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# Mapping and Evaluating U.S.-German Exchange Programs, 2020–2025

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# Executive Summary

This report provides German policymakers with an overview of the status of bilateral U.S.-German exchange in order to inform future initiatives to strengthen relations in a moment of increased uncertainty in transatlantic relations.<sup>[1]</sup> Based on an extensive literature review and interviews with key experts, the report consists of three sections: Section I, «Categorizing and Mapping U.S.-German Exchange,» describes and categorizes major U.S.-German people-to-people exchanges of the last several decades, with an emphasis on bilateral, government-funded exchanges; Section II explores the major changes to U.S.-German exchange programs in the last five years, such as exchange discontinuations, new programs or networks, budgetary or funding changes, and major alterations to existing programs; and Section III provides 12 policy recommendations for consideration in future initiatives in U.S.-German exchange.

Many of the recommendations and exchanges discussed in this report hold clear relevance for maintaining and deepening U.S.-German economic and security relations. Yet, the focus of this report is more specifically on how to strengthen the shared democratic values at the core of the transatlantic relationship. The recommendations here are neither value-neutral nor simply in the interest of maintaining exchange for its own sake. Rather, this publication hopes to reach policymakers, civil society leaders, and organizations at both the national and local levels who share a concern with the accelerating deterioration of democratic norms on both sides of the Atlantic. New programs, topics, and partnering organizations highlighted or proposed here offer concrete ways for leaders and advocates to increase civil society resilience, uphold the rule of law, enhance equality and inclusion, and promote sustainability.

Below are some of the most important findings from Sections I and II:

- **Key U.S.-funded Exchange Programs Remain Intact.** Despite unprecedented budget uncertainty and worrying U.S. State Department interventions, worst-case scenarios for the elimination of CBYX, Fulbright, and other State Department funded exchanges have not come to pass.
- **Multiple Major German-sponsored Exchanges Discontinued.** The Bosch Fellowships and Humboldt German Chancellor Fellowships, two major leadership exchange programs, were discontinued in 2020 and 2024, respectively.
- **New Initiatives in Sub-National and Civil Society Exchanges.** The report identifies increased energy and urgency since 2018 in the sub-national exchange space with

<sup>1</sup> The report was commissioned by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Washington D.C. in September/October 2025 with a call for papers on «Mapping Transatlantic Exchange».

innovative formats focused on sustainability, the renewal of democracy and industrial heartlands, legislative exchanges, and digital democracy.

- **Budget Uncertainties.** The Trump administration's disregard for Congressional appropriations and drastic cuts or freezes of international assistance and public diplomacy staff and programs have led to great upheaval in the long-term plans for U.S.-funded programs.
- **Enhanced U.S. Application Vetting and Procedures and Changes to U.S.-German Fulbright Program, Journalist Visas.** U.S. executive branch and State Department officials have intervened in numerous concerning ways to deny already-approved Fulbright candidates whose research focuses on race, gender, or climate change topics.
- **New Republican-AfD Networks:** Alongside traditional transatlantic exchanges, there are numerous overtures and new outreach initiatives emerging to forge stronger relations between the Republican Party and the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).

**Policy Recommendations.** The report's third and final section consists of 12 policy recommendations for how German policymakers can respond to key changes in the exchange space and areas on which to proactively focus resources to preserve and strengthen a transatlantic relationship based on democratic values. These recommendations emerged from discussions with experts on U.S.-German relations and exchange program staff.

The following recommendations are discussed in full in Section III:

- *Recommendation 1:* Advocate for restoration of merit-based, independent application and vetting procedures for Fulbright and other bilateral exchanges.
- *Recommendation 2:* Mobilize alumni networks and congressional U.S.-German Caucus to ensure survival of key programs.
- *Recommendation 3:* Renew investment in intensive leadership exchange programs, with programming modeled on U.S. IVLP program.
- *Recommendation 4:* Identify new, U.S.-based, private funding partners to support sustained U.S.-German exchange programs.
- *Recommendation 5:* Focus on project-specific exchanges, aimed at social issues and mutual challenges.
- *Recommendation 6:* Seek out and forge subnational partnerships with state and local leaders interested in democracy and projects with social impact.
- *Recommendation 7:* Increase outreach to pro-democracy political actors in the US and Germany.
- *Recommendation 8:* Expand programming for underrepresented minority groups in U.S.-German exchanges.

- *Recommendation 9*: Frame and embed transatlantic exchange programs in a global context.
- *Recommendation 10*: Support exchanges focused on knowledge transfer and best practices for upholding civil rights and democratic values.
- *Recommendation 11*: Support U.S.-German press freedom and journalism through journalist safety exchanges.
- *Recommendation 12*: Develop policymaker and research exchanges for joint solutions to responsible AI, digital information ecosystems, and other «Digital Democracy» topics.

**Methodology:** This report is based on more than 20 interviews with U.S.-German relations experts, former and current program staff of key U.S.-German exchange programs, experts in international exchange, diplomatic staff, as well as numerous alumni of the exchange programs highlighted in the report. The interviewees include a former director of a major U.S.-German institute and think tank, a former director of the CBYX/PPP program, and a senior diplomat at the U.S. Department of State with extensive experience working on U.S.-German exchange programs. Owing to their roles as former State Department staff or in positions dependent on the current administration, some interviewees have requested to remain anonymous. In addition to these interviews, I corresponded via email with representatives and directors of several other exchange programs for background information, data, and attitudes to transatlantic relations. Many of the interviewees have firsthand knowledge of key events and changes that have taken place this year or in previous years by the U.S. administration. This report also draws on information from a wide variety of studies, public reports, and documents, such as program evaluations, published scholarship on exchange programs, official tax and financial reports, appropriation and budget legislation, as well as statements and speeches by politicians from both Germany and the United States. These interviews and documents construct a picture of which bilateral exchange programs in recent years have been the most impactful and important to German-U.S. relations, what significant changes have taken place with these programs in the last six years, and finally, what experts and exchange specialists believe should be the future of U.S.-German exchange at a historically perilous moment in transatlantic relations.

## Background to Mapping U.S.-German Exchange

German policymakers contemplating current U.S.-German relations and exchange face a fundamental uncertainty and ambiguity regarding not only the U.S. approach to U.S.-European relations, but also regarding the democratic character of the U.S. administration itself. Which direction one tends to in answering these questions will prove decisive for the appropriate course of action in relations with the U.S. In the realm of foreign policy, is the U.S. under Trump now a strategic opponent of the EU or simply engaging in a more

abrasive version of a bipartisan, decades-long «pivot» to Asia (including in the area of public diplomacy)? An even more unsettling uncertainty presents itself in U.S. domestic politics: is the US experiencing a precipitous slide toward a Hungarian- or Russian-style autocracy or do current domestic confrontations represent a worrying, but by no means system-altering era?

A parliamentary session in June 2025 on U.S.-German relations illustrates how such ambiguity plays out in Bundestag debates over what tone and practical measures should be taken toward the United States. Speakers for the CDU and SPD insisted that this moment calls for a diplomatic, even-keeled stance that highlights common economic and strategic interests. In his speech pleading for continued engagement with the U.S., SPD MP Ralf Stegner grounded this approach in the fact that «American democracy is more durable than we often suppose» and likewise pronounced his belief that American interests will continue to be largely aligned with those of Europe.<sup>[2]</sup> The next speaker, the Green Party's Agnieszka Brugger, took a much different approach, calling for stronger condemnations of Trump's persecution of political opponents and violations of the separation of powers. For a transatlantic relationship built on democratic values, Brugger continued, this is not a moment for business as usual, but rather for «reducing dependencies», speaking out with strength and confidence against Trump's policies, and seeking new ways to support like-minded civil society partners in the U.S.<sup>[3]</sup>

As it concerns public diplomacy and bilateral exchange initiatives, these two approaches imply starkly different strategies and solutions: rhetorical confrontation or a don't-rock-the-boat stance intent on continuity? Should one craft exchange programs that build stronger ties with Republican leaders in a bilateral fashion or double-down on democratic and progressive allies? Does one allocate funding to projects that strengthen economic and security ties or devote resources to civil liberties NGOs, journalists, and networks that advocate in more forceful ways for democratic values? The chosen strategy will itself be filled with a new set of ambiguities and risks as to what approaches are in fact most effective to stemming democratic backsliding and which may provoke punitive reactions that further damage relations. While German policymakers should be keenly conscious of the failure of a «Wandel durch Handel» strategy, it must also be recognized that as an external actor, Germany's options are distinctly constrained in how one directly participates in or influences the democratic processes of another country.

This report does not propose a definitive answer to all of the above questions. It does, however, strongly tend to the position—backed by widespread research—that right-wing

<sup>2</sup> See the speeches from the Deutsche Bundestag Debate from June 4, 2025, «Beziehungen zu USA vor Merz-Reise umstritten», <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2025/kw23-de-aktuelle-stunde-usa-1083876>. Ralf Stegner's full comment was that «... American interests cannot be that Europe is dominated by Russia or China ...»

<sup>3</sup> Brugger, Deutsche Bundestag Debate, June 4, 2025.

populism is undermining democratic principles and that the downsides of a business-as-usual approach are greater than the alternative. The report thus seeks to offer guidance from experts and practitioners in the area of U.S.-German exchange and relations as to which exchange approaches may best advance transatlantic democratic values, with an emphasis on resilience and consensus-building. The research contained herein identifies impactful exchanges, key alterations and innovations in recent years, and provides recommendations that describe opportunities and directions within the area of U.S.-German exchange. In particular, many of the recommendations build on new ideas in the area of international and transatlantic exchange that focus on addressing the structural and social causes to anti-democratic political extremism and bringing new demographic groups into U.S.-German exchange. Such new exchange models like the sustainability-focused technical exchanges led by Dale Medearis, a regional planner at Northern Virginia's Regional Commission, place-based Industrial Heartlands exchange led by public policy expert John Austin and Georgetown University's Dr. Jeffrey Anderson, or the vocational and HBCU-focused exchanges of the Atlanta-based Halle Foundation offer long-term solutions to the resentment caused by economic and cultural decline in many areas of the U.S. and Germany. Such programs design transatlantic exchanges that are project-based, and that seek to solve specific societal problems, while at the same time offering young people new opportunities, and giving local policymakers tools and perspectives from peers in Germany and the U.S.

It goes without saying that the re-election of Donald Trump and the drastic uncertainty he has brought to U.S.-German relations and the existence of longstanding exchanges represent the primary background for this report. As detailed in Section II of this report, his administration's extreme actions toward foreign policy-related budgets and purging of any programs or staff related to racial or gender equity have had severe negative consequences for longstanding bilateral U.S.-German exchange programs.<sup>[4]</sup> Yet, although exacerbated by the re-election of Donald Trump, this report finds that many problems present in current U.S.-German exchange transcend the actions of his administration. In recent years on both sides of the Atlantic, there has been a decrease in budgets for international assistance and added pressure on cultural diplomacy to prove its value. In addition, interest in other regions or new global crises have led some funders to discontinue key transatlantic programs, viewing them as a lower priority, at the same time that U.S. policymakers pivot to other regions as well.

Finally, when taken as a whole, the U.S.-German exchange space since around 2020 may actually be characterized as experiencing a period of energy and renewal, spurred on by the heightened anxieties since the election of Donald Trump in 2016. As this report will show, a

<sup>4</sup> In particular, see pgs. 19, 23, and 28 of this report regarding the unprecedented interventions by Darren Beattie in the State Department's Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau to deny scholarships to pre-approved exchange candidates based on their research topics.

large number of initiatives—many funded by German donors and government—have begun to address concerns around anti-democratic populism, social cohesion, disinformation and digital democracy, and the specter of a new, more confrontational transatlantic relationship lacking a common democratic foundation.

# Section I: Categorizing and Evaluating U.S.-German Exchange

The following section will provide a description and mapping of key past and present bilateral U.S.-German exchange programs with an emphasis on those that receive governmental support on the federal level and those which play an outsized role in cultivating or maintaining U.S.-German political, scientific, and economic ties. Based on interviews with alumni, program officers, public diplomats, and experts in U.S.-German exchange, as well as reviews of evaluation reports and academic research, a discussion will be offered on the impact of a select group of five programs each representing five distinct exchange categories. These programs will also be the focus for Section II on key changes to the exchanges in the last five years. The programs selected for deeper analysis in both Section I and II are as follows:

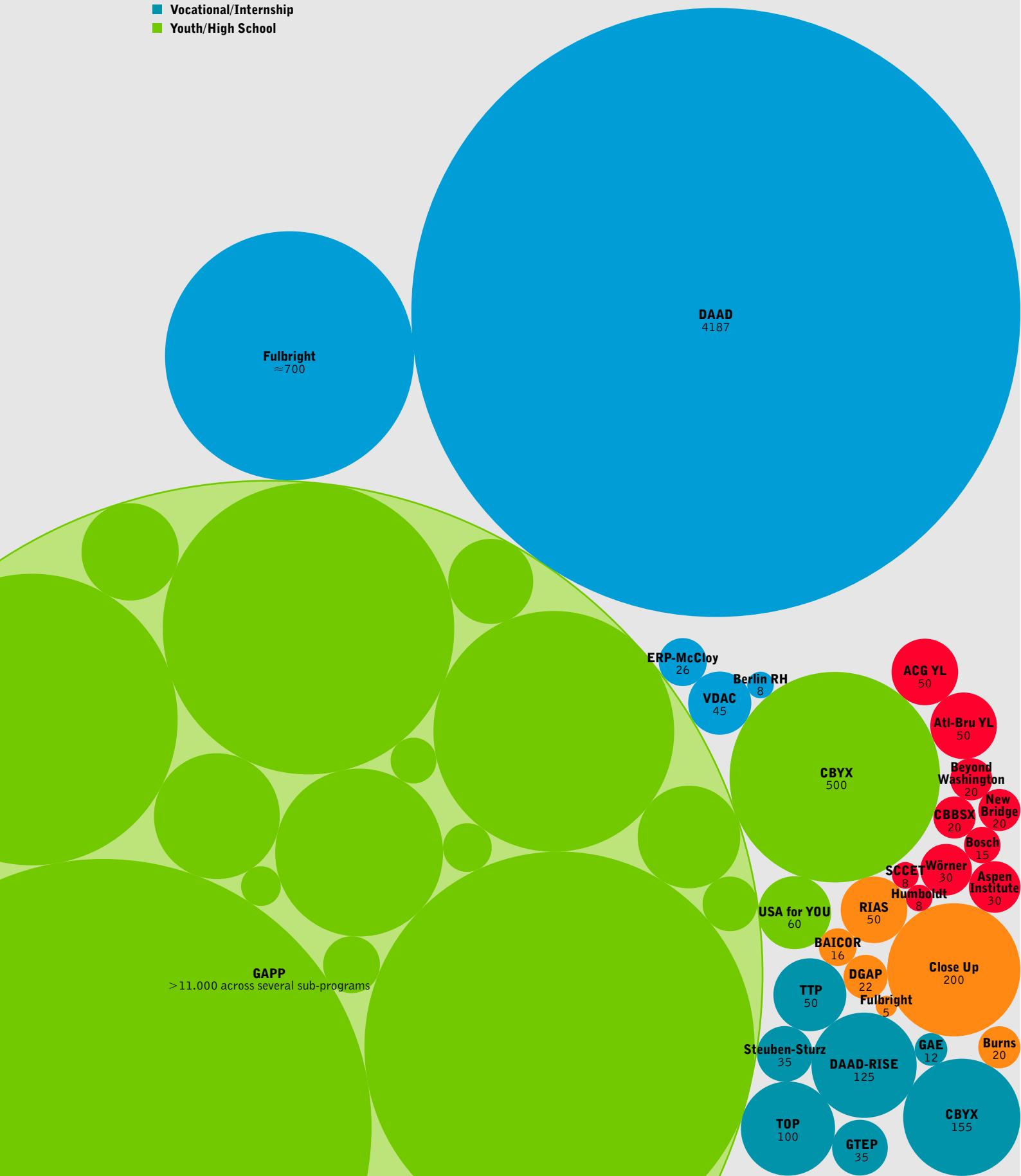
- **Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange Program/Parlamentarisches Patenschafts-Programm (CBYX-PPP)** – Founded 1983. Germany ↔ USA
- **German-American Fulbright Program** – Founded 1952. Germany ↔ USA. DAAD
  - Gilman – Founded in 2022. Germany ↔ USA.
- **American Council on Germany, American-German Young Leaders Conference** – Founded in 1973. Germany ↔ USA.
- **RIAS Berlin Kommission German-American Journalist Exchange** – Founded in 1992. Germany ↔ USA.
- **Transatlantic Talent Pipeline (Halle Foundation)** – Founded 2025. Germany ↔ USA.

Each of the above exchange programs has been selected because of its significance for U.S.-German exchange based on the following criteria: 1) direct bilateral support or funding from the German or U.S. governments, 2) contribution to high-level or critical exchange in either political, civic, and educational ties between Germany and the U.S., and 3) historic and/or symbolic significance or prestige. Furthermore, care has been taken to select programs that represent unique categories of exchange: civil society (RIAS Journalist Exchange), youth (CBYX Youth), academic (Fulbright and DAAD), vocational (CBYX Young and Vocational Components), and high-level political exchanges (ACG Young Leaders). The list includes programs with great variation in size, durations, and aims, with some programs involving only a handful of carefully selected, high-placed individuals on each side of the Atlantic while others exchange hundreds or thousands of students.

**Fig. 1: German-American Exchange Programs by Number of Participants and Category (2020–2025)**

**Type of Program:**

- Higher Education/Scientific
- Journalist/Civil Society
- Leadership
- Vocational/Internship
- Youth/High School



Measuring the success of people-to-people exchange programs is notoriously difficult, given that many programs aim for long-term returns that themselves are not quantifiable or difficult to disentangle from other factors or events.<sup>[5]</sup> Even if, for example, a leadership exchange is particularly successful in reaching young leaders who later occupy positions of power—a key indicator for that exchange type's impact—it is nevertheless no guarantee that their attitudes or positions toward the partner country will have substantively changed. Nevertheless, through my interviews with U.S.-German exchange experts and review of program evaluations which use criteria such as exchange duration/intensity, participant response, and long-term outcomes for participants, I reached some tentative conclusions regarding which U.S.-German exchange programs have been most successful in relation to their stated goals.

Not included for extended discussion here are countless private sector, business, or one-off programs such as study tours (ACG), business delegations, investment/technology centers (GCRI San Francisco), sister city programs, small study or research grants (Max Kade) from local U.S.-German societies or universities, or faculty collaborations. Likewise, a number of influential, government-funded exchange programs exist which facilitate exchanges between Germans and Americans like the State Department's IVLP and Germany's Internationales Parlaments-Stipendium (IPS), but because these are open to all countries and not exclusively U.S.-German, they are not discussed in depth here.

## Category 1: Youth Exchanges/High School Exchanges

By far the largest exchange category in terms of the sheer volume of participants, high school and youth exchanges represent, especially for Germany, a historically significant and nostalgic connection to the US. In particular, the CBYX exchange (see below) whose largest component is a high school exchange, is considered of extreme importance by German politicians and those I consulted for this report. Numerous high-ranking politicians—including the current Transatlantic Coordinator for the governing coalition, Metin Hakverdi—undertook exchange years in the US. Beyond CBYX, the German government supports other key programs including the German American Partnership Program (GAPP) administered by the Pädagogischer Austauschdienst (PAD) and the Goethe Institute, as well as the USA for You program (run by the U.S. Embassy Berlin) for lower

<sup>5</sup> For one recent academic study on measuring international exchange programs and the challenges involved, see Giles Scott-Smith, «Mapping the Un definable: Some Thoughts on the Relevance of International Exchange Programs within International Relations Theory» in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616 (March 2008), Public Diplomacy in a Changing World), pp. 173–195.



income German students.<sup>[6]</sup> GAPP, founded in 1972, alone facilitates the exchange of up to 12,000 American and German students through its network of 750 U.S. High Schools.<sup>[7]</sup>

Long-term trends of the last 15 years show a gradual decline in high school students choosing the US as a destination, mostly due to globalization and other regions becoming economically and geopolitically more significant. In 2011, about 8,500 German high school students did extended exchanges in the US. The latest study shows that number dropping to 4,700 in 2022–23, with the trend was already clear before the pandemic.<sup>[8]</sup> Despite this trend, my communication with the Executive Director at GAPP paints a different picture of the current moment at odds with the overall sentiment regarding transatlantic exchange. In an email exchange, the Executive Director of GAPP, Ajkuna Hoppe, explained that High School exchanges in the US continue to experience high demand: «Participation from the US to Germany has steadily increased each year since 2019, reaching its highest level yet this year. We're equally excited to see that exchanges from Germany to the US this fall/winter remain strong—contrary to prevailing narratives. If you follow German media, you might think no one wants to come to the US anymore, but our data, as of now, tells a different story.»<sup>[9]</sup>

**CBYX/PPP:** In interviews with exchange managers, alumni, public diplomacy and exchange experts, the CBYX/PPP exchange program stood above other youth or vocational programs in its widespread approval, governmental support and prestige, and for its large and active alumni association. Inseparable from a program's success in various areas like alumni engagement and applicant interest is the prestige and buy-in the program enjoys at high levels. Indeed, in the June 5, 2025 Bundestag debate on relations with the United States, numerous speakers specifically referenced the PPP program and their desire to ensure its survival.<sup>[10]</sup> The program, which actually consists of three separate components, allows 250 High Schoolers from each country to complete a full-year exchange, while 65 Young Professionals (ages 18–24) complete one semester of study at a university followed by a three- or four-month internship. The third component consists of a smaller cohort of 25 American students who complete a one-year internship in Germany.

<sup>6</sup> See U.S. Embassy Berlin's program description for «USA for You» here: <https://de.usembassy.gov/usa-for-you/>. Additional private exchange organizations abound in this area beyond the scope of this report. Examples include Youth for Understanding and the Checkpoint Charlie Stiftung, which sponsor or organize short and extended youth exchange programs.

<sup>7</sup> GAPP is primarily funded by the German Foreign Ministry, the Joachim Herz Foundation, the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the Max Kade Foundation, and with support from the U.S. Department of State. Find more information on GAPP and its funding here: [https://www.goethe.de/ins/us/en/spr/unt/efd/gpp.html?wt\\_sc=gapp](https://www.goethe.de/ins/us/en/spr/unt/efd/gpp.html?wt_sc=gapp).

<sup>8</sup> See Weltweiser's 2025 report on «Auslandsaufenthalte, 2025». Bonn: Der unabhängige Bildungsberatungsdienst & Verlag. page 11. Full report available here: <https://weltweiser.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Die-weltweiser-Studie-2025-zu-Auslandsaufenthalten-1.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Ajkuna Hoppe, Executive Director GAPP, email to Timothy Wright, October 7, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Ralf Stegner and Jürgen Hardt both mentioned the PPP exchange in the Bundestag debate of June 5, 2025.

The size of CBYX's alumni network, the long-term nature of the exchange, and the strong identification of participants with the program represent some of its core strengths. The three components of CBYX are all highly competitive with very low rates of acceptance.<sup>[11]</sup> Such figures suggest high interest and high-quality candidates. A 2022 U.S. State Department evaluation report revealed that a very high proportion of participants feel the program advanced their individual development and professional goals (88%) and showed that a majority continued to have contact with Germans and Germany.<sup>[12]</sup>

The CBYX program's goals to introduce youth and young adults to Germany or the US also harmonize with what many interviewees regard as a key target group and focus of future exchanges. According to Professor Christoph Ehland, a Trustee of the Halle Foundation and organizer of multiple U.S.-German exchanges, «high school youth exchanges are the most fundamental and grassroots form of exchange you can do.»<sup>[13]</sup> Any U.S. or German policy on international exchange should ensure that a long-term perspective is maintained and youth programs are of fundamental importance in fostering such long-term connections and perspectives. A separate 2009 evaluation by the U.S. State Department of multiple youth exchange programs that included CBYX concluded that the «long range investment of \$40 million is minuscule considering the multiplier effects over time.»<sup>[14]</sup>

## Category 2: Higher Education – Scientific Research Exchange

Higher Education and scientific exchange between the United States and Germany is perhaps the oldest and most vibrant category of exchange between the two countries, with a sterling record of success in benefiting and enriching both countries.<sup>[15]</sup> About 8,000 German university or graduate students study in the US each year with 6,412 American

<sup>11</sup> Unofficial sources suggest a 1–2% acceptance rate for CBYX. See <https://thehub.dallasisd.org/2022/04/28/two-north-lake-students-earn-the-chance-to-live-and-study-in-germany-for-a-year/>

<sup>12</sup> Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs, *Evaluation Report: Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange*, December 2022. Pg. 8. The evaluation was performed by an independent firm, District Communications Group.

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Christoph Ehland, Trustee of the Halle Foundation, in conversation with the author, 10/09/2025.

<sup>14</sup> Pg. 15–16 «Management Review of Youth Programs, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State,» Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of State and Broadcasting Board of Governors. Report Number ISP-I-10-16, October 2009. Pgs. 15–16. [https://www.stateig.gov/uploads/report/report\\_pdf/file/isp-i-10-16\\_1.pdf](https://www.stateig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf/file/isp-i-10-16_1.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Attracting talented Americans to study in Germany does not only have potential economic benefits, but likewise serves a similar role to intensive leadership programs like Bosch or Humboldt. As an example, Abigail Spanberger, a current U.S. Congress member from VA and leading candidate in that state's gubernatorial race completed a masters at the GISMA Business School in Potsdam and Berlin.

students studying in Germany as of 2024.<sup>[16]</sup> This bilateral exchange rests on hundreds of private sector scholarships and grants, research centers funded by German and American businesses, individual universities and institutes, German and American clubs, and numerous other programs that seek to promote academic exchange between the two countries and are outside the scope of this paper.<sup>[17]</sup> For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on two significant bilateral exchange programs with joint funding by the German and American governments: the German-American Fulbright Program and the DAAD-Gilman German Scholarship.

**German-American Fulbright Program:** The Fulbright Program, founded in 1946 by the U.S. Congress to foster international and educational exchange in the aftermath of WWII, is the flagship U.S. educational exchange program. Focused primarily on one year university and postgraduate research, the program is funded and managed by means of bilateral commissions, with Germany's Fulbright Commission being founded in 1962. As of 2024, the German federal government contributes 48% of the program's overall budget of €9,970,348, with the U.S. government contributing 31%.<sup>[18]</sup> The remaining funds come from the German federal states (9%) and private organizations in both Germany and the U.S.<sup>[19]</sup> Approximately 600–700 German and American students receive Fulbright awards to study or work as a teacher in each other's country.

The inclusion of the Fulbright Program in this study rests partly on the program's prestige, which gives it the ability to attract top American researchers and students to Germany (and vice versa). Moreover, the program is heavily dependent on U.S. Congressional appropriations. As the flagship educational program, it is in many ways a bellwether for governing American attitudes toward education exchanges and exchange programs in general. Indeed, in previous administrations both in the 1960s and 2010s, support for Fulbright fellowships to Europe were targeted for cuts.<sup>[20]</sup> Despite this, U.S. diplomatic personnel have routinely mentioned the program as one of their most valuable soft power tools.

<sup>16</sup> DAAD, «Wissenschaft weltoffen: Fact and Figures on the International Nature of Studies and Research in Germany and Worldwide», pg. 36. *German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies*. Bonn: DAAD, 2024. [https://www.wissenschaft-weltoffen.de/content/uploads/2024/11/WW0\\_2024\\_EN\\_aktualisiert\\_BF.pdf](https://www.wissenschaft-weltoffen.de/content/uploads/2024/11/WW0_2024_EN_aktualisiert_BF.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> The scholarships offered by the Studienwerke, American Council on Germany, and Berlin House of Representatives are a few examples.

<sup>18</sup> As of the writing of this report, the 2025 U.S. budget for Fulbright continues at the same level as 2024 and negotiations for 2026, although ongoing, foresee a continued 'flat' budget or at the same level as the previous year. See section II on changes to program budgets.

<sup>19</sup> Deutsch-Amerikanische Fulbright-Kommission, «Jahresbericht, 2023/24», pg 2. Report available here: [https://fulbright.de/backend/fileadmin/user\\_upload/1004\\_Datensaetze/002\\_News/004\\_Veroeffentlichungen/Annual\\_Reports/FULBRIGHT-Germany\\_Jahresbericht\\_2023-24.pdf](https://fulbright.de/backend/fileadmin/user_upload/1004_Datensaetze/002_News/004_Veroeffentlichungen/Annual_Reports/FULBRIGHT-Germany_Jahresbericht_2023-24.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Lonnie R. Johnson, «The Fulbright Program and the Philosophy and Geography of US Exchange Programs since World War II», 182. In *Global Exchanges: Scholarships and Transnational Circulations in the Modern World*. Eds. Ludovic Tournès, Giles Scott-Smith. Berghahn: New York, 2017.

Fulbright Germany's journalism component, with five fellowships for American journalists to spend a year in Germany is likewise of interest.

**DAAD/Gilman:** DAAD's footprint in U.S.-German educational and scientific exchange is considerable, with 4,187 Americans and Germans receiving fellowships to study in either country in 2023–24. <sup>[21]</sup> Of particular interest for this report, however, is the Gilman-DAAD Germany Scholarship initiated in 2022 in cooperation with the U.S. State Department's Gilman Scholarship and with funding from the European Recovery Fund. The program provides up to 40 scholarships to U.S. students who are recipients of Pell grants (i.e. lower-income students) to enable extended study in Germany. <sup>[22]</sup> In launching the initiative, DAAD Vice President Muriel Helbig stated «The new Gilman-DAAD Germany Scholarships give clear indication that diversity is an important topic in Germany as well, ... American students from underprivileged backgrounds can apply to study in Germany and are welcome at German universities.» <sup>[23]</sup> The Gilman Scholarship represents a nearly three-decade old effort by the U.S. government to broaden participation in international study to first-generation and lower income students with an average of 1,800 scholarships awarded each year. With the Trump administration's skepticism of diversity initiatives, many have feared for the survival of the Gilman Program, but as of the writing of this report, the program is still operational.

## Category 3: Civil Society/Journalist Exchanges

A number of U.S.-German exchange programs supported by both governments focus on civic engagement, civil or human rights, social justice, and exploring the ways that both countries approach solving significant historical or contemporary challenges. Among these programs is the project «Building Cultures of Remembrance» where annual exchanges focus on how each country approaches remembrance and the history of human rights abuses and struggles. <sup>[24]</sup> Other exchange programs in this category include those run by political foundations like the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, or foundations like the Aspen Institute, AGI, or GMF where topics like governance, LGBTQ rights, democratic culture, and

<sup>21</sup> Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst, *Change by Exchange: Annual Report*, 2024. Bonn. pg. 80. Published Digitally by DAAD, September 2025. [https://static.daad.de/media/daad\\_de/pdfs\\_nicht\\_barrierefrei/daad\\_annual\\_report\\_2024.pdf](https://static.daad.de/media/daad_de/pdfs_nicht_barrierefrei/daad_annual_report_2024.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> See DAAD's information sheet for the DAAD-Gilman scholarship here: <https://www.daad.org/en/find-funding/undergraduate-opportunities/gilman-daad-germany-scholarships/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad/gilman-daad-germany-scholarships-reach-new-target-groups-at-us-universities/>

<sup>24</sup> The program is run by Cultural Vistas and funded by the European Recovery Fund as well as the Hans und Berthold Finkelstein Stiftung. See <https://culturavistas.eu/our-programs/professional-study-tours/bcor>

sustainability are examined from a transatlantic perspective by experts or leaders.<sup>[25]</sup> Of particular importance in this category are those programs dedicated to the freedom of the press, primarily conducted by means of journalistic exchanges. This section will highlight one such exchange, the RIAS Berlin Kommission Journalism Exchange.

**RIAS Berlin Kommission Journalism Exchange:** Numerous well-established U.S.-German journalist exchanges have been active in the last several decades, maintaining and cultivating a vibrant transatlantic network of journalists who collaborate on stories, exchange best practices, thereby upholding a key transatlantic value. The German-American Fulbright Commission awards five scholarships to early career U.S. journalists for stays of 8–10 months to deepen their understanding of Germany's economic and political system.<sup>[26]</sup> In addition, the Arthur F. Burns Fellowship (founded 1990) supports ten German journalists and ten American and Canadian journalists to perform a two-month exchange in their respective countries, embedded at a host media organization. The program is funded by corporate donors on the American side such as Google, the Wall Street Journal, Pfizer, BMW North America, and on the German side, the German Foreign Ministry, Deutsche Bank, and the Canadian Embassy in Germany.<sup>[27]</sup> The stated aim of the program is to improve understanding of both sides of the Atlantic in media coverage and strengthen the transatlantic relationship.<sup>[28]</sup> The RIAS Berlin Kommission exchange involves more journalists, but with shorter stays. Each year 48 journalists are selected to participate in the two-week long program that involves discussion sessions with key policymakers or institutions in the host country as well as two- to three-day exchanges with a host media organization. In recent years, German journalists on the exchange have taken the opportunity to visit organizations like Heritage Foundation to ask questions and gain a better understanding of the conservative ideology now dominating Washington. The exchange exists since 1992 as a formal bilateral U.S.-German agreement to keep the spirit of the American RIAS Radio Station alive which broadcast impartial news to East Berlin throughout the Cold War.<sup>[29]</sup>

A key strength and function of both the Burns and RIAS exchanges is the creation of tight-knit networks of transatlantic journalists who can collaborate on impactful stories touching both countries, inform audiences, and connect counterparts to sources and decision-makers. In my interview with the Executive Director of the RIAS Kommission

**25** The Böll Foundation's yearly «Grow the Future» program cultivates a network of progressive voices by bringing Germans to the US or Canada on study tours to discuss issues like tech authoritarianism. See the program page here: <https://us.boell.org/en/grow-future-network-green-voices>.

**26** See <https://us.fulbrightonline.org/countries/europe-and-eurasia/germany/1686>

**27** See pg. 12 of the 2023 Arthur Burns Fellowship, Annual Report: [https://ijp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2023-Burns-Annual-Report\\_FINAL\\_onlinespread.pdf](https://ijp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2023-Burns-Annual-Report_FINAL_onlinespread.pdf). Additional information on the fellowship can be found here: <https://ijp.org/en/programmes/burns/>

**28** Arthur Burns Fellowship 2023 Annual Report: [https://ijp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2023-Burns-Annual-Report\\_FINAL\\_onlinespread.pdf](https://ijp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2023-Burns-Annual-Report_FINAL_onlinespread.pdf)

**29** See RIAS Berlin Kommission, «History» at <https://riasberlin.org/history/>.

Exchange, Christoph Jümpelt, he stressed the success and impact of the program and its alumni network in creating a transatlantic journalistic network that persists across cohorts and regularly produces new reporting with a specific transatlantic perspective. Over 1,700 journalists have participated since the 1990s, and Director Jümpelt underlined that this network is in constant contact, assisting each other in reporting. Demand for the program is higher than ever with both Germans and American journalists wishing to make sense of this moment in both country's politics. Despite this interest, funding limitations have capped the program in recent years to 48 new fellows per year on the core program, with another annual program for alumni totaling about 20 participants.<sup>[30]</sup> This is a significant decrease from the earlier years of the program although numbers have fluctuated over the years.

Although not the official goal of the program, such journalist exchanges can powerfully reinforce and strengthen democratic values and the journalistic ethos by exposing journalists to new methods or social practices that may not be as strong in their own country. As an example, one American journalism student's reflection on what she learned while on an exchange in Germany in 2025 emphasized how Germany's culture of remembrance inspired her to imagine the impact that such collective remembering might have elsewhere: «Meine Zeit in Deutschland hat mich darüber nachdenken lassen, wie es aussieht, wenn eine Gesellschaft die Bewahrung der Demokratie als Gemeinschaftsaufgabe begreift. Die Wahrung der Pressefreiheit ist Teil dieser Verantwortung. Ebenso wichtig ist jedoch auch, wie wir Journalisten uns entscheiden, die Geschichten anderer zu erzählen.»<sup>[31]</sup>

## Category 4: Young Leaders/Political/Professional Exchanges

One area of U.S.-German exchange of particular historic importance is that of young leader's conferences, congressional staff exchange programs, and professional exchange. Many of the most prominent programs in this category trace themselves to key moments of tension in the Cold War or the early 1990s when Germany feared American disengagement

<sup>30</sup> The endowment of the program was a \$1 million gift provided in 1992 by the European Recovery Act of the German Ministry for Economic Affairs. Christoph Jümpelt. Executive Director of the RIAS Kommission, in conversation with the author, 10/11/2025.

<sup>31</sup> Report from Sophia Hammer, participant on 2025 RIAS student exchange program, June 24, 2025. See hers and other reports at <https://riasberlin.org/de/eindrucke-amerikanischer-journalismusstudenten-nach-ihrem-dreiwochigen-stipendium-in-deutschland/>.

from Europe.<sup>[32]</sup> The programs in general aim to advance and strengthen ties by identifying potential decision-makers in multiple sectors and to create networks sympathetic to the interests of the host or exchange country.<sup>[33]</sup> The most prominent U.S.-German leadership and professional exchanges include the American Council on Germany's German-American Young Leaders Conference (1973), a similar Young Leaders Conference by the Atlantik-Brücke, the GMF's Manfred Wörner/Euro-Atlantic Seminar (1982), The Robert Bosch Foundation Fellowship (1984), The Alexander Humboldt Foundation's German Chancellor Fellowship (1990), and the Congress Bundestag-Bundesrat Staff Exchange Program (1983). «Beyond Washington» is a program previously funded by the ERP and now solely by the U.S. Embassy Berlin which takes 20 Bundestag staffers on tours of key American «heartland» regions.<sup>[34]</sup> To these can be added countless shorter and ad hoc political study tours, delegations, and conferences.

**ACG Young Leaders Conference:** For this report, I have selected the ACG's German-American Young Leaders Conference, along with shorter discussions of the Atlantik-Brücke's Young Leaders Conference, CBYX Staff Exchange, and the Manfred Wörner Seminar. ACG's annual conference is in many respects the surviving German-American leadership program with the highest visibility from policymakers, with German Chancellors regularly speaking at the annual summer meeting.<sup>[35]</sup> Each year, 50 Young Leaders meet for five days for informal discussions, presentations and exchanges on key issues related to the German-American relationship. Numerous members of Congress and the Bundestag and other prominent politicians have participated in the conference including Wes Moore (2009), Joaquin Castro (2009), Eric Greitens (2010), Christian Wulff (1992), Hubertus Heil (2003), Cem Özdemir (2001), and Julia Klöckner (2010). Criticism of young leader's conferences has traditionally centered on its closed, elitist character, funding, and its function as a network for career advancement as opposed to identifying policy solutions.<sup>[36]</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See Bruce Gregory, *American Diplomacy's Public Dimension: Practitioners as Change Agents in Foreign Relations*. Palgrave MacMillan: London, 2024. Pgs. 197–198. and Reinhild Kreis, „Bundnis Ohne Nachwuchs“: Die Nachfolger Generation und die deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen in den 1980er Jahren“ in *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 52, 2012, pgs. 607–631. available here: [file:///Users/timothyw/Downloads/Bundnis\\_ohne\\_Nachwuchs\\_Die\\_Nachfolgegene.pdf](file:///Users/timothyw/Downloads/Bundnis_ohne_Nachwuchs_Die_Nachfolgegene.pdf) Many historians attribute the uniquely successful German-American relationship to the existence of the ACG and the Atlantik-Brücke, two professional and elite networking organizations for political leaders. See Anne Zetsche, «Boosting the Image: The Funders of a German-American Public Diplomacy Effort» in *The Atlantik-Brücke and the American Council on Germany, 1952–1974*. Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> See Zetsche, «Boosting the Image», pgs. 119–121.

<sup>34</sup> See the «Beyond Washington» program description here: <https://culturalvistas.org/our-programs/professional-study-tours/beyond-washington>

<sup>35</sup> Jackson Janes, emeritus president of the American-German Institute, in conversation with the author. 10/05/2025.

<sup>36</sup> «Die Young Leaders Programme von Atlantik-Brücke und Weltwirtschaftsforum» *Dokumentationen*. Deutscher Bundestag Wissenschaftliche Dienste, July 2021. Full report accessible here: <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/855616/119369c60378e929d3d597801e4c5c07/WD-1-014-21-pdf-data.pdf>

Two well-regarded programs that brought young American leaders to Germany for extended exchanges have since been discontinued in the last six years: The Bosch Foundation's Fellowship Program and the Humboldt Foundation's German Chancellor Fellowship (see Section II and III for more discussion). Founded in 1984 amidst another turbulent period in German-American relations, the Bosch Fellowship program accepted 15–20 Americans under the age of 40 from business, social, and political fields to work in German organizations for one year. The Chancellor Fellowship likewise allowed 8–10 American «future leaders» to spend a year pursuing a project in Germany. The stated goal of the Bosch program was to familiarize American leaders with Germany's «political, economic, and cultural environment» and to thereby strengthen the transatlantic relationship while the Chancellor Fellowship focused on «prospective decision-makers» who can «maintain lasting ties with Germany, thereby acting as intermediaries between their countries of origin and Germany.»<sup>[37]</sup>

Although in some respects difficult to measure, the programs were achieving their goals: Laura Daniels, a 2016 Chancellor Fellow alum, rose to become the National Security Council's Director for Western Europe with a specific responsibility for briefing the president on Germany, while Phil Gordon, also a Chancellor Fellow, became Kamala Harris's National Security Advisor.<sup>[38]</sup> In multiple interviews with alumni and exchange experts, it was made clear that cancelling these programs was «short-sighted» and that having such an intensive leadership exchange should be a «no-brainer» for German public diplomacy.<sup>[39]</sup> The alumni and German relations experts emphasized the historic importance of personal relations between leaders and decision-makers in the U.S.-German relationship and the success these programs had in fostering such relationships.

Despite the continued existence of the shorter leadership exchanges sponsored by ACG, Atlantik-Brücke, the GMF and others, the lack of immersive, more prestigious fellowships like the Bosch and Chancellor Fellowships diminishes a major advantage and long-term investment by Germany in connecting with future American leaders. As will be discussed in the recommendation section, German policymakers should explore reviving a similar program. On this topic, it is of particular interest that the program with the most success in reaching future political and civil society decision-makers in the German-American

<sup>37</sup> See program description and information for German Chancellor Fellowship here: [https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/fileadmin/Bewerben/Programme/Bundeskanzler-Stipendium/chancellor-fellowship\\_programme\\_information.pdf](https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/fileadmin/Bewerben/Programme/Bundeskanzler-Stipendium/chancellor-fellowship_programme_information.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Other notable US alumni in key policymaking positions include Torrey Taussig (Bosch), Denis McDonough (Bosch) and Christopher Kojm (Bosch). The conclusion that the Chancellor Fellowship was reaching decision-makers who broadly maintained ties to Germany is also supported by a methodical, quantitative program review by an external auditor from 2018: [https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/fileadmin/Entdecken/Zahlen\\_und\\_Statistiken/Evaluation\\_des\\_Bundeskanzler-Stipendienprogramms/ergebnisse\\_evaluation\\_buka\\_lang.pdf](https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/fileadmin/Entdecken/Zahlen_und_Statistiken/Evaluation_des_Bundeskanzler-Stipendienprogramms/ergebnisse_evaluation_buka_lang.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Author's conversations with Atlantic Council Non-Resident Fellow Samuel Denney (10/10/2025), Rachel Rizzo, Senior Fellow in the Strategic Studies Program at the Observer Research Foundation (9/30), and an anonymous alumnus currently serving as a high-ranking U.S. government employee in a public diplomacy role (9/22).

relationship may in fact be the IVLP exchange, a unilateral American program that brings international visitors, including from Germany, to the United States. A large number of high-placed German politicians and business leaders are IVLP alumni including Julia Klöckner, Omid Nouripour, Bodo Ramelow, Bärbel Bas and Carsten Schneider.<sup>[40]</sup> For this and other reasons, this report's recommendation section includes a discussion of potential benefits for Germany in standing up such a program for Americans and other strategically important countries.

## Category 5: Vocational/Internship Exchanges

The last category of exchange included here is that of vocational and internship exchanges which straddle the lines between private commercial enterprises and educational exchange. Given the deep economic ties between Germany and the US as well as keen interest on both sides in adapting training and business models from the other (Germany's apprenticeship system and the U.S.'s start-up culture), this has been a particularly active sector with much development and new initiatives in recent years.<sup>[41]</sup> Among the established programs in this area are the following: the vocational component of CBYX (130 annual interns in total, see above), DAAD's RISE program<sup>[42]</sup>, the German-American Exchange Internship Program (founded in 2009 with support from the American Chamber of Congress and later from the German-American Chamber of Commerce)<sup>[43]</sup> which facilitates internships for 10–15 American students each year, the Steuben-Schurz USA Interns Program<sup>[44]</sup>, as well as multiple teacher training and exchanges such as the German Teacher Exchange Program (GTEP). In discussions with managers of U.S.-German internship programs, they stressed the demand from corporate partners on both sides of the Atlantic for developing talent with

**40** See U.S. Embassy Berlin description of the U.S. Exchange Alumni Reception on July 15, 2025 here: <https://de.usembassy.gov/u-s-austausch-alumni-empfang/> «Among the current 630 members of the Bundestag, 41 are alumni of U.S. exchange programs. They include Bundestag President Julia Klöckner and her deputies Omid Nouripour and Bodo Ramelow, all alumni of the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). Federal Labor Minister Bärbel Bas and Environment Minister Carsten Schneider are also IVLP alumni. In addition, nine (Parliamentary) State Secretaries studied in the US, and numerous staff members from the Bundestag and Bundesrat have participated in programs such as the Congress-Bundestag/Bundesrat Exchange, Beyond Washington, Fulbright, and the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange (PPP).»

**41** One initiative supported by the German-American Chamber of Commerce, is the Industrial Training & Education Consortium of Leigh Valley, started in 2023 to facilitate apprenticeship and retraining programs for manufacturing in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley. See <https://iteclehighvalley.org/>

**42** RISE started initially for the US and Canada in 2005, and there are 300 scholarships each year, with 100–150 of which go to US undergraduates each year to support a 2–3 month internship in the applied sciences. See <https://www.daad.de/rise/en/rise-germany/about-the-program/>

**43** «GAE aims to cultivate a positive view of Germany among future leaders of the United States. Through new experiences and relationships, we hope to provide interns with the foundation to serve as the next generation of ambassadors of the German-American friendship.» See <https://www.globalatlanta.com/wp-content/uploads/4830-4680-6493-v.1-GAE-Company-Information-Package-2021.pdf>

**44** The Steuben-Schurz program was founded in 1999 by the US Consulate in Frankfurt and the Hessen Ministry of Higher Education. It provides «study-related internships» of up to six months to German or American interns. See <https://steuben-schurz.org/2020/01/08/usa-interns/>

experience in German or American industry, but also the challenges in placing interns given that German internships are often unpaid and are experiencing increased competition from other regions.<sup>[45]</sup>

**Transatlantic Talent Pipeline (German-American Partnership Program):** A particularly innovative program that has just been launched under the aegis of GAPP is the «Transatlantic Talent Pipeline». This program will guide 30 German students from NRW and 30 American students through a two-year exchange program (2025–26) to introduce them to the German apprenticeship model and a Georgia school's (Central Education Center) tradition of work-based learning. The program includes immersive exchanges and language learning, project-based trainings in fintech, cybersecurity, and mechatronics, and introductions to vocational schools in Germany. The length of the program is unique and offers the possibility to provide more intensive language acquisition and a more impactful experience overall. The goal of the project is to create a cohort of students with the linguistic and technical training to «position them for professional opportunities with companies in the transatlantic space.»<sup>[46]</sup> The project is funded largely by the Halle Foundation, an Atlanta-based foundation dedicated to fostering German-American relations, especially of a practical nature. The program also partners with a number of German and American companies such as REMA.

## Note on Funders in the Transatlantic Exchange Space

The primary focus of this paper is the status of the programs funded by the U.S. Congress and the German Foreign Ministry (and through the entities it funds such as DAAD, Goethe Institute, Humboldt Foundation, major party think tanks, etc.), and the German Ministry for Economic Affairs European Recovery Program (ERP) and German Chamber of Commerce and finally individual German Bundesländer. The ERP in the German Ministry for Economic Affairs is particularly active in funding many short-term (2–3 year) projects that are examined in this paper. Alongside government funds, programs and the institutes that run them are often funded jointly by a plethora of non-government entities with interests in the German-American relationship and transatlantic exchange. Among the most important of these are private foundations—the majority of which are German in origin—such as the Halle Foundation, Joachim Herz Stiftung (GAPP, TTP), ZEIT-Stiftung, Hans und Berthold Stiftung (BAICOR), the Max Kade Stiftung (GAPP and numerous study scholarships), Bertelsmann Stiftung (GAPP), the BMW Foundation, the GMF (ACG, AGI). The Halle Foundation is a particularly significant non-profit funder as of the last six years, with several of the projects highlighted in this report receiving considerable funding from the

<sup>45</sup> Email from Nicole McCartney to Timothy Wright, October 1, 2025. Ms. McCartney is the Executive Director of *German-American Exchange* with headquarters in Munich, Germany.

<sup>46</sup> For information on the Transatlantic Talent Pipeline, see [https://www.goethe.de/ins/us/en/spr/unt/efd/gpp/fus.html#accordion\\_toggle\\_26756543\\_2](https://www.goethe.de/ins/us/en/spr/unt/efd/gpp/fus.html#accordion_toggle_26756543_2)

Foundation (Transatlantic Talent Pipeline, ACG, and the German-American Exchange Internship Program among others). Although the Halle Foundation has been active for many years, it acquired a very large endowment in 2019 that led to a significant expansion in operations. As will be discussed in the next section, the Robert Bosch Foundation reduced its footprint in the transatlantic exchange space with the discontinuation of the Bosch Fellowship, but the Foundation remains active with its Transatlantic Initiative with the Brookings Institute.<sup>[47]</sup>

Among corporate donors, Deutsche Bank stands out as a key funder in particular, donating to a wide range of German-American institutes (ACG, Arthur Burns Fellowship, Atlantik-Brücke) as well as other exchange programs. In addition, BMW North America (Burns Fellowship), Allianz, Linde, Deutsche Bank, REMA (TTP), Mercedes-Benz (ACG YLC), Pfizer (ACG YLC), Siemens (ACG), Volkswagen (Atlantik-Brücke) are other German corporations who sponsor U.S.-German exchanges mentioned in this report. On the American side, programs by the ACG and Atlantik-Brücke receive support from Goldman Sachs (ACG), BASF, Meta, Microsoft, while the New York Times, Bloomberg, and Wall Street Journal support the Arthur Burns Fellowship.<sup>[48]</sup>

**47** For details, see here: <https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/en/project/brookings-robert-bosch-foundation-transatlantic-initiative-bbti/details>

**48** See <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/burns/sponsors> and <https://americangerman.institute/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2023-Form-990.pdf>

# Section II: Changes to U.S.-German Exchange Programs, 2020–25

This section will provide an overview of major changes, both positive and negative, to significant U.S.-German exchange programs since 2020 up until the present. As summarized below, this period has witnessed new stresses to transatlantic exchange such as the COVID pandemic, faltering support for public diplomacy, anemic budget growth, but has also seen innovative new exchange models and a growing desire to focus exchange programs on solving concrete, real-world problems ranging from social dislocation, critical infrastructure, and digital policies.

Summary:

- **Discontinued Programs:** Robert Bosch Foundation Fellowship (2020), Humboldt Foundation German Chancellor Fellowship (2024).
- **New Programs:** DAAD-Gilman (2022), Transatlantic Talent Pipeline (2025), Transatlantic Dialogue on the Industrial Heartlands (2023), Aspen Institute's *Laboratory of Democracy Initiative* (2020), DGAP, «Influencers and Leadership in the Digital Age» (2025).
- **Changes to Exchange Candidates Vetting Procedures:** Alterations to Fulbright Program Application Requirements, New Visa Regulations, Enhanced Social Media Vetting
- **Budget and Funding:** Federal US and German Budget Changes, New Funders (Halle Foundation).
- **Shifts in Strategic Priorities:** Deemphasis of Transatlantic Public Diplomacy
- **New Political Networks:** Increasing ties between the Republican Party and the AfD.

## Discontinued Exchange Programs

As mentioned above (and discussed in more detail below), two of the most prominent German-funded leadership programs, the **Bosch Fellowship** and **Humboldt German Chancellor Fellowship** were discontinued in 2020 and 2024 respectively. This marks a rare moment in the history of U.S.-German exchange programs where major exchanges were discontinued by the German side. The discontinuations leave a major gap in the category of intensive, long-term leadership exchanges that have been very successful at building relationships with future American leaders.

In addition to these two major programs, a number of smaller programs such as a U.S.-German internship program at the German Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) also came to an end. Much of the U.S.-German people-to-people exchange takes place through small, short-term projects, funded for two to three years to test out a specific concept or probe a specific issue. In this time period, numerous such programs have come and gone and are mostly outside the scope of this report.<sup>[49]</sup>

## New Exchange Programs 2020–25

*DAAD-Gilman:* As one of our highlighted programs, the DAAD-Gilman is one of a small set of new bilateral exchange programs. Although small and one-directional (US to Germany), the 40 scholarships play an important role in expanding Germany's outreach to lower-income and minority populations in the US who may not otherwise have the opportunity to pursue study in Germany. This program is all the more important given demographic changes in the US and the crackdown on other diversity programs by the U.S. State Department.

*Industrial Heartlands:* Another particularly innovative U.S.-German program is the Transatlantic Dialogue on the Industrial Heartlands. Launched in 2023 with funding from the European Recovery Program of the German Ministry of Economic Affairs, the three-year project consists of short-term exchanges and study tours involving local government, union, business and policymaker, academic studies, and public outreach projects all centered on the question of how to revive European, German and US industrial rustbelts in a green, sustainable manner.<sup>[50]</sup> The project is the idea of public policy expert John Austin and Professor Jeff Anderson, an expert on industrial decline in Germany, and also seeks to stem democratic backsliding by tackling it at its roots and building a policy toolkit for economic renewal in neglected regions. It gathers experiences from America's rust belt, Eastern Germany, and the Ruhr region (among others) in the hopes of creating a «transatlantic network to exchange best practices» around reviving industrial heartlands and communication strategies for democratic parties. The program fits squarely into a more focused model of leadership and civil society exchange that is organized around a specific project or concept aiming to bring concrete social or economic benefits from the exchange. The

<sup>49</sup> Among these include the AGI's exchange program «Social Divisions and Questions of Identity in Germany and the U.S.» which ran from 2019 to 2022: <https://americangerman.institute/project/social-divisions-and-questions-of-identity-in-germany-and-the-united-states-2022-2023/>. Also outside the scope of this report is the German Marshall Fund's Transatlantic Academy which was closed in 2017. Although more of a think tank and not exclusively U.S.-German, it nevertheless was an important meeting place for American and German leaders. It had been funded by the Bosch Stiftung, Zeit-Stiftung, and the GMF.

<sup>50</sup> Das Progressive Zentrum, the BMW for German and European Studies at Georgetown, and Progressive Policy Institute sponsor and manage the program. Since the first election of Donald Trump, a number of similar U.S.-German projects have focused on the social and economic causes of populism such as the AGI «Social Divisions» project mentioned in the previous footnote, and new exchanges by the Aspen Institute.

project is intensely concerned with revitalizing democracy, but doing so through research-based, and indirect socio-economic interventions.

A recent exchange on the project—the Midwestern Study Leaders Tour—took a group of American mayors, city planners, and business leaders on a tour of key German industrial regions including Cottbus, Duisburg, and mining villages in the Rhineland. They met with German MP Katrin Uhlig, Duisburg Deputy Mayor Dr. Sebastian Ritter, as well as other business leaders and city planners. The trip offered insight on specific initiatives and projects to renew German industrial regions such as pivoting to agrotourism as well as insights that renewal must be locally led as opposed to imposed from outside.

*Transatlantic Talent Pipeline:* 2025 saw the launch of an innovative, two-year STEM-focused vocational exchange between 30 Georgia high school students and 30 German students at two schools in NRW. The exchange's goal is to open up alternative science-related pathways to High School students by enhancing their mobility through a transatlantic exchange, language training, and experience participating in real-world research projects with university faculty. The exchange incorporates virtual modules, several two-week long in-person exchanges in both Georgia and Germany, and vocational trainings.

*Laboratory of Democracy Initiative* (Aspen Institute Germany). Launched in 2020, the «Laboratory of Democracy Initiative» by Aspen Institute Germany brings 30 state-level legislators from the US, Germany, and Canada together to discuss practical policy issues.<sup>[51]</sup> Each year focuses on a new topic such as climate and energy policy (2022), renewal of industrial heartlands (2023), or critical infrastructure (2024). The program is bipartisan in nature and fits into the growing landscape of sub-national exchange that this report identifies as vital for the future of U.S.-German relations. The project is funded by the European Recovery Fund of the Transatlantic Program of Germany.

*German-American Initiative on Influencers and Leadership in the Digital Age* (DGAP). This innovative program, which launches in late 2025, features a unique format that brings 14 influencers (seven American and seven German) together with eight parliamentary staffers from the US and Germany to discuss how the social media information sphere functions and influences democracy. The exchange consists of two five-day study tours in Washington and Berlin respectively with the goal of formulating policies to counter disinformation and improve digital information hygiene. The program is funded by the German Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy.

<sup>51</sup> For more information on the Laboratory of Democracy Initiative, see the Aspen Institute's description here: <https://www.aspeninstitute.de/programs/program-overview/transatlantic-program/laboratories-of-democracy-initiative-2/>

# Changes to Vetting and Application Process

A bedrock principle governing bilateral U.S.-German exchange programs reviewed in this report is that applicants should be selected through an objective, non-partisan, and transparent process agreed upon and with input from both countries. In some cases, the vetting, interviewing, and review of applicants is entrusted to external scholars, non-partisan commissions, or experienced program managers at implementing partners who judge the application based on its academic quality, and suitedness for the specific program. In the case of the prestigious Fullbright program, U.S. legislative statutes authorizing the program establish a 12-member board to approve candidates who have been vetted by relevant scholars and a Host Country Review.<sup>[52]</sup> Such selection policies ensure that each participating country can have confidence that programs are not dictated by one side and that their interests (and considerable funding commitment) are being represented. They also serve to protect the prestige of the program, and its representativeness of the broader population.<sup>[53]</sup>

In interviews with multiple individuals deeply involved with U.S.-German exchange programs at various levels, and in reviews of open-source materials and reports, I have found that the bilateral and non-partisan selection process of several exchange programs has been compromised by unprecedented actions and interventions by political appointees in the U.S. State Department. Among the unilateral changes to program selection that have taken place are rejections of applicants by the Education and Cultural Affairs Bureau late in the approval stage based on undisclosed criteria, new vetting procedures imposed on awardees, and executive orders requiring that grant awards go to those that *<democrably advance>* the President's political agenda.<sup>[54]</sup>

The most public and controversial example of these changes to selection and vetting can be seen with the prestigious Fulbright Program. The German-American Fulbright Commission oversees the annual exchange of between 600 and 700 university and post-graduate scholars between the US and Germany each year and the program represents one of the largest and most prized U.S.-German bilateral exchanges.<sup>[55]</sup> Following the issuing of numerous Executive Orders focused on eliminating programs and activities related to Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity (DEI), State Department International Exchange program staff were instructed by the acting Bureau Chief, Darren Beattie, to perform keyword searches of

<sup>52</sup> See «Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act Of 1961» (Fulbright-Hays Act). In particular, see section (b)(1) on intellectual freedom on page 12 of the full text version available here: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-1082/pdf/COMPS-1082.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Lonnie R. Johnson, «Memorandum to Members of the Fulbright Association Advisory Committee», July 22, 2025 (Updated September 15, 2025).

<sup>54</sup> «Improving Oversight of Federal Grantmaking», Executive Order No. 14332, August 7, 2025.

<sup>55</sup> These figures are from the Fulbright-Germany *Jahresbericht* 2023–24, which shows 605 scholarships. In conversation with representatives from Fulbright Germany, the number of scholarships for 2025–26 has remained stable and in line with previous years.

Fulbright (and other programs) proposals in order to identify projects related to racial or economic diversity, gender, or progressive politics. Many such projects were subsequently rejected by the State Department's Education and Cultural Bureau.<sup>[56]</sup> This action occurred at the final review stage once national Fulbright Commissions and the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board had approved the candidates. Numerous European Fulbright Commission directors have reported that the number of applications rejected typically averaged 20–25% of the submitted projects but sometimes reaching 40%.<sup>[57]</sup>

In my interviews with a former Fulbright Commission president, university staff members who work on Fulbright, and with Daniel Villanueva, former manager of the CBYX program at Cultural Vistas, they confirmed that such reviews and late-stage rejections of candidates by the State Department are without precedent. These changes to the selection process that are contrary to the program's founding statutes led to the dramatic resignation of 11 of the 12 members of the Fulbright Board on June 11, 2025. In their public statement explaining their resignation, they stated «...the current administration has usurped the authority of the Board and denied Fulbright awards to a substantial number of individuals who were selected for the 2025–2026 academic year. The administration is also currently subjecting an additional 1,200 foreign Fulbright recipients to an unauthorized review process and could reject more.»<sup>[58]</sup> According to Dr. Lonnie Johnson, former president of the Austrian-U.S. Fulbright Commission, the rejected topics «included topics addressing climate change, discrimination, diversity, indigenous peoples, inequality, racism, and women.»<sup>[59]</sup>

**56** The plans for reorganizing the U.S. Department of State released in spring 2025 included a discussion of reorienting exchange programs like Fulbright toward projects dealing specifically with questions of national security. Interview with anonymous U.S. legislative branch staffer, 10/14/2025.

**57** This also applied to scholars traveling to the US. See reporting by the Chronicle of Higher Education «For Fulbright Applicants, a DEI Disqualifier», May 29, 2025. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/global/us-colleges-world/2025/05/29/fulbright-applicants-rejected-over-dei-research-proposals>

**58** See «Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board Resignation Statement», Published on Substack, June 11, 2025. <https://frmrfbsb.substack.com/p/fulbright-foreign-scholarship-board>

**59** Lonnie R. Johnson, «Memorandum to Members of the Fulbright Association Advisory Committee», July 22, 2025 (Updated September 15, 2025). In discussions with CBYX Program Managers at Cultural Vistas, they suggested that no candidates for this year were rejected by the State Department, but that they were required to eliminate any race-based or «diversity» criteria in their selection process.

# Changes to Visa Procedures and Journalist Programs

In addition to intervening in vetting procedures on individual exchange programs, the U.S. State Department has announced and begun to implement enhanced vetting of international students and visa holders' social media feeds, publications, and writing.<sup>[60]</sup> According to the State Department, this vetting asks visa recipients to provide social media handles from any accounts in the past five years and aims to uncover any «any indications of hostility toward the citizens, culture, government, institutions, or founding principles of the United States». The vetting applies to holders of the F-1 Academic Student, J-1 Exchange Visitor, and M Vocational visas by which most German participants of exchanges enter the US. Anecdotal cases of visa denials and statements by Secretary Rubio himself indicate that visa applications in the thousands have likely been affected by the new policies.<sup>[61]</sup> In my interviews with program staff, project leaders, and experts, they all cited the new processes and overall climate entering the US as a non-immigrant visitor as presenting a significant challenge to transatlantic exchanges. One program manager at an implementing organization handling U.S.-German exchanges noted the significant extra time and resources that now must be devoted to preparing candidates for visa applications and the hesitancy which it has induced. In my interview with Professor Jeff Anderson of Georgetown University who started and advises a major U.S.-German program on Industrial Heartlands renewal, he underlined the chilling effect that these changes (along with high-profile detainments and deportations) have had on international students and their willingness to participate freely in public-facing programs and open debate.<sup>[62]</sup>

On August 28, 2025, the Department of Homeland Security published a proposed rule-change that would limit the length of «I» visas for foreign journalists to 240 days with one

**60** See U.S. Department of State announcement of expanded social media vetting from June 18, 2025, «Announcement of Expanded Screening and Vetting for Visa Applicants»: <https://www.state.gov/releases/of-fice-of-the-spokesperson/2025/06/announcement-of-expanded-screening-and-vetting-for-visa-applicants/>. See following articles by immigration lawyers and from the BBC from further explaining the background to the announcement: «State Department Sends Cable to Consulates Requiring Social Media Review of All F, M, and J Visa Applicants», 27 March, 2025 by Tafapolsky & Smith LLC. Here: [https://tandslaw.com/state-department-sends-cable-to-consulates-requiring-social-media-review-of-all-f-m-and-j-visa-applicants/#:~:text=United%20States,State%20Department%20Sends%20Cable%20to%20Consulates%20Requiring%20Social%20Media%20Review,Safety%20Threats%20\(E0%2014161\)](https://tandslaw.com/state-department-sends-cable-to-consulates-requiring-social-media-review-of-all-f-m-and-j-visa-applicants/#:~:text=United%20States,State%20Department%20Sends%20Cable%20to%20Consulates%20Requiring%20Social%20Media%20Review,Safety%20Threats%20(E0%2014161)). Nadine Yousef, «US Resumes Student Visas but Orders Enhanced Social Media Vetting», BBC, 18 June, 2025: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgrxyx0qr7eo>

**61** «Visa Delays Persist Causing Some Students to Defer to Spring», *Inside Higher Ed*, August 27, 2025. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/global/international-students-us/2025/08/27/international-students-face-visa-is-sues-fall>

**62** Dr. Jeffrey Anderson, Professor in Edmund Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, in conversation with the author, 10/3/2025.

renewal also of 240 days, a decrease from the maximum 5 year limit previously in place.<sup>[63]</sup> Numerous press freedom organizations and U.S. senators have protested the change, noting that it will limit foreign journalists' ability to pursue their work and may also be abused to favour reporters and reporting that is considered friendly to the current administration.<sup>[64]</sup> Each renewal period will potentially be an opportunity to deny a journalist credentials based on their reporting.<sup>[65]</sup>

The foregoing changes to application, vetting, and visa procedures present both logistical, strategic and ethical dilemmas for international exchange partners of the United States. On the logistical side, programs that depend on longer visa stays may need to be restructured to fit the shorter visas.<sup>[66]</sup> As regards the U.S. authorities eliminating «diversity» programs or candidates exploring such topics, this may have an impact on the goal of German funders to reach a wide spectrum of the American population to grow and expand interest and familiarity with Germany beyond traditional demographics.<sup>[67]</sup> Although it remains to be seen to what extent the new anti-diversity procedures impact the candidate pools of key exchanges, the clear danger does exist that participation by individuals from ethnically or socio-economically under-represented groups will decrease. Lastly, the above changes have—and will—lead to direct censorship and widespread self-censorship by applicants not only in the topics they propose but also in their social media feeds and other public-facing forums to avoid additional scrutiny by U.S. officials. It may be that precisely with academic and journalistic programs where freedom of speech is a paramount value, the price of participation in U.S.-German exchanges will be avoiding controversial topics and avoiding any overt criticism of U.S. policies.

**63** See proposed federal rule change in the Federal Registry, «Establishing a Fixed Time Period of Admission and an Extension of Stay Procedure for Nonimmigrant Academic Students, Exchange Visitors, and Representatives of Foreign Information Media» from August 28, 2025: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/08/28/2025-16554/establishing-a-fixed-time-period-of-admission-and-an-extension-of-stay-procedure-for-nonimmigrant#footnote-2-p42071>

**64** Letter from Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) to Secretary Kristi Noem, September 29, 2025: [https://www.wyden.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/wyden\\_letter\\_to\\_dhs\\_on\\_visas\\_of\\_foreign\\_journalistspdf.pdf](https://www.wyden.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/wyden_letter_to_dhs_on_visas_of_foreign_journalistspdf.pdf)

**65** Although I was not able to confirm the specifics of the case, I was informed in one interview with a program manager at a major implementer of a German-American exchange program that at least one German candidate for a journalist exchange program in the US was denied the fellowship on the grounds of previous reporting critical of President Trump.

**66** Experts have pointed out that the changes to the «J» visa for cultural exchange visitors could lead to problems for projects of longer duration. The length of a J visa will be capped at four years and although most U.S.-German exchange programs are shorter than this, it does limit the possibility of longer-term exchanges requiring lengthy stays, potentially for research. See the following summary: <https://www.visasandtravels.com/us-to-limit-student-visas-to-4-years-and-journalist-visas-to-240-days-what-you-need-to-know/>

**67** See DAAD page on «Diversität»: <https://www.daad.de/de/der-daad/querschnittsdimensionen-themen/diversitaet/>

# Fluctuating Budgets for U.S.-German Exchange Programs

One particularly dramatic area of change since the 2020 Covid pandemic that is strongly impacting the operations, effectiveness, and viability of core U.S.-German exchange programs is the drawback in both federal and private funding for transatlantic public diplomacy programming. While the causes for declining budgets vary—ideological opposition to exchanges, inflationary pressures, and increasing competition in allocations toward hard-power vs. soft power—the results have produced significant disruptions and cuts to key transatlantic programs. Some of the impacts of this changing fiscal landscape include

- Cancellations of key exchange programs such as the Bosch Fellowship and Humboldt German Chancellor Fellowship
- Smaller cohort sizes (CBYX Young Professionals went from 75 to 65 this past year and High School component was reduced from 250 to 210 on the American side (and to 235 on the German side.)
- High uncertainty for U.S. State Department's Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau Budget (where bilateral exchanges are managed).

## U.S. Federal Budget and Funding

The overwhelming majority of funding from the U.S. federal budget for U.S.-German international exchange programs such as the Fulbright and CBYX comes from the annual congressional allocation to the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) in the State Department with a smaller portion (for Fulbright Hays) coming from the Department of Education. In the U.S. system, each agency prepares its own budget «Justification», which the Executive Branch then submits to Congress as a «request» or recommendation for Congressional deliberations. The President's Budget submitted on May 2, 2025 proposed to cut ECA's budget for International Exchange by 93% (from \$720 million to \$50 million).<sup>[68]</sup> This budget would have eliminated in its entirety the U.S. contributions to the Fulbright, CBYX, Gilman, IVLP, and other exchanges. Despite these drastic budget proposals from the Executive Branch, the most recent Congressional and Senate Subcommittees have ignored these cuts and advanced FY2026 budgets for ECA that include only a slight reduction (\$700,946 million from 720 million for FY2025) and a flat budget for Fulbright (\$287 million).<sup>[69]</sup>

<sup>68</sup> See «Fiscal Year 2026 Discretionary Budget Request», May 2, 2025 (pg. 2, «Educational and Cultural Exchange»: <https://www.asdwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Fiscal-Year-2026-Discretionary-Budget-Request.pdf>

<sup>69</sup> See H.R.4779 — 119th Congress (2025–2026) <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/4779/text>

In normal circumstances, the budget passed by Congress would be the final word on funding and actual programming in Executive branch agencies. However, the current administration's approach to congressional appropriations is anything but normal, lending a high degree of uncertainty to what programs may actually be funded. The executive agency responsible for proposing and implementing budgets, the Office of Management and Budgets (OMB) has employed a variety of legally dubious and backhanded strategies to cut congressionally-mandated programs, including citing national security considerations, funding «pauses» for lengthy reviews, and simply refusing to follow routine procedural steps to activate the funding.<sup>[70]</sup> In early 2025, OMB froze funding for exchange programs, including Fulbright and CBYX, leading to considerable confusion and stranded students. In August 2025, OMB signaled its intent to withhold \$100 million in funding for ECA that would lead to the elimination of 20 exchange programs despite their being funded by a continuing resolution passed on March 15, 2025.<sup>[71]</sup> As of early October, the status of these programs continues to be unclear despite heavy lobbying by a bipartisan group of senators, congress members, and advocacy groups.<sup>[72]</sup>

In conversations with individuals privy to State Department deliberations and decision-making, the survival of most ECA exchange programs to this point is reportedly a result of the interventions by State Department Counselor Michael Needham and Acting Undersecretary Darren Beattie, both of whom advocated for retaining most exchange programs against the desire of OPM Director Russ Vought for much steeper cuts.<sup>[73]</sup> Congressional lobbying has likewise been important according to staff at ECA. In spring and again in summer, members of Congress sent bipartisan letters defending international exchange programs, with Congressman Glenn Thompson (R-PA) in particular urging for the survival of CBYX.<sup>[74]</sup>

The consequences of such non-transparent, sudden, and unofficial funding cuts for exchange programs are far-reaching. For U.S.-German programs like CBYX that function through bilateral funding schemes, and whose application and review process can last up to

**70** These strategies and the impoundment of funds are expressly forbidden by congressional legislation and are the subject of extensive litigation. For background, see here: Mark Overmann, «Where Things Stand: An Update on OMB Holds on ECA Funding» from the Alliance for International Exchange, August 22, 2025: <https://www.alliance-exchange.org/alliance-commentary/where-things-stand-an-update-on-omb-holds-on-eca-funding>

**71** See above and the following reporting by ProFellow, «Advocacy Alert: OMB Cuts \$100 Million From State Department Exchange Programs», August 19, 2025: <https://www.profellow.com/announcements/advocacy-alert-omb-cuts-100-million-from-state-department-exchange-programs/> The intention to cut \$100 million came as an internal directive from OMB to State Department division leaders.

**72** See the 25 September letter from Senators Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Susan Collins (R-ME) calling on OMB to release funds for the 22 programs. Full text available here: [https://www.collins.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/collins-booker\\_letter\\_to\\_omb\\_state\\_re\\_eca\\_fy25\\_cuts\\_09252025.pdf](https://www.collins.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/collins-booker_letter_to_omb_state_re_eca_fy25_cuts_09252025.pdf)

**73** Interview with U.S. legislative staffer, 10/14/2025.

**74** Interview with U.S. legislative staffer, 10/14/2025. For Glenn Thompson's engagement with CBYX, see postings by Cultural Vistas: <https://culturalvistas.org/impact-learning/news-stories/on-the-hill-cbyx-discusses-u-s-germany-with-rep-thompson>.

six months, interest from applicants will potentially wane if awards are delayed or uncertainty exists on whether the program will go forward. As of today, the core U.S.-German exchange programs that receive U.S. funds (CBYX and Fulbright) are still in place, but with slightly declining or *flat* budgets (no increase) that do not account for inflation.<sup>[75]</sup> For CBYX, multiple years of minor budget cuts and flat budgets have led to a decision this past year to decrease cohort sizes for the Young Professional component from 75 to 65 (both German and American cohorts) as well as the High School component from 250 from each country to 225.<sup>[76]</sup>

## German Federal Budget and Funding

Given the dramatic cuts to cultural and public diplomacy in the US following Trump's inauguration in January 2025, it is understandable that slightly less drastic pullbacks in Europe and Germany to public diplomacy may go overlooked. Nonetheless, in terms of the subject of this report—high-level exchanges between the US and Germany—budgetary and other decisions on the German side in the last five years have also led to a significant decrease in bilateral exchange. To begin with, cultural, political, and academic exchange budgets are under new pressures, either experiencing slight cuts or flat budgets in recent years. The proposed budget for 2026 for the Auswärtige Kultur- und Bildungspolitik (AKBP) department which funds the DAAD, Humboldt Foundation, and Goethe Institute foresees a cut from about €1.0 billion to €957 million.<sup>[77]</sup> The proposed budget foresees a flat budget for DAAD, but this is following a €10 million decrease (5%) in last year's funding.<sup>[78]</sup> Meanwhile, the German federal contribution to Fulbright will remain the same as will the budget for CBYX. While support remains strong from all parties for the work of

<sup>75</sup> In 2022, CBYX's U.S. appropriation was \$4.215 million which decreased to \$4.0 in FY 2024. See *Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy & International Broadcasting* (2023 and 2024) published by the U.S. Advisory Committee on Public Diplomacy: 2023: [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2023\\_ACPD\\_Annual\\_Report\\_508C\\_v2-1.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2023_ACPD_Annual_Report_508C_v2-1.pdf) and 2024: [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/2024\\_ACPD-AnnualReport-508C\\_FINAL\\_0307.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/2024_ACPD-AnnualReport-508C_FINAL_0307.pdf)

<sup>76</sup> Daniel Villanueva, former Director of CBYX at Cultural Vistas, in conversation with the author, 9/25/2025. Interview with Implementing Partner Program Officer, 10/7/2025.

<sup>77</sup> On cuts to DAAD, see the following press release by DAAD from 2/26/2025: [https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad-communication-publications/press/press\\_releases/konsolidierungsprogramm/](https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad-communication-publications/press/press_releases/konsolidierungsprogramm/) See the following statement from the Deutscher Bundestag regarding the proposed 2025 budget for the Foreign Ministry: <https://www.bundestag.de/presse/hib/kurzmeldungen-1097826#:~:text=Steigen%20sollen%20hingegen%20die%20Ausgaben,2024%202015%20Millionen%20Euro>

<sup>78</sup> See the Interactive Bundeshaushalt tool at Bundesministerium der Finanzen for the final German Federal Budget summary for 2025: <https://www.bundeshaushalt.de/DE/Bundeshaushalt-digital/bundeshaushalt-digital.html>. For recent cuts to DAAD, see «Entwurf Bundeshaushalt: DAAD kritisiert Kürzung seiner Grundfinanzierung» from IDW Nachrichten, 17 July, 2024: <https://nachrichten.idw-online.de/2024/07/17/entwurf-bundeshaushalt-daad-kritisiert-kuerzung-seiner-grundfinanzierung#:~:text=Beim%20BMBF%20und%20BMZ%20erwartet%20der%20DAAD%20aktuell,Jahr%20rund%202024%20Millionen%20Euro%20von%20der%20EU>. Regarding the 2026 DAAD budget proposal see DAAD's Press Release from 08/04/2025: <https://www.daad.de/de/der-daad/kommunikation-publikationen/presse/pressemittelungen/2025/daad-budget-2026/>

the AKBP and German soft power, some areas such as political foundations are experiencing a de-prioritization amidst the tight fiscal environment.<sup>[79]</sup>

One of the most significant changes to U.S.-German exchange programs funded by Germany in the last five years is a direct result of tightening in federal funding. Here I am referring to the 2024 elimination of the Humboldt Foundation's German Chancellor Fellowship.<sup>[80]</sup> This reflects a reprioritizing of a private foundation's strategic aims amidst inflationary pressures. The cancellation of Humboldt's German Chancellor Fellowship, which since 1990 had brought on average 10–15 American professionals and scholars to Germany each year, was justified by Foundation's President Robert Schlägl due to the lack of increased federal budget allocations combined with the high inflation levels after 2020.<sup>[81]</sup> In order to be able to keep up with inflation for its «core» Postdoctoral Research Fellow Program, other fellowships had to be cut, as expressed in the October 2023 announcement: «It greatly pains us that we are compelled to give up this prestigious programme. Unfortunately, we see no other way to save money in the Foreign Office's budget. Our aim in discontinuing this programme is to avoid causing irreparable damage to our core business.»<sup>[82]</sup>

## Strategic Shift Away from Soft Power Diplomacy

The backdrop for these budget cuts, it must be stressed, is not only objective fiscal pressures nor Republican opposition to transatlantic exchange programs. For several decades stretching back to at least the second term of George W. Bush, the U.S. State Department has repeatedly signaled its desire and intention to shift resources away from soft power programs focused on the U.S.-European relationship, towards regions deemed higher strategic priorities.<sup>[83]</sup> Indeed, in 2015, the U.S. State Department under Hillary Clinton

<sup>79</sup> A cut of €80 million in 2026 has been proposed for political foundations such as the Heinrich Böll Stiftung. <https://www.die-stiftung.de/news/partei-nahe-stiftungen/weniger-geld-fuer-partei-nahe-stiftungen-159904/>

<sup>80</sup> The Robert Bosch Foundation, January 2020 article «New Beginnings: The Foundation's International Work», an interview with Sandra Breka regarding the changing priorities of the foundation: <https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/en/story/new-beginnings-foundations-international-work>. For the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung's decision, see the press release from 19 October 2023, «Reduced Budget Forces Humboldt Foundation to Make Drastic Cuts»: <https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/en/explore/newsroom/press-releases/reduced-budget-forces-humboldt-foundation-to-make-drastic-cuts>.

<sup>81</sup> The Foundation's 2024 budget of €54 million was €1.3 million less than its 2019 budget despite the intervening high inflation levels. The 2025 budget is even less, at €52.9 million. See Humboldt Foundation press release here: <https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/en/explore/newsroom/press-releases/budget-cuts-humboldt-foundation-forced-to-discontinue-fellowships-and-programmes>

<sup>82</sup> See above, AvH Foundation Press Release, Oct. 19, 2023.

<sup>83</sup> See remarks by Condoleezza Rice on reducing Public Diplomacy officers in Germany, «Remarks on Transformational Diplomacy» Secretary Condoleezza Rice, Gaston Hall, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, February 12, 2008. Full text here: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/02/100703.htm>

attempted to cut funding for CBYX by 50%.<sup>[84]</sup> The current U.S. administration's defunding of soft power programs marks both continuity and a shift with earlier reforms initiatives. The desire to deemphasize transatlantic programs continues, but with an intensified campaign against public diplomacy and soft power *in toto*. Instead, all State department programs now—however misleading it may be for the actual effectiveness of public diplomacy—must justify their existence based on how well they contribute to domestic security such as anti-drug operations, dealing with China, energy, and concrete monetary returns. As Secretary of State Marco Rubio testified before Congress, «every dollar we spend, every program we fund, every policy we pursue must be justified by the answer to one of three questions: Does it make America safer? Does it make America stronger? Or does it make America more prosperous?»<sup>[85]</sup>

The hostile climate to Public and Cultural Diplomacy in U.S. government circles was underlined in an interview for this report with one former senior State Department diplomat who worked directly on U.S.-German exchange programs for many years through 2024. The former diplomat stated that «there are no champions for public diplomacy at State or on the Hill. We are seeing a hollowing out of budgets...no one knows which programs will survive. The leadership hates Public Diplomacy.»<sup>[86]</sup> The new climate for those advocating for exchange programs is particularly challenging with new metrics for program impact being introduced that emphasize immediate, quantifiable returns. One Program Officer at an implementing organization for a prominent U.S.-German exchange program shared that among the questions included in a recent State Department questionnaire to measure their program's impact was whether the program «aided the US in securing access to rare earth minerals».<sup>[87]</sup>

Such dismissive or reductive attitudes toward public diplomacy are harder to find on the German side. At the same time, the same pressures to examine the effectiveness of international outreach and assistance funding amidst fiscal and geopolitical pressures is producing a similar result in certain cases, that is, turning away from transatlantic exchanges as the most urgent priority for private foundations and the German government. Such considerations loomed large in the 2020 decision by the Bosch Foundation to discontinue the Robert Bosch Fellowship, one of the premiere leadership programs bringing Americans to Germany. As Bosch Management Board member Sandra Beker stated, the foundation's decision came amidst new pressures from the public as to the «legitimacy and effectiveness

<sup>84</sup> See reporting on planned cuts in 2015: <https://www.dw.com/en/transatlantic-push-to-save-key-german-american-youth-exchange/a-18280893>. Cuts to Fulbright were also proposed: <https://www.dw.com/en/cuts-could-cripple-us-flagship-exchange-program/a-17639083>.

<sup>85</sup> U.S. Department of State Fact Sheet «100 Days of an America First State Department», April 29, 2025: <https://www.state.gov/releases/2025/04/100-days-of-an-america-first-state-department/#:~:text=Fact%20Sheet,an%20America%20First%20Foreign%20Policy>

<sup>86</sup> Senior State Department Diplomat, in conversation with the author, 10/6/2025.

<sup>87</sup> Implementing Partner, Program Manager, in conversation with the author, 10/7/2025.



of philanthropy». [88] The Foundation's realignment «focuses on a few select topics» that include climate change, conflict, migration, and inequality.

## New Transatlantic Networks: The Alternative für Deutschland and MAGA

While many on both sides of the Atlantic are primed to expect a decrease in support for U.S.-German exchanges from the U.S. Executive branch, one area of German-American relations—that between the German far right party the AfD and MAGA—has thrived. Meetings between AfD representatives and Trump's administration are almost as ubiquitous as those with the governing CDU/SPD coalition. Since Trump's inauguration in January 2025, high-level officials or representatives of the administration have met with or signaled their support for the AfD, a hitherto unthinkable action in German-American relations. Vice President Vance's Munich Security Conference speech in January 2025 (and meeting with Party Leader Alice Weidel thereafter) and Elon Musk's virtual appearance at AfD rallies are only the most visible interventions and linkages between the two groups. As the German journalists Annett Meiritz and Juliane Schäuble detail in their recently-published book, *Die Allianz der Neuen Rechten* (2025), the contacts and linkages between the Trump and AfD milieu's is taking place at «all levels», from social media influencers like Beat Ulrich Zirpel and Leonard Jäger, business contacts, to high-level «unofficial» meetings between AfD politicians and members of the administration. [89]

Among such contacts are several meetings which took place this past September in Washington D.C. In mid-September 2025, Deputy Chair of the AfD Fraction, Beatrix von Storch along with other AfD politicians, conducted an «unofficial» visit to the office of the Vice President in the White House, with the discussion focusing on «freedom of speech», censorship, migration, and Islamization. [90] Later in the same month, two AfD parliament members, Markus Frohnmaier and Jan Wenzel Schmidt were invited by Darren Beattie, the acting Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy at the US Department of State. In his post on X after the visit, Beattie said the group discussed «German-American relations as well as shared priorities on cultural exchange and migration.» [91] For his part, Frohnmaier—who is a close partner of Alice Weidel and has apparently been given responsibility to build

**88** See Bosch Foundation «New Beginnings».

**89** Annett Meiritz and Juliane Schäuble, *Die Allianz der Neuen Rechten: Wie die Trump-Bewegung Europa erobert*. München: Heyne Verlag, 2025. See the authors September 13, 2025 article «Der Mord an Charlie Kirk festigt die Allianz von MAGA und AfD» in *Handelsblatt* about AfD-US business connections: <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/usa-der-mord-an-charlie-kirk-festigt-die-allianz-von-maga-und-afd/100154761.html>

**90** See Deutsche Welle report «Germany's AfD seeks closer ties to Trump and MAGA movements», October 6, 2025: <https://www.dw.com/en/afd-alternative-for-germany-beatrix-von-storch-donald-trump-markus-frohnmaier-jan-wenzel-schmidt/a-74254801>.

**91** Darren Beattie on X, September 30, 2025: <https://x.com/UnderSecPD/status/1973200907111391613>.

stronger ties to Washington—explained that the group discussed ways to cooperate more and that he also explained to Beattie that the CDU is financing organizations that threaten the US such as the Gates and Open Society Foundations.<sup>[92]</sup> Although the specifics of their conversation are unclear, Under Secretary Beattie is responsible for managing and directing international exchanges and was the key State Department official involved breaking precedent by rejecting exchange candidates based on proposal topics.

Beattie is by no means isolated at the State Department in his desire to reorient U.S. relations with Europe toward extreme right parties like the AfD. In a May 2025 Substack post by the State Department, a senior advisor in the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Samuel Samson, called for U.S.-European ties to be based on a common «civilization» and «heritage», that is threatened by migration.<sup>[93]</sup> The article described Germany's treatment of the AfD and other extremists as anti-democratic.

Key conduits for these contacts have been organizations like the Young Republican Clubs<sup>[94]</sup>, anti-abortion and fundamentalist Christian conferences, as well as meetings of international far-right groups like the Identitarian Movement.<sup>[95]</sup> It is through the Young Republican conference, for example, that Jan Wenzel Schmidt has built his close ties to the MAGA world. At this point, the expanding ties continue on the level of informal receptions and visits by politicians, discussions through international right-wing conferences, think tanks and associations, and sharing of talking points in foreign-policy related events. At this stage, the author is not aware of any formal government exchange, forum, or initiative that is focused specifically on connecting the AfD with U.S. leaders or policymakers. However, a recent announcement on October 30, 2025 by Sarah Rogers, the new undersecretary for Public Diplomacy at the Department of State, regarding a new «Global Free Speech Initiative» may be a framework in which programs with the AfD are developed.<sup>[96]</sup> The initiative, which will be in partnership with Turning Point USA, seeks to «implement multiple international programs dealing with topics like free speech.» In the interview in which she made the announcement, Rogers spoke of the need to use the tools of

<sup>92</sup> See comments by Frohnmaier to T-Online in its reporting from October 10, 2025 «AfD-Politiker treffen sich mit wichtigem Trump-Berater»: [https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/innenpolitik/id\\_100938636/afd-politiker-treffen-sich-mit-wichtigem-trump-berater-kritik-an-cdu.html](https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/innenpolitik/id_100938636/afd-politiker-treffen-sich-mit-wichtigem-trump-berater-kritik-an-cdu.html)

<sup>93</sup> Samuel Samson, «On the Need for Civilizational Allies in Europe», State Department Substack Post, May 27, 2025: <https://statedept.substack.com/p/the-need-for-civilizational-allies-in-europe>

<sup>94</sup> See reporting by Deborah Cole in the Guardian on the exchanges between the New York Young Republicans Club and AfD members. «Far-Right German Activists Spent US Election Day at Trump's Mar-A-Lago» *The Guardian*, December 7, 2024. See <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/dec/07/far-right-activists-from-germany-spent-us-election-day-at-trumps-mar-a-lago>

<sup>95</sup> See reporting in *Correctiv* from February 28, 2025 by Robin Albers, Gabriela Keller, and Martin Böhmer on the intensifying networks of right-wing activists. «Religiöse Rechte in Deutschland Suchen Schulterschluss mit Trump»: <https://correctiv.org/aktuelles/trump-und-europa/2025/02/28/religioese-rechte-deutschland-trump-maga-abtreibungsgegner/>

<sup>96</sup> See Sarah Rogers appearance on the Charlie Kirk Show from October 30, 2025: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9fLgiM8h6hI>

international exchange to advance right-wing priorities such as changing European laws concerning hate speech.

The dangers of such connections are clear: the U.S. administration's ideological affinity provides the AfD with a sympathetic ear regarding current conditions within Germany, along with their own radical policy prescriptions. Already we have seen this play out with the dramatic éclat with Vance's speech on German «censorship». It is not inconceivable that Germany's strategic priorities regarding NATO, EU, or trade policy vis-à-vis the US have or could be undermined by AfD inroads toward the administration.<sup>[97]</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Thomas Protzman «Conservative America is Waiting: The New Transatlantic Axis?», Blog Post at American-German Institute, November 5, 2025. <https://americangerman.institute/2025/11/conservative-america-is-waiting/>

# Section III: Policy Recommendations for U.S.-German Exchange

The following recommendations include both specific ideas for supporting current exchanges or for developing new forms of exchange, as well as more general recommendations for the topics, issues, and structures for programs that may prove fruitful in this fraught moment in transatlantic relations.

## Recommendations for Supporting Existing Exchange Programs

### **Recommendation 1: Advocate for Restoration of Merit-based, Independent Application and Vetting Procedures for Fulbright and Other Bilateral Exchanges.**

As mentioned in section 2, the State Department's unprecedented rejection of Fulbright candidates approved by host countries constitutes a deeply concerning breach of the bilateral program's principles and threatens the program's mission and standing. Projects that the German-American Fulbright Commission have selected that the German side deems will benefit Germany on such possible topics as climate change research, gender or racial equality, or integration of migrant populations, can now be rejected unilaterally by the US on ideological grounds. Many candidates will self-censor or simply not apply given the well-publicized politicization of the process, thus damaging the prestige and viability of the program further.

It is not known to this author to what degree the German-American Fulbright Commission or the German Embassy in Washington has already protested or questioned these actions. If there has not been an official diplomatic effort to protect Fulbright's (and other programs') integrity, then it should be undertaken. Apart from direct advocacy from the Commission and Embassy, assistance in this effort can likely be found by connecting with prominent Fulbright alumni, and members of Congress to make the case of the damage that such an approach does to the program.

### **Recommendation 2: For CBYX, Fulbright, DAAD-Gilman, mobilize alumni and congressional German-American caucus to protect the survival of these key programs.**

Two of the broader uncertainties facing current advocates for U.S.-German bilateral exchanges are the irregular funding decisions undertaken by OMB Director Russel Vought as well as the troubling absence of sympathetic points-of-contact within State Department leadership. Funding decisions are no longer a deliberative process undertaken by Congress

but rather decided by a small circle at State or OMB. And this circle—including the Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and other top officials—seem resolutely disdainful of public diplomacy. Despite this state of affairs, my conversations with exchange advocates and State Department staff have suggested that some opportunities exist for successfully advocating for international exchange programs. First, according to accounts by ECA staff, the experience of this past year shows that bipartisan congressional advocacy in the form of calls, letters, and meetings supporting specific programs can influence which programs survive.<sup>[98]</sup> The letter by Senators Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Susan Collins (R-ME) in September as well as Congressional hearings on the importance of exchange programs had a significant influence in the release of funds and Congressional notifications for programs initially targeted for cuts. The work of the public and private sector can also not be underestimated with tens of thousands of letters written and constant work by NAFSA, the Alliance for International Exchange, and other groups throughout the year.

Advocates of U.S.-German programs should take note of which Republican administration officials or members of Congress have advocated for or shown sympathy to these programs in the past and with whom deeper connections can be made. These include Secretary Marco Rubio's Chief Counselor, Michael Needham who intervened to prevent Undersecretary Beattie from cutting exchanges, Congressman Glenn Thompson (R-PA), and Senator Susan Collins (R-ME). The departure of Darren Beattie from the U.S. State Department may also provide new opportunities for outreach. The incredibly eloquent diplomatic staff and exchange experts who have testified as to the benefits of exchange programs<sup>[99]</sup> should also be the subjects of outreach to explore ways to ensure the continuation of key U.S.-German exchange programs. CBYX and Fulbright (along with DAAD-Gilman) carry immense value for both the US and Germany and efforts should be renewed to prevent their discontinuation.

### **Recommendation 3: Renew Investment in an Extended, Intensive Leadership Exchange and IVLP Program.**

As mentioned in both sections I and II of this report, it is the opinion of nearly all experts consulted here that an important asset for German outreach to the US was lost with the discontinuation of the Humboldt Chancellor Fellowship and the Bosch Foundation Fellowship which brought young, promising American leaders to Germany for an extended professional exchange. Although questions have been raised as to the potential cohort

<sup>98</sup> Cory Booker, Susan Collins, Letter to Russel Vought, September 25, 2025. See press release by Cory Booker: <https://www.booker.senate.gov/news/press/booker-collins-urge-omb-state-department-to-reverse-funding-cuts-for-21-educational-and-cultural-exchange-programs>

<sup>99</sup> Minutes and Transcript from Public Meeting «Leveraging Public Diplomacy for All Americans» held at USC Washington DC Campus by the U.S. Advisory Committee on Public Diplomacy on April 2, 2025. Full text here: <https://www.state.gov/acpd-official-meeting-minutes-april-2-2025/>

compositions and effectiveness of the alumni associations<sup>[100]</sup>, the consensus of external evaluations, anecdotal analysis of alumni roles in the U.S. political and foreign policy establishment, and inference from similar leadership programs speaks for the obvious value of such a program.<sup>[101]</sup> It is likewise the opinion of this report that an extended, intensive format—as opposed to the short duration formats of the ACG or Atlantik-Brücke's Young Leaders Conference—is more likely to provide the benefits sought in such programs. Participants in a short leadership exchange do make connections and gain a certain degree of understanding into Germany's priorities and system, but these are much more surface-level and fleeting, especially given that such young leaders often participate in multiple short-term exchanges. However, spending a sustained amount of time in a country, up to a year in the case of the discontinued programs, is much more of a life-defining event likely to shape and impact the individual's outlook, future career choices, and professional networks.

There are several ways that a new program could be adapted to the current moment and incorporate suggestions for improvement from evaluations. In the 2018 independent evaluation of the Chancellor Fellowship, it was recommended that the time-period in which the project could be completed should be made more flexible to account for applicants' unique professional situations. The exchange period could, for example, allow for a two-year period to complete the one-year program for more running time or to learn German more completely. The ability for short pauses should also be possible. This is also a suggestion I encountered in my interviews with some experts suggesting that modern exchanges may need to adapt to greater variability in participants' availability. Interviewees underlined, furthermore, that for some programs, low fellowship stipends have likely created more hardship for certain groups (candidates with children, individuals from less privileged backgrounds) or made it difficult to accept a fellowship.<sup>[102]</sup> It will thus be important to adjust the financials and structure to attract individuals from as wide a background as possible. In keeping with other suggestions offered in expert interviews, great care will need to be taken to expand the visibility of the program to appeal to target groups (unifying leaders, marginalized groups).

Lastly, although it is a program with a shorter duration, an additional model for German policymakers to consider is the State Department's International Visiting Leaders Program (IVLP) that invites up to 5,000 specially-selected leaders from countries around the world

**100** Senior U.S. Public Diplomacy official, in conversation with the author, 09/22/2025.

**101** The 2018 evaluation of the Chancellor Fellowship found that a large percentage of participants were in leadership positions and tightly connected to Germany. Full text of the review can be accessed here: [https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/fileadmin/Entdecken/Zahlen\\_und\\_Statistiken/Evaluation\\_des\\_Bundeskanzler-Stipendienprogramms/ergebnisse\\_evaluation\\_buka\\_lang.pdf](https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/fileadmin/Entdecken/Zahlen_und_Statistiken/Evaluation_des_Bundeskanzler-Stipendienprogramms/ergebnisse_evaluation_buka_lang.pdf)

**102** Emily Adams, current Humboldt German Chancellor Fellow at Deutsche Gesellschaft für Außenpolitik, in conversation with the author, October 30, 2025. The comments on stipend amounts are first and foremost aimed at the low stipends for CBYX and Fulbright but also apply to the Chancellor Fellowship for which no family stipend is foreseen and levels were comparably low.

on an annual basis (8,000 Germans have participated since its inception). The program is hailed as a prime example of familiarizing and exporting U.S. governing and business principles worldwide, but especially for its success in cementing U.S.-European relations.<sup>[103]</sup>

## Funding for Promoting Sustainable Exchanges

### **Recommendation 4: Identify New, U.S.-based, Private Funding Partners to Support Sustained U.S.-German Exchange Programs**

As detailed in this report, several major private funders have reduced their activity in the U.S.-German exchange space (Bosch and Humboldt) in recent years at the same time that the U.S. federal government will at best maintain flat budgets for bilateral exchanges. In a moment of unparalleled urgency for addressing ruptures in the transatlantic relationship, a key priority must be to identify and bring new funding partners into this space to make up for decreased activity on the federal level. The departure of Bosch and Humboldt programs and anemic federal funding has primarily impacted long-term, bilateral programs. At the same time, the last decade has seen a proliferation of short-term, project-based exchanges, but which have little hope of becoming permanent exchanges. A key question is thus how can innovative new programs achieve stable funding models?

In the course of this research and in conversation with exchange experts, the issue of short life-cycles for innovative, worthwhile new programs came up several times. Programs such as the Industrial Heartlands, or the Aspen Institute's Laboratory of Democracy Initiative launch with short-term funding for projects envisioned to last a few years, often from a government fund such as Germany's European Recovery Program (in the Ministry for Economic Affairs) or combined with additional private foundation funding. The program may be extended for another, shorter cycle, thus bringing the program to five years in length.<sup>[104]</sup> The ERP envisions itself as providing start-up funding to a wide variety of groups, with the hope that successful programs will secure private funding to expand and continue. In my survey of the U.S.-German exchange space, this expectation is not being fulfilled. Given the changing nature and priorities of foundation funding, most programs do

<sup>103</sup> Giles Scott-Smith, *Networks of Empire: The U.S. State Department's Foreign Leader Program in the Netherlands, France and Britain*. Peter Lang: New York, 2008.

<sup>104</sup> The ERP limits funding to three years with rare extensions for two additional years. See «Deutsches Programm für transatlantische Begegnung (Transatlantik-Programm) –Merkblatt» (1 Juni, 2014). full text here: <https://cyrrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Merkblatt-mit-Finanzierungsplan-deutsch-Stand-2014-06-01.pdf>: «Die Förderung soll bei längerfristigen Projekten nur Anschubcharakter haben und drei Jahre nicht übersteigen. Nur in besonders begründeten Ausnahmefällen kann eine Förderung höchstens für 5 Jahre erfolgen. Bei Projekten, die über den Förderzeitraum hinaus geplant sind, ist vor Beginn der Förderung glaubhaft zu machen, dass eine Anschlussfinanzierung sichergestellt wird. - 4 - An der Finanzierung der Projekte sollen sich nach Möglichkeit auch andere, insbesondere private Geldgeber auf deutscher, aber auch auf amerikanischer Seite beteiligen.»

not secure continuation funding. While not all projects should become permanent projects, this model does mean that even highly successful programs prove short-lived. In discussions with participants on the Transatlantic Dialogue on Industrial Heartlands (discussed more below), several bemoaned the short horizons of a program meant to bring long-term changes and expressed the hope that it could be «institutionalized» or made permanent in some manner once the current funding from the ERP is finished. Otherwise, the network and projects that have been developed will become dormant.

A solution to this short-term project cycle is for policymakers and exchange experts to collaborate in identifying which program(s) may be most promising to function as a permanent, bilateral exchange. The next stage will involve dedicated work exploring possibilities for public-private partnerships to fund the program(s) for a sustained period. This approach is not without precedent as histories of the Bosch Foundation's Fellows program show that its origins lay in overtures from policymakers at a moment of heightened sensitivity in the U.S.-German relationship. The question at the moment is which suitable private funders may exist willing to collaborate. Ideally, a new public private partnership would involve buy-in from American partners. One of the historic facts of the U.S.-German relationship in the preceding four decades has been an imbalance in private funders, with the majority of investments in U.S.-German exchange coming from German foundations. To achieve more sustainable programming focused on strengthening civil society, new U.S. partners must be brought into the space of U.S.-German exchange. Recently, several possibilities have emerged. Since the second election of Donald Trump, the Ford Foundation has signaled its continued commitment to funding programs focused on social justice, election integrity, and the rule of law.<sup>[105]</sup> The new head of the foundation, Heather Gerken, is an expert on voting rights and former dean of Yale Law School. Although likely success will come by identifying organizations with historical ties to Germany, this is a moment to perhaps think beyond the traditional networks and reach a broader section of U.S. civil society. In addition, outreach by policymakers to the Atlanta-based Halle Foundation should be prioritized. As a relatively new funder in the U.S.-German exchange space and one that has found incredible success fostering connections to historically black colleges and innovative vocational exchanges in a Republican-led state (Georgia), the organization's activity could be a model or springboard for similar initiatives beyond the Southeast. Other possible foundations to approach would be Open Societies Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

In terms of German funders, several Foundations have continued to fund projects focused on strengthening U.S.-German civil society and democracy initiatives including the

**105** In the 1980s and 1990s, the Ford Foundation did contribute to U.S.-German institutions such as the American German Institute at Johns Hopkins University. In recent years, these foundations have moved away from country-specific programs. See this author's conversation with the director of the American-German Institute, Susanne Dieper, 11/5/2025.

German Political Foundations, the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the ZEIT-Stiftung<sup>[106]</sup>, the Körber Foundation, the Humboldt Foundation, as well as several smaller projects by the Robert Bosch Foundation. German policymakers should approach these foundations to begin conversations on ways they can advance democratic principles via new transatlantic exchanges.

## Strengthening Civil Society

### **Recommendation 5: Focus on Project-Specific Exchanges, Aimed at Social Issues and Mutual Challenges**

A recurring theme among interviewees and studies consulted for this project was the strong preference for U.S.-German exchange to move beyond «exposure» and «cultural awareness» toward exchange formats that bring people and specialist groups together to study and solve a specific, mutual challenge, often on the local level. This is a point that former American-German Institute (JHU) President Jackson Janes made strongly in my conversation with him: «There is an enormous amount of space for people working on similar projects that don't know each other. At all levels. What used to be the mentality of «exposing» each other to the culture, should now be focused on individual topics like common societal challenges. It's going to take a lot more specificity.»<sup>[107]</sup> To achieve the desired degree of specificity and returns, such project-based programs are best suited for the sub-national level but can apply to all levels of exchange and program goals, be they sustainability, worker retraining, human rights, or addressing social ills like the fentanyl crisis. They also have the added benefit of bringing in non-traditional exchange participants from minority or working-class backgrounds or, which is another key recommendation of this report.

For many programs, it is already the case that they are structured around knowledge-exchange on certain topics or the very structure of the program addresses a much-needed social challenge (youth internship or vocational programs). One area where this insight could be more fully implemented is that of high-level leadership exchanges where previous iterations have either seen individuals pursuing disconnected projects or short conferences that may have loose themes, but few concrete results. In several of my interviews I became aware that key figures in the U.S.-German exchange space are exploring ways that, for example, a longer duration leadership exchange could have greater thematic cohesiveness across the cohort and more opportunities for collaboration among its fellows.

<sup>106</sup> The Zeit-Stiftung pledged one million euros to democracy initiatives in 2024. See: <https://evangelische-zeitung.de/zeit-stiftung-eine-million-euro-zur-staerkung-der-demokratie>

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Jackson Janes, 10/5/2025.

## **Recommendation 6: Seek out and Forge Subnational Partnerships with State and Local Leaders Interested in Democracy and Projects with Social Impact**

An important strategy in the current climate in which the U.S. federal government is pursuing policies adverse to the political and economic values at the roots of the transatlantic relationship, is to re-emphasize and strengthen subnational partnerships, especially with strongly pro-democratic actors. In a politically diverse, federalized system like the US, opportunities abound to establish meaningful relationships with state, local, and regional leaders and organizations that can have long-lasting impacts on strengthening civil society as well as progressive priorities. A similar strategy can likewise apply to Germany, where individual states offer wide room for bilateral partnerships beyond the scope of the federal government. Strengthening existing or establishing new programs with communities, organizations, and stakeholders at the local level will also serve to advance another key point made by many of interviewees: the most effective advocacy for positive U.S. (or German) transatlantic ties is that of local communities and leaders themselves making the case to their representatives.<sup>[108]</sup>

My research found three outstanding examples of transatlantic exchange that have emerged over the last decade; they embody this new project-based and subnational approach to U.S.-German exchange and likewise offer a template for programs that wish to address the erosion of democratic values: the Transatlantic Dialogue on Industrial Heartlands, the Transatlantic Talent Pipeline, and the work of the Northern Virginia Regional Commission's work. As the first two have already been described above, I will focus here on the third example of the Northern Virginia Regional Commission and its work solving real-world problems through exchange with Germany.

My conversation with Dale Medearis, an alumnus of the Humboldt Foundation's German Chancellor Fellowship (1994), explored the ways that he has brought local German and American policymakers, business, and environmental planners together to promote economic development through urban sustainability.<sup>[109]</sup> For almost two decades as a Senior Regional Planner for the Northern Virginia Regional Commission, Dr. Medearis has spearheaded numerous projects that specifically aim to bring sustainable urban planning solutions from Germany to Northern Virginia. These have included bike-lane designs, green

<sup>108</sup> Over the course of 2025, the success of the advocacy campaign was in great part thanks to the 60,000+ letters sent to Congress asking for the continuation of international exchange programs slated for elimination by the ECA Bureau.

<sup>109</sup> Some of Dr. Medearis's work also centers on introducing Germany's dual educational and apprenticeship model to the region. See «Advancing Career Technical Education by Adopting Lessons from Germany's Dual System», in *Public Management* March, 2025. Full Text available here: <file:///Users/timothyw/Downloads/2025%20ICMA%20Article%20on%20CTE%20and%20Germany.pdf>

roof<sup>[110]</sup> and green building initiatives, and a current project exchanging best practices for recycling heat waste from data centers with German companies and municipalities.<sup>[111]</sup> This year, Dr. Medearis led a delegation from Northern Virginia to both Frankfurt am Main and Berlin, to understand how local municipalities, energy providers, and data-center operators there are collaborating to produce, in one example, up to 8MW of recycled energy for the city of Berlin.<sup>[112]</sup>

Following Dale Medearis, both American and German interests are best served by focusing exchanges on projects that bring clear social and economic benefits to each country and which underline why the US can benefit from German know-how in sustainability policy. Such programs have the potential to be more effective in addressing democratic backsliding than other exchanges by solving the underlying stagnation and social ills that fuel disillusionment. In Dr. Medearis's words, «local governments need global engagement that brings social and economic development to Main Street and makes clear why work between the US and Germany is relevant.»<sup>[113]</sup>

A potential starting point for building on the work done by Dr. Medearis in Northern Virginia is to identify other regions where existing partnerships or a major German business presence exist that can be built on to expand on this model. Some possibilities include the Greenville-Spartanburg-Clemson corridor where major German businesses like BMW have founded factories and several cultural exchange programs exist or Charlotte, NC, home to offices or headquarters for 213 German businesses. In each region, there will be unique issues to address and local challenges in need of sustained knowledge transfers and global engagement strategies. In terms of selecting issues around which to build exchanges, one suggestion is to look at the most pressing issues identified by policymakers in a given region. As an example given by Dr. Medearis, Virginia Governor candidate Abigail Spanberger lists among her top priorities the expansion of internship and apprenticeship pathways to address job opportunities and workforce shortages in the state.<sup>[114]</sup> These are areas where connecting with German businesses and communities to share policy ideas can add real value. Making the case for the value of partnering with German businesses and

<sup>110</sup> NVRC relied on an internship exchange between George Mason University and environmental groups in the Stuttgart region, among whom included the Verband Region Stuttgart. See «International Applied Science and Research Partnerships: Supporting U.S. Local Governmental Climate Programs» in *Public Management* February 2024. Full Text available here: <file:///Users/timothyw/Downloads/ICMA%20Article%20on%20Applied%20Science%20and%20Climate%20Change.pdf>

<sup>111</sup> This project involved a delegation from Northern Virginia traveling to Berlin as well as to Frankfurt to meet with the Hessian Ministry for Economy and Energy. See LinkedIn posts here: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7377320162879963136/>

<sup>112</sup> See LinkedIn post from NTT Global Data Centers: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7377176560669233152/>

<sup>113</sup> Dr. Dale Medearis, Senior Regional Planner, Northern Virginia Regional Commission, in conversation with the author, 10/6/2025.

<sup>114</sup> See campaign website for Abigail Spanberger here: <https://abigailspanberger.com/issue/new-abigails-growing-virginia-plan/>

communities can also be accomplished by studies showing the amount of German investment in a region or the economic values from sustainable practices adopted in German communities. Dr. Medearis has himself undertaken an impressive study to measure Direct Foreign Investment by country in the Northern Virginia region to serve as the basis for demonstrating to local officials how to prioritize global engagement efforts.<sup>[115]</sup>

As should be clear, the work of Jeffrey Anderson on Industrial Heartlands is in a similar vein to Dale Medearis's work in Northern Virginia, with both focused on knowledge transfer between local communities. The Industrial Heartlands project has much more explicit political focus in its aspiration to address the roots of anti-democratic populism. To that end the project includes communication strategies and cultural projects alongside ideas on addressing the economic woes that cause radicalism. For progressives in Germany, finding ways to support projects of this nature can be an important way to address the key challenges to sustainable democracy in the transatlantic space.

### **Recommendation 7: Increase Outreach to Pro-Democracy Political Actors in the US and Germany**

A historic bedrock principle of U.S.-German exchange and relations has been the imperative that relations proceed in a bipartisan fashion, with both Germans and Americans engaging with representatives from across the political spectrum. In a context where established parties largely subscribed to democratic values, such a principle made practical, moral, and political sense. This open-ended bipartisanship should now be rethought given the openly anti-democratic statements and leanings of many national and state-level Republican officials and the AfD.<sup>[116]</sup> Both American partners and the German Bundestag cannot unwittingly continue or create new exchanges that provide resources or strengthen radical elements seeking to undermine democracy. Rather, a more discerning approach that prioritizes partners according to shared values and a commitment to the rule of law should be pursued as the best way to promote German and American interests. This position is not without controversy and many groups within both countries endorse alternative approaches emphasizing broad outreach including to MAGA Republicans for the sake of political expediency. In the course of my research and interviews, I encountered on several occasions the insistence that U.S.-German exchange programs must expand their reach to Republicans and even so-called «America First» conservatives in order to make clear the ongoing value of the U.S.-German relationship to those holding the reins of political power.

<sup>115</sup> Medearis's exchanges at the NVRC has been supported over the years by various sources including U.S. and German businesses who have provided in-kind and direct funding. Medearis has also performed analysis for the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

<sup>116</sup> A recent Carnegie Endowment for Peace report classified the US as an «at-risk or early backsliding» state in terms of its democracy. See *Thomas Carothers, Rachel Kleinfeld*, and *Richard Youngs*, «What Future for International Democracy Support». July 7, 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/07/what-future-for-international-democracy-support?lang=en>.

Such outreach was recently a suggestion endorsed both by Rudi Bachmann and Wolfgang Ischinger in an interview with *Die Zeit* where they proposed inviting state-level Republican politicians and officials on exchanges to Germany.<sup>[117]</sup> One interviewee, a former U.S. State Department diplomat, stated that «if Germany was smart, they would only invest in reaching out to MAGA people and congressional staff exchanges.»

While such engagement may be well-intentioned and necessary in certain settings, recent historical precedent and research make clear the long-term inefficacy and danger of a purely geo-economical approach to exchange and foreign policy.<sup>[118]</sup> Such an approach often privileges the status quo, ignores alternative civil society alternatives as well as the likelihood of future change, a particularly strong consideration in U.S. politics. Especially in this moment, policymakers must be forward-looking in engaging actors and organizations in the U.S. landscape that embody and advance transatlantic values such as democracy, climate security, and open and inclusive societies. While other recommendations in this report focus on how to do so in the realm of vocational, educational, and economic exchange, this recommendation aims more specifically at engagement with political leaders and how to do so in a values-based way.

Such values-based exchange begins by identifying groups and topics that will advance the long-term German interest of a staunchly democratic and open America. While there must be red lines for who cannot be embraced as an ally (election-deniers, ethno-nationalists, or strident culture warriors), a goal of using exchanges to strengthen democratic alliances should also be to underline that the U.S. political landscape is much more complicated than often assumed, with large numbers of pragmatic problem-solvers even in so-called «red states» with whom to partner.<sup>[119]</sup> Far from being monolithic constituencies, both Democratic and Republican voters evince eclectic tendencies and concerns for a wide-range of issues with which common cause can be found.

Leadership programs or political exchanges should therefore seek out contributors or partners interested in responding to or reversing democratic backsliding. Following other

<sup>117</sup> «Sind die USA Noch Unser Partner?» in *Die Zeit*, September 30, 2025. <https://www.zeit.de/2025/41/deutschland-usa-beziehungen-wolfgang-ischinger-ruediger-bachmann/komplettansicht>

<sup>118</sup> The example of the failure of Wandel durch Handel in Germany's recent past need not be rehearsed here at length. <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/no-change-through-trade/> And this: <https://www.bpb.de/themen/wirtschaft/freihandel/geoekonomie/562538/wandel-durch-handel-galt-frueher-und-nun/> See Cheibub, José Antonio, and James Raymond Vreeland, «Modernization Theory: Does Economic Development Cause Democratization?», in Carol Lancaster, and Nicolas van de Walle (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Politics of Development*, Oxford Handbooks (2018; online ed, Oxford Academic, 10 Sept. 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199845156.013.26>, accessed 9 Nov. 2025. See also Krause W, Cohen D, Abou-Chadi T. «Does Accommodation Work? Mainstream Party Strategies and the Success of Radical Right Parties.» *Political Science Research and Methods*. 2023; 11(1): 172–179. Doi: [10.1017/psrm.2022.8](https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2022.8)

<sup>119</sup> As recent elections show, voter identification is dynamic, with a not-insignificant number of former Trump voters supporting Zohran Mamdani. See Kabir Khanna reporting for CBS, November 11, 2025: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-analysis-the-voters-mamdani-added-to-the-democratic-coalition-in-new-york/>

recommendations in this report and also current discussions in the future of international democracy programs, such exchanges can experiment with how to label such programs, whether they address «democracy» by name or emphasizing adjacent areas such as climate, local policy, or digital privacy. Such an approach allows for finding the most impactful narratives for the positive benefits of democracy as well as better education on what democracy means. One example of this is the Aspen Institute Germany's «Laboratories of Democracy Initiative» started in 2020 and mentioned above that brings together local legislators from the US and Germany to discuss pressing policy challenges. The topics addressed have been social cohesion, revitalizing post-industrial areas, and climate. Additional exchanges could engage with local or national leaders to develop dialogue initiatives and educational programs thematizing current or historical challenges to democracy. Such programs with a public dimension can have tremendous impact and could also build on Germany's own reputation for confronting the past and historical memory.

Another potential strategy for shaping leadership exchanges to address democratic back-sliding was mentioned in my interview with Sam Denney, a former alumnus of the German Chancellor Fellowship and a Fellow of the Transatlantic Security Initiative of the Atlantic Council. In the US (and Germany) a number of influential politicians and innovative initiatives are currently seeking solutions to extremism and the fraying political landscape. One of these initiatives is the Future Caucus, a non-profit aiming to bring young legislators together to build leadership skills focused on bipartisanship instead of polarization and achieving key policy goals with broad buy-in. The network has been highlighted by the National Governor's Association and Republican Governor of Utah Spencer Cox's «Disagree Better» initiative as a promising actor in creating a new, more cooperative form of politics.<sup>[120]</sup> Underlining the potential effectiveness of such initiatives is recent research showing that media highlighting politicians endorsing democratic norms, highlighting democracy's value, or refuting stereotypes about opponents can decrease anti-democratic opinions.<sup>[121]</sup> Many other groups are working towards similar goals with strategies such as identifying issues and policies that span the political spectrum, increasing transparency in politics, and improving civic education.<sup>[122]</sup> Exchange programs that seeks to partner with such groups or offer platforms for similar issues can be a way of connecting with leaders from both parties and at the same time strengthening transatlantic values.

As a final point, in discussion with alumni of high-level leadership exchanges and exchange experts, it is important for German organizers—especially those involved in

**120** September 28, 2023, «Future Caucus Partners With National Governor's Association To Address Polarization». See: <https://futurecaucus.org/future-caucus-partners-with-nga-to-address-polarization/>

**121** <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2024/10/how-get-democrats-republicans-strengthen-democracy-0>

**122** Another potential partner in this area could be the organization «People Powered», a U.S.-based non-profit that works with grassroot groups to advance direct democracy. NBC, «Local Officials Are Looking For Ways to Keep Polarization at Bay», May 20, 2025. Full article: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/continued-political-polarization-local-leaders-seek-best-ways-mitigate-rcna207295>.

Bundestag-centered exchanges—to be cognizant of exchange formats that may strengthen extremist parties or require fellows to provide support to such parties.

### **Recommendation 8: Expand Programming for Underrepresented Gender and Racial Minority Groups in U.S.-German Exchanges**

This recommendation arises out of two main concerns. The first is the potential decrease in participation from minority groups that we may see owing to the current U.S. administration's ban on any diversity initiatives in federal programs. As described earlier, U.S.-funded programs like Fulbright, CBYX, or U.S. Embassy Berlin are actively screening out applicants based on projects not in accordance with Presidential Executive orders which explicitly prohibit DEI. The second area of concern goes beyond the specific anti-diversity backlash we are experiencing and recognizes that more must be done to expand exchange programs to groups with fewer means to participate and beyond groups with affinity for German culture based on history or immigration background. It is by no means a new insight that both America's and Germany's demographics are rapidly changing with large communities no longer looking primarily toward the US or Europe for cultural or political cues.<sup>[123]</sup> A fundamental aspect of a values-based and democratic vision of transatlantic ties is that of inclusive, broad-based participation in foreign relations not weighted toward one particular demographic over others. Despite policies from the far right against diversity and immigration, population trends will continue and finding effective ways to include and reach the entire spectrum of the U.S. population will be crucial to shaping U.S.-German exchange in a positive, future-oriented manner.

On a practical level, how can this be accomplished? First and foremost, many of the recommendations in this report are interlocking and support each other. This is also the case with this recommendation. Programs that emphasize local governance, vocational programs, or topics (especially if they are strategically selected) that go beyond high-level leadership programs are much more likely to reach underrepresented groups.<sup>[124]</sup> No demographic group is monolithic in its priorities and interests, and given the opportunity to participate in international exchange, minority participants will do so. Yet, indirect strategies can only go so far. In discussions with interviewees, it is important to proactively seek out partnerships with, for example Historically Black Colleges and Universities as does the Halle Foundation with Morehouse College, or other minority serving organizations and groups. More work can be done to identify majority Black- or Hispanic-serving institutions at which to conduct outreach and marketing for existing U.S.-German programs or to identify ways to establish new partners or funders at these institutions. Many U.S.-German

<sup>123</sup> Tim Rivera, «The Transatlantic Relationship Needs to Reflect the Europe and United States of Today», *The Atlantic Council* Blog Post, March 9, 2020: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-transatlantic-relationship-needs-to-reflect-the-europe-and-united-states-of-today/>

<sup>124</sup> DAAD has done much work to think about strategies in this area. See [https://static.daad.de/media/daad\\_de/der-daad/daad\\_infosheet\\_diversity.pdf](https://static.daad.de/media/daad_de/der-daad/daad_infosheet_diversity.pdf)

exchange organizations have already made expanding diversity a priority such as DAAD with its Gilman Scholarship partnership. Depending on the willingness of federal partners to collaborate, there may be opportunities to expand similar joint projects with the Gilman Scholarship program that draws heavily from minority-serving institutions.

### **Recommendation 9: Frame and Embed Transatlantic Exchange Programs in a Global Context**

The foregoing recommendation may also benefit from reorienting U.S.-German and transatlantic programs towards global perspectives and expanding programs that include Global Majority components and participants. The urgency for such a reorientation as the relative influence and importance of non-western countries grow was recently underlined in the German Marshall Fund's recent report «Rebalancing Transatlantic Relations – A Roadmap for 2030» that included recommendations on enhancing economic and political integration of global majority partners in the transatlantic alliance. Such a reorientation recognizes that U.S.-German relations do not exist in a bilateral stasis but are impacted by global dynamics and trends. In the area of exchange programs, integrating a global dimension may include innovative U.S.-German exchange formats that include a third country or region from the global majority. Exchange programs could also focus on topics or themes explicitly involving engagement or even travel to Global Majority destinations for exchanges or study tours. Possible topics could include economic development, civil society collaboration, education, or climate action.

Such programs that take a wider, global perspective will themselves be bolstered by including participants from diverse backgrounds. Several potential models already exist on which to build or emulate new programs such as the German Marshall Fund's Transatlantic Inclusion Leaders Network, which awards fellowships to up and coming leaders from non-traditional backgrounds and offers them peer-mentoring, workshops and exchange opportunities.<sup>[125]</sup> Other institutes that have found success in integrating a global perspective in transatlantic programing include the Global Public Policy Institute's «Global Governance Futures» program funded by the Robert Bosch Foundation. The program created «working groups» of fellows from a diverse collection of countries, with each working group focusing on topics concerning public policy that they discussed in dialogue exchanges and in policy papers.

### **Recommendation 10: Support Exchanges Focused on Knowledge Transfer and Best Practices for Upholding Civil Rights and Democratic Values**

While many of the recommendations mentioned elsewhere focus indirectly on strengthening democratic values by addressing root causes to right-wing populism, there is an urgent

<sup>125</sup> For background see GMF's page on the fellowship: [https://www.gmfus.org/transatlantic-inclusion-leaders-network?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com#](https://www.gmfus.org/transatlantic-inclusion-leaders-network?utm_source=chatgpt.com#)

need for new ideas and greater support for actors who share democratic values on both sides. This recommendation calls for German policymakers to examine specific ways to increase exchange and knowledge-sharing between organizations focused on rule of law, civil liberties, or protection of minority and gender groups.

Exchange programs in this area should not be conferences or seminars where Washington or Berlin leaders discuss democracy programming at a high level of abstraction. They should be project-based and respond to the current terrain of creeping authoritarianism. Examples could include journalist safety or editorial workshops, legal exchanges on strategies against SLAPP suits, or climate groups sharing latest strategies in grassroots organizing. Such exchanges would bring practitioners and directors of organizations together to share tools and solve real-world challenges they are facing. An especially important consideration in this effort involves creating a broad alliance of civil society groups, expanding ties to groups like churches, unions, or businesses interested in promoting social cohesion and civil rights.<sup>[126]</sup>

Potential partners for such practical exchanges focused on human rights, civil liberties, and democracy abound from the ACLU, Southern Poverty Law Center, or the Human Rights Campaign (especially local chapters). We can point to several existing exchanges in this area that can serve as potential models or inspiration for additional programming. Policymakers could explore programs such as «Humanity in Action Fellowships» that provide fellowships to young activists and leaders in the area of human and minority rights to pursue projects and participate in education programs or trainings.<sup>[127]</sup> Fellowships for activists in the area of U.S.-German exchanges could function not only as a means of exchanging best practices and learning new tools, but also as a «time-out» and recuperation period from the emotionally exhausting and sometimes threatening work of pro-democracy advocacy. Whereas Humanity in Action Fellowships are awarded to individuals, working with associations and groups should be prioritized for greatest possible impact. In the area of civic education and human rights, the Halle Foundation sponsors several exchange programs between German and U.S. schools exploring the history of civil rights in each respective country.<sup>[128]</sup>

In the current climate, particularly in the US, where threats against civil society organizations and activists are proliferating—even from official sources—such programs will have

<sup>126</sup> A recent policy paper commissioned by the new Thinktank TTREX on strategies for responding to anti-democratic populism highlights the need to form broad alliances across civil society. See «In die Offensive Kommen!: Was die demokratische Zivilgesellschaft gegen autoritäre Kräfte tun kann.» *ThinkTank Rechtsextremismus* October 2025: [https://thinktank-rechtsextremismus.campact.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2025/10/25-10-15\\_TTrex-In-die-Offensive-kommen.pdf](https://thinktank-rechtsextremismus.campact.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2025/10/25-10-15_TTrex-In-die-Offensive-kommen.pdf)

<sup>127</sup> For information on Humanity in Action Fellowships see here: <https://humanityinaction.org/fellowship-programs/>

<sup>128</sup> See the Halle Foundation, «Grants History», and specifically the grant to the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in 2025 to travel to Nuremberg to plan exchanges on human rights.

to take into account the risks involved in programs focusing on political topics such as civil rights. It may be advisable to discuss which location may provide the most safety for exchanges and training may be required to ensure organizers and participants are well-versed in digital security and safety practices.

### **Recommendation 11: Support U.S.-German Journalism Exchanges on Journalist Safety**

Strengthening independent media is of course one particularly critical area of pro-democracy programs. As described in Section I, there exist a sizable number of longstanding and highly impactful U.S.-German and U.S.-European journalism exchanges with expansive alumni networks and which promote best practices while nurturing young journalists. These exchanges include the Arthur Burns Fellowship, the RIAS Commission Exchange, the Fulbright Journalist Fellowship, as well as the McCloy and Kellen Fellowships through the American Council on Germany. Additional international fellowships are open to U.S. and German journalists to study and report in each other's countries.<sup>[129]</sup> These exchanges do an excellent job of providing journalists opportunities to conduct reporting in the US or Germany, build transatlantic networks, and share experience and best practices for upholding the freedom of the press.

One potential area where U.S. and German policymakers can provide added value for U.S.-German journalist exchanges is that of journalist safety, which is of rising importance in the U.S. as journalists face a multitude of new physical, digital, and legal threats.<sup>[130]</sup> Journalist safety—which may include anything from physical safety while reporting, legal defense, digital security, and psychosocial support—is a sector that simultaneously abounds with useful organizations, but is also chronically in need of funding and connecting individuals with those resources. German policymakers should explore potential collaborations or exchanges with the leading U.S. and European journalist safety groups such as ACOS, The Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters Without Borders.

It should be recognized that in the current climate, it may not be a welcome gesture or politically expedient should the German Embassy ostentatiously imply that journalists need protection from the U.S. administration. As is the case with several recommendations, this report is intended for several audiences and not exclusively the organs of the German federal government. Some potential strategies exist, however, to ensure that such programs do not provoke backlash. A wide array of Germany-based Press Freedom NGOs and Foundations interested in journalism are based in Germany such as the Hannah Arendt Initiative and the Zeit Stiftung Bucerius. It may be advisable for such private foundations

**129** See the following summary of international media fellowships: <https://gijn.org/resource/grants-fellowships/>

**130** The Committee to Protect Journalists recently recorded the first instance in their institution's history of a journalist deported from the US on the grounds of their reporting. See «Journalist Mario Guevara to be Deported from U.S. in Unprecedented Case», *Committee to Protect Journalists*, October 2, 2025: <https://cpj.org/2025/10/journalist-mario-guevara-to-be-deported-from-us-in-unprecedented-case/>



or organizations to lead exchanges with increased federal support. Another potential strategy is to work with organizations to expand existing assistance programs to include more journalists from the US. Some of these may include the European Center for Press and Media Freedom (based in Leipzig) which has several programs supporting journalists facing threats in crisis regions. Such an approach may not attract broader attention.

### **Recommendation 12: Develop Policymaker and Research Exchanges for Joint Solutions to Responsible AI, Digital Information Ecosphere, and Other «Digital Democracy» Topics**

An area of booming activity in the transatlantic exchange space is that loosely known as «Digital Democracy», a broad concept which aims at promoting tech regulations and policies that strengthen democracy.<sup>[131]</sup> Within this area fall joint projects on combatting disinformation, developing common frameworks for AI regulation, examining the impact of social media on social cohesion, and promoting digital privacy and cybersecurity. The number of organizations, individuals, and initiatives in this area with a transatlantic dimension are too numerous to mention, but this recommendation draws primarily on suggestions and work taking place by the GMF's «Digital Democracy» Initiative and programming by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Außenpolitik (DGAP), both of which seek to develop *democracy-affirming* tech policies in the transatlantic space.

DGAP's program, titled «German-American Initiative on Influencers and Leadership in the Digital Age», is notable not so much for its content or goals, but rather for its innovative format. The exchange consists of social media influencers and parliamentary staffers from both Germany and the US.<sup>[132]</sup> The program—which will run for two years—aims to inform policymakers about the forces that drive online information today, and how that impacts democratic decision-making. Over the course of 2025 and 2026, the two cohorts of 14 influencers and eight staffers will make five-day study visits to both Berlin and Washington respectively. The program is an example of the specific, project-based form of exchange that leadership or civil society exchanges can take. It likewise brings two groups into discussion who may not otherwise interact directly on matters of policy. Inasmuch as the goal of similar programs brings practitioners and policymakers together to identify more effective legislation and increase informational security, they have the potential to be effective tools to bridge the gap in an area of significant difference in transatlantic relations.

<sup>131</sup> For an introduction to one Digital Democracy initiative, see the German Marshall Fund report by Karen Kornbluh and Ellen P. Goodman, «Safeguarding Digital Democracy: Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative Roadmap» March 2020, No. 4. Full text: [https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Safeguarding%20Democracy%20against%20Disinformation\\_v7.pdf](https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Safeguarding%20Democracy%20against%20Disinformation_v7.pdf)

<sup>132</sup> For background on the project see DGAP: [https://dgap.org/en/research/programs/technology/center-geopolitics-geoeconomics-and-technology/german-american?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://dgap.org/en/research/programs/technology/center-geopolitics-geoeconomics-and-technology/german-american?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

Such an exchange program that brings together practitioners and policymakers in a sustained manner is easily replicable on additional digital democracy topics. These could include, for example, crafting an exchange that brings researchers or companies involved in Artificial Intelligence together with staffers or policymakers to share best practices or develop a common framework for harnessing AI in positive ways.<sup>[133]</sup>

This is also an area where there is at least modest potential for bipartisan appeal across the political spectrum. In the US, one area that has galvanized support among both liberals and conservatives is the dangers posed by unrestrained and unfiltered access by young people to digital devices. A growing number of local, state, and national initiatives have sought to put in place more responsible policies by tech companies and school districts to safeguard minors. Building on such shared concerns in the digital space can be a starting point for impactful transatlantic discussions on responsible digital policies.

<sup>133</sup> See Steve Feldstein (ed) «Digital Democracy in a Divided Global Landscape», *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 28, 2025. Full text: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/05/digital-democracy-in-a-divided-global-landscape?lang=en#toward-a-transatlantic-information-defense-framework>

# Appendix

## Exchange Program and German-American Institutions Abbreviations

ACGYL:	American Council on Germany, American-German Young Leader's Conference
ACG:	American Council on Germany
AKBP:	«Auswärtige Kultur- und Bildungspolitik» Division in the German Foreign Ministry
AGI:	American-German Institute (Johns Hopkins)
BCOR:	Building Cultures of Remembrance (Cultural Vistas)
CBYX:	Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange (U.S. Congress and German Bundestag)
CBSSX:	Congress-Bundestag Staff Exchange
DAAD:	Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst
DGAP:	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Außenpolitik
ECA:	«Educational and Cultural Affairs» Bureau at the U.S. State Department
GAPP:	German-American Partnership Program
GCRI:	Global Centre for Risk and Innovation
GMF:	German Marshall Fund
GTEP:	German Teachers Exchange Program
IVLP:	International Visitors Leadership Program
IPS:	Internationales Parlaments-Stipendium
PAD:	Pädagogischer Austauschdienst
PPP:	Parlamentarisches Patenschafts-Programm (CBYX)
TTP:	Transatlantic Talent Pipeline (Goethe Institute, Halle Foundation)
TOP:	Transatlantic Outreach Program (Goethe Institute)
VDAC:	Verband der Deutsch-Amerikanischen Clubs

## About the Author

**Timothy Wright** is a trained historian of modern Germany and Europe with a PhD from UC Berkeley. From 2020 to 2025, Dr. Wright served as a federal civil servant first at Voice of America and then at its parent agency, the United States Agency for Global Media. At USAGM, his work focused on supporting journalist safety programs and collaborations with other international public interest broadcasters. In addition, Dr. Wright has published several long-form articles on the rise of the far-right in Germany for the Los Angeles Review of Books and maintains a keen interest in transatlantic relations and political culture.

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