

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Too much inertia among politicians

The first 10,000 West German tractors should have already arrived in Poland by now.

The escalation of the Lithuanian crisis and the brutal intervention of Soviet paratroopers in Vilnius have caused pessimism in Germany, that one may have to reckon with longer time frames for German reunification and the reconstruction of the economies in the East; there are fears in Bonn of a new, chill wind in relations between East and West, and that any public move in favor of Lithuania would provoke a negative Soviet posture on the German issue.

Reality is, however, that even before the outbreak of the Lithuanian conflict, Moscow showed little commitment to breathe life into the Feb. 10 Moscow accords between Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov and West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. The prospect of rapidly extending economic cooperation between Germans and Soviets is again buried in the middle of the Kremlin's typical political tactics.

One day there is a statement by one of Gorbachov's advisers in favor of German unity; another day the same adviser, or usually Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, raises new conditions that have to be met by the West Germans before reunification gets the go-ahead. This classic Kremlin method of spreading confusion worked mostly because there was still a communist-led transition regime in East Germany. The elections for parliament in East Germany on March 18, resulting in a solid conservative-liberal majority of 53%, have changed the game. The new, freely elected government, which might begin work before Easter, will improve things for the Germans.

But there is also dangerous inertia

on Bonn's part. A lot of time and potential has been wasted in respect to Poland. Under the combined pressure of domestic communist and international media propaganda in the East and West, the Poles were manipulated into unfounded fear that German reunification could put into question their current border with the Germans running along the Oder and Neisse rivers. The potential of massively increased cooperation that seemed to result from the talks Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Chancellor Kohl held in Warsaw in early November 1989, lost steam, for which Bonn is partly to blame.

The Bonn government should not have allowed itself to be drawn into this fruitless debate on the border question, but should rather have done something very simple: a special gesture, a donation from West Germany to Poland, consisting of several thousand tractors and farm machines (new and used), during the month of February. The cost would have been relatively low, and the shipment would have arrived in time for the beginning of the planting season, doing much more to build a positive image of the Germans in Poland than a hundred solemn declarations from Bonn on the integrity of the Oder-Neisse border.

Unfortunately, this is not what Bonn did, but it is the type of thing that should be done to outflank the superpowers, and partially also the French, to drive wedges into Germany's relations with its East European neighbors and create artificial tensions. Bonn should also have delivered at least a symbolic shipment of machinery and the like to the Lithuanians.

After all, Kohl gave Gorbachov a

present of DM220 million on Feb. 10 to cover 50% of a DM440 million purchase of food for the Soviet people. Kohl could have added another DM100 million present to the Poles and the Lithuanians each—it wouldn't bankrupt the West German state. It would have been a useful present, getting a jump on something which should be done in any case, and it would have proven Bonn's strong interest in a peaceful process of transformation in Eastern Europe.

Would Gorbachov, for example, really have stopped German machinery deliveries at the Lithuanian border? Would Moscow have interfered with tractor shipments to Poland? Would Britain's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher have had a chance to slander the West Germans on the phony issue of the Polish-German borders, at a time when West German tractors—not troops, as in September 1939—were crossing that very same border?

On the contrary, other Western governments would have been morally pressured to match the German aid. The Germans could also have used the occasion of tractors crossing the border to underline the overall need for rapid development of the railway grid in the East—a unique chance to launch positive propaganda.

Positive propaganda, an impulse for cultural warfare penetrating the cabinet diplomacy that still rules the East and the West, is needed. The entire sphere of political and economic flanks outside the military-strategic realm is largely neglected by Western governments.

The West Germans must be more clever. A new Western diplomacy is very much in need, and key elements of that could be developed in Bonn: "Made in Germany" can become a new trademark for political initiatives.