

The German Left and its European Challenges

A lecture by

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The upcoming extension of the European Union, or EU, can be regarded as the most important project for Europe during this and during the next decade. Its failure would be decisive for the European future. The extension of the EU by at first three to four, but in perspective ten countries from Central and Eastern Europe (plus the mediterranean countries Malta, Cyprus, and Turkey) is an enormous challenge. This refers to European decision-making, the future of the European Commission, the financing of structural and social funds, democratization, the relationship between “deepening” and “widening” as well as to a political balance between left, centre, and right in Europe, that will be changed by the entry of Post-communism.

In this, Germany has a special role , because it is

- (1) the economically strongest and politically most influential EU member;
- (2) the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are now as important foreign trade partners of Germany as the USA.

East Germany is especially concerned, because East Germany is the immediate neighbour of two early accession countries: Poland and the Czech Republic. In addition, East Germany experienced immediate EU integration by unification. The lessons of this can be seen as twofold: On the one hand the former East German Democratic Republic experienced an effective modernization of infrastructure and a high rise of incomes and pensions. On the other hand the working population declined from 9,7 million people in 1989 to 6,05 million people in 1997 (see Gros 1999, p.859) . In 2001 it was at 5.7 million (“Neues Deutschland”, 5 September 2002). The economy became nearly de-industrialized .It is characterized by a “branch plant economy”, that means that companies produce only components and don’t decide about investing, controlling, marketing, and distribution. Of all East German companies with more than 1000 employees ,only **one** company has all entrepreneurial functions (see Roesler 2000, p.57) And the unemployment rate is currently at 17.6 % , compared to 7.7 % in the West (see “Deutschland Archiv” , No.1 /2002, p.2).

And East Germany has a leftist post-communist party , the Party of Democratic Socialism, or PDS, which is strong there , but nearly non-existent in the Western part of the country. I will talk about it in a moment.

In order to clarify this situation further I want to do the following: **First**, I want to give a brief definition of “what’s left”, especially in Germany. **Secondly** I want to describe the current state of the German left, **thirdly** to talk briefly about turning points in the history of the European Union, and **fourthly** to identify the major upcoming European challenges.

I (What's left?)

What's left? This question has definitely a double meaning since the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Europe after 1989. It asks not only about the understanding of "left", but also : what's left of the Left after the demise of authoritarian state socialism? Was there a perspective left for a Left that at the very at least historical roots with the deceased regimes? So it is not surprising the very notion of a political Left has come under attack during the nineties. To Anthony Giddens there seemed to be a future only "beyond left and right", Peter Glotz saw "the Left after Western victory" rattled, frustrated and without courage. Christopher Lasch asked for the sense of the differentiation into left and right (Lasch 1991). And Norberto Bobbio stated that this difference would be regarded by many as outdated (Bobbio 1994). But Bobbio also added that they exist in reality and that therefore the distinction has a meaning.

To most people it is regardless of all modern developments a central dimension of political orientation. To quote the British political scientist Peter Mair: "For all the changes experienced in recent years, it is clear that left and right remain (not only) the major organizing principle in modern West European politics, but also help to create a uniform foundation for contemporary patterns of policy competition" (Mair 1997,p.27). "Social justice", "small people" - these attributes exist in spite of changed social conditions. To Norberto Bobbio it is the opposition between a horizontal and an egalitarian vision of society. And to Eric Hobsbawm it is the difference between the "party of progress" and the "party of perseverance" (Hobsbawm 2000, p.117).

And if there would no distinction between left and right - where would the place of the centre be? If we look at the three major parties in question in Germany, we get interesting answers. To the General Secretary of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the SPD, Franz Müntefering, it seemed to be easy : "The left people's party SPD, that is the centre" (Frankfurter Rundschau ,5.2. 2001).And the Green party states in its new program: "As the party of ecology we have taken up leftist traditions, value-conservative ones and also those of the rule-of-law liberalism"(Grüne 2002).The only German party defining itself as "leftist" with no reservations is the Party of Democratic Socialism, or PDS. It confesses to fight "from the left" principally

“against war, social torpidity, and social injustice” (PDS 2002).

As complex as this may seem, the nuclear groups of party members and voters as well as the German voters have clear images of “left” and “right” (including their own positions), and of the parties of the left. And to most Germans these are the SPD, the PDS, and the Greens (acc. to Renate Köcher, FAZ, February 20 , 2002). Opinion researchers have developed “right to left” scales with value indications from “inequality is motivating efficiency” to “socialism is a good idea” with 22 items (see Jagodzinski / Kühnel 2001, p.208).

Bearing this in mind, Tobias Dürr, himself a self-styled “moderate” Social Democrat, has recently argued that the social-democratic fixation on a vague “centre” should be followed by the search for a new normative clearness. Therefore he answers to the question “What’s left?” with the following summary: “The longing for more social equality, enriched by the trust to actually realize this greater measure of social equality by the means of liberal democratic politics” (Dürr 2002, p.12).

II (Current state)

(SPD)

Within this framework, the oldest party of the German Left is the Social Democratic Party, or **SPD** (2). Its roots go back to the Marx' and Engels' League of Communists (1848) and Ferdinand Lassalle's General German Workers Association (1863). During the Second Empire (1871-1918) it became the largest German party, but held no government positions until the Weimar Republic (1918-1933). After the Nazi years it re-emerged in 1945, but was forced to a merger with the Communists in East Germany in 1946. It became one of the leading parties of the West German Federal Republic (1949 to 1990). By 1959-60 the SPD replaced Marxist orthodoxy by ideological pluralism and an acceptance of a social market economy as well as the economic, political, and military integration into the West. Thus it cleared the way for governing the country in a grand coalition with the Christian Democrats from 1966 to 1969, and in a coalition with the Liberals under Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt from 1969 to 1982. During unification in 1990 it reunited with the East German SDP - GDR / SPD, an offspring of the civic revolution. In 1998 it formed a coalition government with the Greens under Gerhard Schröder, which was continued after the 2002 elections. Its programmatic headline in the 1998 campaign had been "innovation plus social justice", which was revived during the 2002 campaign, where the party could refer to successes in social policy, but still had to face a high unemployment of more than 4 million people.

It is not only the oldest still existing German party, but also the largest. It has 734 000 members, of whom only 30.000 reside in the East. In 1990 it won 33% in the federal elections, in 1994 36%, in 1998 41%, and in 2002 38%. Currently it is governing 8 states out of 16: Berlin (in a coalition with the Party of Democratic Socialism, or PDS), Brandenburg (in a coalition with the Christian Democratic Union, or CDU), Bremen (with the CDU), Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (with the PDS), Lower Saxony, North-Rhine Westphalia (with the Greens), Rhineland-Palatinate (with the liberal Free Democratic Party, or FDP), Schleswig-Holstein (with the Greens). That shows that it is a party with four coalition options - more than any other German party. During the 2002 election campaign, however, Federal chancellor and SPD chairman

Gerhard Schröder, rejected a coalition with the PDS on the federal level “because it hasn’t arrived in the Republic yet” (Statement on national TV, ARD, 8 September 2002).

On the European level the SPD is an active member of the “Social-Democratic Party of Europe” (SPE), which has been constituted in 1992. The SPE has member parties of all EU member states as well as from Cyprus and Norway. It has 181 seats in the European Parliament (second strongest faction). Its party program stresses the importance of social policy and emancipation, the fight against unemployment, the guarantee of basic rights and a common defence policy in the EU (see Maurer / Mittag 2002, p.158).

In its current government program, the SPD demands an Eastern extension of the EU within this decade, the strengthening of Europe as a social model, supports the planned EU constitution, and advocates a direct election of the President of the Commission (see < <http://www.regierungsprogramm.spd.de>>).

(Greens)

The **Greens** emerged in West Germany during the late 70s out of the “new social movements”: the ecology movement, the womens’ movement, and the peace movement. They describe their goals in four catchwords : the party is ecological, non-violent, grass - roots democratic, and social. In the beginning they regarded themselves as an “anti - party party”, i.e. they introduced an imperative mandate, a rotation principle, the incompatibility of party and parliamentary office, and a quota regulation in favor of women. Of this today only the latter has survived.

In 1993 the Greens merged with “Alliance 90”, the organization of the East German civic movements, but it has 40000 members in the West and only 3000 in the East. Currently it is not represented in the East German parliaments, but in ten West German state parliaments and in the federal parliament. Its share of the votes in the federal elections was 4.9 % in 1990, 7.3 % in 1994, 6.7 % in 1998, and 8.6 % in 2002. The Greens govern with the Social Democrats in North-Rhine Westphalia and Schleswig Holstein, and since 1998 also on the federal level. They regard

as their governmental successes especially the exit from nuclear power, the new citizenship law, and the “homosexual marriage” . Its in-official leader, foreign minister Joschka Fischer, is the most popular politician in Germany. In May 2002, Fischer, gave a “grand speech” at Berlin’s Humboldt University, in which he envisioned a “federal Europe”. In 2002 he became a member of the European convention in order to discuss a future European constitutional document.

On the European level, the Greens are part of the “European Federation of Green Parties”, or EFGP. Unlike the Social Democrats, the EFGP is a pan-European alliance with 31 “green-alternative” member parties from 29 European states. It is much more diverse than other European alliances. In the EP the EFGP is the fourth strongest faction with 48 deputies (see Maurer / Mittag 2002, pp.158-159).

In its 2002 election program, the Greens call for further democratization of the EU. They want the President of the Commission to be elected by the European Parliament. The planned European constitution has to be accepted by the European citizens in a referendum. Eastern Integration should happen that fast, so that the first new members shall already participate in the European elections of 2004. As for the Common Foreign and Security Policy , the Greens stress the priority of civil conflict management (see Bündnis 90/Grüne 2002, pp 84-85). Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a German-French green politician and member of the European Parliament for *Les Verts*, added recently that “all of Europe practices social democracy ... and this is a basic difference from the USA, which are ready to accept extreme inequality, misery, and poverty as part of their liberty” (“Grüne Zeiten”, Special Election Issue 2002, p.3).

(PDS)

In a way the traditions of the Party of Democratic Socialism, or **PDS**, are as old as the Social Democrats, because it emerged as a successor to East German communist state party , called the Socialist Unity Party, or SED, after the East German revolution of 1989. In terms of members this meant a decline from 2,3 million in 1989 to 80.000 now, of whom only 3.800 reside in the West. More than two thirds of the members are retired. The goal of the PDS is a democratic-

socialist society . It has a pluralist understanding of socialist theory , advocates a mixed economy and claims to have broken completely with Stalinism. In addition, it regards itself as representing especially East Germany. The biggest political difference with the Greens and the SPD is the German military support for the Allied interventions in Afghanistan and former Yugoslavia, which the PDS rejected.

In the federal elections of 1990 , it gained 2.4 % (11.1 in the East), as compared to 4.4. in 1994 (19.8 East), 5.1 in 1998 (21.6 East), and 4.0 in 2002 (16.0 East). It is represented in all state parliaments of the new states , in Saxony and Thuringia it is the second strongest party, during the elections to the city-state of Berlin in 2001 it became the strongest party in East Berlin with more than 47.6 % . It is governing Berlin and Mecklenburg - Western Pomerania in coalitions with the SPD. Its chairperson is Gaby Zimmer, who was reelected after the lost elections of 2002. She is not as popular as her predecessors Lothar Bisky and Gregor Gysi, who also resigned as Berlin minister of economics recently.

In the European Parliament the PDS works within the “Confederated Faction of the United European Left / Nordic Green Left” (42 members; fifth largest group, see Maurer 2002,p.193).

Its specific program “for a change in Europe” stresses that the PDS is the only German party that rejected the Maastricht Treaty in the federal assembly, because it would cement the dominance of big business and the lack of democracy within the EU. It calls for a complementing of the currency union by an employment - oriented , social, and environmental union (see PDS 1999). Like the Social Democrats and the Greens, the PDS is a member of the EU convent working towards a new constitution of the EU.

III (Turning points)

Let me now briefly freshen up your memory of the **turning points** in the history of the European Union (3):

1957. **Foundation** of the European Economic Community by the Benelux countries, France, Germany, and Italy. One main goal is a customs union (achieved 1968).

1970 Foreign Trade. The community gets the competency for the joint foreign trade policy.

1973. **Northern Extension.** Britain, Denmark, and Ireland join the community.

1974. European Council. The European Council of the Community is created by the heads of government.

1979. **European Parliament.** The first direct and general elections to the European Parliament take place.

1981. Greece. Greece becomes the 10th member of the Community.

1986. **Southern Extension.** Spain und Portugal join the Community.

1990. German Unification. The access of East Germany to the West German Federal republic makes the five new Eastern states immediately part of the Community.

1993. **Maastricht Treaty.** The single European market is completed. That implies free movement of persons, products, and services. The Community calls itself the European Union (EU). The “three pillars” are defined as the “economic and monetary union” , the “common foreign and security policy” , and “justice and home affairs”. Maastricht also created the “European citizen” , who can settle anywhere in the Union and enjoy everywhere local voting rights.

1995. Schengen . The Schengen agreement becomes valid: uncontrolled personal traffic from the

Polish Western border to Portugal is now possible.

1995. Finland, Austria, and Sweden join the EU.

1999-2002. **Euro**. Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain found the Economic and Currency Union. The Euro becomes their official currency.

In sum, it can be said, that **economic** integration - including the northern and southern extensions- has worked well. There are, however, **six major problem fields**.

- (1) *Agriculture* is still highly regulated, subsidized, and exempted from market structures.
- (2) There is a tendency towards an “*European integration of different speeds*”, as proven by the differences regarding the Schengen and the Euro implementations.
- (3) There is a *contradiction between “deepening” and “widening”* which so far has been resolved only insofar as the “deepening” has been restricted to the economic field.
- (4) The “*contradiction between “supra-nationality and “inter-governmentality”*” has not been solved, but the latter prevails.
- (5) There is still a *lack of democratic legitimacy*, at least as long as the EP doesn’t elect the commission, and as long as the Council is the most important legislative factor.
- (6) Of the *three “Maastricht pillars”*, one - economic integration - is successful, whereas the Common Justice Policy and the Common Foreign and Security are relatively weak. These are areas of special concern for the Left, because the Eastern extension will put new and heavy demands on social policy (see Steinitz 2001). In regard to the common foreign policy the MEP Andre Brie (PDS) writes: “The rejection of a policy endangering stability, as it comes from Washington today, would be enough incentive to return to the Maastricht intentions. When, if not now?” (Brie 2002).

IV (Challenges)

The challenges lying ahead are firstly the still remaining six problem fields, which overshadow the current work on a European constitution. Secondly, there is the accession of new members after 2004. In the first round these will probably be beside Malta, Cyprus, and Estonia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, in short, all of Central - Eastern Europe, related by a common history and a similar way of post-communist transformation.

With this accession, at least **four more challenges** are to be assumed(see Piazzolo 2002):

- (1) There will be a certain pressure to adopt wages, esp. in border regions; structural change especially in agriculture will be speeded up. There will be more migration. This will lead to more demands on *social policy*.
- (2) There will be an *increasing competition* for transfer payments out of the common EU budget between the new members and the current net receivers Greece, Portugal, and Spain.
- (3) There will be a *new need for a rethinking of agricultural policy* after the accession of countries in need of high agriculture subsidies, such as Poland.
- (4) With the increase in the number of members, the space for action becomes more limited. At least the principle of *unanimity* within the European Union Council has to be rethought.

V (Concluding Questions)

Instead of trying a formal summary, I would like to stop here and ask **four concluding questions**, which may also serve as starting points for discussion:

- (1) Will there be a *realignment* of the German Left? In this context, it may be of interest to read the following quote from an internal strategy paper of the PDS: "If the Social Democrats ... are serious with their warnings of a Haider - Berlusconi - Stoiber Europe, they may not ignore the

red-red-green option any longer.....The strategic challenge for SPD and PDS is: normalization within cooperation. If the Greens want to stay a left-centre party, they may join. It's their decision...In the end there would be two changed leftist parties. Or in the long run ... a new left party in Germany" (Christoffers / Falkner 2002 , p.55). This may sound, however, a little arrogant read after the electoral defeat of 2002.

(2) Will there be a *reorganization* of the European Left? Will that include not only the relations between parties, but also between individual party members and their European organizations?

(3) Can the European and German Left press more energetically for a *democratization* of the EU? Would that mean:

- More power to the EP?
- Election of the Commission by the EP?
 - Creation of individual ridings?

(4) Will the West European Left intensify the *dialogue* with the East European Left, including the Post-communists? Which function could Germany have in that?

NOTES

1 I'm concentrating on the *established political left*. For the *unionist left*, see Bierbaum 2001.

2 In the next paragraphs I'm following Reichart-Dreyer 2001.

3 In the next paragraphs I'm following Matern 2002.

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