

Two political systems and now one country – the German experience of psychosocial adjustment*

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Abstract

The paper explores the psychosocial adjustment of East Germans and West Germans to living in a new re-unified Germany after 1990. It outlines a historical and a personal perspective, reports own experiences and summarises findings of an empirical longitudinal study which repeatedly surveyed a sample in East Germany since 1987.

Adjustment problems occurred almost exclusively in East Germany where many people have been affected by unemployment and even more feel threatened by it. People there have a type of double identity and value distinct aspects of both the former and the new political system. At the same time they mistrust both systems, and express increasing disappointment about the societal developments since re-unification. Living in totalitarian states might have led to a tendency to seeking paternalistic styles of government which in turn fostered unrealistic and naïve expectations after re-unification. Those expectations have not been met, resulting in wide spread and long-term disillusion and decreasing general optimism.

Re-unification was implemented as a rapid take over of East Germany through West Germany, and subsequently the East German population had various problems to adjust to the new system. The loss of social security and of a reliable future, and the experience of substantial unemployment are likely to have been critical in the process.

* Paper presented at a Korean-German symposium on “Psychological and Social Integration” on 18 April 2007 in Seoul, co-organized by the Institute of Korean Unification Studies (IKUS) of the Yonsei University and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)

Almost two decades have passed since German reunification and any analysis of the psychosocial adjustment since will be influenced by the given perspective of the historical context and the personal background. I will therefore briefly summarise my understanding of the historical processes and explain my own position before exploring how people in West Germany and East Germany adjusted to being part of the same country and political system.

Historical context

German existed as a formal empire since medieval times. However, it was not a homogeneous and centrally organised state, but rather a loose and consistently changing association of various more or less independent political entities. All of them shared one language, but the same language was also spoken elsewhere, and the exact boundaries of the German empire remained disputed for most of the time. At the beginning of the 19th century the empire existed mainly on paper and was officially abandoned in the Napoleon wars in 1805. The 19th century saw an uprising nationalism in Germany as in several other European countries. The movement to establish a new and united German empire was first revolutionary and grew stronger over time. Within the movement there was a fierce debate as to what a new German empire should include, in particular whether German-speaking Austria should or should not be part of it. After the war between Prussia, the strongest state in Germany, and France, Germany was founded in 1871 – without Austria. This was the first real German state with a homogeneous political system, which quickly became a powerful and affluent nation. This development was abruptly ended in the First World War from 1914 to 1918 after which the emperor resigned, Germany lost some of its territory to neighbouring countries, and a troubled and short-lived democratic republic was formed. The republic came to an end in 1933 when the National Socialists took power and engaged in the Second World War lasting from 1939 to 1945. After the Second World War and intensive negotiations between the allied powers of the Soviet Union, United States of America, Great Britain and France, Germany was divided again with parts of its territory being integrated into the Soviet Union and Poland. The main part was divided into two unequal pieces, which turned into very different states. The larger part with 65 million people became the Federal Republic of Germany, i.e.

West Germany, with a western democratic system. It soon became part of NATO and the emerging European Union. A smaller piece with 17 million population turned into the German Democratic Republic, i.e. East Germany, with a socialistic system and a strong Soviet Union occupation.

The two states fundamentally differed in many respects. West Germany had a liberal society and experienced a substantial economic boom soon becoming the dominating economic force in Europe. East Germany included the traditionally poorer and more agricultural areas of the former Germany, experienced a totalitarian system and economically always lagged behind West Germany. Both states claimed to be German and maintained different aspects of the tradition of the former German empire. Yet, the political systems were contrasting and, to some extent, defined themselves through that contrast. The West German society argued that a system like the one in East Germany has to be avoided by all means, whilst the East German regime argued that totalitarian measures had to be in place to protect against a take over through capitalism. Both systems were in a constant rivalry and evaluated themselves by comparing their achievements with the situation in the 'other' Germany.

Whilst ideologically the political systems were linked to each other in their opposition, on a practical level the situation was not symmetric at all: people in the East watched western TV, aimed to get western clothing, listened to western music and tried to keep up with cultural developments in the west, people in the West had little, if any, interest in the situation in East Germany and remained largely ignorant about it. People from the East regularly tried to escape to the West even since the wall had been built between the two Germanys in 1961. At the same time, hardly anyone ever voluntarily moved from the West to the East.

Reunification

For reasons that cannot be explored in this paper, the situation in East Germany as in the whole of Eastern Europe became tense in the late 1980s and the wall between West and East Germany came down in November 1989. Demonstrations in East Germany had first used the slogan 'we are *the* people' suggesting that the regime should stand down following the wishes and self-determination of the East German

people. After the wall had fallen, the slogan changed into ‘we are *one* people’ emphasising the wish to be united with West Germany. Thus, the protest against the East German political system later turned into a strong urge for reunification. After only four months the first free elections were held with a surprising result: the conservative party won most of the seats in the new parliament, and dominated even in areas where traditionally, i.e. in the 1920s, more social-democratic parties had held the majority of votes. However, social-democratic politicians in 1989-90 were somewhat critical towards very quick reunification, whilst conservative party leaders more enthusiastically promised ‘blossoming landscapes’ in the East following rapid reunification. Expectations in the East German population were high, and one might argue that there was a tendency to replace the previous paternalistic leaders by new ones. Thus, democracy was not seen as taking over more own responsibility, but rather to choose the most suitable leader who promises most and later has to take the blame if promises may not have been met.

Politically, reunification went ahead rapidly indeed, and was implemented as a takeover. The West German constitution was kept as it was and simply extended to East Germany. The political system in East Germany collapsed within weeks, and the state of East Germany disappeared within less than a year. Reunification was pushed by the East German people. In West Germany reunification was widely welcomed, but over boarding enthusiasm, if it existed at all, was limited.

Personal Background

I grew up in a unique place, which was West Berlin. It was created by strange political haggling between the allied forces in 1945 and emerged as an island of the western political system within East Germany. It was formally governed by France, Britain and the United States, and in fact a heavily subsidised part of West Germany. On a territory of approximately 20 by 45 kilometres, 2 million people lived a western style of life, enjoyed all advantages of a democratic system and economic wealth, and were completely surrounded by the Berlin wall. As a child I regularly crossed East Germany, which was possible only on defined streets and on very strict conditions. I grew up in a totally liberal system, but was always familiar with what was going on in East Germany and visited family friends there whenever possible. I developed

significant personal relationships with people living in East Germany and witnessed the developments before and after reunification from both perspectives first hand. My personal involvement fuelled the research interest so that I conducted several studies in mental health disorders of people who moved from East to West Germany and in mental sequelae of political imprisonment in East Germany (1-9). One major result of these studies was that people who left East Germany before or in 1989 adjusted in the West very well and occasional initial mental disorders tended to disappear soon. These findings were consistent with other research in similar groups. Yet, people who left East Germany at the time to settle in the West may have been a selection of particularly energetic, adventurous and confident people. It remained therefore unclear whether the results could be generalised to all people in East Germany and be a reason to expect similarly positive adjustment to the new system throughout East Germany after re-unification. In 1997 I moved from Berlin to London and have a more external perspective since.

Personal Experience

When I meet people in East and West Germany, we sometimes discuss the experiences, adjustment processes and opinions about Germans in the two former parts of the nation. Yet, the topic comes up more often in the East than in the West. Typically for people in the West, an insurance broker from Hamburg stated that any adjustment problems have long gone. Now, East Germany was relatively poor as it has always been, and subsequently needed economic support. He further outlined that economic inequalities between regions existed in most states, and there was nothing unusual about it.

People in the East still talk more readily about their views of West Germans and themselves. For example, a researcher from Leipzig said that she can still identify East and West Germans after a conversation of 10 minutes. People from the West appear more confident and skilled in social contacts, whilst easterners are more cautious and rather shy.

The originally widespread stereotype of the 'whinging easterner' and the 'arrogant westerner' can still be heard, but certainly much less so than in the mid 1990s. What

however is tangible is a criticism of the capitalistic system amongst people in the East many of whom vote for the former communist party. At the same time, such criticism also exists in West Germany although it might be expressed in different political ways.

Research

As an academic I tend to search for research evidence in addition to personal impression and anecdotal evidence. Numerous research studies have been published on very different aspects of reunification and its consequences. One website alone (10) lists more than 30,000 references, the overwhelming majority of which however are available only in German. No secondary study, let alone a brief paper like this, can comprehensively review all the findings. Yet, most studies are merely retrospective, address limited aspects and have serious methodological shortcomings.

What one would really want in this situation is a longitudinal study with a defined sample of people who were repeatedly surveyed, first before reunification and ever since. Surprisingly, such a study exists, and it is the only study I will report here. It is the Saxonian Longitudinal study (11,12). The East German government was concerned about the attitude of young people towards the political system and commissioned regular surveys the results of which were always kept secret. Thus, in 1987 a random sample of 14 year old pupils of 41 schools in two towns in Saxonia were selected. The sample was representative for the 14 year old population in the whole of East Germany at the time. They were interviewed annually until 1989 and expressed an increasing distance towards the political system. This finding worried the East German government and they decided to ask the sample whether they would be willing to participate in further surveys. Approximately 50% gave consent and formed the basis for further assessments, which were conducted by academic institutions in Saxonia every year since. The original sample of 1,281 pupils was reduced to 587 after reunification. The response rate of further postal surveys was mostly above 60%. In 2005 there were 390 respondents, which represent 67% of the sample after reunification. The results of the repeated surveys from 1987 to 2005 have been summarised in 13 key findings (12):

1. From 1987 to 1989 there was an increasing disappointment about the political and economic conditions in East Germany and a decreasing identification with the official political ideology. At the same time, all pupils still had a clear idea and firm expectations about their personal and professional future within the system.
2. For a large although significantly decreasing majority, there is no going back to the political constellation before reunification. Only a small minority wonders whether changing the political system was the right decision, but many doubt that the original intentions and aspirations of the political movement for the change in East Germany have been achieved. This goes along with doubts as to whether East Germans really gained full freedom.
3. The reunified Germany has become part of normality, and most respondents think they can utilise the potentials for personal growth and a better way of life. Yet, they also realise that the economic conditions in East Germany are still unfavourable as compared to the West, and become less optimistic that this difference will disappear soon.
4. The positive attitude to German unity is not identical with an approval of the political system. The societal and in particular economic system receives rising scepticism and rejection.
5. The willingness for societal participation has dropped every year and has now almost disappeared. This is partly motivated by the perception that chances for East Germans to succeed in a society, which is dominated by West Germans, are slim.
6. The trust in democratic political parties is low. Around 75% said that they do not trust any existing political party. This is associated with a critical view of politicians who are seen as representing only the rich and privileged groups in society.
7. This critical view culminates in a growing pessimism about the capacity of the political system to deal with the challenges of the future. Less than 10% believe that the current system can solve the most urgent problems of humankind and that it is a humane and dignified model for the future. The significant majority has been critical towards the given political system throughout the longitudinal study, i.e. first they rejected the socialistic system and later the capitalistic one.
8. Many in the sample show a kind of double identity: they feel as citizens of the new reunified Germany without having totally lost the link with the former East

- German state. A complete identification with former East Germany is slowly decreasing, however also a complete identification with the new system is falling.
9. In a comparison of the two former political systems, former East Germany is seen more favourably every year. This applies in particular to social security, child-care, relationship between people, promotion of family, protection against crime, school education, and social justice. The respondents consistently insisted that East Germany had positive as well as negative aspects. Not surprisingly, the former East German system is judged more positively the more negative the view of the new Germany is.
 10. The increasing distance towards the new societal system goes in hand with a rising tendency to identify with socialistic ideals. The majority feels socialism was a good idea, which was poorly implemented, and almost half of the respondents feel a reformed socialism might be a good alternative to the current system. The principal question ‘capitalism or socialism?’ is for most of the respondents not yet finally answered. Only a few think the current model is a solution for future generations, but also only a few believe that realistically socialistic ideals will dominate future societies.
 11. The general optimism about the personal future became worse after reunification and has not improved since. Almost 25% of the original group already left East Germany with no intention to return.
 12. The low optimism is associated with the stressful perception of existential threats and concerns about potential or actual unemployment, rising costs, and personal poverty. These general worries are reflected by the fact that two-thirds of the 32-year-old respondents already anticipate poverty in old age and feel threatened by it!
 13. An important influential factor for the attitudes of the sample is the experience of unemployment, which had affected two-thirds of the sample at least once by 2005. The percentage of people who had been repeatedly and long-term unemployed increased from 17% in 1996 to 35% in 2005. And 64% believe that unemployment will rather increase in East Germany in the future. This actual experience of unemployment or the potential threat of it is central to the views of almost all respondents.

The Saxonian Longitudinal study is well conducted although there obviously is a selection bias for the repeat interviews. It also has to be noted that since 2002 it has been partly funded by a left leaning foundation, i.e. the Rosa-Luxemburg-Foundation, which may or may not influenced aspects of the study implementation, data analysis, or presentation of the findings. In any case, the authors conclude that more than 15 years after reunification the majority of the young people are still sceptical towards the new societal system and that mass unemployment has been a critical factor for this.

Discussion

My personal experiences and the research results point towards a similar conclusion. Problems of psychosocial adjustment have never been substantial in West Germany. West Germany took over East Germany and did not have to change. There may be jokes and stereotypes about East Germans, but there are also jokes and stereotypes about people from other regions.

The situation in West Berlin as a place which turned from being a front-line island of the western system into a normal part of the former East Germany is certainly different and more complex, but also very specific and of little general relevance to the whole country.

Thus, significant challenges of psychosocial adjustment occurred only in East Germany. These adjustments apply to the new political system and not the fact of reunification as such. The new political system comes with substantial unemployment, which would probably affect any population and undermine the enthusiasm for the current system. However, there are additional aspects to understand the processes of adjustment or non-adjustment which have already been going on for almost two decades and are likely to continue.

One might argue that the East German population had lived in a totalitarian system since 1933 and became used to a simplified and paternalistic view of society. They may have been extremely critical towards the regime in East Germany, but nevertheless believed in the important role of leaders and a top-down organised society. This may have led to unrealistic expectations after reunification and naïve trust into politicians who promised whatever needed to be promised to win the election. Such expectations increased the later disappointment, which was

subsequently expressed as dissatisfaction with politicians in the new system. At the same time, social values and overall security that were experienced in former East Germany are now missed. Paradoxically, such aspects might be easier to identify and value, once they are lost, and the disappointment about the loss appears to increase over time.

It is highly questionable as to whether the German experiences can be transferred to any other historical context. With hindsight, reunification probably worked relatively well and benefited from both the quick pace and the economic power of the West Germany. However, the economic power was not strong enough or not appropriately utilised to bring East Germany up to West German economic standards and avoid significant unemployment, which in turn fuelled an exodus of significant parts of the population. It does not require sophisticated psychological theories to understand that moving from social security to actual or potential unemployment is difficult and would cause long-term adjustment problems in most of us.

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