

Report From Bonn by Rainer Apel

German democracy in a profound crisis

The former communists are reaping the benefits of the economic collapse forced on Germany by the free marketeers.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl's Christian Democrats (CDU) suffered a humiliating defeat in the Dec. 5, municipal elections in the eastern state of Brandenburg, the first test of electoral strength in the East since December 1990. On the state average, the CDU finished third behind the PDS, the party of the "converted" communists, which gained second party status behind the Social Democrats (SPD).

The state average, however, does not tell much about real party strength in individual municipalities. In the four big cities of Brandenburg, the PDS finished first in Potsdam and Frankfurt/Oder, and second in Cottbus and Brandenburg/Havel. But in Cottbus, the vote total is only 0.3% between the SPD, which had 28.4%, and the PDS, which had 28.1%; and in Potsdam, the PDS gained more than 11%, and its candidate for mayor of that city, Rolf Kutzmutz, crushed the incumbent mayor, Horst Gramlich of the SPD, with 45% against 29%.

It cannot be ruled out that in the second round on Dec. 19, Kutzmutz may be elected as the new mayor of Potsdam—the state capital of Brandenburg and a symbol associated with the history of Prussia.

While the former SED communists always posed as the "red Prussians," everybody knew that they had come to power not through normal and free elections, but by the force of the Soviets, the postwar occupying power in Germany's East. If Kutzmutz were elected mayor on Dec. 19, it would be in a free, democratic vote, and the PDS as a whole would benefit.

But even if Kutzmutz were defeated by an all-party alliance of SPD, CDU, and others, he would still be the decisive factor of municipal policies in Potsdam, because the PDS, being a centralist party, would represent the most coherent and strongest factor of power, and would have close to 50% of the vote in any case. A newly elected, non-PDS mayor might not be able to stay in office for long anyway; incumbent Horst Gramlich is the third mayor in three years, since the 1990 elections.

The secret to the rise of the PDS in all five east German states, is the sentiment building among voters against the "Bonn parties," and against the western system of free market economic policies that has eliminated 75% of the industrial jobs which the east German state still had in early 1990, created real unemployment rates of 40-50% in nearly all cities of the East, and led to a collapse of domestic security and the spread of drugs and prostitution. The PDS, adopting a strategy of admitting that "we were wrong in the past, but the others are much more wrong at present," has fared quite well.

Corruption scandals such as the one that forced the entire CDU-led cabinet of the state of Saxe-Anhalt to resign on Nov. 28, have contributed to the rise of the PDS as well. Another factor of its broadening resonance also among non-PDS supporters has been spectacular publicity stunts such as the logistical and legal assistance which the PDS of Thuringia lent to the hunger strike this past summer by

potash miners of Bischofferode against the closure of their mine.

PDS mayoral candidate Rolf Kutzmutz, whose party had 38.4% of the vote on Dec. 5, could never have received the 45% for himself, had he not been backed by non-PDS voters. The CDU of Potsdam lost 7% of its 1990 vote, and lost 11.3% on average on the state level.

The PDS gains and its strength in the bigger cities have implications for the national party political landscape. Actions like the one in Bischofferode have boosted the image of the former communists to an extent that latest opinion polls give them a voter preference of 6% on the national level—enough to meet the mandatory 5% level for a seat in the national parliament. By German election laws, however, a party only needs directly elected candidates in three districts, irrespective of the national percentage, to be seated in the parliament. Building on its gains in the Dec. 5 municipal vote, the PDS is now in a position to consider a victory in Potsdam, Frankfurt/Oder, and Cottbus as realistic possibilities.

This does not imply that all of Germany will turn communist, or "post-communist," as have Lithuania and Poland; but the erosion of the constituencies of the established Bonn parties (CDU, SPD, and FDP) which typify the postwar political system and the type of "social" market economy that has kept west German society stable and calculable through 44 years, is reason for major concern.

The established parties are also losing voters at an alarming pace. Some 40% of the voters are so fed up that they don't vote anymore. This process is hitting all areas of Germany: In the Sept. 12 Munich municipal elections, voter participation was at 62%; in Brandenburg on Dec. 5, it was 59.2%.