

Picturing Politics: Berlin by night

By Dr Anja Neundorf

On 9th November 1989, history was made in Berlin, the divided city that symbolised the Cold War for more than 40 years. The border between the socialist East and the democratic West opened and within one night, Eastern Berliners crossed the fenced boarder that divided their city without fearing imprisonment or even death. The 9th November is the anniversary of the toppling of the Berlin Wall – the beginning of the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the German reunification. This year is the 24th anniversary – nearly a quarter of a century. There are young Germans that do not even remember the Berlin Wall, Walter Ulbricht (the infamous General Secretary of the Socialist East German Party that gave the order to build the Wall) or anything related to the German Democratic Republic. They were simply not born. So the question then is: grew together what belonged together? Is there a unified Germany?

Certainly there is a political unity, but there are still many differences that remain even after 24 years. This picture, taken by a Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield earlier this year, shows Berlin by night and a careful observer can see that the East is slightly more yellow and the West has a more greenish tinge to it. It is not very difficult to make out the course of the former Wall. This is remarkable little (and surly unimportant) detail about the state of German reunification, even in 2013.

However, there are differences in the East and the West that are more significant – beyond the colour of street lightening. Looking at the electoral map of constituency results in the recent Bundestag election reveals the boarder of the GDR as well. This is the case when comparing voting and non-voting, but especially when comparing the results of the Linke – the successor of the former socialist state party, which has tried to appeal as an all-German party since it merged with a West German party in 2004. In East Germany, the party received on average 20% of the votes. In the West, the party received merely 5%.

But East and West Germans do not only differ in their political preferences. The two parts of Germany are still very different economically. For many years, the gap in unemployment was about 10% points. But even those that have a job differ greatly in their income. The average income in the private sector in the East is only 65% of a comparable job in the West.

What, then, does German reunification teach us about the democratic transitions? It shows us that complete assimilation needs time. This is not a matter of a few years. It will take 2-3 generation of unified Germans until the differences diminish.

In recent years, the gap in unemployment has slowly been closing, productivity is slowly picking up in the East, and life-styles are changing. It might take another 40 years until the lighting system in Berlin will be unified, but it might not take that long for Germany to be politically and economically unified.