

The PDS party conference in Cottbus

German post-Stalinists poised to enter the "mainstream"

By Ulrich Rippert and Peter Schwarz
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Eleven years after it was founded, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor to the ruling Stalinist party (SED—Socialist Unity Party) in the former East Germany, has dropped its image as a left-wing protest party once and for all. In the future, it intends to play a “state-supportive” role as a regional party in the east of Germany, similar to that played by the conservative CSU (Christian Social Union) in Bavaria. That is the essential outcome of the PDS's latest party conference, held in the eastern German city of Cottbus.

The clearest indication of this change in course is the PDS's unequivocal stance in favour of coalitions with the ruling Social Democrats (SPD). “Cooperation, not fundamental opposition” is the party's new outlook, and, according to Gabriele Zimmer, the newly elected party chairperson, this can only be done in an alliance with the SPD. A resolution proposed by the new leadership offering cooperation and support to the SPD at the regional and national level was passed with 99 percent of the votes. Only four delegates voted against it.

In view of the fact that the SPD has continuously moved to the right in recent years, this resolution in itself is a clear-cut programmatic definition of the PDS's position. Nobody in the PDS can seriously claim that anti-capitalist policies can be implemented side by side with today's SPD, under the leadership of Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Finance Minister Hans Eichel.

None of this is new. For years now the PDS has been loyally cooperating with the SPD and, in some cases, with the conservative CDU in eastern German municipalities. In the state of Sachsen-Anhalt the PDS

supports the SPD-led state government, and in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern it is even a member of the state coalition government. The effect of its political activities differs in no way from that of the other established parties. But up to now the PDS undertook strenuous efforts to present itself as a radical opposition party, while it pursued a policy that served the interests of the capitalist state. After the Cottbus conference, this tightrope act is a thing of the past.

Paradoxically, this change in course dovetails with a change in leadership that has brought back to the surface the party's past in the GDR (German Democratic Republic—the former East Germany). The PDS's previous leaders—Gregor Gysi and Lothar Bisky—are also former SED members, but they came from a sector of the East German intelligentsia that sympathised with Gorbachev's perestroika and kept a certain critical distance from the regime in the final phase of the GDR's existence. The new leadership—Gabriele Zimmer, Roland Claus, Helmut Holter and Dietmar Bartsch—had no such critical impulses. In the final days of the GDR they remained loyal junior party functionaries, hoping to climb the bureaucratic ladder.

“Gabi” Zimmer, in particular, is the incarnation of the stereotypical aspiring SED functionary. Her outlook combines hackneyed professions of commitment to social welfare with a marked predilection for order, discipline, the family ... and the fatherland. Her assurance that she loved Germany and envied the French and Italians for their unabashed national pride was noted prominently and favourably in the press. With every sentence she utters it is obvious that farsighted designs, visions and utopias are abhorrent to

her. Much better to pursue a policy of small, practical steps.

Zimmer was elected party chairperson with 93 percent of the votes—a far better result than her predecessors ever obtained. She is much more representative of the PDS membership, which has its roots in the mid-level party cadre of the SED and has always been conservative in its outlook. Their political idol is Hans Modrow, the honorary chairman of the party, who saw his task as the head of government of the GDR during the critical weeks between the opening of the Berlin Wall and the last elections for the *Volkskammer* (the East German parliament) as “maintaining the governability of the country and preventing chaos” (Quoted from Modrow's book *Aufbruch und Einheit*).

These people were never against re-unification and the restoration of capitalist relations. They were merely indignant because unification was carried out without them, because they were humiliated and despised, and because they lost their privileged status and, often enough, their income as well. This indignation is the source of their “socialism”, and it was their urgent desire to be accepted in the West that enabled Gregor Gysi to become the party's figurehead. With his quick-wittedness and rhetorical skills, Gysi was best suited to provide the PDS with a modern image that made it acceptable beyond its own circles.

As he has repeatedly stated recently, Gysi himself saw his task to be the integration and firm establishment of the PDS in the Federal Republic of Germany. It is now generally accepted that he succeeded in this.

Former CDU Chairman Hinze, who waged a virulent anti-PDS election campaign (the notorious “red socks” campaign), has vanished from the political scene, but Gysi is now a much sought-after guest of the political elite, meeting with (ex-chancellor) Helmut Kohl for a private chat, or enjoying a candlelight dinner with Chancellor Schröder and his wife.

Gysi's success, however, is not so much a result of his own efforts as it is a product of political changes. Protest against the social effects of unification gained the PDS influence and election successes. With such success came political offices.

The PDS may not have solved the social problems of the eastern German population, but it certainly solved

its own social problems. As with the other established “popular parties”, the active membership of the PDS now mainly consists of officeholders and functionaries. At the same time, the PDS has become indispensable for maintaining state authority in crisis-wracked eastern Germany.

The PDS has thus—albeit after some delay—finally “arrived” in capitalist Germany. The high-wire act of balancing between socialist propaganda and pro-capitalist deeds is no longer necessary. The party can finally come out in the open. The “red” garnishings are merely ornamental, a shadow of the past.

Consequently, Sarah Wagenknecht of the “Communist Platform” (a hard-line Stalinist, pro-GDR grouping within the PDS) is allowed to remain in the party's executive committee, but only (as one commentator noted mockingly) as a “mascot”, after having delivered a servile speech.

That this is the significance of the Cottbus party conference is widely recognised in the bourgeois press. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented: “The PDS wants to belong. It no longer cordons itself off from the long-hated Federal Republic of Germany. It wants to be part of this new Germany. For 10 years, the PDS played the foreign body, the party of the East, gathering up the ‘displaced persons’ of the defunct GDR, channelling their resentment and facilitating their transition into the Federal Republic. Acting as a kind of self-help group, the PDS carried out the therapy of the disenfranchised and disinherited of the GDR on its own. Now it once again has political clout.”

And the weekly *Die Zeit* wrote: “Gregor Gysi's withdrawal from the leadership is not the beginning of the end, but rather the end of the beginning for the PDS. For 10 years he worked at establishing the PDS in the Federal Republic.... Both of them [Gysi and Bisky] personified the arrival of the PDS in the Federal Republic. The new leadership elected at the Cottbus party conference now symbolises the post-arrival situation.”

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