

The reunification of Germany – a Korean Perspective

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In Korea, the process of German unification has been widely labeled as „unification by absorption“. This term implies a critical moral nuance, meaning that the model, the power and the logic of capitalism prevalent in West Germany were applied to Eastern Germany regardless of the specific interests of East Germany. To the critics of German unification this „unification by absorption“ could easily be connected with a „colonization thesis“.

The understanding of the negative results of German unification as results of an „unification by absorption“ raised continuously reproduced warnings about possible, even more serious negative results if Korea was to be reunited through „unification by absorption“. The German model has even been recognized as „a path that should not be pursued“, „a warning of those traps that should be wisely avoided“ while preparing for Korean reunification. There were even voices talking about „negative lessons of anti-teachers“ (persons you should learn from, how not to do s.th.) Even those looking positively upon German reunification questioned the comparability of South Korea and West Germany with regard to the economic power, the development status of democracy and the installation of a welfare system.

For the development and communication of the critical discourse on German reunification the role of the scholars studying in Germany was of high importance.

However, it would be a simplification to blame the influence of West German left-wing intellectuals for their critique.

Rapid transition after unification, complete replacement of the East German elite, mass unemployment, solidarity towards the East Germans looked upon as socially disadvantaged, who had experienced frustration as second class citizens - the problems of the process of integration that was led by West Germans and the critique about the frustration of the East German intellectuals in culture and arts which coined the negative verdict on German reunification.

South Koreans who got actively involved in the critique of German unification can be understood in this context

During the 1990s such one-sided assessments were filed individually, but it was in the wake of conferences and publications in connection with the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification that several experts criticized the aftermath of reunification in a fundamental way.

Unfortunately, 20 years after German reunification there still is no comprehensive study on Korean perspectives on this issue.

The first Korean report examining the research on German reunification with a detailed bibliography was published in 2009.

In this report it was argued that the negative perception of German reunification „made it necessary to examine carefully on German reunification and what implication there are for our (= the Korean) reunification process.“

It is noteworthy that some experts that had joined the criticism on German reunification in the past published a collection of papers that clearly shows the transformation of their orientation.

In this publication it is assumed that "the negative aspects of German reunification that were spread unduly through domestic media became a factor that weakened the commitment to the reunification of the people (in Korea)".

Thus, this book aims to promote a deeper understanding and to formulate positive expectations on the benefits of a reunification of the Korean peninsula through by widely promulgating the aspect of peaceful reunification in Germany and its achievements and developments in the last 20 years.

Integration of the systems in politics and law

While the majority agrees on following primary factors enabling German reunification as Gorbachev and his reforms, the collapse of East German economy, the West's economic power and the massive emigration of the East Germans to the Federal Republic, the protests of dissident of citizens in the GDR, the West German diplomatic efforts, on the other side conflicting opinions were raised about the role of Willy Brandt's policy of rapprochement in recent years.

Yang Changseok highlights following main factors enabling German reunification: "the strength of a superior West German system based on economic power to absorb", "West German government policies for inclusion and strong support of the United States", "appeasement of the security concerns of the Soviet Union", "strategic and diplomatic skills of the West German political elite," "policy changes in the Ostblock due to Gorbachev and the emergence of changes in the Soviet Union" and "the effective and realistic cooperation policy of the West based on principles".

Yang argues that although there was criticism about the intra-German trade enhancing the acceptance of the GDR (German Democratic Republic) regime, „trust was build up towards the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany)“ and personal contacts between East and West were increased. That brought a big change to the understanding of the East German residents and thus became a main factor for reunification.

Therefore, he concludes that we "should not drop the ties of dialogue" and catch the hearts of the North Korean people in order to achieve reunification.

While a majority used to agree that Willy Brandt's new east policy contributed to German reunification, different opinions are being raised recently beyond the borders of progressive and conservative, positive and negative evaluations about this policy itself.

Yeom Donjae considers "the Western support of the East as a reason for the delay of democratic revolution in Eastern Germany" and holds that "East German revolution would not have been possible if the West German government had followed the path of reconciliation and cooperation as recommended by the Social Democratic Party (SPD)." He argues that the route of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) labeled „lead with strength“ and based on the magnetic theory (Magnet-Theorie) enabled German unification.

Other authors, on the other hand, see an important role in personal and material exchanges for German reunification due to the new east policy, which also became a "model for the Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments in promoting a policy of embracing the North (Sunshine Policy)".

They argue that the strategy of the New East Policy was to implement "detente and by acceptance of the given conditions to overcome the present situation, that is to achieve peace first, then reunification", and explain it as "the necessity of progressive agreements for an approach for reunification".

As a concrete strategy, they insist, prior to inducing an opening and reform policy in North Korea a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula must be established and, based on this, the cooperation of the two Koreas must gradually be strengthened".

Most of the literature dealing with the political reunification of Germany praise the competent diplomatic role of Helmut Kohl and Hans-Dietrich Genscher during the difficult 2 + 4 talks that they successfully led.

In addition, Korean literature on this issue often noted that postwar Germany has had a central role in the European integration movement. Thus, the goal of reunification could be pursued within the framework of European integration, and it was achieved without significant opposition from EU member states.

These studies believe that building an East Asian community would be a favorable environment for Korean reunification.

In this context, several researchers have noted the 1975 Helsinki Agreement, which gave birth to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (KSZE).

They acknowledge that the Helsinki agreement "opened up the possibility for reunification by recognizing the right of self-determination of the German people", and that CSCE has "contributed decisively to overcoming the Cold War and the peaceful

transition in Eastern Europe".

Since a legal integration is the basis of a system integration, shortly after German unification a lot of research and analysis was done by jurists in South Korea. Their assessment of the legal integration in Germany is predominantly positive.

Critics of German reunification rebuked the way of unification by absorption according to the Basic Law (Grundgesetz) article 23, but Jeon Kwangseok regards this as the fastest possible way of reunification which was what East German residents wanted, and allowed to maintain the homogeneity of the Basic Law that received a higher esteem than any German constitution before. Additionally, it left room for the possibility of a further reform. He takes it to be a mistaken decision that article 4 of the Unification Treaty limited Article 146 of the Basic Law (Grundgesetz) and thus left an ember for unnecessary controversy.

Huh Yeong effusively praised "the foresight of the fathers of the German Basic Law opening the main street of the unification by absorption," and admired the measures of the Constitutional Court as "politically very sensitive, yet effective by judicial argumentation to solve such big problems, which is a brilliant achievement that will be recorded in the history of the German Constitutional Court."

He acknowledges the integration process of German legal order to present a sample model of unification by absorption. However, of course, there are jurists critical about the way according to the Basic Law Article 23 and favoring a model of reunification in accordance with Article 146 as more desirable on the Korean peninsula.

Jang Myeongbong thinks that South Korea lacks the economic power that West Germany has had to afford an absorption unification. Moreover, the basic structures for cooperation are missing, so that the capability to cope with the aftermath of reunification is seen as insufficient. Unification by absorption on the Korean Peninsula could lead to a big mess. Therefore, the reunification of the two Koreas should be brought about through a unified constitution with equal rights of both countries which conforms to the Korean reunification policy principle of the "national community reunification plan".

Economic integration

The Korean point of view temporally lags behind the economic integration in Germany after reunification, reflecting the impact of changes in the situation in Germany and of a unification discourse.

Ahn Seok-Kyo visited Germany in the year of unification and expected a change in the German economy after reunification very optimistically. However, Ahn Doo-Soon published his book two years after reunification when the aftermath had become evident. He pointed out which results were produced by German unification policy, and why such a policy is definitely not suitable for the Korean Peninsula.

Firstly, he suggests as an alternative to monetary integration that caused mass unemployment that "after reunification, ahead of a complete integration, North Korea should be separated monetarily as a special economic zone with intensive support and management until productivity and national income rise close to South Korean level", that is a gradual economic integration method.

Secondly, to prevent corporate bankruptcies and mass unemployment as a transitional measure "the freedom of migration" should be regulated as well as "the freedom of occupation" and "the freedom of business activity", while the "freedom of travel between North and South" is to be recognized.

Also he recommends that all of the "people's property" of North Korea instead of being privatized should be assigned to North Koreans in the way of "people's share" or "our share certificates".

There are also studies reflecting the alternative of "Hong Kong style unification by absorption" or "Chinese style unification by absorption". But this does not mean to reject the possibility of a rapid "unification by absorption" as was carried out in Germany.

The Development Research Institute and the German Economic Research Institute (DIW) leave open both possibilities. Nevertheless, a gradual unification is estimated to be more desirable. In my eyes, this two-year joint research project report is particularly interesting.

That's because of the participation of German experts that contributed to the economic policy at the time of German reunification and afterwards. The authors of the report argue that "postponing integration in economic and political respects to the time after forming a treaty community would have been desirable."

They emphasize the benefits that North Korea may have from a currency of its own as a measure of macroeconomic policy if the regime transition is done before the economic integration which can be promoted slowly over time. But even in this case they claim that "a regime transition should be conducted as quickly as possible."

Hwang Byeongdeok views the policy of the Trust Agency (Treuhand) that focussed on privatization as a failure and claims that the state-owned businesses in North Korea that can be revived in the transition process "require an active economic normalization by which their market competitiveness can be strengthened to minimize the social and economic side effects that occur during the transition process."

By those measures he suggests in the same way that the German economic Research Institute (Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung) suggested to give subsidies for wage and capital costs and that the country at the same time should take over the debts of the companies.

Regarding the privatization of state property he recommends that investment and employment are to be entrusted to the consignee while the companies should be sold at the highest price possible in a direct and open way - without any condition.

Proponents of a gradual unification argue that for a limited time a 'Special Economic Zone' should be maintained in the North and also independent money should be used, and temporarily, the market should be protected through regional tariffs or import restrictions.

A monetary union should be carried out in the last stage of the economic integration of North Korean companies after their competitiveness to some extent is secured through this transition period. Regarding privatization they criticize the sale method by the trust agency (Treuhand) and prefer alternatives as employee holdings, free distribution of private certificates and voucher system as has been done in Czechia.

Regarding property that cannot be assigned, the principle of compensation rather than return should be implemented, while even compensation should be carried out very restrictively. With regard to the method of financing borrowing abroad, sale of the state-owned property and cuts in military spending were proposed.

In order to prevent mass unemployment and to preserve jobs, an assistance for the companies is essential, with a majority tending to suggest wage subsidies rather than investments. Employment guarantee benefits, income security and social safety measures should be combined with the residence in North Korea if a gradual unification is to be established, which implies - as an important part - the inhibition of migration.

The person who criticized the economic integration of Germany most poignantly is Yi Haeyoung. In his book with the provocative title "Germany was not unified," he declares clearly the failures of German reunification. Following Habermas' sociological model, "German unification was a dual process of colonization: on the one hand – by the system – it was the colonization of the former GDR's everyday life; on the other hand, it was a colonization of the East German socialist system by the West German capitalist system"

According to his evaluation the economy of GDR lost its own regional basis after the 'former people's property companies were sold by the Trust Agency (Treuhand) "and tumbled down to a "filial economy" of the FRG, with the result that the transnational capital of Western Germany became the largest beneficiary of German reunification."

He holds material differences to be the ultimate root for deepening new conflicts and alienation between East and West Germany and diagnoses this as a failure of neoliberal policies. He views the future of the new federalism would be a 'mezzogiorno' in Central Europe.

In opposition to this opinion, Bak Gwangjak applauds the German government "for effectively promoting an optimal unification strategy." The East German production facilities were generally outdated, and according to his esteem the shock "considering the fact that the cost for updating many industrial facilities of the East had no economic value at all – like of scrap metal – was highly justified,".

He praised the Trust Agency (Treuhand) "for building a foundation for growth in the long run" by managing to reorganize the structures in the shortest possible time through drastic adjustment policies. Therefore he believes that "there was no viable alternative to the process of German unification, including the rapid establishment of the Monetary Union and altogether drastic restructuring of the East German organization and ownership system“.

According to him, forcing a barrier or blocking the implementation of the freedom of residence between the two Koreas in an artificial way is impossible under open and reform-friendly conditions. Thus, Germany's radical conversion and integration model 'is most likely to be applied also between the two Koreas.’’

The privatization management of the Trust Agency (Treuhand) carried out for four years is evaluated negatively by the most. Nevertheless, it is a fact that it has contributed significantly to the local infrastructure of the GDR, as Shin Woocheol claims.

He also refutes the theory of internal colonization proposed by progressive researchers. In his view, it is too simple to speak of colonization if more than 60% of the East Germans felt joy about German reunification. He also criticized the opinion that stresses the legitimacy of a reunification by 'consensus' on the basis of questioning the 'unification by absorption“.

"A completely neutral" third way "is an idea merely existing in the minds of scholars," To expect a unification without establishing a leadership position of one party seems to be unrealistic and leads only to the boring situation of a 'status quo'.

He views the result of the unification process in the mode of absorption but holds the process to be consensus-based, with the unification treaty, the 2 + 4 Treaty and with a number of other treaties, and also including election. Therefore, the result of unification (= absorption) and its process (= agreement) should not be confusingly mistaken to be an opposition in order to stick to the 'only agreement-model'.

According to my quantitative analysis the issue most frequently researched is the general topic of the problems of transition from a socialist planned economy of the

GDR to a social market economy. This includes the question of privatization and monetary integration. In the first half of the 1990s, the construction sector was crucial for the rapid growth and for the subsequent economic stagnation in East Germany, but not even a piece of research was published on this subject until 1998.

Regional development, urban space policy will have to be further examined because of the importance of rebuilding East Germany. Environmental issues also with regard to the restructuring or improvement of the living conditions of the East Germans are also important research topics.

Although demographic change and migration issues are highly important for the understanding of the restructuring of the East German society and economy, unfortunately they have nearly not been researched on with regard to issues of deepening regional differences. Despite the great significance of living standards, income, life satisfaction of East Germans –or the assessment whether the integration of the German Society was successful for East Germans these issues have not been researched in a manner appropriate to them.

Socio-cultural integration

In 1990, when a positive assessment of German reunification was prevalent it was sociologist Jeon Seongwoo who diagnosed sharply the problems German society would have to experience: "German reunification carried out under the unilateral initiative of the West while the expectations of the East German citizens are not considered fully and systematically and also being processed too rapidly, can cause considerable national and international problems".

He strongly criticized the "logic and the will of the stronger one" that he observed in Germany as "a one-sided approach to an integration by absorption". He reckons such an integration-by-absorption-approach to be neither possible nor desirable for Korea. In his view South Korea is not in the position of 'the stronger one' like West Germany was when it absorbed East Germany, because of several reasons: "an undemocratic regime, a sharp ideological conflict, an extreme gap between rich and poor, and based on that, a fundamental confrontation between classes, huge "costs of unification" that can hardly be handled due to a vulnerable economic strength".

He believes the 'social market economy' to be the source of power that made West Germany be 'the stronger one' and enabled it to incorporate East Germans through a quick unification. Thus, according to him, the key for unification is "a transformation of our system into a truly social democratic and civil society". As a particular problem he highlights the fact that "the process of restructuring of East German society began almost entirely by domination of the West as an "external force", and the GDR's internal and self-

determined way was blocked from the beginning". This, he believes, gave a feeling to the East Germans that East Germany had become a colony of West Germany and caused a growing oppositional identity that they were rejected.

Han Unsuk believes that the increase of oppositional identity in East Germany is neither to be referred to the socialization nor the situation only, but that both parts had an effect in different ways. He states that after reunification three factors can be found: Firstly, conflicts with regard to economic interests, secondly, the ruling of the West German elite and along with that the feeling of political deprivation and thirdly, the feeling of deprivation due to disregard for the social, intellectual and cultural history of the East Germans. As a lesson that German reunification can give he recognizes the effort to reduce the social impact and crisis after unification through a fundamental improvement in social welfare policy, the enforcement of intra-Korean exchanges as far as possible, and the effort of both sides to understand the historical experiences of each other in respect and with the aim to integrate them into a united history.

In the 2000s, the person leading most actively with the social and cultural problems of reunited Germany is germanist Kim Nuri. 15 years after reunification he diagnosed that German society is "socially and culturally disintegrating even more despite a successful political and economic integration". He stressed the need for a 'cultural turn' in the field of research on reunification. Germanists usually tend to support the German left wing intellectuals who criticize the aftermath of German reunification brought about by the conservative government in a very quick process and preoccupied by the conservative government in intellectual debate and discourse. Some of them condemned - from a elitist point of view like Kim Nuri – the folly of the majority of East Germans to have chosen the way to colonization by the West.

In respect to regional cultural changes in East Germany after reunification the collective crisis in literature, theatre plays and movie production was slowly overcome and since the mid-1990s works of unique identity gave a new impetus to united German culture.

However, it needs to be reconsidered if the sentence "the east conquers the culture of the West" is true as it stands. It's not easy to draw concrete implications for the preparation of Korean reunification from cultural changes in East Germany. Because most studies are not based on deep understanding of North Korean culture, they only give a brief introduction on German experiences or suggest the alternative of a "third way" that could avoid the problems of both social systems in discussion on principle. For preparing for reunification there are needed dialogue in depth and collaboration between experts on German and North Korean culture.

Closing remarks

20 years after German reunification there are a lot of South Korean publications dealing with the transformation process of German reunification (Gesellschaftstransformation). However, our knowledge and reflections on the lessons that the unification of Germany can give us for the reunification of the Korean peninsula is still not befitting to the growth rings. We should also reflect on whether the cooperation between Korea and Germany has been productive and desirable. Mostly, these forms of cooperation were sporadic and ended at a first stage. There hardly was any case that it was done with a big vision and with a mid- or long term prospect.

Many documents dealing with German reunification were translated – partly due to specific interests and passions of the researchers, partly due to the need of certain government departments. But still, there are important reference documents in some fields that have not been translated yet. Translations done in the government departments were mostly concentrated on issues regarding a quick system integration immediately after reunification and neglected issues like the coming to terms with the history of the GDR, social cohesion, cultural changes, East German regional reconstruction projects (Aufbau Ost), the impact of unification on West Germany and other questions that need a long-term observation and forecast. Although it is difficult to understand the transformation of the new federal territories after reunification without knowledge about the history of the GDR, but this history and its impact of the reunited Germany is hardly taken notice of.

If the costly translations is appropriate to the subject, if the quality of translation is credible, if the translated materials are being properly utilized according to established research standards must be reviewed critically.

This criticism also refers to academic research projects receiving support in a variety of ways through research foundations or government ministries and other public institutions.

There seem to be several important factors influencing the perception of German reunification by Korean experts: The present situation of the German unification process and transformation, the discourse in Germany about that issue, the domestic political situation in Korea, inter-Korean relations and the situation in Northeast Asia, the political tendency of the professional experts and their German experience and information sources etc.

Shortly after German reunification Korean government prepared for reunification by applying the "unity by absorption" model in Germany in anticipation of a collapse in North Korea. Like in Germany, also in Korea the pros and cons about the model of unification by absorption were discussed in a heated debate. Commentators opposing

this model believed that Korea was unable to fulfill an unification by absorption because the history of inter-Korean relations and the vast economic differences. With economic stagnation becoming evident as an aftereffect of German reunification since the mid of the 1990s and the Regime change in South Korea in 1998 the hegemony of the discourse that German reunification can not be our model has been boosted.

Whereas the interest in Brandt's new east policies (that could support the Sunshine Policy) decreased, the image of German reunification as a anti-teacher caused a competing discourse of the conservatives on the successful model of German unification..

There are still unresolved problems like social integration and the reconstruction of East Germany, but since the 2000s in Germany the discourse on reunification became more realistic, stating that not all problems can be resolved within a generation but requires a longer-term cast. Further one could see during the 15th and 20th anniversary of German reunification that the publications coolly evaluating the long-term results bring somewhat of changes to the awareness in Korea about this issue.

In Korea, the fact that negative evaluations on German unification could cause the interest of the citizens to drop or made it unable to learn earnestly from German unification, was reflected.

The Korean trend reversal (Tendenzwende), namely the strengthening of the neo-conservatives represented by the New Right, has had an influence on Korean discourse on German reunification since the regime change in 2007 (to the conservative party), the stiffening of inter-Korean relations, the deepening military conflict and the nuclear crisis in the West Sea. With expectations according to a positive evaluation of unification by absorption in Germany getting stronger, and even claiming the new east policy of Brandt had extended the life of the GDR regime, there was also raised the call for a "policy of strength" (Politik der Stärke).

Here, one can see the influence of the right-wing that had been reluctant to the engagement policies of the past Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments. On this topic one has to ask critically, if such a recognition of German reunification is not merely a construed discourse under the division system to take over the political and cultural hegemony rather than a logical consequence of the reflection of research contemplating peace and unity for the Korean peninsula.

The reunification issue is the most important issue to define our future and the 21st century. We need to learn from the experiences of Germany beyond the boundaries between political interests and we also need to cooperate across party lines for peace and reunification of the Korean peninsula. That we learn from Germany does not mean that we are looking for a master key we can adopt for our situation of reunification.

We do not know concretely which situation will occur after reunification. But learning

about German reunification will - while being careful in such unpredictable circumstances – help grow competence and swiftness to respond flexibly. To train such flexibility there are needed a historical perspective willing to see the process of reunification and structural changes in long term, and an attitude to explore alternatives in a wider stance including the transition in Eastern Europe.