

Slow road to cooperation

Munich

DESPITE the dramatic political changes in East Germany and the opening of the borders on 9 November, the widely expected increase in industrial and scientific contacts between the two German states is only slowly coming into view.

The West German Research Ministry (BMFT) announced last week that it expects there to be many more cooperative projects between the two German states. Perhaps as many as 20 new projects might be initiated by early next year, nearly a doubling of the current number. But financial and political hurdles must be overcome before such cooperation can flourish.

The new projects, ranging from surface science to data processing to continental deep drilling, were discussed at a meeting in October between representatives of the two states. Officials will meet early in 1990 to discuss the proposals put forward both by East Germany and by West German universities.

Ministry officials were especially optimistic that the Fraunhofer Institutes, which do applied research under contract to industry, might receive contracts from East German industrial combines.

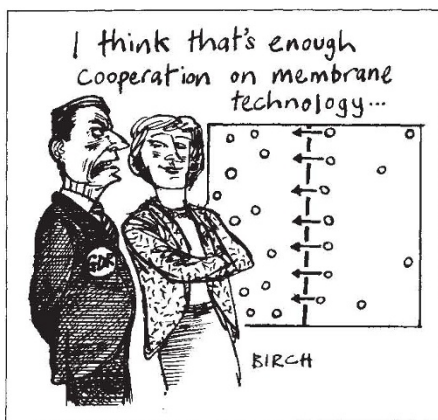
BMFT officials say their hopes of brushing aside political obstacles to cooperation were strengthened by the October meeting, which took place in Wiesbaden, West Germany, the day after East German leader Erich Honecker was deposed.

The East German officials recognized the need for economic reform in their country and wanted to explore ways to use West German knowhow to achieve it, a spokesman for BMFT said. The previous tendency to put a speed limit on cooperation was no longer there, he said.

But contacts continue to be limited by East Germany's lack of money. In many cases, the inefficiency and poor management at many combines and state-run agencies is only now coming to light. Research contacts may have to take a back seat during the many years of rebuilding necessary. Until then, East Germany will look to the West for help.

Until now, BMFT has followed the West German government line of waiting for proof of political and economic reforms — including free elections and the introduction of a market-oriented economy — before volunteering Western money for East Germany. The spokesman said the planned visit of Chancellor Helmut Kohl to East Germany in mid-December is expected to clarify the situation.

In the meantime, other political and bureaucratic problems remain. Cooperation between the two German states has always been hindered by the status of



West Berlin, which East Germany refuses to recognize as a *de facto* part of West Germany. West Berlin is still officially administered by the Western Allies. West Germany insisted on the inclusion of West Berlin researchers in all cooperation agreements, which made negotiations difficult.

Technology transfer to East Germany could also be held up by the CoCom restrictions on high-technology exports, which remain in force despite the political changes in the Soviet bloc. The current agreement on scientific cooperation between the two German states, signed in Bonn in September 1987, includes few projects that involve high technology (see *Nature* 329, 192; 1987). **Steven Dickman**

MAX PLANCK SOCIETY

Expanding contacts

Munich

THE Max Planck Society expects to expand its contacts with the East German Academy of Sciences beginning early next year.

During a visit of academy president Werner Scheler to Munich in mid-October, the two organizations agreed to work out a 'framework agreement' for future links between their organizations. The agreement would make it easier for researchers on one side to invite and collaborate with their counterparts in the other country and would lay down the financial terms for the visits.

A spokesman for the Max Planck Society said that of 384 official guests last year from the Soviet bloc and China, not a single one came from East Germany.

The Max Planck Society has 62 institutes and an annual budget of DM 1,240 million (\$670 million). It has 13,000 employees, who do primarily basic research. The Academy of Sciences of the German Democratic Republic, modelled on the Soviet Academy of Sciences, has 70 institutes and 23,000 employees. Its annual budget of 1,000 million East German marks is spent both on basic research and applied research for industrial combines (*Kombinate*).

Steven Dickman

Research still a priority

Berlin

STREET demonstrations, shouted slogans, and the triumphant return *en masse* of East Germans to West Berlin after a 28-year absence give the impression that life in East Germany is one big party. It only adds to the elation that the East German government appeared so receptive to the changes proposed by opposition groups.

But the party is coming to an end, as the opposition, led by New Forum, must make its own proposals for the construction of a new society on the ruins of the old.

The state of the East German economy is more worrying than is often supposed. Much of East German industry faces collapse after decades of neglect. Even such staples as energy for home heating could be interrupted, with serious consequences.

Against this backdrop, the future of research institutes may seem trivial, but New Forum members are convinced that research, both basic and applied, is central to the future of the economy. If research is not protected, they warn, "the next crisis is already programmed".

New Forum emerged earlier this year when the 18-year rule of Erich Honecker was seen to be running out of time. "A change was in the air", says physicist Sebastian Pflugbeil, one of the few dozen founders.

At the outset banned, New Forum has become one of the most popular political groups in East Germany, although it clings to its identity as a "citizens' initiative" and has resisted pressure to become a political party. It has been the catalyst for many of the street demonstrations of recent weeks.

New Forum is not so much interested in reforms within the government party as with the rot that reaches much further down in all areas of society, including science. "Too many department heads have prevented their subordinates from doing effective research work; they must be replaced", says Pflugbeil, who works at the Academy of Science's Central Institute for Heart and Circulation Research in Berlin-Buch. He says that important positions there have been filled on a "false selection principle", based on ideology rather than achievement, and that the problem is more general.

"But I don't know where to get competent people to replace them", he continues, "or what to do with them when they have been sent home". East Germany already has a labour shortage because of all the refugees who have fled to West Germany, estimated on 26 November at 283,696 this year alone.

Allotting research funds transparently is another top priority. Even research directors do not know how much has been spent in their respective areas across East Germany. Academy and university funds in many fields have not been totalled to give an overview of