



**CSAC Monographs 14**

**Power and Institutional Change**

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**Post-Communist Eastern Europe**

**Edited by Birgit Müller**

**Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing  
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### 3. Local Elite and Power Relations: A Comparison of two towns in East Germany

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Local government in the ex-GDR is generally presented as a place of strong continuity of power. This observation is based upon two elements: the upholding of institutions and the great proportion of the administrative personnel that have remained in place.

My aim is not to question this statement but to offer a less restricted view relying on empirical research made in two East-German towns, Hoyerswerda and Eisenhüttenstadt. Indeed my enquiry on the spot has allowed me to notice some not inconsiderable differences between the two towns as far as the continuity of power is concerned. But before going any further into this presentation, I should define what the notion of power covers.

#### Definitions of power

Power can first of all be defined as an attribute whose contents and range are officially fixed. Thus, it corresponds to a function whose exercise confers legally defined prerogatives. From this point of view, I am interested in two organs on the local level: the administration with the executive power at its disposal and the city council who has the legislative power.

This approach is nevertheless very restrictive, as it overshadows the informal and relational nature of power. In other words, power is exercised through interaction. I take up again here Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg's approach<sup>1</sup>: I consider power as an unbalanced relationship between actors or groups of actors, due to inequality in their resources or differential abilities to mobilize them.

Finally power requires legitimacy, for it supposes adhesion or, at least, agreement on the part of those on whom it is exercised.

#### Presentation of the two towns

My first empirical study took place in Hoyerswerda, in the spring of 1994 and my second one in Eisenhüttenstadt one year later. Each time I

carried out 70 to 80 qualitative interviews of people who had activities on local level<sup>2</sup>.

Both towns have the common feature of being archetypes of the 'socialist model town'<sup>3</sup> conceived by the East-German régime at the beginning of the 50's. Their creation was motivated then by the implantation of an industrial combine whose employees had to be provided with accommodation. But those new towns were not only meant to become dormitory towns. They represented both a place of experimentation and a kind of 'shop-window' for the socialist ideals. Concretely, this means they were founded on principles of urbanism and organisation favouring a collective dimension in local life. The combine fulfilled a central function: it was not only the main employer; it was also an agent of integration, even a driving force which managed the equipment and the sociocultural and sporting activities. Moreover, the status of 'socialist model town' ensured some advantages to the inhabitants: quick access to relatively modern and comfortable accommodation, salaries above the national average and a better supply of consumer goods.

In July 1950, the third congress of the SED<sup>4</sup> took place. The setting up of an iron and steel combine, EKO, situated on the Germano-Polish border was then decided on. The building of the factory and the town designed to welcome its workers began a short while later. In 1953, the latter was baptized Stalinstadt and 1961 it became Eisenhüttenstadt on the decision of the Central Committee of the SED. Two neighbouring villages, Fürstenberg and Schönfließ, were then integrated into it. Hoyerswerda was built a little later, from 1955 on, near to a gas and coal combine, the *Schwarze Pumpe*.

Along with the collapse of GDR's régime came a crisis that was economic as well as social and psychological. Because of their specific identities, these two towns are particularly confronted with this crisis. They have both experienced a significant decrease of population since 1989: from about 53,000 down to slightly more than 48,000 for Eisenhüttenstadt and from about 68,000 down to a little more than 62,000 for Hoyerswerda. The unemployment rates – around 15% – are not above the East-German average, but the mono-industrial inheritance constitutes a handicap as far as economic reconversion is concerned. The disappearance of the structures of sociability proper to the socialist model results in a process of social disintegration. This is shown through an increase in the number of divorces, the rise in alcoholism or violence. The attack by teenagers on a home for immigrant workers in Hoyer-

swerda in 1991 can be considered as one of the most radical expressions of that social anomie.

As to their positions in their respective *Länder* – Brandenburg for Eisenhüttenstadt and Sachsen for Hoyerswerda – Eisenhüttenstadt has been deprived of its status of county-free town<sup>5</sup> since the territorial reform of 1993, whereas Hoyerswerda should normally rise to it. A complaint lodged by the county for legal flaw has nevertheless blocked the process.

Since 1989 the local political life has been punctuated by two elections. In May 1990, the PDS<sup>6</sup> was in the lead in Eisenhüttenstadt, followed by the CDU<sup>7</sup>, the SPD<sup>8</sup> and the FDP<sup>9</sup>. In Hoyerswerda, the victory went to the CDU. The PDS came second and the SPD third. In both towns a large coalition made up of the CDU, the SPD and the FDP was formed against the PDS and a CDU mayor was elected by the city council. In February 1993, the mayor of Eisenhüttenstadt was dismissed from his functions by the city council. He was temporarily replaced by his first deputy, a member of the SPD. In Hoyerswerda, as the council couldn't find a local candidate after the mayor had resigned in the spring 1991, the CDU fraction called on a German from the West who had a long experience in local administration. In Eisenhüttenstadt, the second election was won in December 1993 by the SPD followed by the PDS. The CDU came third with only 14% of the votes. The SPD member who had deputized for the mayor was elected to that function by direct suffrage. In Hoyerswerda, the election took place in June 1994: the new mayor was a member of the PDS and this party became the most important fraction of the city council followed by the SPD and the CDU. Both boroughs are today ruled without any real coalition: a majority must be found about every subject.

### Identification of the actors within the structures of power

I must first specify that I have chosen not to take into account, at least as an object of study, the Round Table composed of members belonging to the different political organisations that regularly met in both towns from december 1989 to May 1990. The provisional nature of this organ, its blurred range of capacities and limited possibilities of action seem, in my opinion, to justify this decision.

### *The city council*

The composition of the city council after the first local election incites to an ambivalent observation. On one side, we can observe a quasi-total renewal of the members. On the other side, a fairly large proportion of the city councillors were members of the Block Parties even if they didn't have any responsibilities in those parties<sup>10</sup>. The PDS members, very strongly present in both municipalities, practically all belonged to the SED. In Hoyerswerda, some of the members of the CDU and FDP already belonged to political parties in GDR's régime. On the other hand, the 'new' parties (SPD, Bündnis 90, ecologists) are essentially made of people whose political commitment was born with the events of the autumn of 1989.

The last local election has accentuated that renewing process of the local political elite, insofar as some of the city councillors decided not to stand for election again. Besides, the difficulties met in the establishment of the list of candidates are underlined by the parties by and large.

### *The local administration*

In Hoyerswerda and Eisenhüttenstadt as well, lots of town employees – 'old cadres' – have kept their jobs in the new administration. Two facts however point out a greater continuity in Eisenhüttenstadt as far as this matter is concerned. On the one hand, the 'old cadres' are rather confined at the bottom of the administrative hierarchy in Hoyerswerda whereas practically half of the heads of section had already got jobs previously in the administration in Eisenhüttenstadt. Likewise, some people who had positions of responsibility in the old system have been able to reintegrate the new administrative apparatus. It is the case of two councillors, one of whom was even elected mayor in May 1990. The presence of 'old cadres' within the administration of Eisenhüttenstadt is presented as the fruit of a deliberate policy whereas in Hoyerswerda it is rather considered as a constraint linked to the shortage of personnel. Generally speaking, the town employees have a much more positive opinion of the continuity of power in Eisenhüttenstadt than in Hoyerswerda.

Besides, the local administration has some novices – 'newcomers' – in its ranks. They have mostly got a position of responsibility, that is to say as section and division heads. They come mainly from industry, particularly from the combine, and they are trained persons from universities or more often from technical colleges. In Hoyerswerda, a group

privitizing round the Round Table settled in the politico-administrative apparatus as a strategy of 'seizing power'. In other words, access to positions in the hierarchy follow the links of networks as pointed out by one of the protagonists:

You know, at the time we were in such a disrupted situation. We simply took over the jobs that were free, coming to an agreement between us

For this group, their commitment in the local public life since 1989 has found extensions through an access to administrative and political functions within the new system. The plurality of functions on town and county level is also a widespread practice. This strategy of 'seizing power' seems absent in Eisenhüttenstadt. Two particularities of the process of transition can be put forward as elements of explanation. The 'newcomers' have, to a certain extent, found the field 'clear' in Hoyerswerda on account of the defection of the 'old cadres'. That is not the case in Eisenhüttenstadt where, as it is illustrated by the first mayor's election, the 'old cadres' offer a greater resistance. The existence of different administrative structures in both municipalities is also to be considered. Hoyerswerda has opted from the beginning for the model of division heads<sup>11</sup> where civil servants elected by the city council are in charge of the positions of responsibility. In Eisenhüttenstadt, this model has only been introduced in 1994; the hierarchical positions had been filled before by civil servants appointed. This latter system had therefore limited the political interference in the attribution as well as in the occupation of positions.

Civil servants coming from the 'old' *Bundesländer* bring in a second form of change in the exercise of power. Here again, differences between Hoyerswerda and Eisenhüttenstadt are to be noticed. The first distinction concerns the respective weights of the *Leihbeamte* in both administrations. These are much more present in Hoyerswerda: six of them have been holding posts there as section heads since 1992; three of them have even chosen to be transferred there definitively. In Eisenhüttenstadt, there were less *Leihbeamte* and they didn't keep posts for very long. Besides, Hoyerswerda, as I mentioned before, had even at its head a West German mayor between the summer of 1991 and the spring of 1994. There are nevertheless West Germans in the ranks of the Eisenhüttenstadt local administration. Most of them, however, arrived later, from 1993/1994, to take over posts that were vacant after a normal procedure of appointment. Their profile is different from the *Leihbeamte*'s: they are

either young people having their first professional experience or people who have come to the ex-GDR with the will of innovating and who don't correspond to the archetype of the 'standard' civil servant. On this account, it is striking to note the concentration of West-Germans in the sociocultural fields: people in charge of the museum and the cultural center, the head of section for social questions and culture and the head of the cultural service are all originally from the 'old' *Bundesländer*.

So, the members of administration are, roughly speaking, to be separated into four categories: the 'old cadres' from the East, the 'newcomers' from the East, the *Leihbeamte* and the civil servants coming from the West and appointed after normal procedures.

### The power games within the politico-administrative organs

The official sharing out of the parts within the local politico-administrative organs offers only a partial view of the reality of the relations of power.

The strategies of alliances introduce specific configurations of power within each local government. In Hoyerswerda, the local actors are first of all searching for support from West-German partners. To this end, resorting to the networks of relations is favoured. So, the mayor from the West was contacted through a CDU MP<sup>12</sup>, who was originally from Hoyerswerda. Identically, the twinning with the West-German town of Pforzheim was not achieved in the limits of the official programme of aid. The city council team chose themselves to organize an exchange with that municipality by means of the personal relations of a member of the Round Table. This started a regular narrow cooperation that is still being carried on today in several town services. In Eisenhüttenstadt, on the other hand, there is not such a strong and 'unreserved' search for West-German supports. As I have already mentioned, the presence of the *Leihbeamte* remained limited. The relations with the twin town, Saarlouis, are indeed called good and fruitful but they have remained rather impersonal and are today very loose.

West-Germans have consequently got different positions in both administrations. In Hoyerswerda, their influence in the local administration is particularly strong, less because of their number than of their positions in the hierarchy, their comparatively long presence and, above all, the part for which they have explicitly come and even, in the case of the mayor, for which they have been called in, that is the transmission of

their experience and their know-how. This situation seems to confer them some power over their East-German colleagues. Their power seems to be obvious in the definition of the local administrative structures. The arrival of these new actors corresponds to a more systematic alignment on the West-German model, at least on *their* West-German model. Their influence is expressed, too, though in a more diffused way, by the evolution of the functioning and of the practices in local administration. The East-German employees always compare their former behaviour of improvisation and of trials and errors with the present greater formalism. Some even regret what they consider a less bureaucratic system. More generally, it is striking to observe that the distinction between 'before' and 'after' the arrival of the West-German mayor and civil servants is a leitmotiv in the speech of the East-German employees.

In Eisenhüttenstadt, the relations between East and West-Germans are based on a type of exchange placing the former in a position of power. On the one hand, almost all of the western civil servants have come get a job and not in order to transmit a know-how and a model<sup>13</sup>. Some refuse outright to play this role; others can obviously not do it because it's their first appointment. This sometimes raises the question as to the legitimacy of their presence. The East-Germans and, more particularly, the 'old cadres' are often appealed to on account of their knowledge of the town and its past and of the ways of life and the habits of their fellow citizens. So, the western civil servants seek a privileged collaboration with an eastern colleague whom they use, to some extent, as an informant. It is the case of the head of the cultural service and of the director of the museum who regularly call on the advice of an employee who has been working in this field for many years. The novices also call on the knowledge and the memory of the 'old cadres', when they are confronted with the problems of restitution of property. The weight of the 'old cadres' is expressed in the care with which they keep elements of the previous organisation, notably all the satellite organisations<sup>14</sup> that were managed by the town in the years of the GDR. Paradoxically, the West-Germans holding posts in the administration support them in that direction: in some ways, their desire for innovation relative to the West-German model meets the will to preserve an East-German specificity. We can on this account quote the example of a person who came as a jurist and who later on was elected chairman of the council of personnel and who has the plan of reintroducing forms of

sociability around work close to the East-German practices in order to favour cohesion and solidarity within the administration.

The relations between the administrative apparatus and the city council are very different in the two municipalities. In Hoyerswerda, the working of the urban government is characterized by a weak cooperation between the two organs and by the ascendancy of the administration over the city council. The members of the latter do not question the quality of the work done by the civil servants but they regret the practices of retaining informations that make the actions of the administration somewhat opaque. They consider that the process of autonomisation of the administrative apparatus diminishes their capacity of decision-making and their power of control.

In Eisenhüttenstadt, on the other hand, the situation seems to be rather in favour of the city council, although its members notice a recent evolution towards a greater independence of the administration. If its political representatives estimate that the relations between individuals are satisfactory, they don't hesitate to express overtly their criticism in regard to the professional abilities of the employees and they even doubt their declarations. Moreover, they exert a strong control and a heavy pressure on the administration by demanding notably a reduction of its personnel<sup>15</sup>. The introduction of the model of division heads, on injunction of the city council, illustrates both the will and the ability of the council to assert its power.

These differences seem to be linked, at least partly, to the particular balance the diverse categories of actors have come to within the politico-administrative system of both municipalities.

In Hoyerwerda, the central position of West-Germans has contributed, as I already mentioned, to introduce a greater professionalism in the administration, concretely placing it in a position of strength in regard to the city councillors who have neither had the time nor the support to get familiar with all the subtleties of West-German law. But the presence of West-German civil servants in its ranks does not only constitute objective resources for the administration: it also represents symbolic resources that produce legitimacy. Indeed, the civil servants coming from the West and above all the mayor benefit from the prestige of experts close to the members of the politico-administrative apparatus as a whole.

In Eisenhüttenstadt, the strong presence of 'old cadres' places the administration in a position of weakness with regard to the city council<sup>16</sup>. This one can assert its legitimacy as an organ elected by the citizens facing an administrative apparatus marked by its closeness to the preceding régime. This allows the council to question the personnel's abilities<sup>17</sup>. The first mayor was, at the initiative of his own fraction, officially dismissed from his functions for being neglectful: he was said to have failed to transmit documents concerning the relations of each of the town employees with the *Stasi*. It seems however that the mayor wasn't directly responsible for that and that the CDU profited from the occasion to get rid of a personality who, on account of his links with the former system<sup>18</sup>, could, as a local political actor, compromise the credibility and the legitimacy of the party.

## Notes

1. See Crozier & Friedberg, 1977.
2. I have mainly interviewed town employees, city councillors, members of associations and heads of local firms.
3. *Sozialistische Musterstadt*.
4. United Socialist Party of Germany (East).
5. *Kreisfreie Stadt*.
6. Party of Democratic Socialism, successor of the SED.
7. Christian Democratic Union.
8. Social Democratic Party.
9. Liberal Party.
10. Eisenhüttenstadt however presents two interesting cases of political changes of positions of the former local elite: the ex-mayor and an ex-councillor were elected city councillors in may 1990 with very good scores.
11. *Das Dezernentenmodell*.
12. *Bundestagsabgeordneter*.
13. If the East-German employees notice the transformation of the functioning and the practices in the administration, they don't link this fact to the arrival of this third group of actors. They speak either of a continuous or a gradual evolution.
14. *Die sogenannten nachgeordneten Einrichtungen*.
15. This situation corresponds to an inversion of the balance of the power outlined by the process of attribution of posts.
16. It is interesting to notice that the recent evolution towards an autonomisation of the administrative apparatus -regretted by the city councillors- seems to be connected with the arrival of West-German civil servants. Those display a greater self-confidence towards the city

council and don't hesitate to remind its members the limits of their role. This confirms that the West-German civil servants contribute to introducing a new balance of power in favour of the administration.

17. The courses of retraining and the phenomenon of 'learning by doing' have of course, as in Hoyerswerda, led to a routine of the working process. But it doesn't seem to be recognized by the city councillors. They either emphasize the lack of the personnel's competencies or the dysfunctions of the administrative apparatus. In other words, they don't allot to the town employees the status of professionals. This points out the weight of the actor's representations in the establishment of power relationship.

18. *Die sogenannten Alltusten.*