

Address by Willy Brandt on the State of the German Nation (14 January 1970)

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Address by Chancellor Brandt Before the Bundestag on the State of the German Nation, January 14, 1970

[...]

As for our topic of today the following must be stated: Some 25 years after the unconditional surrender of the Hitler Reich the concept of the nation forms the tie in divided Germany. In the concept of the nation, historical reality and political will are combined. The word “nation” encompasses and means more than common language and culture, more than state and social system. The word “nation” is based on the continuous feeling of belonging together held by the people of a nation.

Nobody can deny the fact that in this sense there is and will be one German nation as far as we can think ahead. In its constitution the GDR, too, declares itself part of this German nation. We must, I believe, have a historical and political perspective if the state of the nation is discussed, if we confirm the demand for self-determination for the whole German people. History which has divided Germany through its own faults — at any rate not without its faults — will decide when and how this demand can be implemented. Yet as long as the Germans muster the political will not to abandon this demand the hope remains that later generations will live in one Germany in whose political system the Germans in their entirety can cooperate.

The national components will also have their place in a European peace settlement. We have, however, a long and tedious way to go to reach self-determination for the Germans under such a peace settlement. The length and difficulty of this road must not prevent us from arriving at a regulated coexistence between the two states in Germany in this phase of history as if this were possible. What matters is the German contributions in an international situation in which, to quote President Nixon, a transition from confrontation to cooperation is to occur.

The Federal Government has submitted to this high house some material on the development of the German problem and on the status of inter-German relations. It is working on a report which will contain a comprehensive comparison of conditions existing in the Federal Republic and in the GDR in the most variegated spheres of life. Preparatory work for this extensive report alone has discovered, or confirmed, that the opinion expressed under the term “convergence theory” is wrong and correct simultaneously — wrong because the two states in Germany do not automatically develop toward each other, and correct, because the necessities of modern industrial society in East and West demand measures, developments and also reforms regardless of what political and social conditions exist.

This also points out that some technical and scientific projects and the approach to some structural problems in various fields point in the same direction in both parts of Germany. Objectively viewed, these facts are encouraging. Nevertheless, the two state and social systems, which have been existing on German soil for more than two decades, manifest entirely different and incompatible views on what constitutes German unity, and what a common future is to look like and how it can be achieved. Nobody must harbor the illusion that he can evade disputes, which are unavoidable because Germany is not only divided in terms of a single state but also because two entirely different social systems are facing each other on its soil. On the following point we are agreed with Ulbricht: there cannot be any merger, any foul compromise, between our system and what has become a system over there. In my government statement of 28 October of last year I stated what I would like to underscore today:

1. Nobody can tell us that the Germans do not have the same right to self-determination as all other peoples.
2. The questions which have emerged from World War II and from the national treason committed by the Hitlerite regime can ultimately be answered only in a European peace settlement.
3. It is the task of practical policy during the years now ahead of us to preserve the unity of the nation — to the extent that this is possible, and to the extent that this is up to us — by relieving the tension currently existing in the relations between the parts of Germany.

4. To reach a state of living together via a state of a regulated coexistence not only corresponds to a German interest but is also significant for peace in Europe and for East-West relations.

5. For this reason the Federal Government has offered and does offer to the GDR Council of Ministers negotiations without discrimination on the government level which are to lead to contractually agreed cooperation.

6. Our readiness to conclude treaties on mutual renunciation of the use of, or threat of, force is also applicable to the GDR.

What remains unchanged is this: The Federal Republic and the GDR are not foreign countries to each other. And what also remains is this: recognition of the GDR under international law is out of the question for us. It is absurd if East Berlin's polemics claim in this context that we wish to turn the GDR into Bonn territory or impose on it a colonial status. To be sure, ladies and gentlemen, it will be to no avail if the so-called forces ready for understanding, the so-called peace-loving forces in the Federal Republic are called upon to intensify their influence. Nor would it serve any purpose if we were to call upon the forces ready for understanding in East Berlin and in the GDR to prevail more than heretofore against the dogmatists and leftist reactionaries for whom their power positions are more important than the peace of the European nations.

The Federal Government will not do these people the favor of engaging in mere counterpolemics. It will actively promote objectively possible historical developments for improvement in the relations between the two parts of Europe and the two parts of Germany. There are people in East and West profiteering from partition. The people in East and West are suffering from it.

[...]

We are dealing with a remarkable development, the Warsaw Pact states, excluding the GDR, have understood the good will of the Federal Republic, despite some limitations. They drew attention to the fact that words must be followed by deeds. That corresponds to our conviction that this should be taken into consideration everywhere. There are leading forces in the GDR excelling one another in constantly making demands. Just recently a high degree of stubbornness must be granted to them. I would like to cite three examples: The first one is: the GDR demands from us recognition under international law. The other Warsaw Pact states expect from us contracts with the GDR, namely, those which of course are just as binding as those concluded with them — the other states.

Another example: the GDR demands that the Federal Government revise the Paris treaties and reduce or abandon its commitments in the Atlantic Alliance. The Soviet Union and the other Warsaw Pact states stress that a European security conference in this period in which we are living is being blocked by those who wish to place the reduction or elimination of the existing alliances on the agenda. Now the question of an equal troop reduction is not everywhere considered topical or opportune. I hardly need stress here before this high house that neither the Paris treaties nor our commitments in the Atlantic Alliance are a subject of discussion for the Federal Government.

Third example: The GDR government declares that it recognized the Oder-Neisse line as a final peace border 20 years ago, namely, as it has been drawn on behalf of all Germans, also in the name of the West German population. I do not know whether this statement sounded pleasing to the ears of the Polish Government. The logic of this statement would lead to the conclusion that the Polish western border need not be a topic for us. According to what is known to me the Polish People's Republic is not of this opinion. I am really asking what degree of presumptuousness the Federal Republic and other European states — and not only in the West — will have to expect from the GDR leadership. Europe will certainly not profit from their know-it-all attitude. Whoever has a minimum of self-respect and sense of realities will have to reject East Berlin's attempts to press conditions on everybody which would not improve European conditions.

[...]

Patriotism calls for realizing the facts and trying over and over again to seek new possibilities. It demands the courage to recognize reality. This does not mean, however, that this reality is desirable or that one gives up hoping to change it in the course of time. The honest reality without which no policy can be maintained for a long period I think calls for never raising demands that can only be fulfilled with wishful thinking. It also obliges us to protect our people against being lured into destruction by rat catchers.

I am all for the hour of truth which was recently mentioned again. This includes the fact that the same language be used in this house as in the country, and that no hopes be raised among our countrymen which cannot be materialized. It would be illusionary to create the impression that politics must show short-term successes. Respect for the competent citizen dictates that difficulties not be hidden from him. It is exactly on this background that I say there must, can, and will eventually be negotiations between Bonn and East Berlin. The exchange of argumentative blows with East Berlin will not suffice. There are, however, on our part indispensable orientation points.

1. The right of self-determination,
2. The desire for national unity and freedom within the framework of a European peace order,
3. Close ties with East Berlin, without curtailing the responsibility of the four powers for all of Berlin,
4. The Federal Government respects and will respect the rights and responsibilities of the three powers for Germany as a whole and for Berlin. We do not even think of questioning this or letting somebody else question it. This includes commitments for the Federal Republic as well as for the governments of the three powers. Ladies and gentlemen, I have been working long enough in Berlin to know that there are certain things which are too big for us to shoulder, and in these areas the Federal Government has no interest in striving for unlimited sovereignty.

[...]

The unity of Germans is a possibility, no more or less. Taking into consideration the Federal Republic's restricted weight, the rights of the four powers, and the interests of all our European neighbors, it lies in the hands of all of us who bear political responsibility in the Federal Republic not to lose this chance. Helping the real sovereign, the German people, to gain authority must be our objective, as formulated by Herbert Wehner.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no longer just one German question; in speaking of Germany one has to speak of German questions, of several German questions, which can be handled individually as separate problems and which no longer can simply be solved in a uniform way, as was tried for instance in the fifties. Today they must be considered individually, although not separated from each other and above all not isolated.

Speaking of German questions, several German questions, I think of what all of us think in this connection: The fate of the Eastern provinces and their people, of those who were exiled, of those who remained there, of those who settled there, and of those who in the meantime were born there; the Soviet occupied zone from which the GDR emerged and the three Western zones from which the Federal Republic of Germany emerged, both being no longer provisional institutions and both having gained economic importance and become closest partners of one of the two super powers; last, but not least, the reality of West Berlin, part of a four-power city, under the unrestricted supremacy of the three powers, linked — on behalf of the three powers — with the economic, financial, and judicial system of the federation and represented outwardly by the Federal Government.

Such is the situation, sketched briefly. One may at times talk in detail about any of these problems confronting Germany. Yet in view of this situation which we know and which oppresses us and which has accompanied us for so many years, the following question arises: What are the objectives toward which German policy in this context should be oriented?

The first answer is that we must preserve freedom in those parts of Germany where it exists today or — as was said — that the Federal Republic must voice its own recognition. The second answer is that we wish to and must solve all our problems only peacefully. The third answer is that we must contribute to the granting and implementation of human rights. These are the four points of orientation.

Logically, the following question arises: How can German policy gain these objectives today? They can no longer be achieved with the help of the traditional means of national states, but only in alliance with others. In the future, significant political solutions will no longer be achieved outside alliances, security systems, or communities.

In the future important German problems cannot be tackled in the sense of a national state or in the traditional sense, but only by striving step by step for a European peace order.

Consequently, it is a question of recognizing and respecting realities, not to accept with resignation existing injustice, but — very close to reality — to help eliminate the divisive character of the European borders in the course of the years.

[...]

Now, the GDR Government says it is ready to negotiate. We have taken note of this. We, too, are ready to do this, and also with other members of the Warsaw Pact. The Federal Government proposes to the GDR Government negotiations on the exchange of declarations on the renunciation of force on the basis of equality and nondiscrimination. Having entered into an exchange of views with the Soviet Union on this issue without, however, being in a position to say anything yet about a positive outcome, we consider it a practical step to enter negotiations also with the GDR Government. They would offer a good framework for a comprehensive exchange of views in which all issues should be discussed which are important for a well-ordered relationship between the two sides. This, however, excludes one side from saying: This is my draft treaty; only this one can be accepted. Should this be the attitude taken by the GDR, there would be only rejection.

According to our opinion, it would be in the interest of an agreement if there could be an exchange of views on all issues that are of interest to both sides and that are related to one another prior to the formulation of details. This is the usual, practicable procedure. This is now going on between the Federal Republic and the Soviet Union. This exchange of views or these negotiations, however one may term it, could be started soon.

Each side thereby must be free to introduce all the points it wants to discuss. I would like to say that a treaty cannot be placed at the beginning of negotiations, but must come at the end of them.

In the near future, I shall make an appropriate proposal to the chairman of the Council of Ministers. In this proposal, the Federal Government will proceed from the following principles:

1. Both states are obligated to maintain the unity of the German nation. They are not foreign countries to each other.
2. In other respects, the generally recognized principles of international law must have validity, especially the exclusion of any discrimination, respect for territorial integrity, the obligation to peacefully solve all controversies, and respect for mutual borders.

3. There is still another obligation — the obligation not to try to change by force the social structure prevailing in the territory of the other partner.
4. The two governments and their commissioners should strive for neighborly cooperation, above all, for the regulation of professional-technical cooperation, general facilitation being established by government agreements.
5. The existing rights and responsibilities of the four powers with regard to Germany as a whole and to Berlin are to be respected.
6. Efforts of the four powers to make arrangements for an improvement of the situation in and around Berlin are to be supported.

Agreements could also be reached on other points. Therefore it must be clear that regulation of relations between the two sides must not be limited to a certain period of time. Such regulation, together with the prospect for improvement, must be valid for the time when these two states exist.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me finally state for the Federal Government that our attitude is determined by a prudent and realistic estimation of the situation. This means that the Federal Government enters into negotiations with the Soviet Union, with Poland, the GDR, and others guided by the serious desire for serious negotiations and the wish for the most positive development possible. It does not nourish any false hopes regarding the difficulties of these negotiations. Regarding the solid positions which it holds and will hold in the future, it cannot exclude the probability that these efforts might fail, although it does by no means desire this. But I want to repeat that the Federal Government is testing itself and the other governments mentioned here to see if efforts for detente and peace are serious.