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Austria

Memo¹ by the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

THE SPECTER OF GERMAN REUNIFICATION

Vienna, 19 September 1989

A specter is haunting Europe. The specter of German reunification, and it scares the Western Europeans. This fear – rarely acknowledged – is behind many discussions about the future of European security.

The two superpowers are apparently less bound by fear. One sometimes hears from both the US and the USSR that German “reunification” is not only possible, but perhaps even desirable. The expectations of the US and the USSR are, however, contradictory: The United States expects that a reunified Germany would push against the East, and weaken the USSR. The Soviet Union expects that a reunified Germany would step out of NATO, and thus fatally weaken NATO.

This discussion of German reunification is surprising in some respects. After all, because of its treaties with the East, through its recognition of the GDR, and through its involvement in the CSCE process, the FRG seemed to have finally and irrevocably accepted the status quo in Europe and thus the existence of two

¹ *Memo (translated from German):* Austrian State Archive ÖStA, AdR, BMAA, II-Pol 1989, GZ. 22.17.01/4-II.6/89. Written and signed by Thomas Nowotny, dodis.ch/P57516; also published in Wilson Center, doc. [165711](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/document/165711). This memo was sent to all section leaders, the Cabinet of the Foreign Minister, all departments of the Political Section as well as to all Austrian diplomatic missions in states participating in the CSCE. On 20 September 1989, Ernst Sucharipa attached a note to this file entitled German reunification? On the ghost train ride of Department II.6. The statement should have been forwarded to the Section Heads, the Cabinet of the Federal Minister, all departments of the Political Section, the General Secretary, the Austrian Embassies in Bonn, Berlin (East) and Moscow, the Austrian delegation in Berlin as well as to all Austrian diplomatic representations in states participating in the CSCE. However, for unknown reasons, it was not forwarded. The note read: 1) It is correct that there is again increasing talk everywhere about the question of German reunification (or “new unification”, according to IISS Director Heisbourg). Basic consideration of the issues raised in the essay of department II.6 therefore seem inevitable in Austria. Here are the first brief remarks from the perspective of the Eastern Europe Department; 2) In foreign policy, perception is often more important than reality: Despite the circumstances mentioned by Department II.6., which “trivialize” the dimension of a Germany consisting of the FRG and GDR, the impression (the fear) will persist in Eastern (and also Western) Europe that such a structure cannot be integrated into the European Peace Order. 3) Despite the publicity-effective emigration movements from the GDR (Scale in 1989: approx. 100,000 citizens, of which approx. 5/6 “legally”, 1/6 “illegally”) there is a “GDR national consciousness” and pride in the benefits of its “own”, “other” German state, which is not to be underestimated. The silent majority is still a majority even in the GDR. The slowly forming opposition groups want to keep their GDR (reformed and completely overhauled, but distinct from the FRG). 4) In spite of Perestroika and Glasnost, the Soviet Union looks everywhere to strictly maintain the territorial status quo. German-political changes that go beyond, ‘change through rapprochement’ are therefore not to be achieved without argument with Moscow.

German states, and without ulterior motives. Against the backdrop of these hard facts, the question begs to be asked: How serious is this new flare-up talk of reunification? Is there really nothing more to it than a mere superficial and purely verbal response to the advance of the right-wing nationalist “Republicans” in the FRG? Or is it to be taken more seriously?

The question was broached at the Ambassadors’ Conference in early September. The ambassadors in both Berlin² and Bonn³ were unanimously convinced that this talk is not to be taken seriously. Nobody in a position of political responsibility, according to the Austrian ambassador in Bonn, would really aim for a “reunification” with the GDR.⁴ The coexistence of the two states would be accepted by virtually all. The maximum goal supported by almost all political parties would merely be a “Germany policy” that intensifies existing contacts between both States at all levels.

The Austrian Ambassador in Berlin claimed there was no great pressure for radical changes in the GDR. Sudden outbursts and changes of course are not to be expected. Because it works on the whole, the state would also be accepted by the population.

The opinions expressed by the two ambassadors describe – probably accurately – the current state, which is not a given. They assume that this state will essentially remain unchanged. This may be correct, but need not be so. There is some evidence that attitudes toward “reunification” are changing in the two German states. In the two German states, there are signs of a fundamental change in the political climate. In the FRG, for example, the Historians’ Dispute (in which German war-guilt was relativized) changed the emotional-political framework in which postwar international relations were anchored. Three to four years ago it would have been unthinkable that the Polish-German border would be called into question again by a high-ranking politician and many years after its recognition by the Warsaw Treaty.

Three or four years ago this would have signified the end of every political career. Not so today. A whole new attitude towards the European East has estab-

² Franz Wunderbaldinger (*1927), dodis.ch/P52001, Austrian Ambassador in West Berlin 1985–1990.

³ Friedrich Bauer (*1930), dodis.ch/P51060, Austrian Ambassador in Bonn 1986–1990.

⁴ During the ambassadors’ conference at the Austrian Foreign Ministry on 8 September 1989 Wunderbaldinger noted: German-German relationship: contractual regulations in many areas, strong contacts at various low levels. Large flow of visitors in both directions. Bauer later added: The West was not prepared for the so strongly desired reform process in the East, and has no concept. The FRG sees the EC as a place to embed itself in Western Europe (leading it out of the status of a defeated country). Bonn wants to include the EC in its own policy on Germany. Relationship FRG-GDR: little information about intra-German trade. Meeting of Bonn-Berlin representatives about adapting intra-German to internal market rules. FRG seeks osmotic relationship with GDR. Reunification in the Bismarkian sense is not sought. *The head of the political section of the Austrian foreign ministry ambassador Erich Maximilian Schmid summarized:* The transformation process in the East was desired by the West, yet it was completely unprepared for this. The reduction of tensions resulted from the economic impossibility of a permanent arms race. This should have been predictable. Processes in the East are to be assessed positively, but there is a danger of it spiraling out of control and resulting in destabilization. Austria welcomes upheavals in the East, but these pose a danger that Austria could be associated with a kind of gray zone in Central Europe. German reunification: a theoretical discussion topic indeed, but not currently a reality. Cf. *the minutes of the Ambassadors’ Conference, 1989; Working group East-West, Envoy Johann Plattner, Vienna, 8 September 1989, ÖStA, AdR, BMAA, II-Pol 1989, GZ. 502.00.00/13-II.1/89.*

41 lished itself— obviously and gradually there is a renewed belief in a special “German mission in the East.” This mission goes far beyond the “Ostpolitik” of Willy Brandt⁵. Its essential goal had only been the acceptance of the status quo. But the objectives of today’s German Ostpolitik are more ambitious. In their new nationalism, the aggressive advocacy of unification, and their skepticism towards the west and European integration the right-wing “Republicans” are thus a symptom of a political change in mood that encompasses more than just their voters.

The GDR appears to be the most solid of the communist states – especially in economic terms. Nevertheless, this country has political feet of clay. The binding power of communist ideology has – if it ever was great – anyhow disappeared. This also happened in other communist countries. These other states, however, base their social cohesion and identity on something other than communist ideology – on religion or – mostly – on nationalism. There is probably no such thing as GDR nationalism. At best, there is a certain feeling of connection with their homeland. One probably got used to some convenient facilities of “real existing socialism” in the GDR – such as secure jobs, cheap food staples and apartments, etc. But that alone does not secure identity, and this comfort will gradually wane in the course of necessary economic reforms, which will come sooner or later, even in the GDR. Likewise, it is becoming increasingly difficult to hold the state together with dictatorial measures. Where, if not mainly to the FRG, would the GDR turn if its economic and political opening can no longer be delayed?

Reunification may, therefore, very well be on the future political agenda of the two German states. Formally, the other – and especially Western European – states cannot object. The principle of self-determination is recognized internationally. This principle will not be questioned openly by any Western European country and not when applied to the two German states. Actually, no one wants a real application of this principle by a “reunification.” This fear, however, is not articulated openly. One is only too aware of the fact that taking an open stand against reunification would only strengthen the extreme and nationalist forces in the Federal Republic. Hence, there is no open political dialogue with the FRG on this issue – only unadmitted silent fear.

If, in what form, and when there is a merger of the German states, is certainly uncertain. In any case, the desire for “reunification” in both German states cannot be ruled out, especially in the FRG, once it ceases to be a merely abstract and distant goal and becomes a specific concern. One should thus take the possibility of a reunification seriously and really examine what the consequences would be. Would such a reunification actually blow up the entire postwar order?

Reunification would certainly be a huge shock for this order. It is argued below that the European postwar order would not have to fall apart because of this. Even a reunified Germany would not be so strong that it would dominate the European continent economically and militarily. It would just be a very big country among the other major European states.

⁵ Willy Brandt (1913–1992), dodis.ch/P15409, Foreign Minister of the FRG 1966–1969 and Chancellor of the FRG 1969–1974.

	Inhabitants 1985	Inhabitants 2025	Surface in km ²
FRG	61.0	57.2	249,000
GDR	16.6	17.3	108,000
Together	77.6	74.5	357,00
France	55.2	63.7	547,000
Italy	57.1	58.5	301,000
Czechoslovakia	17.5	18.5	127,000
Poland	37.2	48.0	312,000
Together	54.7	66.5	439,000

The surface of a reunified Germany would be 357,000 km², far less than the combined area of Poland and Czechoslovakia (439,000 km²).

In the GDR, the population is growing slowly, in West Germany it is dropping sharply. In 2025, a "unified Germany" would have a population of 74.5 million. France would, in contrast, have a population of 63.7 million, and Czechoslovakia and Poland together would have a combined population of 66.5 million.

Not only is the FRG's population growth low (or even negative), the FRG's economy is also far less dynamic than itself and other European countries assume. The most reliable measure of the development of economic power is the development of productivity. The development of productivity in the Federal Republic of Germany has been slow since 1960 and risen far less than in either France or Italy.

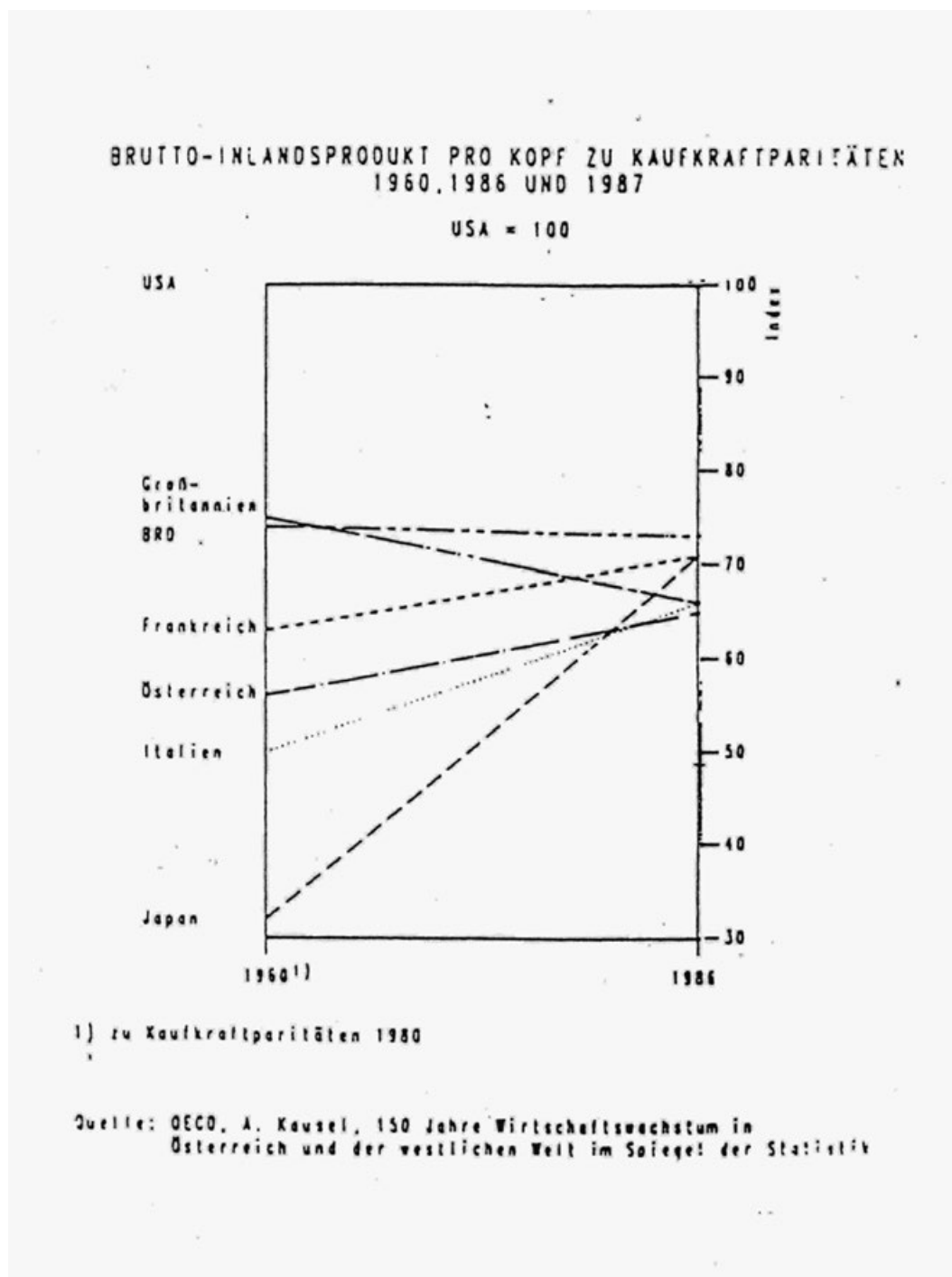
These trends are likely to continue, and in 10 years at the latest France will have caught up in absolute economic power with the FRG.

One must assume that even with reunification the current GDR could not immediately be brought up to the economic level of the FRG. One could therefore assume that the productivity of the area that is the GDR today, even in 2025, would be somewhere – perhaps around 15% – below the productivity of the current FRG. The entire economic potential of the two unified areas would therefore in 2025 approximately match the economic power that France will then have.

The economic power of a "unified Germany" must not just be compared with France, but also with the rest of the Western European states. Above all, the southern EC countries (such as Italy and Spain) will – as in the past, but also in the future – develop more rapidly economically, so the economic and political weight of these EC countries will increase when compared to the FRG or a "reunified Germany".

A reunified Germany would not be significantly greater in population and economic strength than the FRG is today: namely, one among the most powerful nations of Europe.

The consequences of a "reunification" cannot, however, only be looked at from a purely economic standpoint: they also need to be viewed from a military security perspective. What would be the consequences of "reunification" in this area?



Gross domestic product per capita at purchasing power parities 1960, 1986 and 1987

Military and Security Policy Aspects of a "Reunification"

"Reunification" is sometimes associated with a "neutralization" of the then united Germany. Neutralization would thus be condition or result of an association of the two German states.

44 *First*, as Khrushchev⁶ said during his tenure to the then Foreign Minister Kreisky:⁷ “Neutrality is a status which is appropriate for a small country located geographically and security-politics-wise between two powers.” Neutrality does not apply to a state that, because of its own great influence, whether it wants that or not, becomes a significant factor in international relations. The Ostpolitik of a reunified Germany, even if that state is formally “neutral”, in practice would not be neutral. Whatever a large state undertakes has far-reaching consequences, both in the West and in the East of the continent. For example, whether a small neutral country participates in sanctions does not significantly increase or reduce the effectiveness of such sanctions, but whether a country with more than 70 million inhabitants participates, this determines very well whether such sanctions are effective or not.

Second, a “neutralization” of the current FRG (as proposed by the neoconservative American intellectual Irving Kristol⁸ in the enclosed article) would weaken the Western defense alliance so much as to make it insubstantial. “Geopolitically”, geography simply privileges a large landmass to the east of the continent. In contrast, NATO-allied Western Europe has less strategic depth. If this depth were further reduced by the “neutralization” of the FRG, a military counterweight to the Soviet Union could in no way be maintained on such shrunken territory. A “balance” (or better: a conflict-hindering balance of power) would no longer exist.

Third, the neutralization of West Germany would naturally bring about the withdrawal of US troops from Europe (which are stationed for the most part in the FRG). Europeans doubt – probably rightly – the ultimate effectiveness of the “nuclear guarantee” granted to them by the US. More important is the guarantee – or “hostage” function of American troops. These troops enable – more effectively than nuclear missiles – the “coupling” of the European theater of war to the United States. This coupling would be lost with the withdrawal of US troops.

Fourth, there is perhaps a problem with a reunited Germany arming itself with nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are today quite “cheap” to produce. The technical know-how is certainly available in the FRG. The incentive to guarantee one’s security in such a “cheap” way through nuclear deterrence is therefore considerable. Speaking against the purchase of national nuclear weapons is certainly the uncertainty that the possession of such weapons would trigger in European countries in East and West. Speaking for the possession of nuclear weapons is the fact that a reunified and neutral Germany would be surrounded by potential enemies, who could be held at bay best and most “cheaply” with the aid of nuclear deterrence.

Fifth, one must question if the FRG stepping out of the western defense alliance would even be physically possible as things stand. The FRG is nowadays very tightly integrated economically and socially with the rest of Western Europe.

6 Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971), dodis.ch/P14485, *First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1953–1964 and Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union 1958–1964*.

7 Bruno Kreisky (1911–1990), dodis.ch/P2507, *Austrian Foreign Minister 1959–1966 and Federal Chancellor 1970–1983*.

8 Irving Kristol (1920–2009), dodis.ch/P57517, *American author and social scientist, protagonist of the neoconservative movement*.

45 This Western European integration and cooperation will increasingly extend to security matters. The situation where European security is provided largely by the United States can historically not be maintained indefinitely. Western Europe will increasingly have to provide for its own security – sooner rather than later.

Security policy is all-embracing. It also has a specifically economic aspect and an economic basis. If a “neutralized” reunified Germany were to pursue an independent security policy, then the FRG would have to, at least in some important areas (such as in technology), free itself from already existing dependencies and connections with Western European countries. But the integration of Western Europe has already progressed too far. This option of stepping out of Western European cooperation is no longer open to the FRG. For example, the FRG no longer has the option to develop its own aviation and aerospace industry separately from the rest of Western Europe.

It is of course the – acknowledged or unacknowledged – objective of the remaining Western European countries to strengthen the integration of the FRG into Western Europe and make it irreversible. Behind the integration-friendly policy of France is not just France’s desire to secure its influence through a united Western Europe, which it could not exercise acting alone in today’s world. With this policy, France is also pursuing its objective of strengthening the “Western tying” of the FRG to an extent that makes it inextricable.

Hence, it is both unlikely and undesirable that the FRG should withdraw from NATO to become neutral simply in order to “unite” with the GDR. This would also not be in the long-term interests of the Warsaw Pact and the USSR. A united Western Europe (also including the FRG) would certainly have a far less ambitious “Ostpolitik” than a reunified, neutral Germany.

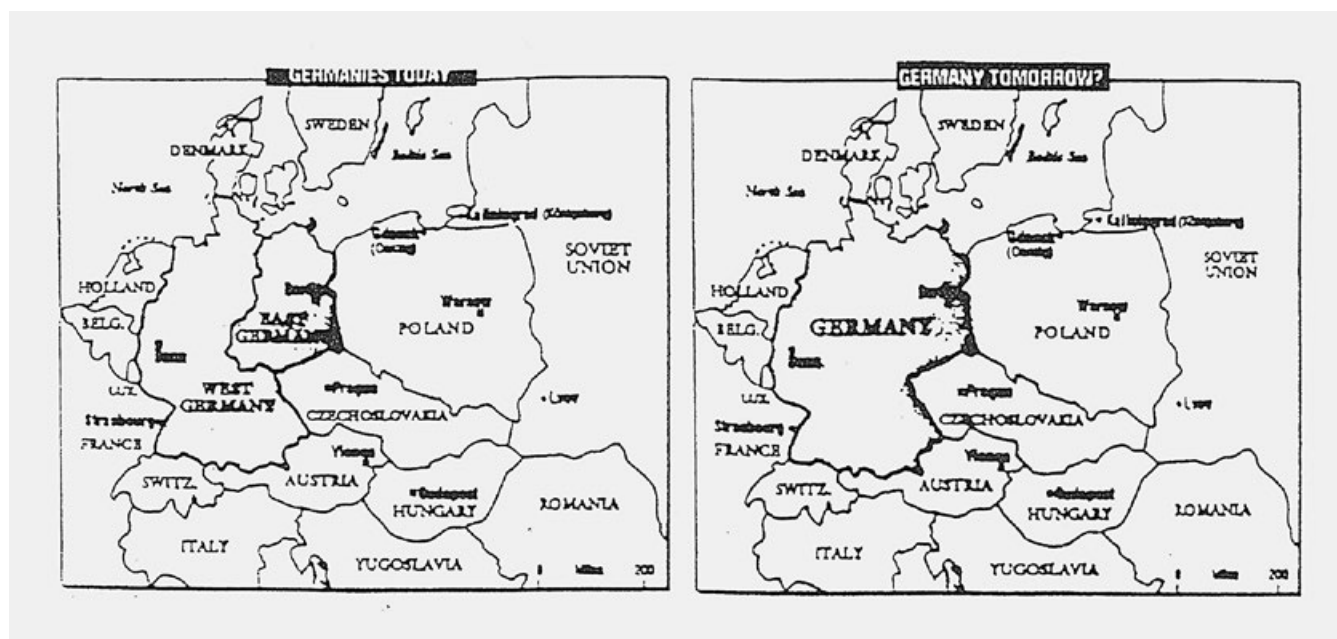
What would be the consequences of the more likely solution in which the reunified Germany does not become “neutral” and the FRG remains in the Western defense alliance? This would certainly result in a military shift at the expense of the East. But this shift is less far-reaching than one would at first assume.

The advantage that the Warsaw Pact currently draws from the fact that the GDR is a member shows itself in the light of the present – still – ruling Soviet military doctrine. This demands that in the event of an East-West war, Warsaw Pact troops will advance to the Atlantic Ocean as quickly as possible in order to prevent the arrival of reinforcements from the US. The “Spur” in the south of the GDR that protrudes into West Germany (“Fulda Gap”) would serve as a springboard for such an offensive.

However, it is intended and also probable that the military doctrines will be changed. The predominant doctrines in both the West (“deep strike,” FOFA) and the East (“forward defense”) assume “attack is the best defense”. These offensive military tactics are contrary to the principally defensive strategic objectives of the two alliances, who just want to maintain the status quo and seek no territorial gains.

If the military alliances and, especially, the Warsaw Pact convert their “defense” to a purely defensive one, with no element of attack against Western Europe, this removes the goal of reaching the Atlantic coast as quickly as possible, thus lowering the military value of the East German spur protruding into the

When the Wall Came Down



FRG. This reduces the military disadvantage of withdrawing the GDR from the Warsaw Pact. The loss of militarily useable terrain is hardly decisive strategically. The GDR is, in its east-west dimensions of 200–300 km, a relatively narrow state. In contrast, the new East-West border, also being the eastern border of a reunified Germany, would have the advantage of being straighter than the previous military East-West border and therefore easier to defend.

Indeed, Czechoslovakia would be more negatively affected by such a shift in the military dividing line to the east. Its north-west border is currently covered against NATO by the GDR. If the GDR withdraws from the Warsaw Pact, this border would be directly exposed to NATO. A solution to this problem could be to “demilitarize” the territory of the present GDR even after reunification with the FRG, although the reunified Germany would belong to NATO, and this demilitarization could be secured through international guarantees.

Summary:

Despite lip service supporting the right of “self-determination”, at present no European country desires German “reunification”. The fear of such a reunification can, however, become a highly destabilizing element for European policy, even without being able to prevent reunification. Whether reunification actually happens is, of course, uncertain, but it cannot be excluded. In both German states there are developments that make such a reunification more probable today than it was just two to three years ago. A reunified Germany could and should not be neutral or neutralized. If at least the western part of the reunified Germany remains integrated in NATO, and the entire Germany is a member of the EC, then no threat would arise through a newly formed military and economically dominant superstate, which is the general fear.