extensive dialogue and collaboration.

20

The program's experts developed and launched over 20 new educational courses covering diverse topics — from sustainable development to the establishment of an inclusive society.

50

More than 50 manuals and studies on inclusion, sustainable development, social and environmental issues have been developed within the framework of the program, ensuring knowledge dissemination.



Main Thematic Directions of Program Activities

Selecting specific focuses for each stage, the Belarus Support Program simultaneously aimed at ensuring continuity in its actions, addressing key directions of sustainable and organizational development, as well as the development of a fair and inclusive society. Numerous projects and events were implemented in each of these areas, with a focus on the practical resolution of specific issues and structural transformations.

The strategic feature of the program was the deliberate combination of different working formats within a single process. For example, participants in the program, thanks to educational trips, were able to observe new practices that were later adapted to Belarusian realities within pilot projects. The results of these projects were presented at forums and conferences, where recommendations for improving framework conditions were developed by participants. Following the networking events, working groups were formed, and expert consultations were conducted to develop new

concepts, strategies, or regulatory documents. These became the foundation for a new cycle of actions.

Supported pilot projects had to meet **the following general criteria:**

- Equal Participation: Initiatives had to ensure an equitable participation of partners from both Belarus and Germany in project implementation.
- Innovative Solutions and Multiplication: Emphasis was placed on the exploration of innovative solutions and the dissemination of experiences gained.
- Intersectoral and Inter-agency Cooperation: Projects were expected to foster collaboration across diverse sectors and entities.
- Showcasing the Significance CSOs activities: The project implementation should aim in strengthening

the societal impact of CSOs by garnering acknowledgement for their contributions to development from state agencies at the local, regional, and national levels.



While the program adhered to common approaches, each thematic area exhibited its own dynamics. The BSP team and its partners consistently considered the specific context, maintained flexibility, and responded promptly to emerging opportunities for promoting innovative reforms. This adaptive approach ensured the attainment of optimal results.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The **primary focus** of the Belarus Support Program in the field of sustainable development was to provide methodological support for the elaboration, implementation, and monitoring of sustainable development strategies (SDS) in local communities and regions, and subsequently, the National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS).



Active engagement with local initiatives on sustainable development strategies began as early as 2005. In 2007, the program published a guidebook titled “Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Sustainable Development Strategies. Local Agendas for the 21st Century in Belarus” was published, presenting the entire spectrum of existing initiatives for the first time. Additionally, during the 5th stage of the program, an educational course for coordinators of local initiatives was conducted. However, at this time, the program did not yet succeed in establishing systematic work with sustainable development initiatives.

The work in this sphere gained new momentum with the adoption of the **2030 Agenda** by the UN General Assembly on September 25, 2015, following a three-year period of international negotiations. In 2014, the program supported visits by German experts to comprehensively consult on the drafting process of the National Sustainable Development Strategy until 2030, and proposed recommendations for establishing national institutions to coordinate sustainable development efforts. Furthermore, in 2015, in collaboration with the Scientific and Research Economic Institute of the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus and the Regional Sustainable Development Network “Agenda-21” of North Rhine-Westphalia (LAG 21 NRW), a Methodological

Handbook on the development of sustainable development strategies for local communities and regional districts was prepared.”

The **Sustainable Development Weeks** (SDW), held in 2010, 2013, 2015, and 2017, played a significant role in shaping the Belarusian movement towards sustainable development. Representatives of UN structures, the EU, the Ministry of Natural Resources of Belarus, and other state and civil society organizations actively participated in these events. The scale of the SDW gradually increased, with the fourth SDW lasting for four weeks from September 25 to October 25, 2017. The calendar of these Weeks included 158 events at the national, regional, and local levels, with the participation of around 15,000 people. The National Coordinator for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), appointed in May 2017, addressed the central conferences. Following the fourth WSD, the Partnership Group was formed as supportive structure of the Sustainable Development Council, with leaders of five civic society organizations acting as thematic coordinators.

Starting from the 6th phase, jointly with LAG 21 NRW, the program team launched **systemic courses** to train consul-

tants from civil society and state institutions working in line with the principles of the European Sustainable Development Network. This led to a substantial increase in professionalism and expertise within the country. Program experts actively participated in the work of the public council for monitoring and evaluating sustainable development strategies at the Ministry' of Economy research institute, co-authored an analytical report on the implementation of NSDS-2030, and contributed suggestions to the NSDS-2035 project.

At the regional level, from 2019 to 2021 program experts played a pivotal role as key consultants in the elaboration and initial implementation of the sustainable development strategy for the Mogilev region. This strategy was based on the assessment of regional potential, considered the priorities of NSDS-2035, and included provisions for assisting in elaborating sustainable development strategy at the local level. The sustainable development workshop conducted by program experts in 2021, engaged representatives from initiative groups in seven districts and the city of Babruysk. Thus, Mogilev became the first Belarusian region, systematically implementing the principles of vertical and horizontal integration of the SDGs.

Pilot projects, implemented in the field of sustainable development throughout all program stages made a practical contribution to advancing the green transition in various areas of life at the local and regional levels. They contributed to the development of organic farming, environmental management and circular economy, the qualification of specialists in the energy-efficient construction and real estate management, the implementation of ecological purification facilities, and more. In many cases, project results either provided impetus to the development of a comprehensive sustainable development strategy or were directed towards achieving the goals of an already existing strategy.



FAIR AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

The Belarus Support Program's work in the social sphere commenced with **a focus on pilot projects** designed to foster inclusivity. These projects demonstrated the innovative capabilities of CSOs and the positive outcomes resulting from intersectoral collaboration. Through joint efforts, there was notable shift in the perception of individuals facing challenging circumstances for various reasons. They ceased to be passive recipients of organizational assistance and instead became equal participants in decision-making processes, project implementation, and result assessments. After 2015, this approach was widely recognized as the "Leave no one behind" principle of the 2030 Agenda.



As a result of the growing mutual trust and an intensive three-year consultation process, in 2012 the Belarusian Ministry of Labour and Social Protection introduced the mechanism of **social service contracting**. This marked a pivotal moment in the social services delivery system, as for the first time Belarusian state bodies were permitted to procure social services from Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) or subsidize their provision. However, initially, the contracting system was limited to the areas of elderly care and services for people with disabilities, and only the personnel costs of care workers were financed from the state budget.

Over the subsequent seven years, the BSP team and experts undertook numerous initiatives to broaden the practical application of the social service contracting mechanism. This included organizing joint trainings for representatives of CSOs and state agencies across all regions of the country, publishing two guides to clarify practical aspects of the mechanism's implementation, actively supporting pilot projects, and more. These efforts bore fruit: the number of contracts between local state bodies and CSOs increased from 3 in 2013 to 82 by the beginning of 2019. Furthermore, the Belarusian Ministry of Health adopted the use of the social

service contracting mechanism in its sphere. As a result, the mechanism was also utilized to provide services to people with HIV infection, dementia, mental disorders, or those who existing detention facilities.

The **Republican Social Forum**, initiated by the BSP and held in 2011, 2014, 2016, and 2018, played a crucial role in advancing the social service contracting mechanism and other social reforms. The forum engaged representatives from CSOs, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, other state bodies, businesses, scholars, foreign experts, and active members of local communities. It became the largest dialogue platform allowing all stakeholders to consider issues from various perspectives and find coordinated measures to respond to current challenges. For instance, following **Belarus' accession to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**, the third Republican Social Forum extensively discussed the preparation of the National Action Plan for its implementation. In the following years, CSOs played a leading role in implementing the convention, contributing to the removal of both physical and

communication barriers. In particular, BSP supported the development of a national standard for easy language.

The dynamic development of social initiatives led to the need for specialized thematic platforms. In 2017, BSP supported the initiative to hold **the Social Business Forum of Belarus**, which became an annual event until 2021. To develop business models based on the principle of public benefit, the BSP team organized educational trips, published best practices, and supported pilot projects in the field of women's and inclusive business. Since 2018, SBP contributed to the development of the **Coalition "For Dignified Longevity"**. The coalition's members actively participated in the elaboration of the National Strategy "Active Longevity - 2030", and organized its own forum in 2019. The goal was to shape a society for people of all ages, create conditions for the fullest and most effective realization of the potential of elderly citizens, and facilitate sustainable improvement in their quality of life through the systematic adaptation of state and public institutions to population aging.

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The main goal in this area was to enhance the effectiveness of activities, ensure sustainability, and develop the organizational capacity of Belarusian civil society organizations. This implied improving the managerial and professional competencies of their activists and staff.



To achieve this goal, **training sessions** were conducted at each program stage, covering various aspects of organizational development, such as drafting public annual reports, monitoring the impact of activities, drawing up and implementing organizational development plans, enhancing financial sustainability, and more. Additionally, the Belarus Support Program provided **expert support based on individual requests** from project partners and other stakeholders. Throughout, the focus remained on the program's substantive priorities. For example, during the 4th and 5th program stages, expert support was particularly useful in the creation and strategic planning of activities for public councils on rural and ecotourism.

The BSP team has always been oriented towards developing the competencies of local experts, with the **overarching goal of overcoming dependence on external consultants**. The first significant step in this regard was the course for training consultants in **organizational development** conducted in 2005-2006. Participants in the course later proved to be highly sought-after by both Belarusian and international organizations. Some participants in this course were engaged as experts and trainers in BSP events until 2023.

Numerous knowledge- and experience-sharing events, held as part of the Belarus Support Program since 2002, facilitated the pooling of resources among various stakeholders. The BSP team considered it crucial to continually support the **development of network cooperation** and contribute to strengthening the potential of network partners. For instance, starting in 2007, the BSP supported projects to create and develop a Partner Network of Sustainable Development Schools, which led to the registration of the **“Education for Sustainable Development”** Association in 2014.

It is also noteworthy that partner networks emerged not only at the national level but also at the regional level. In 2015, at the initiative of 14 NGOs, the **Regional Partner Network of Social NGOs** in the Gomel Region was established. In 2016, the **“Land of Vivifying Springs”** tourism cluster was formed in the Mogilev region, and in 2018, over 20 state and non-governmental organizations signed an agreement to create the **Grodno Regional Partner Network for Sustainable Development** “For the Prosperity of the Prineman-sky Krai.”



Innovation and Resilience: Adapting to the Changing Landscape after 2020

The final stage of the Belarus Support Program was implemented in challenging and ever-changing conditions. Since the beginning of 2020, the primary actions were redirected to an online format due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the major game changer was the political crisis that erupted in summer 2020 against the backdrop of the presidential elections. A combination of factors, including the pandemic, sanctions, and the closure of transportation routes, led to the **re-emergence of physical borders in Europe between the East and the West**. In this situation, the program's motto "Overcoming Boundaries" took on new meaning. Facing these challenges, the BSP team, guided by the principles and dimensions of the 2030 Agenda, sought to maintain and establish platforms for dialogue to counteract the growing confrontation exacerbated by Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine.

Despite numerous attempts to preserve spaces for cross-sectoral interaction and explore opportunities for dialogue, the government sector continued to distance itself from independent civil society. Consequently, collaboration with state institutions became significantly more complicated. Starting from the summer of 2021, **over a thousand NGOs in the country**, including organizations of all Partnership Group coordinators, **were liquidated**. Many civil society actors and experts were forced to leave Belarus, leading to the **dismantling of numerous structures and platforms created within the BSP since 2002**. Additionally, in November 2021, the Representation of the Dortmund International Educational Centre in Belarus was closed.

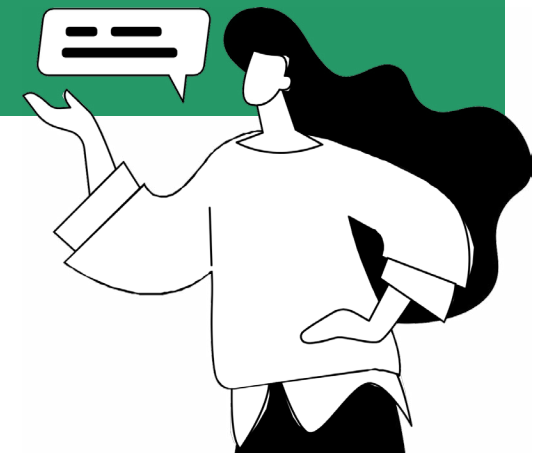
Considering the Belarusian state authorities' refusal to engage with independent CSO representatives, the BSP team restructured its work. The program's focus shifted to providing support to its civil society partners and exploring options for their continued work in key thematic areas of the 2030 Agenda. In particular, program efforts were directed towards:

- integrating Belarusian civil society experts into various expert communities of bilateral and international character. For instance, by the end of the 9th stage Belarusian and Georgian experts had prepared five reports on different aspects of localizing SDGs,
- launching the **sustainability educational platform ibb-edu.org** based on the Moodle learning management system. By the end of the 9th stage of the BSP, courses on sustainable event management, development and implementation of sustainable development strategies, and a basic module on circular economy had been introduced on the platform,
- developing an **expert community on civic monitoring of the 2030 Agenda**. By the end of the 9th stage of the BSP, Belarusian experts had prepared reviews on six SDGs and one accelerator of the 2030 Agenda,
- **supporting the creation of new organizational structures, and initiatives** facilitating collaboration with CSOs in other Eastern Partnership countries, particularly Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The 2030 Agenda 2030: Potential for further cooperation

The geopolitical crisis, caused by the ongoing political repressions in Belarus and Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, has significantly complicated the implementation of joint projects aimed at achieving the SDGs. However, the 2030 Agenda remains one of the few global frameworks that can still serve as an important guiding principle for all stakeholders. Therefore, despite the conclusion of the Belarus Support Program, IBB Dortmund remains committed to continuing its work in the interest of sustainable development. This commitment is based on the shared conviction of all team members at IBB Dortmund gGmbH:

“Without a strong civil society, there is no future. We strive to direct attention to challenges that persist beyond the paradigm of political disagreements and conflicts. Climate change, demographic crises, aging populations – these are all issues that the state cannot solve without compromise with society. It is crucial for us to preserve the potential for the future development of Belarusian-German cooperation in the context of the 2030 Agenda.”





For more information on the results of the Belarus Support Program and the work of IBB Dortmund within the context of the 2030 Agenda, please visit:

IBB 2030 Agenda Hub: [🌐 ibb-d.org](https://www.ibb-d.org)

Sustainability Educational Platform: [🌐 ibb-edu.org](https://www.ibb-edu.org)

Contacts:

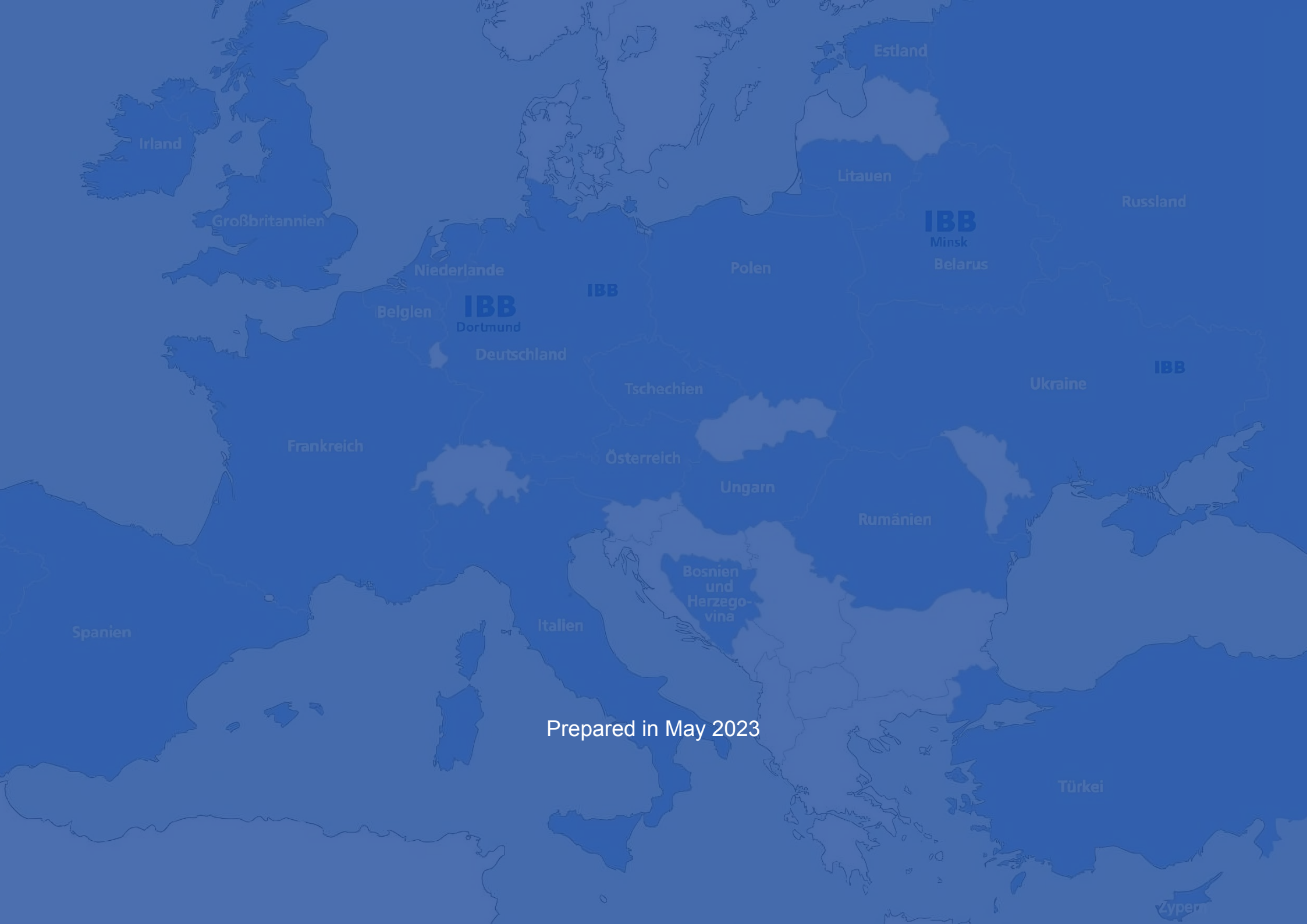
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