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# Second Life in the Bundestag? Former GDR Delegates in German Parliaments

*Ronald Gebauer & Stefan Jahr*\*

**Abstract:** »*Ein zweites Leben im Bundestag? Ehemalige DDR-Delegierte als bundesdeutsche Parlamentsabgeordnete*«. East Germany's 20th anniversary of a fully democratic representation in 2010 gives reason to reflect the democratization process again. Democratization was without doubt never contested by politicians with their political roots in the opposition groups. Nevertheless, in the early 1990s and even later on, there was still a considerable minority among East German MNPs and MSPs with a comparatively strong affiliation to the former communist system (though not necessarily member of one of SED's successor parties). The German Parliamentary Survey (first wave, 2003) contains data of 140 of those 'survivors' out of 635 MNPs, MSPs and MEPs with an East German background. This contribution, first, reconsiders political representation in the GDR. Second, the social profile of delegates in the Bundestag and the State parliaments with their political roots in the SED and the bloc parties will be compared with that of those electees who appeared in the political arena in 1989/90 and later. Third, the adherence of former GDR delegates to democratic values will be discussed, likewise mirrored in the German Parliamentary Survey, by asking delegates how they rate statements like: "Democracy persists only in the case of a strong leadership that is able to curtail partial interests." and other.

**Keywords:** post-communist transition, East Germany, representative elites, delegates, politics.

## 1. Introduction

The 20th anniversary of a fully democratic representation in East Germany in 2010 gave reason to reflect the democratization process in Germany again. Democratization is a process that is ridden with prerequisites and is a game of confidence and acceptance. In this question one may think on the relevance of the general populace and the electorate's acceptance and confidence in democratic values. Nevertheless, this might not always be the only requirement to sustain enduring democratic processes. So if it is not, what are other, presumably more relevant conditions for a sustainable democratization? In order to

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answer this question it is useful to take a closer look at the role of political elites. A very simple assumption about the role of political elites is that they are at least not indifferent towards such fundamental changes. Right on the contrary, as history tells us, the former ruling elites of the soviet type of societies usually heavily rejected the introduction of civil rights and a parliamentary democracy. In this case of tightly united elites democratization is rather improbable, if not impossible. The same is true in the case of utterly disunited political elites, as there is ample evidence by countries in the Middle East or the Balkans. Any of these constellations are highly detrimental for a genuine democratic development. John Higley suggests, however, that there is a specific elite composition, which is conducive to democratization. For this specific constellation it is remarkable that elite members, i.e. persons or groups form complex formal and informal networks, where they exert same activities and share similar skills. Additionally, and not less important, members of these networks share a consensus about the rules of political behavior, particularly with regard to the acquisition, execution and transmission of political power. In this respect, it is a *consensually* united elite (cf. Higley 2009).

### Historical Background I: *Volkskammer* and Delegates in the GDR

The Peoples' Chamber (*Volkskammer*) constituted on October 07, 1949 as a (socialist) national representative body 'of a new type' as opposed to a democratic parliament with changing majorities. Along the lines of Walter Ulbricht's infamous "Everything has to look democratic but everything has to be controlled by us." members of the approved bloc parties also were allowed to nominate candidates on a single list, controlled by the ruling Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED), in detail, members of the (East-German) Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Liberal Democratic Party of Germany (LDPD), National Democratic Party of Germany (NDPD), Democratic Farmer's Party of Germany (DBD) and diverse mass organizations. In this respect, until the 9th election period the *Volkskammer* maintained a fixed ratio of mandates. The self concept of *Volkskammer* was to be the one and only institution of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) with the ultimate power as a constitutive and legislative representative body. This function implied also the election of *Volkskammer's* presidium, the election of members and of the chairman of the Council of Ministers (government), the election of the chairman of the National Council of Defence and of further important positions. In practice, however, *Volkskammer's* relevance was that of a pure ratifying one, thereby legitimating decisions already taken by SED's power elite. In addition to the *Volkskammer*, until 1958 the Chambers of States (*Länderkammern*) formally had legislative power, but had been continuously marginalized after 1952 when the division in districts was imposed by the SED,

paralleled now with genuine District Assemblies (Bezirkstag), furthermore supplemented by assemblies at the level of circle districts and the municipal level.

## Historical Background II: The Free Elected 10th *Volkskammer*

After the collapse of the communist system in 1989 and a short interplay of the “round tables” the first and only free *Volkskammer* election on March 18, 1990 swept the old order completely away. Only 12 former *Volkskammer* delegates could regain their mandates under the new condition on the national level and a few 6 candidates had been successful in the elections on the federal level on October 14, 1990. Nevertheless, particularly party members on the lower ranks and even apparatchics of the bloc parties (incorporated later on by their Western pendants, except the SED or PDS: East-CDU, DBD, now part of the CDU; LDPD, NDPD, now part of the FDP) could move up and gained a sizeable share of seats.

Table 1: Representatives of the 10th *Volkskammer* by Year of Joining the Party in % of Specified Data

	CDU	DBD	FDP	NDPD	PDS	DFD	other	all
Until 1989	92	100	58	100	86	1	-	59
1989/90	8	-	42	-	14	-	100	41
Not specified (% of N)	11	-	14	-	24	-	17	15
N	165	9	22	2	67	1	143	409

Source: *Volkskammer* data, author’s calculation, similar, cf. Hausmann, p. XVIII.

As table 1 documents, also the majority of the now free elected *Volkskammer* members had been affiliated with the *ancien régime*, at least by party membership (59%), (missing data not taken into account) in the case of the CDU amounting to a breathtaking 92% of all seats, even surpassing the PDS (86%) while the minority, not even half of all electees, had been no party members of one of the former bloc parties or the SED at all. Other information not at hand, involvement with former SED rule supposedly was even stronger, as for example, data do not inform about Stasi activities, i.e. (informal) memberships of the infamous State Security Service of the GDR. By taking an ex-post perspective this casts a serious shadow on the political process in the early 1990s and as a matter of fact such an elite composition was at least for the first glance no safe bet for German Reunification<sup>1</sup>, keeping in mind, that fragmented, disunited

<sup>1</sup> As Joachim Gauck, the Federal President, puts it: “And what had been a lie all throughout this 40 years, changed for truth: a German *Democratic* Republic. Yet, at a closer look my

elites tend to harass or suppress each other. However, one can assume that there were some factors that alleviated the complex situation. First, party affiliation and especially sympathy with the old SED rule was supposedly rather weak at the new elected, but former secondary and tertiary political elites; reconsidering, that the old *Volkskammer* elite was almost non-existent anymore. Second, the pressure of the people for reunification left *Volkskammer* members with no alternative. Third, as Heinrich Best proposed, also disunited elites can cooperate. Adopting the theoretical concept of antagonistic cooperation, it becomes clear, that German Reunification turned out to be a win-win situation: On the one hand, resource transfers from the West and the removal of Soviet troops had been attractive for many Members of *Volkskammer*, the same applies even to the expansion of West German institutions, providing a stable framework for elite action or at least extended space of individual autonomy (cf. Best 2009). In this respect, discontent with the process of reunification (loss of power and relevance) had no negative consequences on reunification itself. On the other hand, West German political elite could likewise profit from reunification by extending its activity sphere nationally and also internationally by regaining full sovereignty on the whole of Germany (cf. Best/Vogel 2011). The Unification Treaty finally passed *Volkskammer* by 294 votes in favor, 62 against on August 23, 1990.

Table 2: Unification Treaty, Voting Results by Faction  
(Selection, % of Specified Data)

	CDU	SPD	PDS	FDP/LD	DSU	DBD	DA	NF	GP/UFV
Yes	100	95.2	0	100	100	100	100	14.3	0
No	0	2.4	100	0	0	0	0	57.1	50
abstention	0	2.4		0	0	0	0	28.6	50
N	154	83	51	20	25	8	4	7	4

Source: *Volkskammer* data, author's calculation.

After reunification, 149 members of the 10th *Volkskammer* ran for the 12th Bundestag, whereas 74 (=18% of all 409 *Volkskammer* members) were successful in the election and obtained a seat as representative and so, at that time, 56% of all East German MPs formerly were members of the 10th *Volkskammer*. For this reason, *Volkskammer* ranks among the most relevant experiences of East German representatives that even today still share four MEPs and ten MNPs. The same applies for MSPs: in this case 88 members obtained a seat in one of the re-established state parliaments amounting to the ratio, that one in ten MSPs had a *Volkskammer* experience around the turn of the millenium. Currently, 12 MSPs had been members of the 10th free elected *Volkskammer*.

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eyes and my pride clouded. About 185 of the new delegates were members of the SED or of one of the bloc parties during the just ceased old system.” (cf. Gauck 2009, 235).

Yet, how is the process of democratization to be evaluated retrospectively with regard to delegates' composition around the turn of the millennium, when there was still a considerable parliamentary minority with political elite experience even before 1989 and also still some of those dissidents or civil rights activists left, who entered the political arena in 1989/1990? Has there emerged a consensually united elite, in respect to structural and normative principles, indispensable for the democratic process?

## Structural Integration

### Education

Although the share of East German MNPs and MSPs is declining due to West-East migration, East German population is still represented in Bundestag and State parliaments by delegates with a genuine East German socialization and this by a relevant share of seats. Here East German delegates with high levels of education are prevailing, 74% holding A-Levels and 77% graduated from universities or academies of applied sciences, compared to 71% of delegates of West German origin (cf. Best and Vogel).

Additionally, if one differentiate between delegates with mandates, political or administrative functions even *before* 1989 and those around and *after* the system collapse 1990, the general impression of East German delegates gradually changes with 76% compared to 92% holding university or advanced technical degrees in the case of the latter. So, if lesser educated persons are not formally excluded from nomination, this elite composition will pose no problem with regard to the electorate. At the same time this composition may have been propitious for the emergence and sustainability of a consensually united elite, because delegates with high levels of education are supposed to be more result-oriented and therefore more prone for compromise.

Table 3: School Leaving Degrees of East German Delegates % of N (MSPs, MPs, MEPs)

	Pre-1989	1990	Later
No school certificate	0	2.5	0
8th Gr. Completed	6.8	3.7	1.4
10th Gr. Completed	23.5	12.3	24.7
A-Level ("Abitur")	69.7	81.5	73.9
N	132	81	421

Source: Jenaer Abgeordnetenstudie 2003, author's calculation

Table 4: Vocational/Professional Education of East German Delegates % of N (MSPs, MPs, MEPs)

	Pre-1989	1990	Later
unskilled	0	0	0.2
skilled	7.5	4.9	10.3
Master	3.7	0	1.8
Polytechnical	12.7	3.7	10.1
Advanced Technical	14.9	12.2	9.6
University	61.2	79.3	65.6
current training	0	0	2.3
N	134	81	421

Source: Jenaer Abgeordnetenstudie 2003, author's calculation.

### Occupation

Analysis of educational attainment documented the relevance of the high educational status of German representative bodies. Yet, how are German parliaments composed by occupational or professional backgrounds? Answering this question will help to evaluate the communicative climate among delegates: Are there professions more suited to establish a consensually united elite than others? Are there any professions more prevalent than other, helping to get in touch with colleagues and lower communication barriers? In this respect, Heinrich Best and Lars Vogel found that civil servants dominated parliaments in East and West Germany during the 1990s, by the majority from more than one-third in the case of East German MSPs (37%) up to almost half of East German MNPs (47%), West German delegates ranging somewhere in between (MSPs 38%; MNPs 40%). Meanwhile political and affiliated professions have been catching up; a parallel trend among both, East and West German delegates. With regard to professional aptitude among East German delegates one can extend the analysis even further to the occupational/professional careers before 1989. As it turns out, in this respect, delegates with and without Pre-1989 political elite experience only vary gradually: 23% of delegates with political carriers already before 1989 have had also managerial responsibilities. Nearly the same applies to delegates with a first political mandate or function in 1990. Here even 27% report managerial responsibilities and, last but not least, 28% of representatives without any political career on or before GDR's collapse report managerial experience. Beside managerial responsibilities many East German delegates have job experiences of working independently at difficult problems or independent activities with responsibility. The same applies to 63% of political elites with political careers on or before GDR's collapse. In this respect, the percentage is smaller for the novices (44%). However, among novices are more employers, self-employed, independent and academic professions (14%) compared with pre-1989 political elites (5%) and delegates with political careers starting in 1989/90 (8%). These findings – prevalence of academic education and vocational/professional careers mirroring managerial

responsibilities or independent activities with or without responsibility, keeping in mind, give the impression that there have been indeed favorable conditions for the establishment of a consensually united political elite in East Germany. In relation to the whole of Germany, the situation is similar, because, as for both, among West and East German delegates, the same professions prevail and the same trend, i.e. growing relevance of political and affiliated professions, is in progress.

Table 5: Occupational/Professional Skills of East German Delegates % of N (MSPs, MPs, MEPs)

	Pre-1989	1990	Later
Managerial Responsibilities	23	27.3	28
Diff. Problems/Independent activities	62.9	62.6	43.9
Self employed/independent	5.4	7.6	14.3
N	113	80	408

Source: Jenaer Abgeordnetenstudie 2003, author's calculation.

## Normative Integration

So far, East Germany's political elite has been portrayed as a structural consolidated formation, at least in terms of educational and occupational backgrounds. Additionally, East Germany's political elite varies only little from West Germany's. However, one might ask if this favorable condition will result in a *homogenous, normatively consolidated elite* that shares the same attitudes in relation to the acquisition, execution, and transmission of political power. This question draws major attention to the attitudes of delegates, i.e. their evaluation of political institutions, parliamentary procedures, and their own colleagues. In the following, we focus, first, on two items related to politics, in detail delegates' *Esprit de Corps* and *party discipline*, and second, on one item related to policy, namely *delegates' attitude towards state intervention*.

### Politics I: Esprit de Corps

1989/90 was a major caesura in almost every East German biography. This applies also for political elites. Novices and former secondary or tertiary elites collected their first experience in parliamentary democracy. One can assume, that these experiences have tied electees together, keeping in mind, that they had not only to adapt to a democratic process they have not known before, but they also had to take a vast number of decisions with far and profound implications. One might guess that this sort of learning-by-doing has left indelible memories in the minds of delegates across all factions. However, data analysis reveals, that even though there is a considerable esprit de corps, attitudes are more heterogeneous than expected. In general, esprit de corps varies dependent on the start of political commitment: As it turns out, particularly representatives



with political careers starting in 1989/90 were advocates of such strong attitudes: More than 70% of them replied the question, if they feel associated with their colleagues from other parties and factions with 'Yes'. Compliance is less common among representatives with pre-1989 experience: Only about half of them feel associated with their political opponents. Novices after 1989/90 again feel gradually more affiliated than the pre-1989 elite (60%), but consent is less present than among delegates with a first political mandate or function in 1990.

Table 6: Esprit de Corps among East German Delegates  
(MSPs, MPs, MEPs, Compliance % of N)

	Pre-1989	1990	Later
Esprit de Corps	52.1	71.1	59.7
N	73	45	303

Source: Jenaer Abgeordnetenstudie 2003, author's calculation.

## Politics II: Party Discipline

Party discipline is one of the fundamental basics of parliamentary democracy, facilitating political action and parliamentary compromise. As a rule, in order to enable the exertion of influence, delegates vote in accordance with the pre-ordained stance of the faction. In relation to conformity with their faction's stance, delegate's attitudes also vary, though similar to esprit de corps, a majority accepts parliamentary party discipline.

Table 7: Party Discipline Among East German Delegates  
(MSPs, MPs, MEPs, Compliance % of N)

	Pre-1989	1990	Later
Party Discipline	56.9	72.3	58.5
N	72	47	299

Source: Jenaer Abgeordnetenstudie 2003, author's calculation.

## Policy: State Control of the Labor Market

Delegates also were asked, whether they comply with political interventions in the labor market by state controlled creation and maintenance of jobs. As it emerges from the data, state control among delegates is mostly rejected. Additionally, variation across delegates is rather small. Both, pre-1989 political elites and novices after 1989/90 reject state intervention by 77%, delegates with a first political mandate or function in 1990 by 80%.

Table 8: Attitude with Regard to State Intervention Among East German Delegates (MSPs, MPs, MEPs, Rejection% of N)

	Pre-1989	1990	Later
State Intervention	77	80	77.3
N	74	45	304

Source: Jenaer Abgeordnetenstudie 2003, author's calculation.

### Some Concluding Remarks

As Heinrich Best and Lars Vogel have already examined in more detail, West and East German political elites' social profile and attitudes obviously are as sufficiently homogeneous, so that one can speak of a consensually united elite. The objective of this contribution, however, is to supplement our colleagues' findings with the historical component, by asking, whether there have or had been a genuine 'Second Life' of former GDR Delegates in German Parliaments after the 'Peaceful Revolution' and German reunification. As analysis reveals, the initial position in 1990 even after the first free *Volkskammer* election, turns out to be ambivalent, since many delegates had been members of SED or bloc parties once before. New political elites, formerly not entangled with SED rule, however, with similar qualification, took responsibility. Their experience resulted in attitudes that are up to now (though there are only some who are still delegates) marked by a higher and sustained appreciation of consensus and compromise. This gradual variation has or had been no disadvantage for the democratization process of the last two decades. On the contrary, it underlines the presence of a cooperating consensually united elite not only in East Germany but also in the whole of Germany.

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