

How does the legacy of forty years of the GDR affect politics in eastern Germany today?

How is a younger generation shaping the debate in reunified Germany?

The Lasting Division of Germany: Two Germanys – Still Far from United

By Johann Legner and Linda Teuteberg

In this essay, we present two views on the political developments in eastern Germany, reflecting our two different experiences. One reflects the experiences of a journalist who has observed the developments in East Germany for more than twenty-five years. The other comes from a young politician, now a member of the state legislature in Brandenburg, elected on the list of the Liberal Party (FDP), who was raised in East Germany but is young enough to define herself in the new context of a united country.

The Political Gap between East and West is Not Narrowing—It Is Larger than Ten or Twenty Years Ago

If we take a closer look at the results of the last federal election (*Bundestagswahl*) in eastern Germany, we arrive at an astonishing conclusion: The political gap between west and east is larger than ever since the reunification of the two Germanys.

The main and growing difference results from the enduring success of *Die Linke* (the Left Party), which is the political successor to the former ruling communist party of East Germany, the Socialist United Party of Germany (SED). Today, *Die Linke* is also a considerable political force in the west, but to a far lesser degree. In the east, the party was the front-runner in four of the six states (*Bundesländer*) in the last federal election. Only in Saxony and the western districts of Berlin were the Christian Democrats (CDU) able to secure a small overall advantage over the Left Party. But the difference between the CDU and the Left Party is shrinking. In 1990 the gap was more than 30 percent of the overall vote; in 2009 it was a small difference of 1.3 percent (see also the attached charts). The rise of *Die Linke* is connected to the decline of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in eastern Germany. The SPD received less than 18 percent, and the Left more than 28 percent, of the vote.

Underestimating the Results of Decades of Dictatorship

If we try to understand the growing gap between east and west in the election results, we should begin with the events of 1989—the growing protests against communist rule. Contrary to the general perception and later myths, the peaceful revolution was accomplished by a minority with regional roots, specifically in Saxony, and culminated in October 1989 in Leipzig. Today the only real bastion against the left is in Saxony—it is also the only federal state that is governed by the same parties as large parts of western Germany and it is the most populated state in the east with a very specific history of opposing the governing regime. The correlation between these specific elements, i.e., the events of 1989 and the differences in the political landscape of today, are striking. One could argue that only those who were somehow engaged in the final assault on the communist rule are today able to come closer to the political agenda of the west.

For the rest of eastern Germany, specifically for certain eastern parts of Berlin and the surrounding state of Brandenburg, we have to observe that the heritage of the forty year long SED rule is stronger than most would have believed in 1990. The Left Party gets its success from this lasting mental heritage. Some of its key elements are: belief in a strong state; distrust of western values; indifference to dictatorships like China or

authoritarian rule like Russia; acceptance of a policy that calculates huge debts; no understanding for European integration; xenophobia; and the lack of any kind of liberal heritage in large parts of the east. Furthermore, many people were involved in one way or another in the functioning of the dictatorship—not always as a perpetrator, but more often as a bystander. Bystanders tend to deal with their part of responsibility in a very interesting, disturbing way. Sometimes they associate themselves more closely with the former rulers than with those once oppressed.

There are other reasons, too, for the differences in the political landscape between east and west, which we can only shortly mention, such as the mistakes made in the process of reunification, the legalization of the SED heritage, and the difficult relationship between the Social Democrats and the ex-communists, who were once—in 1946—forcefully united by the Soviets.

Problems Will Persist in the Near Future

The newest development in the state of Brandenburg—the formation of a coalition between the Left Party and the SPD—shows quite clearly that the east will continue to develop its own very different agenda, which will to a certain degree influence German politics as a whole. The political experiment, started as an example of reconciliation, immediately faced great difficulties because a larger portion of the leading personnel of the Left Party was uncovered as former members of the East German secret police (Stasi). But the SPD Minister-President of Brandenburg, the former federal chairman of the SPD Matthias Platzeck, still continues this alliance—an alliance that would have no chance at all in any part of western Germany.

The central question surrounding the future of the currently divided political landscape in Germany may be determined by the fate of the SPD, reminding us in some ways of the situation in the first years after the Second World War. Will the SPD continue to refuse cooperation with *Die Linke* or will the new leadership of the Social Democrats prefer a future in which finally the two parties will merge into one? Right now, the very different agendas of the two parties, specifically in international politics, seem to be very far apart. The Left Party is anti-NATO, anti-EU integration, and demands an immediate retreat from Afghanistan—in general a fundamental adversary to the current foreign policy.

Berlin and Brandenburg

The two federal states of Berlin and Brandenburg are now the “battlefield” on which the controversy over the political future of eastern Germany is being played out. Approximately six million people live there and both states are governed by a coalition of the SPD and *Die Linke*. In both states, the regional leaders of the SPD consider their coalition as a model for the whole republic. Up to now, their strategy does not seem to work. In Berlin, the SPD is losing ground while in Brandenburg the newly installed coalition struggles with accusations about the compromising past of leading members of the Left Party and a very articulate opposition in parliament which includes the newly-represented Liberals and the Greens. The outcome of the experiment will have a perhaps decisive importance for future relations between the parties on the left and, therefore, for the political future of Germany as a whole.

Economic Development since 1990

Indeed, the challenges in 1990 were huge. And there is no reason to be disappointed by what we have reached in the past twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall if we take into account that the challenge has been extremely complex:

- The economy of the eastern *Länder* (federal states) has been marked during the past twenty years by a fundamental structural change. The phase of privatization has been followed by promoting investments and assuring existing as well as developing new locations of industry. Today small and medium-sized businesses are at the heart of the eastern economy. New industries are

emerging, for example, the production and implementation of solar cells. New markets have developed in central and eastern Europe. Trade between Brandenburg and its direct neighbor Poland, for example, has increased significantly—especially since Poland joined the European Union in 2004 and joined the Schengen Agreement in 2008.

- A modern transport and communications infrastructure has been built as well as a modern administration. Historical urban centers, which had been at risk of being completely destroyed, were renewed thanks to great local efforts. Massive damage to the environment has been contained. And at the heart of this development are the people in the east who supported and shaped these fundamental changes more than once in their lives. The most important lesson people in the east have learned during the past twenty years is how to manage crises.

Today the gap between east and west is still huge. In terms of convergence the east is lagging behind, although it has caught up enormously. The greatest challenge remaining today is to achieve a better balance of employment and economic growth: only once the economic development of eastern Germany is self-supporting will German unity really be accomplished. Politics can only give the framework for such developments. Time is short. In 2019, the Solidarity Pact II will end, which provides the financial basis for the advancement and special promotion of federal states in eastern Germany.

What is needed is an infrastructure of capable scientific and research facilities to educate and train engineers and entrepreneurs. Enhancing the industrial innovative capacity is the key to attracting more investors and thus to fostering economic growth. The German capital region (Berlin/Brandenburg), for example, possesses the highest concentration of R&D (research and development) institutes in the country. Brandenburg has considerably developed the infrastructure available for technology transfer between R&D and industry.

The Younger Generation and its Own Point of View

As mentioned earlier, the legacy of SED rule is stronger than many people probably would have thought in 1990. Political culture in eastern Germany differs from the west in many regards. Forty years of the SED regime has left its traces.

First, the way of dealing with rules of democracy and taking into account opposing parties and opinions still reveals some of the old archetypes. Political debate, discussion, and constructive controversy are rarely balanced.

In this regard the result of the latest election in Brandenburg is promising as there are now representatives of three democratic parties to build a strong parliamentary opposition. Two of them, the Greens and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), are represented in the Landtag of Brandenburg for the first time since 1994.

It is often a result of interpretive predominance (*Deutungshoheit*), which had been the rule under the SED regime, when in public debate different opinions and viewpoints are not considered. We should beware of not confusing personal memories of life in the GDR, which often are positive, with the system itself. Most of the people tend not to distinguish between personal experiences, like the first love or making friends, and the system in which they live. Of course one could live a proper life, even under bad living conditions in the GDR, but certainly not because of them.

Coming to terms with history and learning facts about the GDR and the injustice of the SED regime does not intend to degrade eastern German biographies. Nevertheless

many eastern Germans are not self-confident regarding their own abilities—although they have good reason to be so.

Those who fought for and won democracy and freedom on their own twenty years ago have every reason to be proud of themselves. This was an extraordinary and precious experience. The willingness to assume political responsibility is the most important message of 1989.

German unity still is a work in progress, and not only in economic terms. Today we need more than ever a critical debate with the successors of the SED regime; young people need to learn about the SED's oppressive system through civic education in schools and by preserving authentic memorials. The process of coming to terms with the past in the Federal Republic of Germany after 1945 gives reason for cautious optimism—even if the historic circumstances and the dimensions of oppression are not comparable.

Only one who has dealt with the impacts of lack of freedom, a one-party system, and a planned economy is able to appreciate the virtue of personal rights of freedom, democracy, and market economy. Otherwise there is a high risk of suffering from the illusion of social paradise.

Therefore the crucial point for a self-supporting development of eastern Germany is to provide people with prospects. One of the errors in 1990 concerning the economic challenges was to think that reconstructing the east was simply a question of modernization. Indeed, almost the entire eastern German industry was outdated and the economic system was about to collapse—enormous efforts were called for to modernize it. The aim was to harmonize living conditions in both east and west.

But harmonizing living standards does not mean the same as giving people the chance of realizing their lives under comparable conditions. When recent studies state that living standards in the east are almost the same today as in the west, they often neglect to compare the prospects of life. Young people do not leave their eastern homes for lack of appreciation of their towns and cities; people emigrate because they lack prospects.

What people for more than forty years lacked in a repressive socialist system was freedom—personal freedom in terms of freedom of expression or assembly as well as the freedom to decide on how and where to live, and what and where to work.

The opportunities for personal development were restricted. People's talents and their abilities, their creativity to implement new products or ideas only counted toward the realization and achievement of the planned production target in a state-directed economy. Assuming responsibility was not really a virtue. But hopefully the younger generation will be able to overcome this legacy.

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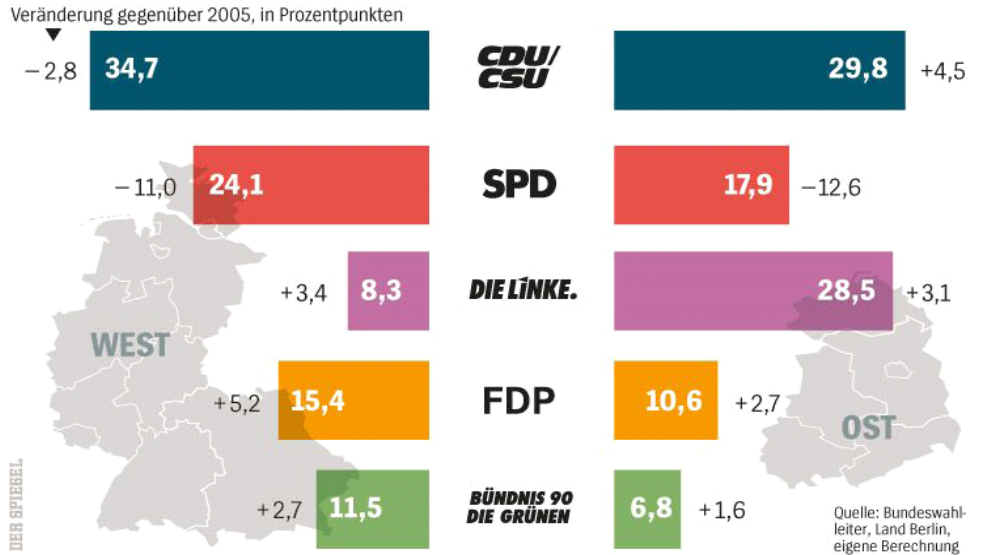
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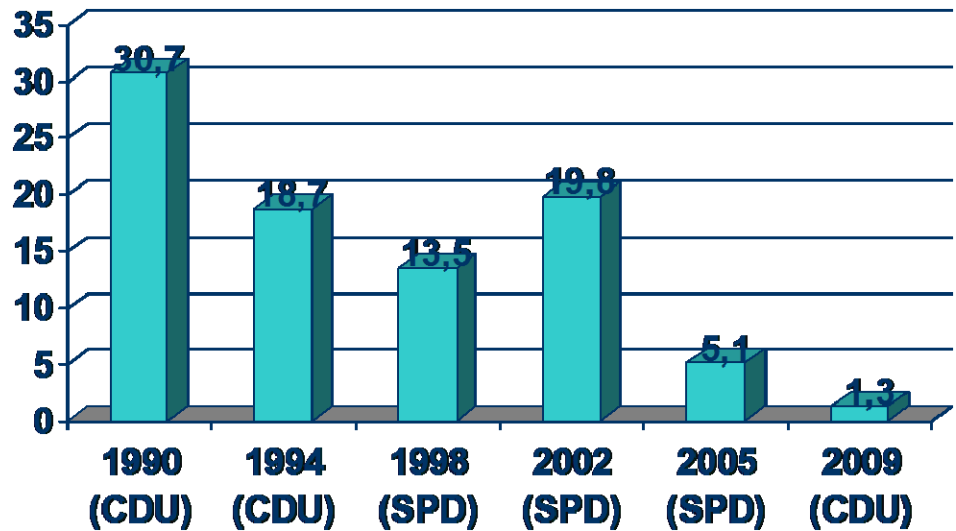
Results of the 2009 Bundestag Election in Western and Eastern Germany

Das Wahlergebnis im West-Ost-Vergleich

Angaben in Prozent



Gap Between the Left Party and the Winner in Eastern Germany



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