

## Interview with Egon Bahr: rapprochement between the two German states (Metz, 10 June 2006)

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[François Klein] You were State Secretary in Willy Brandt's chancellery from 1969 to 1972, and November 1970 saw another 'taboo breaking', as you put it. That is when you began your talks with Michael Kohl, GDR State Secretary, on improving relations between the two German states. What was the nature of those talks and what was the general mood during them?

[Egon Bahr] The taboo breaking began with Brandt's government statement in which for the first time he described the GDR as a state, even though it could not be a foreign country. That produced an explosion in the Bundestag, and Barzel reacted very emotionally and laid down his party's position, until it lost power as a result or did not regain it, at any rate in 1972. Effectively the meaning was: we cannot expect to normalise our relations with Eastern Europe if we bypass or go against the GDR, for any attempt to exclude it in that way would result in all the states showing solidarity with the GDR, led of course by the Soviet Union.

It was also relatively easy, the then foreign minister of the grand coalition, sorry, the then foreign minister under, I must be careful now ...

So all the CDU's attempts to normalise relations while bypassing the GDR failed. Naturally, that meant acknowledging that the Soviet Union was not only the leading power in the Eastern bloc but also the deciding power, and that if you wanted to change anything you could only change it in Moscow. That meant we had to start in Moscow, as indeed we did, and it was very difficult — we would have got nowhere with Ulbricht, we would have got nowhere with Gomułka. They would simply have said no. So we chose to go via Moscow and made it clear from the outset that we regarded the whole thing as a package, an agreement with Moscow on normalisation, a similar treaty with Warsaw, with the CSSR, and of course the normalisation of relations between the Federal Republic and the GDR while maintaining — on the Western side — the Four Powers' special rights over Germany as a whole. We could not take a decision on the division, just as we could not decide on reunification. We were still confined to special relations because our sovereignty, German sovereignty, lay in the hands of the Four Powers. In principle, therefore, this was a way of exploiting the fact that the Four Powers, which naturally wanted to retain their right of say on Germany, had no option but to accept that position; even Gromyko could not do otherwise. But that took a long time.

Luckily for me, it was my colleague Gromyko who had to pass on the bad news, that is to say the negative outcome for the GDR and the Czechs, to the people in East Berlin and Prague in person. He spared me that task. That did not mean I felt sorry for him. Right. That was the issue. With regard to the GDR, it was very difficult with Kohl at the start; basically things were extremely tense. One reason was that this was the first time Kohl had met someone from the West who had not only talked to the important people in Washington, for that might still just have been acceptable, but who had also talked to the important people in Moscow, Brezhnev and Gromyko. So he had to tread very carefully. He was very tense. It took a long time before we could crack the first little joke or he could force a thin smile onto his face. He knew full well that when he was in Bonn he would have to see the journalists afterwards. They were waiting below. And the first time I went down with him and he saw them he said 'Can they all put questions?' 'Of course!' I replied, and beads of sweat formed on his brow and he said 'Mr Bahr, I have to go and think for a moment.' Then he withdrew into a room. Now that he could not consult anyone, he had to consider in advance exactly what he could or could not say. So that was the beginning. Things became more normal in the course of the following two or three years, that is to say we got to know one another, he also became more sure of himself and began to get used to, began to enjoy, this normalisation. Of course one consideration was this: if the GDR was internationally accepted and recognised via us, it would become normalised, it would become used to good relations, and to good conduct and good food and I don't know what ... it would become used to everything! Obviously that could only be in our interest. Basically we then embarked, firstly, on the negotiations on the Four Power Agreement, the German side of the Four Power Agreement. This was the first time in post-war history that the Four Powers could not decide autonomously on an important German issue, i.e. without the two German states. That is to say, we developed the '4 + 2' model, which 17 years later automatically became '2 + 4', and the intention was to conclude an agreement under which the two German states would fundamentally regulate their relations until reunification. It was to last until reunification. And it did last

until reunification. And during the Four Power negotiations on Berlin and travel, if it came to the point where we got into difficulties, we could of course call on the Four Powers to decide. It did not once come to that. That means the negotiations were a total success — and I think not only in my view — as could be seen if only from the fact that the moment Kohl became Chancellor, contrary to what he had said in the past he did not change a single agreement, did not cancel a single agreement, did not make amendments to a single agreement, but continued the policy. The only thing he added was unconditional financial credits for the GDR. And that was the right thing to do; we had not dared to do so.