



Volume 10. One Germany in Europe, 1989 – 2009  
Protests in East Germany (August 22, 2004)

In response to the introduction of another stage of labor market reform (Hartz IV), “Monday demonstrations” were organized in many parts of East Germany; these Eastern protests brought far more demonstrators to the streets than those in the West. The causes of the protests, according to this journalist, could be found in the unsolved problems of the past and in the lack of economic prospects for the future.

---

### Revolt in the East

*Unrest is seething in the new Länder. The economic rebuilding of the East has stagnated. Many people feel like losers whose social safety net is now being taken away from them as well. Week by week, growing numbers of people are flocking to the demonstrations – but also to the radical parties on the left and the right. The biggest winner from the turmoil is the PDS.*

Rainer Roth is an Ossi. Actually, these days one can even say: Rainer Roth feels like a real Ossi. Unemployed, an opponent of Hartz IV, a Monday demonstrator. Grew up in a country that no longer exists. Just a few weeks ago he would not have had to emphasize this. Then came the outrage over the labor market reform, and now every Monday people pour into the streets by the thousands to demonstrate against the government. “It’s a catastrophe that we in the East are being ignored like this fourteen years after unification,” says Rainer Roth. “A Wessi can’t understand this.”

Roth organized one of the first Monday demonstrations in the Brandenburg city of Senftenberg, about 140 kilometers southeast of Berlin – “formed a resistance group,” as he himself puts it. When he invited people to the first meeting at the end of July, he was expecting a handful of participants. In the end, 150 people squeezed into the pews of the Senftenberg church. Most of them wanted to paint posters that very evening and go out into the streets.

Their goal is clear: Hartz IV must go. The group announced that the first demonstration would be held on August 2. About 1,000 participants streamed through the city of 24,000. Two weeks later, Roth had already counted 3,000 participants. “And next time there’ll be even more,” says the forty-eight year-old. “By now, this has reached dimensions we hadn’t expected.”

The East is rising up. Last Monday, more than 80,000 people in the new *Länder* took to the streets to vent their anger about the consolidation of unemployment and welfare benefits into the new Unemployment Benefits II package. Whereas the West could only muster a few hundred demonstrators here and a few dozen there, the associations of the unemployed, unionists, and opponents of globalization in the East organized massive resistance.

They call their action “Monday demonstrations” in reference to the protests in 1989, the year of political change in the East. It doesn’t bother them that this time it’s not about resistance to a dictatorship but to a reform law. “The East is burning,” writes the *Super-Illu*<sup>1</sup>.

It hasn’t come to that yet. So far, the Hartz opponents in Leipzig, Magdeburg, Berlin, or Senftenberg are holding their peaceful demonstrations independent from one another. In the future they want to coordinate their protests. The activists are meeting in Leipzig next Saturday to develop a strategy. At that time, they are also likely to discuss whether SPD dissenter Oskar Lafontaine should speak in Leipzig on August 30<sup>th</sup>.

Many politicians seem more concerned about a “radicalization” of the new *Länder*. In East Germany, warns Thuringia’s Minister President Dieter Althaus, “doubts about the effectiveness of democracy” have grown. Others report a “feeling of second-class citizenship” in the new *Länder*, one that is supposedly being reinforced by the reforms of the welfare system. How else should citizens assess a law whose implementation involves luring former postal workers from the West to Halle or Gera with the promise of hardship payments?

But there are also contrary voices: “One must tell the people in East Germany that freedom, democracy, and a market economy demand even more courage and individual responsibility in difficult times,” says Klaus von Dohnanyi, who heads the federal government’s *Gesprächskreis Ost [Roundtable East]*.<sup>2</sup> “If one exaggerates the protests, at some point it will lead once again to where the GDR came from.”

Pollsters have long since categorized the upcoming *Landtag* elections in Brandenburg and Saxony on September 19 [2004] as a protest vote. The winners of the crisis are the parties on the right and left fringes. They can count on large electoral gains. The governing party in Berlin definitely seems like it’s out of the game. In Saxony, the most recent polls predict no more than ten to twelve percent for the SPD. In Brandenburg, the SPD is in danger of losing its majority for the first time since reunification. The PDS could for the first time become the strongest party in a federal state with 30 percent of the votes. The successor party to the SED is making the most skillful use of the discontent, for example, with the poster: “Hartz IV = Legislated Poverty”

The extreme right wing, like the DVU [*Deutsche Volkspartei*; German People’s Party] and the NPD [*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*; National Democratic Party of Germany], is

---

<sup>1</sup> The *SUPERIllu* is a popular weekly in the eastern part of Germany – eds.

<sup>2</sup> See Document 11.

also getting involved in the demonstrations. Hand-painted banners with clumsy rhymes call for the overthrow of the government. But even some functionaries are now losing all sense of proportion. For example, the head of the DGB [*Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund*; Confederation of German Trade Unions] in Thuringia, Frank Spieth, compared the Hartz reform to the labor service of the National Socialists: “Here, and I am really putting this bluntly, the Reich Labor Service is being introduced in a new guise,” he declared on the radio *Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk*<sup>3</sup>.

There is one thing the demonstrators in Gera, Cottbus, and Schwerin have already achieved. Market liberals, too, are pointing to the harshness of the reforms. For example, Bert Rürup, advisor to the government, speaks of the “toughest social reform ever.” Additional incentives for the unemployed to take new jobs are not helpful, he argues, if there are no jobs to be had. This problem exists above all in the East.

Because fourteen years after reunification, the new *Länder* still lag behind. Their economic output has been dwindling since 2001. The per capita income is far below the level in the West. Thuringia’s CDU Minister President Althaus muses that the collapse of entire branches of the economy after reunification and high unemployment have left many people simply “without hope.”

In fact, many lack not only hope for the future, but also a piece of the past, a piece of identity. For fourteen years, East Germans have barely played a role in the Federal Republic. The beginning of the new millennium saw only a brief retro-wave that started in movie theaters. Films like “Sonnenallee” and “Good Bye, Lenin!” elevated the liquidated GDR into a lifestyle. Step by step, nostalgia became *Ostalgie* [nostalgia for the East].

“Many people today say they feel it’s intolerable that their life histories are being devalued, even though they never had anything to do with the SED,” says Brandenburg’s Minister President Matthias Platzeck (SPD). That also applies to the public devaluation of old structures: the outpatient clinics [*Polikliniken*] that are now called doctors’ houses [*Ärztelhäuser*], or the *Kinderkrippen* [GDR daycare centers] that were long mocked as socialist hokum. “In the East there are a lot of scientists, doctors, and workers who say to me: We weren’t stupid at all. But in West Germany, the only thing I hear is: Those people in the East can’t get anything done,” says Platzeck. And that’s also his explanation for the intense protests: “Something is bursting out that has been building up for years.”

This could already be felt in the spring, when the economic rebuilding of the East became a media topic. *Der Spiegel* reported that a government commission had concluded that the economic rebuilding of the East had failed. The unfathomable sum of 1.25 trillion Euro had flowed from the West to the East since reunification. The result was virtually zero. “This

---

<sup>3</sup> The *Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk* [Central German Broadcasting] is a regional television and radio station that focuses in coverage on Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia – eds.

discussion was poison for the soul of the people in the new *Länder*,” laments Manfred Stolpe (SPD), the minister in charge of the economic rebuilding of the East. And Günter Nooke, a CDU politician and former co-founder of “Demokratischer Aufbruch” [“Democratic Awakening”] says: “Unfortunately there are many people who didn’t want unity in 1990 and are now happy about every bit of bad news.”

All that’s left in people’s head is: “East Germany? A gigantic flop.” In reality, the commission also highlighted many successes of reunification. “The world ‘failed’ doesn’t even show up in our report,” says commission chairman von Dohnanyi. And still today he wonders who launched the claim about the 1.25 trillion. It wasn’t his commission, that’s for sure.

In fact, von Dohnanyi is generally puzzled by the way East German reality is handled. He feels that the Hartz uprising was avoidable. “I’ve been saying for years now that we’ll get vociferous protests in East Germany if you lie to people,” Dohnanyi asserts. The East Germans are “very reasonable.” They deserve openness and honesty. “But neither the Kohl government nor the current government has told the people in East Germany the truth of the situation,” Dohnanyi continues.

It would be absurd to believe that the new *Länder* would be at the level of the West in only 15 years, as Stolpe just prophesied once again. “Whoever says anything of the sort doesn’t know the situation in the East,” counters Dohnanyi. Real reforms are needed. “The physician must tell the patient the truth, unless he thinks he’s doomed. The East is rich in opportunities.”

More than a hundred thousand people are likely to demonstrate in the East. “We’re sick and tired of the fact that politicians are constantly downplaying Hartz IV,” says Rainer Roth. “Hartz IV must go.” But by now there’s far more at stake.

*With contributions by Jens Krüger*

Source: Cornelia Schmergal, “Aufstand Ost” [“Revolt in the East”], *Welt am Sonntag*, August 22, 2004.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap