



Volume 10. One Germany in Europe, 1989 – 2009

Willy Brandt on the International Implications of Unification (February 5, 1990)

In this wide-ranging interview, former chancellor and honorary SPD chairman Willy Brandt discusses the international and domestic implications of Gorbachev's decision to give the green light to German unification. Brandt emphasizes the need to proceed deliberately to find acceptable diplomatic solutions and cushion the shock of the transition to a market economy.

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**“Unification is in the Bag”**

Willy Brandt, honorary SPD-chairman, on Gorbachev, Modrow, and Germany's future

**SPIEGEL:** Mr. Brandt, Soviet head of state and party leader Mikhail Gorbachev has dropped his objections to German unification, and GDR Minister President Hans Modrow has surprisingly proposed a step-by-step plan for it. Is unification imminent?

**BRANDT:** The events show that things in Europe are changing at a newly accelerated pace. But even after these statements by Gorbachev and Modrow we still have to prepare ourselves for unification in stages. It will start with a treaty community, with a joint government committee, with a soon to be formed joint parliamentary body, composed of equal parts from East and West [*paritätisch*], with a number of other organs dealing with practical matters like the economy, the currency, and the environment.

**SPIEGEL:** But everything is happening faster than originally assumed.

**BRANDT:** Yes. We will experience the transition from a treaty community to a confederation, that is, to a state alliance, to a German alliance in the form of a community of the two German states, more rapidly than most people had thought. What's new right now is that Modrow said that the sovereignty rights of the two states could also be transferred to joint institutions relatively quickly. That is important, because he said it after he'd been in Moscow. One might now presume that the Soviet Union would no longer object to the creation of something that lies halfway between a confederation and a federation in terms of national and international law. And then others wouldn't be able to object either. That's a new situation.

**SPIEGEL:** It is true, then, as you put it, that “it’s in the bag”?

**BRANDT:** Unification, in principle, is in the bag. Gorbachev has put it in negative terms: there are no fundamental objections anymore. I put it positively. Since Germans want it anyway – though the form is still up for negotiation – and if the Four Powers no longer have any fundamental objections, then one could say: It’s happening or has already happened.

**SPIEGEL:** Now there’s talk again of a step-by-step plan. Recently you gave the impression that unification was imminent.

**BRANDT:** That’s incorrect. I’m aware that such an impression arose from some quotations and headlines. As I said in Rostock, Magdeburg, Gotha, and Eisenach, and at the party congress of the Social Democrats in Berlin in December: the unity of the people has been growing since November 9th. Unity from the bottom up is evident everywhere that people meet. And it’s also starting to assume concrete form from the top. Confederation and federation are also concrete manifestations of unity.

**SPIEGEL:** With the distinction that in a confederation, two states and two citizenships remain.

**BRANDT:** According to the law of the Federal Republic, German citizenship has always continued to exist. By the way, Switzerland still refers to itself as a confederation, but in our understanding it’s more of a united state, despite the significance of the cantons.

For me, this is crucial: the process of growing together is already underway. If a referendum were held, the vast majority would support it.

**SPIEGEL:** And then?

**BRANDT:** Then, whatever government is in Bonn will answer: “Friends, slow down. First we have to see how fast the economy can adapt, how the currencies can be merged, how the social legislation can be adapted.”

**SPIEGEL:** But it can also happen that the people of the GDR will sweep all step-by-step plans aside, that the people in the streets will demand “unification now.”

**BRANDT:** It’s indeed a historical oddity that the leader of the second strongest communist party in the world is issuing a warning about what is going on in the streets. Previously I’ve heard that only as a conservative argument. An old-fashioned Social Democrat like me would never put it that way, because I think when the people say what they want it must be taken seriously. But I agree with you here, there is some chance of a stampede.

**SPIEGEL:** Is it a danger?

**BRANDT:** There have been cases in the world in which good came of chaos, but there is no guarantee that good will come of chaos here. Only this is certain: what you are implying is possible would also be highly undesirable. Such a scenario can only be averted if the people over there [in the GDR] are told: It will not take years for things to change; things will change this year and next year, and the change will be dramatic. Otherwise we'll be in for a big sprint or a real mess. Perhaps it will happen, but I'm in favor of preventing it.

**SPIEGEL:** A big sprint? Do you mean the wave of resettlers?

**BRANDT:** It could grow considerably. But even those who don't want to leave could do a lot more than just express their discontent.

**SPIEGEL:** What do you mean by a real mess? Do you mean that the consequences of yet unresolved economic problems might lead to unification more quickly than you would like?

**BRANDT:** I have nothing against speedy unification. I'm only saying that it won't solve any practical problems. A monetary union won't come simply because millions of people get up and move instead of thousands.

**SPIEGEL:** What do you think of the various scenarios presented by the Chancellery to prepare us for the fact that unification might actually come much more quickly, that the special meeting of the CSCE [Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe] will find a solution as early as this summer, and that a constitutional assembly for all of Germany will already materialize this year?

**BRANDT:** I am not satisfied with what the respective ministries have prepared so far – in early February. Up to now, the ladies and gentlemen have operated under the impression that the other side must first satisfy certain requirements, but that we ourselves have time and will only need to contribute marginal amounts. But there isn't time, and we will be required to offer up a lot, including – and especially – financial payments.

I have nothing against playing simulation games, deciding when which bodies will convene in Berlin or elsewhere. What should I have against Berlin! By the way, this Germany will be federalist and tied into Europe or it will not be at all. The conference of the minister presidents [of the FRG] will presumably meet with the five minister presidents of the GDR before there is a common German government or a government of a federation that could also be called a confederation.

**SPIEGEL:** Should the federal government make the necessary agreements with the Modrow government or should it wait until after the GDR elections?

**BRANDT:** No one would object if some important basic points were determined now, in preparation.

**SPIEGEL:** Could you imagine the Bundestag elections being cancelled?

**BRANDT:** No, I don't think so. If we proceed solely on the basis of the Modrow agenda, then unification will not be possible in six months' time. Yet a lot can be done along the way. But no one will be content with what Modrow proposes. And with all due respect, he also knows that other proposals will follow.

**SPIEGEL:** Do you agree with those who say that better times will start as soon as unification comes?

**BRANDT:** Someone – someone whom I take seriously – even said: “Many who are shouting ‘unity’ or ‘reunification’ actually mean prosperity.” And I say to that: “So what! Do you want to hold that against them?” But if it is so, then it's all the more evidence to support my argument that proclaiming state organs or constitution-like documents does not in itself solve a single practical problem at the outset.

**SPIEGEL:** If your foremost “grandson”<sup>1</sup> Oskar Lafontaine were here, he would say that access to pots of meat has nothing to do with the unity of the Germans. If the pots were in Poland rather than here, then the people would go there instead.

**BRANDT:** That's too hypothetical for me and reminds me more of the time after the Second World War. It's a fact that people at the time would have gladly crossed the border – no matter where to – if things were better there. And who could condemn them for that?

**SPIEGEL:** In Gotha you spoke out for honest dealings with our European neighbors: “And that does not mean that the German train can be arbitrarily stopped by those who hide behind what they call Europe in order to obstruct Germany.” Doesn't that give the impression that you rank Germany higher than Europe?

**BRANDT:** I wouldn't mind if this were understood to mean that Germany is particularly important to me. Otherwise it would be necessary to explain what is meant by Europe in this context. The events in Germany are a subset, admittedly a very important one, of the changes in Europe: the end of communist rule, the end of the state-run controlled economy. The EC [European Community] has just signed a trade and cooperation agreement with the Soviet Union. So the collapse of post-Stalinism also affects European politics. Here, the two main currents in German politics, the Conservative-Liberals and the Socialists, agree that we should not move away from the EC.

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<sup>1</sup> The next generation of the SPD – Oskar Lafontaine, Gerhard Schröder, and Rudolf Scharping – is ironically referred to here as Willy Brandt's “grandchildren.” At the time the Berlin Wall fell Oskar Lafontaine was thought to be (and considered himself) the most important among them – trans.

Let me put it as a formula: Two German states, as long as they exist, can be members of one economic community. But one German state, in my opinion, cannot be a member of two military alliances. Modrow says that, too.

**SPIEGEL:** Modrow demands that Germany be militarily neutral. Do you think that is an option?

**BRANDT:** No, that is not a helpful suggestion. It cannot be assumed that the Federal Republic of Germany will leave NATO like leaving a soccer club, and I am against it too. It also cannot be presumed that NATO will be expanded to include the entire territory of a Germany that is growing together. Most of the people here want to remain in the western alliance, as long as the global situation does not change totally. What else will happen might come out of a change in the character of the alliances as things continue to develop. In some areas they are already shifting from being military organizations to becoming identity groups. We cannot simply check out, but must instead stand at the fore in matters of overcoming confrontation.

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Source: “Die Einheit ist gelaufen” [“Unification is in the Bag”] [Willy Brandt with editors Dirk Koch and Klaus Wirtgen in the Bundehaus in Bonn]. *Der Spiegel*, February 5, 1990.

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