An East German Journalist Criticizes the Lack of German Unity (August 25, 2005)

Abstract

Looking back on fifteen years of unification efforts, journalist Jens Bisky, son of PDS chief Lothar Bisky, emphasizes the continued existence of significant differences between East and West Germans. These, he argues, make claims of inner unity appear utterly illusory. His article gives special attention to the economic rebuilding of the East and asks whether the “blooming landscapes” promised in 1990 would ever materialize.

Source

German Unity? East against West

Minister Manfred Stolpe is calling halftime in the economic reconstruction of the East. Does that mean that Eastern landscapes will bloom in fifteen years? And will there finally be the yearned-for “inner unity”? Hardly. A taboo is being anxiously guarded: German unity has failed.

You don’t have to try very hard to be considered an enemy of German unity and to provoke sharp calls for “order.” You only have to mention the facts. For example, that in Germany two separate societies exist side-by-side, that the East remains more pagan, less bourgeois, and poorer than the West, that the project of German unity has failed.

Immediately, the keepers of harmony speak up and make accusations: whoever talks like that is endangering the growing-together process, which should, after all, be of equal concern to all of us. The defenders of the East Germans don’t hold their tongues either: whoever talks like that is defaming the people; moreover, society in the new *Länder* is in reality much more diverse than our image of it.

These are all lame excuses. For fifteen years, the illusion that there is actually such a thing as an “inner unity” capable of transcending all conflicts and conflicts of interest has hindered free debate about the correct path to rebuilding the economy of the East.

This patriotic taboo has harmed unity more than anything else. Because the quarrel over differences and the substantially divergent interests in East and West is not carried out with civilized equanimity, because there is a desperate attempt to deny the very existence of conflicts and to marginalize differences as soon-to-be-overcome nearly every season brings us a brief outbreak of intra-German quarreling.

Recently, [Jörg] Schönbohm and [Edmund] Stoiber provided new occasions for this, and once again the therapists and mollifiers jumped in to end the debate before the interesting problems could be discussed.

A Different Social Temperature

If someone were to draw a map of Germany today and color the federal states according to how the economy, the party system, social life, culture, politics, generations, and family are developing in each of them, that person would rediscover the old intra-German border in every significant case.

That the electoral results in the new states diverge reliably from FRG normality is a source of frustration not only for the Minister President of Bavaria. The economic strength of the East is about two-thirds that of West Germany. The net product is stagnating at about 63% of the Western level; there is a shortfall of around 3,000 medium-size companies and 700,000 workers; the existing companies are too small and suffer from weak capital bases. The combined sales of the 100 top-selling companies in the new states are about the same as the sales of [the West German companies] RWE or Metro alone. One in five employable persons has no regular job, out-migration continues. Every third Euro spent in the East was earned outside the new states. There are hardly any signs of an economic catch-up.

Whoever grows up in the East goes to *Jugendweihe*

With just under 60,000 Euro, East German households have merely 40% of the average wealth of Western ones. In 1991, the gap in net income between Eastern and Western households was 1,440 Deutschmarks. It dropped to 730 Deutschmarks in 1996. Today, at 662 Euro, the gap is larger again. In 2002, the average East German household had attained 82% of West German net income.

Whoever grows up in the East goes to *Jugendweihe*, not to Confirmation or First Communion. Significantly fewer foreigners live in his or her neighborhood than in the West. After the *Wende*, a separate East German identity emerged, a clear declaration of not belonging, of being different. More than 70% of East Germans – a figure that has remained unchanged for years – embrace this identity. The other side responds with a lack of interest, ignorance, and re-education fantasies. According to an Allensbach poll, the brothers and sisters in both parts of the country feel no closer or more distant to each other than Austrians feel to Germans.

This is the reality that the preachers of "internal unity" would like to close their eyes to. Needless to say, East Germans have not been deformed by birth or upbringing or propaganda, nor are they incapable of living in freedom. The 2.4 million of them who have moved to the West since 1990 have integrated themselves successfully and largely without incident. The new states themselves, however, have established themselves during this period as an underdeveloped, marginal region.

That a different social temperature exists here, that other values often hold, should come as no surprise. Only barbarians could expect and wish that 55 years of divergent development could pass over human beings without leaving a trace. But why is it so difficult to accept these differences, and to understand that Germany unity – like every good marriage – could only be had as the sum of its conflicts?

Just Pay and Don't Ask Questions

Last year it almost seemed like this could change. When the expert commission headed by Klaus von Dohnanyi and Edgar Most examined the instruments for promoting the economic rebuilding of the East and concluded that they were unsuitable for bringing about a self-sustaining upswing, when the *Spiegel* asked: "1.25 billion – For What?," there was a pause, and the occasion seemed to have come to bid farewell to the routine of transfer payments.

Things have changed here and there. The state of Brandenburg developed the concept of concentrating subsidies on economic bright spots. Recently, the Minister President of Thuringia, Dieter Althaus (CDU), called for allowing the investment subsidy for the new states to run out.

On the whole, however, the necessary course correction in the economic rebuilding of the East is not happening, the transfer insanity continues: with too little funding for investments and too much consumption, with almost no competitive advantages for East German companies, with crazy infrastructure projects, with funds being used in a manner contrary to their designated purpose. It doesn't seem to bother the West Germans that, according to OECD[1] calculations, two-thirds of Germany's weak growth is attributable to the burden of reunification. They just continue to pay and

barely ask questions.

The unfulfillable promise of the “equalization of living standards” is still in the air, even though the issue in large sections of the new states is to prevent downward development and to break the vicious cycle of economic weakness, unemployment, out-migration, over-aging, and the need for transfer funds.

A new beginning would require an honest stocktaking. And that’s exactly why it’s so difficult. The governmental unification of the two states in 1990 was the right political decision and has been successful, but it need not go hand-in-hand with conformity and dissent-free agreement. One would have to acknowledge that the economic rebuilding of the East, the most ambitious undertaking of the last fifteen years and one in which Germans have invested a large part of their energy and funds, has failed and that instances of cultural difference are not going away either.

Complaining about Kohl and the mistakes of the early years has become *de rigueur* by now. But the real scandal is that things continued for all these years even after one could see that the guiding ideas of “equalization” and “inner unity” were leading us over the cliff.

A radical new beginning is difficult because a common public hardly exists. The quiet society in the new states is largely refusing access to the supra-regional media. After the systematic de-bourgeoization of the GDR, after the elimination of the socialist functional elite and the continuing out-migration, the East lacks a bourgeoisie, a middle class, elites. Little occupies the social sphere between family and state.

Within the parties hardly anyone is willing to take on this topic. The minister presidents and the economic-rebuilding-of-the-East politicians seem too firmly committed to the redistribution apparatus, which is part of the problem. For the most part they coddle the patriotic taboo.

Those Who Want to Can Dream on

It is “halftime” in the economic rebuilding of the East, as Manfred Stolpe recently declared – and this sounds as though what we dreamt of in 1990 could be attained in the next fifteen years: a strong, transfer-independent economy in the East, equal living standards, and “inner unity.” Experts who were asked on behalf of Stolpe’s ministry were more skeptical.

We can definitely expect a strong intra-East German differentiation into a small number of urban centers and underdeveloped rural regions, with further out-migration and rapid aging, with continuing differences in income and wealth, with a continuing need for transfer payments, and the passing on of East German peculiarities. It is unlikely that the distribution conflict over the transfer funds can be repressed for much longer through invocations of solidarity.

Thus the East-West opposition will be with us for decades to come. It joins the many new and old antagonisms and gives them a special tint.

Old age and unemployment, for example, assume a different face in the new states, for they affect a society in which social ties were, until very recently, still completely bound up with the structures of the working world. Whoever wants to can go on dreaming of “inner unity” or wait for the next Ossi-Wessi hysteria.

The reasonable thing would be a conflict-aware equanimity. It presupposes a culture of inequality and differences. Hardly anyone is prepared for that in either East or West.

NOTES

[1] * Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – trans.

Source: Jens Bisky, “Deutsche Einheit? Ost gegen West”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 25, 2005.

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Recommended Citation: An East German Journalist Criticizes the Lack of German Unity (August 25, 2005), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-3431> [October 13, 2026].