Germany's post-Stalinists in turmoil: PDS leaders Gysi and Bisky step down

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Ten years after its founding, and only months after substantial election gains in several eastern German states, the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—successor to the ruling Stalinist party of East Germany) is in the grips of a severe crisis.

PDS parliamentary leader Gregor Gysi has announced he will step down from office this October. At the end of the PDS national party congress, held in Münster on the weekend of April 8-9, Gysi said he would not stand as candidate for the position of chairman of the PDS parliamentary group in the *Bundestag*. Before that, PDS Chairman Lothar Bisky announced he would not run for a third term and would resign from his office this autumn.

These announcements were preceded by a stunning defeat for the PDS executive committee. Its motion to change the party's position on military interventions was voted down by a two-thirds majority of the 350 delegates.

The majority of the PDS parliamentary group and the party executive committee had already, last fall, abandoned their general opposition to military inventions sanctioned by the United Nations, resolving instead “to decide on peacekeeping UN operations on a case-by-case basis”.

This question had led to bitter disputes in the period leading up to the party congress. For many PDS members, the memory was still too fresh of how the transformation of the Green Party started with its so-called “review of UN peacekeeping missions on their individual merits”, and then led directly to support for the German Army's participation in the NATO attack on Serbia. But the PDS executive committee was determined to have its way at the party congress.

In a letter to the delegates, Gysi demanded a “clear separation from the dogmatic left in terms of (political) content” and emphasized that the party's parliamentary group would under no circumstances relinquish its right to “concretely evaluate each UN mission”. With customary demagogy, he accused his critics of “lagging far behind Lenin”, who had always demanded that “a concrete analysis must be undertaken before a political opinion is formed or a political demand put forward”. He forgot to mention that Lenin rejected any war if the “concrete analysis” showed that it was being waged by an imperialist power.

This dispute was not just about the UN and whether military operations are to be supported or not, but about the entire trajectory of the PDS' politics. Gregor Gysi knows full well that access to the real levers of political power is only granted on the basis of unequivocal acknowledgement of the organs of the capitalist state. It was no different with the Greens. Without kowtowing to the military, Joschka Fischer would never have been made foreign minister.

Not for the first time was there trouble in the air at a PDS party congress. But it seemed initially that, as in the past, the congress organizers had everything under control. The first speaker was honorary PDS Chairman Hans Modrow, who emphasized the successes of the past ten years in his welcoming address. Then came the previously announced farewell address of outgoing Party Chairman Lothar Bisky, who appealed to the delegates not to lose sight of their common goals despite all differences of opinion. Even repeated heckling and disruption by a handful of delegates and guests seemed to fit into the leadership's scheme for managing the congress, providing as it did an opportunity to portray any serious critic as a member of the “left-wing lunatic fringe”.

But then the deputy party chairperson and member of the European Parliament Sylvia-Yvonne Kaufmann gave a speech in which she vehemently warned against revising the existing PDS policy on war. Kaufmann emphasized that, in its present condition, the UN is not a force for peace. The veto-wielding powers in the UN Security Council “and first and foremost the USA” unfailingly act according to their superpower and economic interests, she said, adding that there was “no military logic” for civil rights and democracy.

To those who might accuse her of being unrealistic, she replied that realistic politics offering a perspective for the future also needed “the courage to dream”. Choking on her tears, Kaufmann declared to the delegates that, in her opinion, there was no such thing as a “humanitarian military intervention”—and received massive applause that lasted for minutes. She was visibly surprised and even alarmed by the subsequent vote in favor of her position.

The party leadership, which hitherto had always made a great show of the PDS' supposed democratic nature, reacted angrily to the delegates' deviant voting behavior. They interrupted the congress, withdrew for a one-and-a-half-hour crisis meeting, and then threatened to resign en masse, a threat which they did not carry out.

Only Gysi announced the following day that he was stepping down as parliamentary leader, although several party members, including outgoing Party Chairman Bisky, tried to change his mind in hopes of preventing the PDS from losing two of its leaders at the same time.

While the congress was still in progress Gysi stated to the press that this was not an emotional decision made on the spur of the moment. True, he was “furious” about the defeat, but his decision not to stand again as parliamentary leader had been firm for some time, the only question being when and under what circumstances he would announce it.

The simultaneous resignation of the PDS' two top leaders signifies the end of a political era. When the SED (Socialist Unity Party), the former state party of the German Democratic Republic (GDR—East Germany), renamed itself the PDS ten years ago, this move was tied to a definite political goal. The intended task of the newly named party was to integrate the remains of the GDR into the unified German state and keep the resultant conflicts and social tensions at a minimum.

Hans Modrow, the chief of state of the GDR during the decisive months between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the last elections for the East German parliament, saw it as his responsibility “to prevent the political stability of the country from being undermined”. Later, in his memoirs *Aufbruch und Einheit (Upheaval and Unity*), he wrote, “What was important to me was to maintain the governability of the country, to prevent chaos”, adding that, in his opinion, “the road to unification had

become an inevitable necessity", one that "must be seized with determination".

Modrow's minister of the economy at that time, Christa Luft, who is now a member of the PDS' parliamentary leadership, sang the praises of private property. *Lust auf Eigentum (The Pleasures of Property*) was the title of a book she published in that period. Luft founded the *Treuhandanstalt* trust agency, which oversaw, in league with Western corporations and banks, the privatization of the GDR's economy.

Even then there was not the slightest doubt that the PDS supported German unification and capitalist property relations. If it nevertheless continued to use socialist phraseology dating from the days of the GDR, this was out of consideration for its voter base and membership.

Particularly the middle and lower layers of former SED party functionaries experienced the collapse of the GDR as a catastrophe. They had lost their previously enhanced social status and, on top of that, were constantly faced with accusations regarding their collaboration with the East German Ministry of State Security and the border police.

To make matters worse, the Western power and money elite showed little inclination to share the profits of re-unification with the former GDR *nomenklatura*. Their ranks were soon swelled by other people who had lost out in the course of unification: academics whose careers had come to an abrupt end; small businesspeople whose hopes of benefiting from the "flourishing economy" promised by West German politicians had been disappointed; and finally the unemployed and socially marginalized.

The program and propaganda of the PDS was addressed to these layers. They were the target group at whom the socialist phrases, the calls for "social justice" and the *Ostalgie* —the romantic idealization of the GDR's past—were directed.

This was a permanent tightrope act for the PDS. On the one hand, it was attempting to draw all those to its ranks who were embittered and outraged about the results of German unification in order to prevent their pent-up fury from expressing itself in other ways. On the other hand, it was striving to overcome the reservations of the old West German parties and present itself as a "state-affirmative" party.

Within the PDS, this contradiction found its expression in the constant faction fighting that surfaced at every party congress. At one end of the spectrum was the Communist Platform (KPF), a collection of old Stalinist cadres who churned out anti-capitalist rhetoric without ever seriously questioning the actual course of the PDS. They were reinforced by former Maoists and members of the defunct West German DKP (German Communist Party), who had found a financially comfortable nest for themselves in the small party organizations in western Germany.

At the other end were the active state and municipal politicians who would have preferred to do away with the socialist rhetoric altogether and transform the PDS into an eastern German "popular party" modeled on Bavaria's conservative Christian Social Union (CSU).

This constant balancing act required a division of labor in the party leadership. Bisky took over the chairmanship of the party from Gysi and looked after internal relations. Using his talents as an "integration grandpa" (as he called himself), he reconciled the conflicting wings of the party. Gysi represented the party to the outside world, trying to curry favor in the West and doing the rounds of TV talk shows. After the party congress in Münster, he declared it was due to him that the PDS "had been introduced into society"—adding that it had not yet become part of society.

If the integration of the former GDR had been a success and the social crisis gradually overcome, things would have worked out as Gysi and Bisky had planned. The internal friction would have eased off and the PDS would have gradually transformed itself into a completely normal reformist party that would have competed with, or let itself be absorbed by, the SPD (Social Democrats). Instead, the social crisis deepened and the number of people marginalized in society increased. The PDS gained more support and now has government responsibility in numerous eastern German municipalities. In the state of Saxony-Anhalt it supports the Social Democrat government, and in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern there are PDS ministers in the state government.

The more the PDS was integrated at the government level, the more apparent the contradiction between its rhetoric and its political practice became. Despite all its propaganda about "social justice", its practical policies are not in the slightest different from those of the SPD or the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). It works hand in glove with those parties to carry out cuts and cost savings that are directed against the population.

Saxony-Anhalt, where the PDS has been supporting the SPD-run state government for six years, has the highest unemployment rate of all German states, at just under 24 percent. And in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, where the minister of labor is a PDS member, workers receive the lowest wages in all of Germany. Some 41 percent of all jobs are not covered by a collective wage agreement—the highest rate in eastern Germany.

Under these circumstances, the PDS is no longer able to stretch itself in two directions, posing as an opposition party in words and upholding the existing order in deeds. It has to come out with a clear message. That is the reason for the crisis at its latest party congress. The proposal to support military interventions embodied the PDS' complete integration into the existing system and its abandonment of all forms of protest politics.

But social reality has thwarted the party leaders' plans. The situation in the east of Germany is strained to bursting point. The average unemployment rate there is 19 percent—more than twice as high as in western Germany. In many east German towns and cities, a third of the employable population is out of work. To a certain extent, the defeat of the PDS party leadership is an expression, albeit a thoroughly distorted one, of growing opposition to these conditions.

There was no mistaking the frustration the party leaders felt over not having managed, even after ten years, to completely integrate the PDS into the existing system. But they left no doubt as to their determination to use every means at their disposal to achieve exactly that.

At a press conference held a day after the party congress, Gysi demanded vigorous action to crack down against "left-wing demagogues". The party must now take some "clear decisions" and make up its mind "where it was going", he said, calling for an end to "tolerance for intolerance".

When asked whether he was in favor of expelling people from the party, Gysi replied ambiguously that the statutes of the PDS provided other possibilities. Party organizations that permanently infringed basic principles of the PDS program could be dissolved by resolution of the next highest-ranking organization.

Gysi and Bisky have made it clear that they will use their remaining weeks in office to open the way for a younger generation of party functionaries who are not so embedded in the traditions of the GDR, but have proved their worth as pragmatic supporters of *realpolitik*. These include PDS National Secretary Dietmar Bartsch, who is being touted as Bisky's successor, and Roland Claus, a possible successor to Gysi. Backing them up are numerous state politicians who have been closely cooperating with the SPD and the CDU for years.

There can be no doubt that the PDS will move further to the right after this party congress.

The mainstream press has given warm support to Gysi's efforts, and not only because the PDS is needed more than ever as a means of keeping order in eastern Germany. The PDS is playing an increasingly important role in foreign policy as well. Its opposition to the Kosovo War a year ago was closely interlinked with its criticism of American dominance of NATO. Even at that time, the PDS was not alone in this criticism. There

were similar voices in the CDU and the SPD, and they have become louder since then. The common thrust of these opinions is that Europe must develop an independent foreign and security policy to a much greater extent than in the past, and no longer allow itself to be kept in tutelage by the US.

The PDS, which, as the successor to the SED, is the only German party that stood on the opposite side during the Cold War and has traditionally good relations with Russia, is closer to the new interests of German foreign policy than are the SPD and CDU. Just last year, the PDS parliamentary group announced that it would take the initiative to discuss in Parliament the basic elements of a new policy towards Russia.