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Change through Rapprochement (July 15, 1963)

In the following speech, which was delivered at the Evangelical Academy in Tutzing, Egon Bahr emphasizes Germany's special role in overcoming the entrenched East-West conflict in Europe. He proposes a policy of stronger cooperation, particularly in economic affairs, with the goal of gradually dismantling the status quo. The speech signaled a change of course in the Social Democrats' policies towards East Germany and the Communist states of Eastern Europe.

Egon Bahr on July 15, 1963, at the Evangelical Academy in Tutzing

[. . .]

The American strategy for peace can also be defined by the formula that Communist rule should be changed, not eliminated. The U.S. approach to improving East-West relations helps change the status quo by first attempting not to change it. This sounds paradoxical, but it opens up possibilities, whereas the previous policy of pressure and counter-pressure led only to a solidification of the status quo. The confidence that our world is the better one, the stronger one in the peaceful sense of the word, the one that will prevail, makes it conceivable to try to open up ourselves, to encourage the other side to do so, and to renounce previous notions about liberation.

The question is whether this concept includes a special German responsibility. I believe this question needs to be answered affirmatively if we do not wish to exclude ourselves from the ongoing development of East-West relations. Within this framework there are even responsibilities that can only be fulfilled by the Germans, because in Europe we find ourselves in the unique position of being a divided people.

The first conclusion to be drawn from applying this strategy for peace to Germany is that the policy of all-or-nothing must be ruled out. Either free elections or nothing, either all-German freedom of choice or an obstinate "no," either elections as the first step or rejection – all this is not only hopelessly antiquated and unreal, but in a strategy of peace it is also meaningless. Today it is clear that reunification is not a one-time act that will be put into effect by a historic decision on an historic day at an historic conference, but rather a process involving many steps and many stations. If what Kennedy said is right, that the interests of the other side also need to be recognized and considered, then it is certainly impossible for the Soviet Union to let the Eastern Zone be snatched away from it for the purpose of strengthening the West's potential. The Zone must be transformed with the approval of the Soviets. [. . .]

If it is correct, and I believe it is correct, that the Zone cannot be snatched away from the Soviet sphere of influence, then the logical consequence is that every policy aimed directly at toppling the regime over there is hopeless. This conclusion is excruciatingly uncomfortable and runs counter to our feelings, but it is logical. It means that changes and alterations coming from the current regime are the only ones that are attainable. It is an illusion to believe that economic troubles might lead to a collapse of the regime. [. . .]

The American President has advocated the approach that we should generate as much trade as possible with the Eastern bloc countries without endangering our security. If one applies this approach to Germany, an unusually wide field opens up. It would be good, at the outset, if we could define this field according to our capacities and limits. I think they exceed all known estimates. If it is correct that intensifying East-West trade (with the qualification mentioned above) lies in the West's interest, and I believe it is correct, then it is also determinately in Germany's interest. We do not have to be so persnickety, to use that well-known Cologne expression for a familiar attitude. The goal of a policy like this, of course, cannot be to blackmail the Zone, for no Communist regime, and certainly not one as endangered as the one in the Zone, can let its character be changed by economic relations. But, after all, not even the Americans made this demand when they gave loans to Poland, and this is also not the meaning of the American wish for intensified trade with the East. Our concern right now is the people, and the exhaustion of every conceivable and responsible attempt to ease their situation. Material improvement would have to have a relaxing effect in the Zone. [. . .]

We have also said that the Wall is a sign of weakness. One might also say that it was a sign of the Communist regime's anxiety and urge for self-preservation. The question is whether there might be opportunities to gradually move these thoroughly justifiable concerns far enough away from the regime that loosening the borders and the Wall becomes feasible, because the risk is tolerable. This is a policy that can be summarized by the formula: change through rapprochement.

I am firmly convinced that we have enough self-confidence to pursue a policy like this without illusions, a policy, moreover, that fits seamlessly into the Western concept of the strategy for peace, for otherwise we will have to wait for miracles, and that is no policy at all.

Source: Egon Bahr, "Wandel durch Annäherung" ["Change through Rapprochement"], speech delivered on July 15, 1963, at the Evangelical Academy in Tutzing; original German text reprinted in Bernhard Pollmann, ed., *Lesebuch zur deutschen Geschichte [German History Reader]*, vol. 3, *Vom deutschen Reich bis zur Gegenwart [From the German Reich to the Present]*. Dortmund, 1984, pp. 247-49.

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