

Party Mergers (July 6, 1990)

Abstract

The author discusses the differences between the parties in the Eastern and Western parts of the country and describes the problems presented by their impending merger. The challenges include disparities in membership size and financial resources, as well as ideological differences.

Source

Fresh Blood for Old Parties

The “different reality” was already driven home to the Greens at the “Perspectives Congress” [*Perspektivkongreß*] in the middle of November [1989]. “I find all of you quite nice, quite funny, quite colorful,” said Katrin Eigenfeld of Halle, cofounder of the New Forum. “But I can’t even begin to understand your language.” At the Dortmund party congress, the “Realo”-Green^[1] politician Ruth Hammerbacher spoke of a “different reality” in a future united Germany – and that reality, many of the delegates suspected, will surely also change the party.

Not only the Greens. The “different reality” will catch up with all of the West German parties as they now eagerly push ahead with the merger with their “sisters” in the GDR. Whether it be the SPD, the CDU, or the FDP: they all face internal changes.

“We can hold our own church congresses soon” – these words were said on the eve of the SPD party congress in Halle by a West German politician who has been advising the SPD’s sister party in East Berlin for six months. To be sure, the following day, the delegates broke with the unpopular image of the “pastors’ party” and elected Wolfgang Thierse as chairman. He had trained as a typesetter and was not one of the two pastors recommended by the party’s executive board. Thierse makes public appearances in an unbuttoned collar and without a tie.

Yet this still doesn’t come close to solving the East-SPD’s main problem: it is not a workers’ party. How could it be, with a paltry membership of 30,000, not even enough for the party to field candidates everywhere in the communal elections [in May 1990]? In the *Volkskammer* elections, admonishes board member [Karl-August] Kamilli, 58% of workers voted for the Alliance for Germany^[2], that is, chiefly for the CDU. The aged Käthe Woltemathe of Rostock wrote to her party: “The SPD doesn’t care about the people anymore.”

This is a reminder to stay grounded. But given the current membership structure of the SPD in the GDR, a merger will achieve the opposite and reinforce the influence of intellectuals in the party and the Protestant element. That may only change slowly with the establishment and expansion of the new trade unions, which will also likely bring new members to the GDR-SPD.

Up to now, the SPD, having lost about 6,000 party members in a bloodletting, had only a narrow foundation upon which to begin. That explains the delegates’ jubilation after the Halle party congress changed the Leipzig resolution (February 1990) and opened up membership to former members of other parties.^[3] The explanation given for this decision makes only general mention of former block party members. However, in light of the works council elections, this decision seems to have been made mainly in view of former members of the SED (now PDS) who have clout in the workplace. In Halle, Angelika Barbe of the party executive committee warned in no uncertain terms against a PDS monopoly

on the subject of abortion. The delegates thereupon approved the petition “Right to Self-Determination in Pregnancy.”

The CDU in the GDR also differs sociologically from its sister party in the Federal Republic, but in this case (and in the case of the FDP) the differences vis-à-vis the Western party have a much more explosive function: what’s at stake here are power relationships within the governing parties here and there.

On the one hand, the “different reality” is very material: the former CDU block party in the East is (still) relatively well off, the West-CDU, by contrast, is dirt poor, and the Christian Democrats over there are exhibiting corresponding self-confidence. Both, assets and a sense of self-worth, are likely to continue growing after the merger with the former block party DBD (Democratic Farmers’ Party), since farmers are a politically influential clientele in the northern part of the GDR. They especially have to be courted if the PDS’s [4] comfortable vote cushion in Mecklenburg is to be flattened out. The all-German CDU will get what it already had in earlier times: a clear agrarian component.

Furthermore, the (Protestant) “high C” [5] has far greater significance – also here. To be sure, several delegates to the [CDU] party congress in December warned against assuming the air of a “clerical party”; therefore they were not pleased with the election of State Church Councilor [*Landeskirchenrat*] Martin Kirchner as general secretary. At the congress there was also, and this was not untypical, extensive discussion about the reintroduction of church holidays.

By now, however, Lothar de Maizière has given the “C” an eminently political slant, one that comes close to that of Western politicians like Kurt Biedenkopf, Heiner Geißler, or Ulf Fink: the social responsibility of business, or environmental protection as a moral duty. From what one hears, this fact is not unwelcome to some politicians in the West-CDU; through the sister in the East it is possible to keep discussing topics that already seemed to have vanished into oblivion last summer. The merger – it is also a new edition of the programmatic power struggle.

Moreover, the merger will strengthen the Protestant element within the overall CDU. This will make accommodation with Catholicism – formerly constitutive for the concept “Union” – more difficult. Especially since (Rhenish-) Catholic liberalism is something very different from (Prussian-) Protestant liberalism. The Protestant working group of the CDU will be a power base once again.

The occupational breakdown of the delegates to the party congress resembled the middle-class portion of the business wing of the FDP during the Adenauer era. Like all other parties aside from the SED, before the revolution, the CDU had also been prohibited from recruiting active workers as members. The party immediately made up for that. An employees’ group has been formed within the CDU/DA *Volkskammer* faction. It includes 35 representatives. The word in the Karl Arnold House, the Bonn headquarters of the CDU social welfare committees, is that this is an encouraging start. In the meantime, employees’ associations modeled after the social welfare committees of the CDU have been established in all future GDR *Länder*, with the exception of Thuringia. But the number of organized members, at around 800, is very small. At the same time, industrial workers account for a higher percentage of the working population in the GDR than in the Federal Republic. The business wing of the West-CDU believes it has a large lead in forming grass-roots organizations in the GDR: many East Germans are interested in the Economic Council of the CDU; thus, it is easy to create the organizational forms.

In the united CDU, the economy will be the priority. That might even be in the interest of those employees who will have no problem adjusting to the market economy and for whom the quickest possible increase in income is more important than the expansion of social legislation. The CDU might end up feeling a certain tension between the needs of the GDR and the wishes in the Federal Republic.

The FDP faces a problem that is totally different from those of the other parties. For the first time in its

history, it is becoming – at least temporarily – a member party. Its 68,000 members will be joined by about 140,000 from the GDR, primarily from the former block parties LDPD and NDPD. While the SPD muses about “minority protection” for its GDR sister party at a unification party congress, the FDP has to take the opposite approach. Here, too, firm frontlines have formed behind the scenes within the ranks of prominent Western party members; some West-Liberals^[6] apparently believe that they can use programmatic content from the numerically significant GDR party to shift the balance within the West-FDP. This is something that some East-Liberals have also realized by now, and thus their self-confidence is growing as well. To lead a party of more than 200,000 members, [Otto] Graf Lambsdorff, who wants to act as party chair after the merger, will need an organizational structure that is totally different from the one used up to this point to lead a party of notables.

The programmatic basis of the Liberals in the GDR is vague, however. Even after the departure of Minister of Justice [Kurt] Wünsche (who was seen as an unwelcome “poster boy,” at least by the legal policy wing of the FDP, which tends toward a socially liberal orientation) some of what is currently happening in the GDR (for example, the “clean slate” action) must strike the West-Liberals as a heavy burden for a state under the rule of law [*Rechtsstaat*] – quite apart from the fact that the NDPD (National Democratic Party of Germany), which has joined up with the League of Free Democrats [*Bund Freier Demokraten*], originally served in the political consolidation and neutralization of former supporters of National Socialism. Of course, decades have passed since then, but the fact still remains.

Unlike the CDU and the SPD, the FDP is familiar with its sister the LDP (but not with the NDPD) from many years of contact. It therefore knows that – similar to the CDU – it must prepare itself for a strengthening of the business wing. Incidentally, that is likely to limit its coalition options for the foreseeable future; the “stock of shared interests” with the SPD is small.

The parties in the Federal Republic are pushing for unification. In the process, they will have to get ready for internal changes. And it is still difficult to gauge what kind of change in the political landscape is heading their way from the outside: from the PDS. There is, for one, the situation in the GDR. Ever since it dropped the name SED, the party (i.e., the PDS) has lost about two million members. Gregory Gysi puts its current membership at 350,000. Where are the two million going? Certainly, a large part may be fed up with politics (in the sense of party membership). But the decision by the SPD party congress proves that under certain conditions other parties are seeing the PDS as a quarry. Because even former unity socialists are likely to take their cues from electoral success, the CDU will also have to integrate former SED/PDS members.

Moreover, the PDS for its part is looking for “sisters” in the Federal Republic. The party chairman travels ceaselessly from one discussion event to another. As of now, he still has plenty of resources. A zealous *Neues Deutschland*^[7] asks Green politicians time and again about the “chances of leftist alternatives in Germany.” The “goal”: in the Federal Republic there is “room for a leftist socialist party.” Here, then, is where the PDS wants to look for the “other leftist forces.”

That sounds presumptuous. But the important thing is whether the SPD will be forced to react programmatically in order to keep the competitor on the left wing at arm’s length. That would expand the latitude for the parties of Bonn’s governing coalition [CDU and FDP] in a situation when they must deal with the consequences of their mergers. Still: the economic tasks that have been created by German unity, it may be presumed, will entice the large parties as always to scramble for the political center.

NOTES

[1] Particularly in the 1980s and early 1990s, the Green Party in (West) Germany was divided into two factions: the Realos (realists) and the Fundis (fundamentalists) – eds.

[2] Electoral alliance between the CDU, the DSU [*Deutsche Sozial Union* or German Social Union] and

DA [*Demokratischer Aufbruch* or Democratic Awakening] for the first democratic elections in East Germany in March 1990. The Alliance favored quick unification with West Germany; it won the most votes – eds.

[3] At the SPD Party Congress in Leipzig (February 22-25, 1990) it was agreed that former members of the SED and the so-called block parties (CDU, DBD, LDPD und NPDP) who had left their respective parties after October 7, 1989 (that is, after the beginning of massive demonstrations against the SED regime) would only be granted membership within the party after the observance of “blocking periods.” This principle was overturned at the Extraordinary Party Congress in Halle on June 9, 1990 – eds.

[4] Party of Democratic Socialism: the successor party to the SED – eds.

[5] “C” stands for Christian – eds.

[6] The members of the Free Democratic Party (in the former West Germany and the unified Germany) are also referred to as Liberals; the FDP belongs to the category of liberal party as it promotes individual freedom and the market economy – eds.

[7] *Neues Deutschland* was the official party newspaper of the SED. After the demise of the SED regime, it has maintained a socialist outlook and support for the PDS (now the Left Party) – eds.

Source: Ludwig Dohmen, “Neues Blut für alte Parteien”, *Rheinischer Merkur*, July 6, 1990.

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