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The unexpected success of the successor party to the SED, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), at the ballot box in East Germany put the established (Western) parties in a difficult situation: what response was called for, ostracism or integration? The essay analyzes the reasons behind the success of the PDS in the East and the changing party membership.

The Party that Lights a Fire

Ostracized in the West, voted for in the East – the successors to the SED are drawing surprising support. Discontent over reunification, GDR nostalgia, or a yearning for socialism – what makes the PDS attractive?

Last Friday, around 12:30 pm, a familiar ritual began in the Bundestag. When representative Uwe-Jens Heuer of the PDS stepped to the lectern, the parliamentary group of the Union [CDU/CSU] transformed itself into a raging crowd. While Heuer spoke of his party's SED past, heckling cries rained down on him: "nonsense," "outrageous."

The PDS makes their competitors' blood boil, more so than ever. Saxony-Anhalt votes for a new *Landtag* [state parliament] on Sunday, and the successor to the SED could get twenty percent of the vote. It did similarly well in the European elections in several East German states. In municipal elections, the PDS has often emerged as the strongest faction, for example, in Halle, Schwerin, Rostock, Neubrandenburg, and Hoyerswerda.

A specter is haunting East Germany. Is socialism celebrating a comeback, this time in democratic guise? All of the Bonn party headquarters are in a tizzy. How to deal with the PDS? Integrate it? Ostracize it? The SPD is quarreling over whether it should get involved in coalitions¹. The vice-chairman of the party, Wolfgang Thierse, wants to tolerate cooperation on the municipal level, whereas Party Chairman [Rudolf] Scharping offers preemptive assurances that the PDS will remain a political opponent. The CDU already sees the resurrection of the Popular Front of the Weimar Republic. Kohl's deputy, Angela Merkel, accuses the Social Democrats of "throwing themselves at the PDS out of sheer opportunism." The head of the

¹ In German politics, most federal and state governments are coalition governments; that is, two or more parties join together to form a government – eds.

CSU, Theo Waigel, throws a hard left-right combination punch: the PDS must be opposed with the same determination as the *Republikaner* [the Republicans].²

The PDS, the pariah among the parties, is misjudged in the West. It is more than just an outlet for unification frustration. And it is more than Gregor Gysi. Its success is also grounded in a social network of its own and in the cultivation of specifically East German milieus.

“We’re the party of social justice,” proclaims the slogan that echoes from the concrete walls of satellite towns. The PDS won’t be outdone by anyone in its commitment to the common people. For example, in Schwerin it was the PDS that fought against an increase in bus fares, against an increase in garage leases, against an increase in rents and theater tickets, for more subsidized housing, and so on. Whether it’s children’s daycare facilities or green space statutes, everything interests the PDS, everything is an issue. Populism? You bet!

Whether it’s a political coffee meeting in the Große Dreesch³, a question-and-answer session with the *Landtag* representative in the Weststadt, whether “Gysi is speaking” in Neu Zippendorf, the PDS, says a local reporter in Schwerin, “is present on every corner like no one but the egg-man.” The PDS local candidate, Gert Böttger, makes a point of taking “the tram every day to come into contact with the people.” Böttger has even gone to various churches to win young Christians over to his side.

Because the PDS wants to be everywhere and everything at the same time, it needs discipline and commitment and throngs of party workers, the last of which it still has from the old days. One thousand seven hundred Schweriners belong to the PDS – three times as many as to the CDU. The newly established SPD has a squad of only 250 hardy souls.

To be sure, the PDS, as Western democrats and civic activists constantly remind us in admonishing tones, is the successor organization to the accursed SED. By renaming the party after its refounding, Gysi and his comrades had primarily sought to secure the assets of the former Unity Party⁴ – by now the *Treuhand* has control over them. But the legacy includes not only burdensome guilt, but also a piece of the political culture of the workers’ movement, which is alive in the East like nowhere else in Germany: solidarity among work colleagues and neighbors, commitment to each other and the common good, a sense of duty, empathy.

Long ago, the SED first channeled the old workers’ culture with its strict party organization and then paralyzed it. Anyone who was working and was also a party member belonged to a workplace party organization. Pensioners, housewives, the unemployable, and other homebodies were integrated into their neighborhoods through residential party organizations.

² A political party at the far right of the political spectrum – eds.

³ City district on the outskirts of Schwerin (the capital of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) that was built by prefabricated slab construction during the GDR – eds.

⁴ Reference to the former Socialist Unity Party (SED) – eds.

When the GDR collapsed in 1990, the secretaries of the new PDS saw to it that the remaining party comrades transferred from the endangered workplace party organizations to the residential party organizations. This created the new grassroots groups that form the backbone of the party today. The 131,000 members of the PDS are organized into approximately 12,000 grassroots groups.

The groups meet at least once a month. The program includes readings, discussions with the party leadership, lectures on the history and theory of socialism, and – time and again – debates about the SED past. For many party members, the grassroots group has become a pillar of support in an environment full of insults; it protects them against the cold wind from the West.

Woven around the party groups are entire neighborhood initiatives that provide help in matters of everyday life: filling out pension applications and forms for housing benefits, joining together to resist unfair increases in utility costs, defending endangered children's daycare facilities, looking for space for small, cash-strapped art galleries, organizing May Day festivities.

Thus the PDS is the successor party to the SED, though in a sense that's very different from what Westerners suspect: the new party didn't secure all the assets of the old one nor are ominous cliques [*Seilschaften*] still at work. No, it is the Eastern party's grassroots structures, which perhaps only now, after the liberation from centralization and the introduction of free elections, are truly coming into their own.

Today's PDS members see themselves as the critical part of the old SED, the part that already failed to agree with the real socialism of the Honecker regime back then; the segment of the party that placed its hopes in Gorbachev and perestroika. André Brie, head of campaigning for the PDS in Berlin, puts it this way: "There was a large potential for criticism in the SED. Half of the PDS is made up of those critical people. The other half is a large self-help organization." One can read the numbers in different ways: ninety percent of PDS members were already in the SED, but today's PDS members account for only six percent of the SED's former comrades.

Anyone who visits a party meeting will have to search for a long time to find a face without wrinkles. The PDS is the party of sprightly pensioners. In 1991, the last year for which party data was analyzed, a mere 9% of members were below thirty, but 48% – one out of two – were retired. That also has its advantages. The pensioners – many are early retirees who lost their jobs under the free market economy – have a lot of free time. They are brimming with anger and are eager to get back at capitalism one more time.

The party of academics, white-collar employees, and the unemployed is changing only very slowly. As little as three years ago, the Institute for the Analysis of Social Data [Institut für Sozialdatenanalyse], which is close to the party, concluded that it was above all the losers of German unity who had fled to the PDS.

Now, however, one can find also new faces in the Berlin PDS: above all, very young people, rebels, colorful characters from the anti-Fascist scene. Most recently, and this is a surprise, small and medium-scale entrepreneurs, retailers, and small tradesmen have also started joining the party. These are East Germans who've just made their economic start in the new era; sometimes with a little start-up help from the party.

Many newcomers have been drawn in by the charisma of Gregor Gysi. The PDS would be weaker without him, that high-gloss *Ossi*: "A gifted intellectual and speaker, but of course also an opportunist and a rascal. But always with a lot of charm, never rough." This is how Gregor Gysi describes his father. The same words could be applied to the son.

Whether he's running the meeting of the PDS group in the Bundestag in a laid-back but sensible manner, whether he's explaining himself and his politics in a funny but intelligent way in a car between Cologne and Siegen, one soon understands why the talk-shows are fighting over him. Gysi's criticism of the West is brilliantly presented and to the point, and the same is true of the way in which he defends the East. Gysi reminds those who accuse GDR citizens of timid conformity just how many *Wessis* "with shaking knees knuckled under to GDR customs officials when crossing the border."

[. . .]

In Bonn, by contrast, the established parties, themselves rather forgetful of the past, are using the PDS's Stasi burden to isolate the party. Gregor Gysi was already insulted in the Bundestag as "the speck of fat on top of socialist gravy." Michael Glos, chairman of the state groups of the CDU, calls the PDS deputies "unpalatable characters of the SED successor party." When Gysi and his colleagues speak in committees, nobody listens. Their motions go nowhere. The climate is frosty.

The PDS deputy Gerhard Riege, who committed suicide in February 1992, wrote in his suicide note: "I am afraid of the hatred that is coming at me in the Bundestag, from mouths and eyes and postures."

Jürgen Reents, press spokesman of the Bundestag group, has "a job with a lot of free time." The media largely ignore the work of the PDS representatives. For example, the cameras are usually turned off when a PDS parliamentarian speaks to the full house of the Bundestag. When Gregor Gysi wanted to speak to delegates of the DGB [Confederation of German Trade Unions] last week, some of the unionists walked out.

But the calculations don't add up. Anyone who isolates the PDS because of its past excludes voters who also have a GDR past. "Without the narrow-minded victor's mentality that has been used to exclude us," says Rolf Funda, PDS deputy in the *Landtag* of Saxony-Anhalt, "we wouldn't be where we are now." As a student, Funda had been a candidate for the Stasi. A serious illness ended his career before he saw any action. His unflagging hard work makes

citizens forget this flaw: he was elected mayor of the community of Löderburg with sixty percent of the vote.

Great anti-PDS coalitions in the city council were supposed to freeze out the socialists in Schwerin, Rostock, and Neubrandenburg. The exclusion made the pariahs strong. Nobody gave the PDS an office; they never had to prove their ability. Now these cities are among their strongholds.

“The mammoth coalition gave rise to grotesque mistakes,” says Michael Will, editor of the local paper *Unser Schwerin* [*Our Schwerin*]. “Everyone was fighting, and the PDS was able to gain stature with populist campaigns.” The mayoral candidate from the PDS, Gerd Böttger, also admits: “We did virtually nothing constructive; almost all we did was prevent things.”

Since its most recent electoral success, at the very latest, the PDS is a party that can no longer be ignored on the municipal level. In Schwerin it holds 18 of 47 seats on the city council. In Halle it represents the strongest group with 26 of the electoral votes. There are “certainly pleasant and intelligent people” in the PDS group, says Jürgen Schmitz, who represents the CDU in the city council of Halle. And when a sensible issue is at stake, “you don’t look where the votes are coming from.” In the Hanse city of Wismar, where the Social Democrats have now scored a sensational electoral result, the PDS has already shared the responsibility of governing for four years: it runs the housing department. “We work together well with the PDS,” says mayor Rosemarie Wilcken (SPD). The department chief from the PDS, a toy merchant, is a nice fellow and his accomplishments for the city are undisputed, “but he has not achieved more than others.” Ever since, Wismar knows: the PDS can’t work magic.

“I’ve offered the same working conditions to all the parties,” says Klaus Czundaj, CDU mayor of Sangerhausen in Saxony-Anhalt. “I try to include them in every decision from the very beginning.” And he has gone to PDS party meetings on several occasions to solicit support for his planned municipal policies. In the medieval town hall, the coalitions change on a case-by-case basis. “Substantive issues force a consensus,” says Czundaj. The PDS, too, could not avoid dealing with the financial problems. “We just have to explain it to them.” For eighty percent of all city council decrees, not a single dissenting vote is recorded in the protocol. For the budget deliberations, the council went into closed session – three days in a remote hotel. The budget was passed unanimously. The PDS was there, of course.

Source: Sabine Rückert, Wolfgang Gehrman, Kuno Kruse, and Dirk Kurbjuweit, “Die Einheits-Partei” [“The Party that Lights a Fire”], *Die Zeit*, June 24, 1994.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap