

Nostalgia for Times Past. On the Uses and Abuses of the Ostalgie Phenomenon in Eastern Germany

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Nostalgia for Times Past

On the Uses and Abuses of the *Ostalgie* Phenomenon in Eastern Germany

Aline Sierp

Abstract: *This paper will investigate the way collective and individual memory of the experience of Communism has been framed by the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) in the Eastern German federal states. It explores possible reasons for the 'Ostalgie' (nostalgia) phenomenon in Eastern Germany and analyses to what extent the PDS, being the successor party of the former GDR state party SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany), uses or abuses this phenomenon in order to secure itself a stable electoral basis in the Eastern German federal states. The analysis is mainly based on the first fifteen years after re-unification, paying tribute to the fact that the PDS has undergone major transformations since 2005.*

Keywords: *Memory, Communism, German Democratic Republic, Party politics*

Introduction

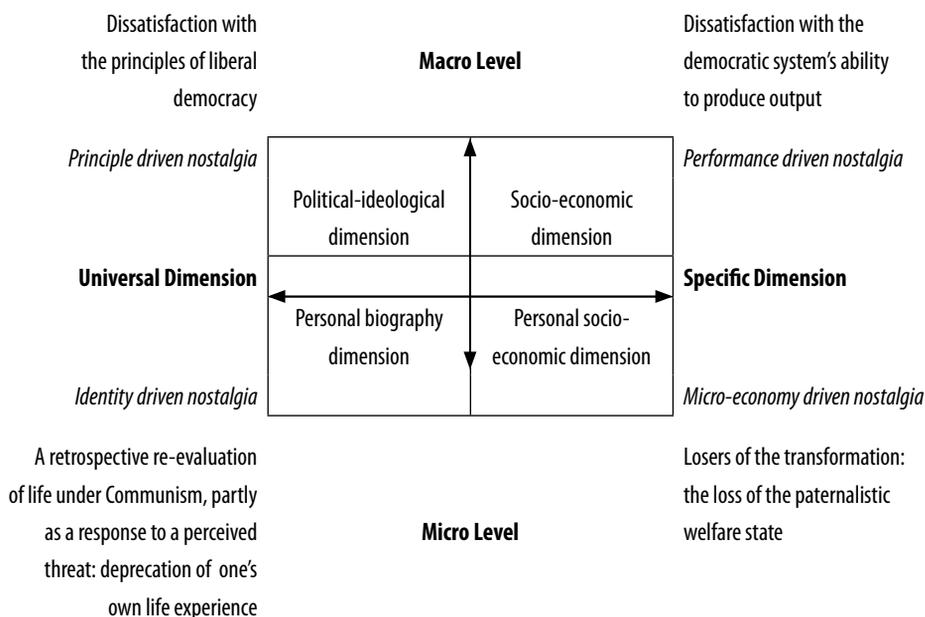
Nostalgia is a double-edged sword: it appears to be an emotional antidote to politics, which in turn makes it one of the best political instruments.

(Boym 2001: 70)

Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, an unexpected phenomenon can be observed in many former communist countries: a certain kind of nostalgia for the

communist past expressing itself not only in opinion polls¹ and political discourse but also in art² and a renewed attachment to certain material objects. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, nostalgia is either ‘the state of being homesick’ or ‘a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition’. When analysing nostalgia for the communist past, however, it seems that the concept of nostalgia in this context is much more complex than the dictionary definition appears to indicate. Joakim Ekman and Jonas Linde (2005: 356), in fact, distinguish between four analytical dimensions of nostalgia: a political-ideological dimension, two socio-economic dimensions, and a life biography dimension (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Dimensions and Indicators of Communist Nostalgia



Source: Adapted from Eckman and Linde (2005: 354–374)

Those four dimensions played a particularly powerful role in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) where not only had the communist rule ended but at the same time statehood and the Eastern German nation had been destroyed. It is therefore not surprising that the kind of nostalgia appearing in Eastern Germany after 1989 was coined *Ostalgie*. Its meaning ranges from ‘the denotation of a geographic and political origin to the rejection or affirmation of specific identities grounded in

the “other” Germany’ (definition by Keßler 1995: 101). What exactly is *Ostalgie* and how can its emergence be explained?

1 The Phenomenon

Nostalgia for the communist past is not a new phenomenon in Eastern Germany. Surveys showed that disaffection with the new state and the basis for what has later been called *Ostalgie* were already present in the middle of the 1990s. It expressed itself in the reawakened interest in material objects that had been symbols of the communist past, the most prominent among them being the Eastern German *Ampelmännchen* (the pedestrian traffic sign). But also *Trabant* automobile clubs, parties with a GDR dress code, stores selling typical Eastern products, former GDR radio transmissions and music enjoyed high popularity (Brussig 2001: 109). Symbols of everyday life suddenly started to acquire a certain ‘remembrance value’ and were thus marketed in this way. The particular nostalgia developing in Eastern Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, did not only refer to a material world that had vanished but made reference to the loss of the caring, community-oriented nature of the GDR as well. To what extent this past evaluation of the communist regime is correct is obviously questionable. The positive image painted by nostalgic memories usually referred to the 1960s, standing out as a bright and hopeful decade between the exhausting production quotas of the 1950s and the widespread disillusionment, growing deprivation and economic hardship of the 1970s and 1980s (Betts 2000: 246–247).³

How can it be explained that a positive image of the GDR remained alive in the hearts and minds of many of its former citizens twenty years after its demise? Is it the fact that ‘memory is able to make peace with the past, rancour vanishes and the veil of nostalgia poses itself on everything that once had been perceived as painful’ (Brussig 1999: 32)? Or are there other reasons as well?

2 Social and Economic Factors

One of the reasons for the rising prominence of *Ostalgie* has certainly been the difficult economic situation in Eastern Germany after the fall of the Wall. High unemployment figures, an increasing social gap and difficulties in adapting to a market economy, made people tend to not only look towards the future but also back to the past. The budget deficit resulting from the currency exchange and the rebuilding of the East precipitated an economic crisis in both parts of the re-united country, leading to the disappointment of former GDR citizens who were unfamiliar with

the real situation in the West. They felt disillusioned and suffered particularly from the economic disparity between East and West, giving them the impression of being second-class citizens (Jozwiak and Merman 2006: 785). The degree of estrangement between the two Germans had been vastly underestimated by the West German government who for a long time denied the costs and promised quick prosperity. As a result many Eastern German citizens retreated to the past as a defence mechanism against the uncertainties caused by rapid political and economic changes. Trenker's (2001) finding that one out of three Germans has often or sometimes wished the Wall back out of fear of the future, is therefore not particularly surprising.

Not only the adaptation to a new economic reality proved to be difficult. Also the social environment had changed completely. Eastern Germans suddenly had to locate themselves in an unfamiliar society, complete with its own rules, values, and hierarchies. As a result they felt like 'immigrants who were expected to integrate into a society they did not know and that did not welcome them' (Blum 2000: 230; Jozwiak and Merman 2006: 781). They felt colonized by the West, who imposed its way of life with all its rules and values. Western Germans flooding the East, buying up houses and industries while taking possession of the best positions in universities and administration gave many Eastern Germans the impression that the transformation of the economy and the public administration had been an externally directed affair with little consultation of Eastern German citizens (Hough and Grix 2001: 161). The difficult relationship with Western Germany was in fact at the heart of a number of problems, pushing many Eastern Germans to reaffirm their specific Eastern identity.

3 A Question of Identity

Half a year before unification 61 % of Eastern Germans felt more German than Eastern German. By 1992 these figures had reversed: only 35 % identified themselves as German and 60 % as Eastern German. In 1999 only one out of five said they felt like a citizen of the unified Germany (Brussig 2003: 101; Oswald 2004: 77). In addition to that, about 20 % of Eastern Germans considered themselves to be victims of the re-unification (Trenker 2001: 103). How can we explain this sudden retreat to an identity, which after 1989 had lost its grounding in official statehood?

Eastern German identity had been constructed largely in contradistinction to the West. For 40 years the GDR antifascist state, stressing community and the common good, had been juxtaposed to the imperialist regime where people were alienated from each other (Jozwiak and Merman 2006: 784). This *Trotzidentität* (identity based on defiance) that had developed through the comparison with Western Germany is still very much present today. The attachment of many Eastern Germans to

material objects of the GDR can be explained with the fact that they had unconsciously developed into symbols of resistance to Western-style consumerism and a global competitive environment. Once cherished products of the West lost their appeal as soon as they became readily available, while Eastern products, being the last reminders of a non-capitalist consumer society, turned into signs of a fading identity (Betts 2000: 742–746).

The sense of alienation caused by the difficult adaptation process to the Western German political, social and economic culture gave rise to a far stronger feeling of being 'East German' than most citizens of the former GDR had ever felt before 1989 (Pulzer 1998: 41). This feeling of 'Easternness' has been further enhanced by the general stigmatisation of the communist past by the West and the demonisation of what had been the homeland for 16 million citizens for over 40 years (Hough and Grix 2001: 161). A feeling of shame imposed from outside mingled with a 'desperate gesture of cultural defence' in order to show that Eastern Germany did not come into the union empty-handed (Betts 2000: 743). Western Germans often did not recognize this, which led to the heavy assertion of a specific Eastern German identity. This furthermore blended with feelings of shame and insecurity, rendering an open coming to terms with all aspects of the communist past particularly difficult and laying the foundation for further conflicts between East and West.

4 Coming to Terms with the Past

In the 1990s a debate started on how to adequately deal with the past of the 'second German dictatorship' implicitly connecting the GDR with the Nazi regime and comparing the two historical experiences. The term 'dictatorship' already indicates the direction the discussion took. The politics of memory imposed by the West tended to focus on the *Stasi* regime, the terror, the victims of failed attempts to escape and the military and repressive character of the regime. They paid however little attention to the everyday experiences of Eastern Germans (Knischewski and Spittler 2006: 281, 289). Many Eastern Germans therefore started to fear that the true nature of their everyday experiences was being elided from the historical record. By concentrating on the state system of control and suppression, the actual everyday experience of living in the GDR has often been devalued and ignored. Reports of serialized *Stasi* disclosures, state corruption, widespread denunciation and personal betrayal effectively blocked any real positive identification with the GDR past, creating the strong desire of Eastern Germans to challenge those oversimplified and belittling portrayals of GDR everyday life that were mass-produced in the Western media and triggering the strong desire to at least recover and reclaim the elements that had been positive but that had quickly been cancelled after reunification (Betts

2000: 743; Capuzzo 2004: 162). From a psychological and sociological point of view this development is explainable and maybe even understandable. Why has it given rise to strong concerns among intellectuals and policy actors though?

5 Political Implications

Many scholars have argued that the rise of nostalgia for the previous authoritarian regime might be detrimental to democratic development (see, e.g., Finkel et al. 2001; Hofferbert and Klingemann 2001; Dalton 1994). According to some researchers there are several dangers in the nostalgia trend and the *Ostalgie* phenomenon:

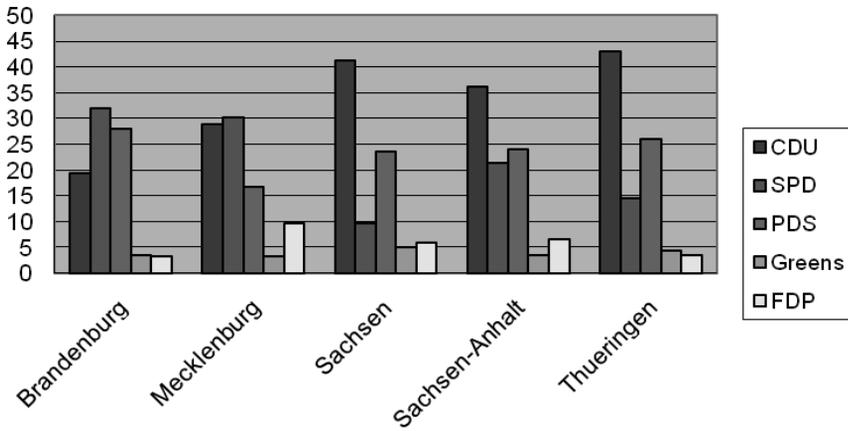
1. it might undermine German unification and the objective evaluation of the past (see Cooke 2003)
2. it might contain the danger of glorifying a repressive regime (see Betts 2000)
3. it might turn into extreme opposition of capitalism and requital with the Federal Republic of Germany (see Müller 2006)
4. and it risks being instrumentalised by political parties (see Bortfeldt 1997).

It is particularly the last aspect that has provoked considerable debate due to the fact that memory in general and remembrance of communist rule with all its positive and negative aspects in particular has high potential for instrumentalisation in political-ideological conflicts. A number of studies affirm indeed that post-communist parties tend to capitalize on the positive memory of the previous regime and provide evidence that their success in Central and Eastern Europe is often due to the nostalgia factor (see, e.g., Waller 1995). The *Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus* (PDS) in Eastern Germany is no exception to this rule and provides an exemplary case for the investigation into the nexus between collective memory and political success of a particular party.

6 The PDS as a Regionalist Protest Party

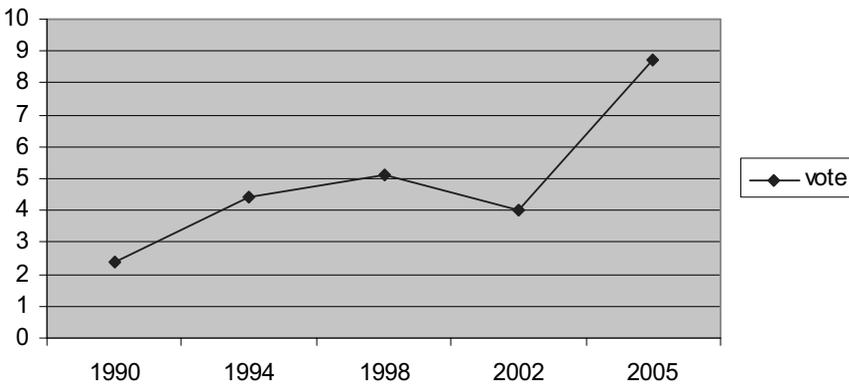
It had been expected that the PDS, being the successor party of the former GDR state party SED, would not survive the first years after re-unification. Surprisingly it did not disappear but polled consistently 20–25 % in most regional elections in the Eastern federal states (see Figure 2) and gained more and more votes even in national elections (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: Regional Election Results 2004/2006 for the Eastern German Federal States



Source: <http://www.wahlrecht.de/ergebnisse/index.htm>, author's calculations

Figure 3: Votes for the PDS in National Elections 1990–2005



Source: <http://www.bundestag.de/Parlament/wahlen/sitzverteilung/1543.html>, author's calculations

Despite its recent success on the national level, the PDS has traditionally been classified as a regional interest party because of its self-proclaimed special responsibility to serve Eastern interests.⁴ Its self-understanding as an Eastern ideological protest party that sees its main responsibility in representing Eastern Germans — who it claims are discriminated against in the united Germany — emerges particularly in the 1993 party programme stating: ‘We speak up for an elected Eastern German representation that looks after the interests of Eastern Germans in the national government and in the *Bundestag* and that stands up against the erosion of the Treaty of Unity’ (PDS 1993: 12).⁵ Even more explicit is the following sentence, taking up the

common theme of the ‘colonization of the East by the West: ‘The PDS wants to actively defend the interests of the citizens in Eastern Germany against the destructive tendency of colonialist *Anschluss*-politics’ [...] ‘The politics of the established parties will turn the citizens of the former GDR into second class citizens with limited basic rights for years, if not decades’ (PDS 1993: 5, 28).

Bortfeld’s (1997: 284) assessment stating that the PDS understood itself initially purely as developing out of this sense of opposition, publicly denouncing Western colonialist behaviour and proposing an alternative political and economic model is being confirmed when reading the 1993 party manifesto: ‘In contrast to the established parties, we do not want a westernisation of the East because we do not want mass unemployment, wealth at the expense of third world countries and the destruction of nature. We are fighting for development policies in the Federal Republic that include the positive aspects of the former FRG as well as of the former GDR and that are capable of facing global challenges’ (PDS 1993: 12). The denunciation of the political hegemony of Western Germany and the clear demarcation from the ‘Western’ model, emerging from those lines is less pronounced but still present in the 2003 manifesto, proving that the party sticks firmly to its regional protest party image: ‘The ruling elites of the unified Germany have ignored the historical heritage of the GDR and its peaceful revolution of 1989/90 in order to maintain their hegemony and to obstruct the social and democratic reform of the wider Federal Republic’ [...] ‘We have fought for the equal unification of the two states and will continue to do our utmost to make sure that Eastern Germans receive the same rights and possibilities of development in our common land that Western Germans have’ (PDS 2003: 19, 52). By constantly affirming its self-assumed role as the representative of Eastern German interests and guardian of citizens’ rights, the PDS managed to effectively respond to the wide-spread fear of many Eastern Germans of becoming regarded as second class citizens and of losing their identity in a unified Germany.

A particularly effective tool for passing this political message and for rallying support has always been the PDS’ grassroots presence. Local branches helped Eastern Germans to come to terms with the changes by offering a forum for discussion and by providing advice and help in adjusting to a transforming society. By organising activities similar to those common in the GDR, it managed to revive certain positive aspects of the communist times and to recreate in its local associations the same sense of camaraderie that had characterised many GDR organisations and whose loss was mourned (Oswald 2004: 78–82). In addition to that the PDS made particular efforts to revalue the GDR past by advancing those elements that had turned into symbols of the particular Eastern German experience. It supported and advertised for example the diffusion of *Ostprodukte* (consumer products from Eastern Germany), staged campaigns to save street names commemorating communist heroes and to preserved GDR historical buildings like the *Volkskammer* (the Communist equivalent of the

Parliament) in East Berlin (McKay 2004: 62). The PDS was certainly perceived by Eastern Germans as being the only party openly criticising the social and economic deficits of re-unification including the expropriation of GDR citizens, the high unemployment figures, the destruction of the social system and the reduction of the GDR past to repression, injustice and SED dictatorship by the West on the one hand, and as the only political institution paying attention to the importance of East German symbols of identification on the other.

7 The PDS Electorate

With its concentration on Eastern German interests and because it remained the only distinctly Eastern German party among predominantly West German parties, it is not surprising that the PDS managed to attract a wide electorate in the East. In order to secure a stable electoral basis it adopted a mixed strategy: for its core support it relied on former SED members, while it applied a broader regionalist appeal to attract as many Eastern German voters as possible. According to a study conducted by Katja Neller and Isabell Thaidigsmann (2004: 185–218), the PDS appeals to two main voter groups: a) well educated white collar workers who had a privileged status in the GDR and who feel that they have lost out on reunification and b) the unemployed who had enjoyed a high degree of social protection during the communist regime and lost their jobs after reunification. Those two groups are being united by the same diffidence towards democracy and by the shared feeling of belonging to a ‘community of destiny’ that was forced to give up a fundamentally positive political project that had merely been carried out badly.

The PDS’ difficulty of finding the right balance between distancing itself from the SED past without alienating those who had worked in the GDR for the ‘just socialism’ the SED had proclaimed, becomes particularly evident when comparing the 1993 and the 2003 party programme. While the 1993 programme still praises the ‘world-historic event of the October revolution of 1917 that mankind owes fundamental positive developments of the 20th century to’ (PDS 1993: 7), the 2003 programme underlines that the party is ‘united by the irreversible break with the contempt of democracy and political rights of freedom that has been practiced by a number of left parties, among them the SED’ [...] and that it accepts moral responsibility for the fact that ‘quite a number of SED members have taken part in the structures of repression and have allowed or even actively supported the persecution of dissenters’ (PDS 2003: 2, 52).⁶

Even if the PDS tried to distance itself from the totalitarian past of its predecessor party, it however relies on exactly the same electorate,⁷ capitalizing on the dissatisfaction with the unification process and the attachment to values and experiences that

were seen as being particular 'Eastern': 'The attempt of socialist rule in the GDR has formed the life story of people living in Eastern Germany substantially. Among their experiences is the elimination of unemployment, the defeat of poverty, a comprehensive social safety net, important elements of social justice, in particular a high amount of equal opportunities in education, the public health system and the cultural sector, new rights for women and young people...' (PDS 1993: 6). Both party manifestos⁸ explicitly include elements that are distinctly socialist and anti-capitalist following the preamble of the party's statute stating that the PDS wants to 'give voice to those who oppose the capitalist society and fundamentally reject the given conditions' (PDS 1991: 27). Not only the official party programmes but most party documents pay tribute to the fact that the different socialisation of Eastern and Western Germans has produced large differences in the kinds of demands that are made on the political system, and large differences concerning expectations and evaluations of political and economic output. It is therefore not by accident that party manifestos and election posters emphasise the social policy element and the role of state provision in the PDS policy proposals. By incorporating what it sees as uniquely East German values, beliefs and interests (e.g., egalitarianism, social justice and state interventionism) into its programme, the PDS managed to present Eastern Germany as the starting point of a reform movement against the predominance of neoliberalism. The latter started to become an important element in the more recent transformation of the PDS from a regional interest party to all-German leftist party.

8 The PDS in Western Germany

As the PDS tried to increment the success it has had on the regional level by moving towards the national level,⁹ it had to focus more on its criticism of the negative effects of capitalism (which are shared by many Western Germans as well) and emphasize less its position as an Eastern protest party. It had, however, been precisely this concentration on the representation of Eastern interests that had been the winning strategy of the PDS in the first decade after the fall of the Wall. Because of its self-proclaimed special responsibility to serve Eastern interests, however, it has always been regarded as a regional interest party also by Western German voters, a label it could not shed that easily, even though the PDS increasingly tried to represent itself as a socialist party to the left of the SPD.¹⁰ The attempt to attract Western voters while keeping its Eastern electorate on board, becomes again evident in the 2003 programme: 'Our aim is to constitute a consequently democratic and emancipatory nationwide effective, modern socialist party. Out of historical reasons, the *Linkspartei*. PDS has to take on particular responsibility in the East of Germany' (PDS 2003: 52).

In the struggle to appeal to Eastern and Western voters likewise, the party divided itself into an ideology-driven and a territorially-oriented faction corresponding to the different kinds of voters it wanted to attract: while many Easterners support the PDS out of a sense of regional and cultural identification, for Western voters the PDS represents a vehicle for the struggle against capitalism (McKay 2004: 54). In order to satisfy both electorates, the PDS was forced to sacrifice part of its identity as a specific Eastern German party, moderate its political discourse by giving up its heavy criticism of Western Germany and partly abandon the exploitation of the *Ostalgie* phenomenon for its own purposes. The analysis of those more recent developments leading to the transformation of the PDS into the new party *Die Linke*, however, exceeds the scope of this paper. A further investigation of the transformation process the PDS has undergone and of the new position *Die Linke* has subsequently acquired in the Germany party system would nevertheless be worthwhile and could constitute the starting point for further research.

Conclusion: the PDS and *Ostalgie*

The *Ostalgie* phenomenon in Eastern Germany can be explained as:

1. A reaction to the disillusionment many Eastern Germans felt after reunification, when they became aware of the high social and economic costs that had to be paid.
2. The need to reaffirm an Eastern German identity based on certain ideas and values that risked vanishing together with the GDR.
3. A response to the stigmatisation and demonisation by a West that concentrated only on the negative aspects of the communist regime without paying enough attention to citizens' everyday experiences.

The above analysis shows clearly the extent to which the successor party of the SED has used the above elements lying at the heart of the *Ostalgie* phenomenon for its own political purposes. By presenting itself as a regionalist interest party that is responding directly to many issues identified as explanations for this nostalgic longing for the communist past, it managed to secure itself a stable electoral basis in the East. In doing so it benefited from and capitalised on the dissatisfaction with the transformation process after re-unification. Party officials realised very quickly that by taking up exactly those issues dear to former GDR citizens, who felt disillusioned, exploited and colonised by the West and by presenting themselves as the only effective articulator of Eastern German interests, they could gain a substantial share of the Eastern German vote. With its qualified embrace of Socialism, the PDS provided Eastern Germans with an institutional political vehicle through which they could express particularly their dissent. By having its emotional roots in the Eastern

federal states and by attuning to the sentiments, ideas and past and present experiences of the East German population, it gave the *Ostalgie* phenomenon a political home and appealed effectively to a society that had retained many convictions, values and objectives of the GDR period. However, with its recent wish to reform itself, to break with the SED past and to also appeal to Western voters, it is now slowly moving further and further away from its nostalgic GDR roots.

Behind the *Ostalgie* phenomenon as such there might not be 'the attempt of political restoration' (Capuzzo 2004: 161) but it certainly has political implications that can be successfully exploited by political parties for their own purposes. To return to the quotation from Boym: Nostalgia might not be 'the best political instrument' but it is certainly a very effective one.

Notes

- ¹ See the New Europe Barometer Surveys.
- ² See the two fairly recent films 'Goodbye Lenin' by Wolfgang Becker and 'Sonnenallee' by Leander Haußmann.
- ³ By the early 1960s the GDR economy had completely recovered from WWII destruction and even posted impressive results. By 1965 it ranked among the world's ten most prolific industrial producers.
- ⁴ For an overview of various scholars' and journalists' attempts to classify the PDS, see Hough, D. (2001) *The Fall and Rise of the PDS in Eastern Germany*. Birmingham: Birmingham University Press.
- ⁵ All translations are the author's if not otherwise indicated.
- ⁶ The incorporation of those statements might have been the result of external pressures: in 2001 the PDS was asked to publicly apologise for the fatalities and the distress caused by the Wall regime. The party executive refused. See Spiegel Online (2001, July 02) *Die PDS will sich nicht entschuldigen.* Spiegel Online.
- ⁷ It excluded Stalinists only in 1995.
- ⁸ There is only the 1993 and the 2003 manifesto. The 2003 manifesto was revised in July 2005 when the PDS became officially *Die Linkspartei*. PDS
- ⁹ In the 2005 parliamentary elections the PDS merged with the Western German WASG (*Wahlalternative für Arbeit und Soziale Gerechtigkeit*) to form the new party Die Linke.
- ¹⁰ In 2001 the PDS counted 74.000 members in Eastern Germany but only 5000 members in the Western *federal states*. Figures from: <http://www.pds-online.de/partei/daten/mitgliederzahlen/2001.htm>.

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