

The Reestablishment of the *Länder* (April 19, 1990)

Abstract

When the German Democratic Republic was founded in 1949, it consisted of five *Länder* – Mecklenburg, Brandenburg, Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia, and Saxony – in addition to East Berlin. In 1952, the *Länder* were abolished and replaced with 14 districts [*Bezirke*]; they were joined by East Berlin, which was often counted as the 15th district. After the fall of the Wall, there was broad consensus that the *Länder* on the territory of the GDR needed to be reestablished, but their creation posed a host of problems. Territorial boundaries had to be drawn and capital cities designated. One core problem was that the new *Länder* lagged far behind most of their Western counterparts in terms of population size and economic might. Therefore, the author of the following piece suggested that consideration be given to territorial restructuring rather than the reintroduction of the traditional *Länder*.

Source

On the Foundations of the Postwar Period?

The planned restructuring is full of administrative difficulties and regional conflicts.

That the future GDR will no longer consist of districts, as it has for nearly forty years, but will be made up of *Länder*, is by now no longer a topic of discussion. The date for elections has not yet been set, but as of January 1991, as announced by Minister for Regional and Municipal Affairs Manfred Preiß, there will once again be five *Länder*. But the clearer the schedule for introducing the *Länder* has become, the clearer it has also become that their establishment will by no means go off without controversies and quarrels. To be sure, the introduction of the *Länder* is in essence a restoration – namely, of the *Länder* structure that existed in the GDR up to 1952. But this operation isn't as simple as it might seem at first glance – and there's also the question of whether it would actually be a good thing to make the task of establishing a federal structure in the GDR such a simple one.

Like the Federal Republic, the GDR originally developed out of the *Länder*. But throughout almost its entire existence, it was a centrally governed unitary state, in which only some regional consciousness, culture, and folklore were preserved from the *Länder*. Therefore, for all the differences that once existed between the various regions of the GDR, the *Länder* must in fact be newly established as state-political entities. Should they be erected on the nearly lost foundations of the postwar *Länder*? Or are there alternatives more in keeping with the goal of an efficient federal structure?

Of course, the most obvious path would be to take the districts that replaced the *Länder* and recombine them into *Länder* once again. For in fact the district structure rests by and large upon the old *Länder* framework. At the very least, the districts have their basis in the former *Länder*: Schwerin, Rostock, and Neubrandenburg in the north in Mecklenburg; Magdeburg and Halle in Saxony-Anhalt; Potsdam, Frankfurt/Oder and Cottbus in Brandenburg; Erfurt, Gera, and Suhl in Thuringia; finally, Leipzig, Dresden, and Karl-Marx-Stadt in Saxony. But that's true only in a very general sense. The current districts also deviate from the former *Länder* boundaries to no small extent. It's here, especially, that new problem zones emerge.

In the north, the question arises as to whether Uckermark and Westpriegnitz, which would belong to Mecklenburg if the districts were simply transformed into *Länder*, should revert back to Brandenburg. In the south, the issue is whether the counties [*Kreise*] of Altenburg and Schmölln, which are now part of the

largely Saxon district of Leipzig, would have to become Thuringian again. Similar problems present themselves in the Lausitz, where parts of the current district of Cottbus could be reincorporated into Saxony, and problems could also arise between the future *Länder* of Saxony-Anhalt and Brandenburg with regard to the area of Bad Liebenwerda, Senftenberg, Brandenburg, and Rethnow.

The commission for the “Preparation and Implementation of Administrative Reform” appointed by the Modrow government^[1] last year has proposed referenda for all these regions. But hidden in the details of the restructuring are not only objective-administrative difficulties, but also highly sensitive emotions and regional passions. The letters that Minister Moreth, the minister in the Modrow government responsible for local government bodies, has received on the subject show this just as much as the desire for separate political-administrative structures that has been voiced in some parts of the GDR. For example, in Vorpommern, which was added to Mecklenburg following the separation of the eastern territories after the war, a strong yearning for autonomy has arisen – just as it has in the part of Silesia on the German side of the Oder and Neiße [rivers] that belongs today to the Saxon district of Dresden.

Other conflicts have been ignited over the question of the capitals of the future *Länder*. In Mecklenburg, the traditional capital of Schwerin has competition in Rostock, which grew into the most important city on the Baltic Sea during GDR times; and in Saxony-Anhalt, whose capital was Halle, claims are being staked by Magdeburg, which has long been the center of the old Prussian province of Saxony. Such quarrels have already given rise to ideas like that of a “Free and Hanseatic City of Rostock” – which at least is a measure of the will to independence behind the decision to return to the *Länder*.

Does this will to independence play too dominant a role in the pull toward the *Länder*? It is, after all, obvious that the five *Länder* that would emerge would not only enrich German federalism with an increase in diversity but also burden it with many problems. If one takes the population numbers as the key, the GDR *Länder* would increase the number of small *Länder* in a unified Germany, and these small *Länder* are already having trouble backing their politically guaranteed independence economically and financially. Only Saxony, with around 5 million residents, would rank in the middle, right after Hesse. All the others – Saxony-Anhalt with 3 million, Brandenburg with 2.7, Thuringia with 2.5, and, finally, Mecklenburg with 2.1 – would fall between Rhineland-Palatinate with its 3.7 million residents and the tailights of the list, the city-state of West Berlin with 1.8 million, Hamburg with 1.6, the Saarland with around a million, and Bremen with 650,000 residents. The number of “poor houses” – as these *Länder* are irreverently referred to in view of their weak economic and financial strength – would grow, and the need for financial equalization payments would cause tensions within the federal system to increase.

For that reason, too, there have been thoughts of combining the reconstitution of the *Länder* with a restructuring [of them]. At the heart of these considerations is the division of the state of Saxony-Anhalt; as it is, Saxony-Anhalt is the most artificial creation among all the GDR *Länder*, and it only existed in the form in which it would be reconstituted for a brief historical moment between 1945 and 1952. The government commission has proposed allocating the existing district of Magdeburg to the state of Brandenburg; the district of Halle would then join Saxony. As the commission report states, this would “give rise in the central part of the GDR to two efficient *Länder* that are comparable to the medium-size *Länder* in the Federal Republic and that would also be able to play a significant role in Germany as whole.”

Other thoughts go even further. They reflect on whether it might not be better to organize the GDR into three or only two *Länder*. If one considers that the GDR as a whole is equal in size to North Rhine-Westphalia, this idea has much to recommend it. A large southern state, formed by Saxony and Thuringia, would have a counterpart in a northern state – either with or without Mecklenburg, which, because of its pronounced historical and regional peculiarities, has a special role in all discussions of restructuring. That such a radical solution by no means represents merely a drawing board-creation of the technocratic mind, but has its historical, political, and cultural corollaries, is made clear by the

proposal from Karlheinz Blaschke, a Dresden historian who specializes in regional history [...].

A special problem arises from the role of Berlin. Should the city, whether as the German capital or not, form a separate federal state – as West Berlin does now within the context of the federal states of the Federal Republic – or should a state of Berlin-Brandenburg be established?[2] The latter has mostly practical reasons going for it. A state of Berlin-Brandenburg would make it possible to get some kind of a handle, in terms of planning, on the problems that will emerge from what is expected to be a large “intertwined region” surrounding Berlin and stretching all the way to Brandenburg and Frankfurt/Oder. Moreover, Berlin would avoid the fate of a city-state like Hamburg. For a long time, the Hanseatic city has been complaining vociferously, and for good reason, that it’s losing more and more industry – and thus tax revenue – to the surrounding area, without being compensated for the cultural and social services it provides to that area. On the other hand, West Berliners – according to FDP Bundestag representative Lüder – are afraid that in such a federal state they’d be “demoted to a Brandenburg commune;” whereas the western half of the city is now federal land. This argument, however, is presumably outweighed by the fear of having to use their own tax revenue to help not only East Berlin, but also scenic but economically poor Brandenburg get on its feet.

NOTES

[1] The government under former SED district head of Dresden, Hans Modrow, was in place from November 1989 until April 1990 – eds.

[2] In 1996 a public referendum regarding a fusion of Berlin and Brandenburg failed due to the negative vote in Brandenburg – eds.

Source: Hermann Rudolph, “Auf den Grundmauern der Nachkriegszeit”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 19, 1990.

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