

Germany divided on a single academy

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Germany is developing plans for a national academy of sciences, but the country's regional academies and a learned society have differing ideas.

The German government has been asked to consider setting up a new national academy of sciences along the lines of the US National Research Council. But the suggestion is likely to anger Germany's many regional science academies which are competing to be chosen as reunified Germany's first national scientific voice.

The recommendation comes from Dieter Simon, president of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences. In a paper requested by Jürgen Rüttgers, minister for education and research, Simon says that setting up a new institution would put an end to the emerging public battle between the regional — or *Länder* — academies.

A national academy was first suggested by Chancellor Helmut Kohl during a speech to parliament in 1994. The idea was revived late last year and in February Simon laid out the options in his paper to Rüttgers.

Simon suggests that the new body be called the National Academic Convention. It could function, he says, as an *ad hoc* group of 30 or 50 scientists appointed by the German president, and be called upon to address problems proposed by the government, parliament or a scientific organization. The present period, before the start of the 1998 election campaign, could be the right time to push ahead with such a plan, Simon says.

But Germany's other *Länder* academies see things differently. They believe that their umbrella organization, the Conference of Academies, is exactly the sort of forum that is needed. They place their hopes on an internal paper of the research ministry which, they claim, takes seriously the suggestion of a national academy based on the organization.

Long history, strong rival?

The regional academies, however, have another rival in the shape of the Leopoldina Academy of Scientists, Germany's oldest learned society, formed in 1652 and based in Halle in east Germany. The Leopoldina considers its exceptionally long history a justification for forming the kernel of a national academy.

At its biennial conference in Halle last month, the Leopoldina's president, Benno Parthier, said that his academy "must not be passed over if a German national academy of sciences is to be established".

Simon says he agrees in principle,

acknowledging the tradition and reputation of the Leopoldina. But he doubts that it could adequately represent the whole spectrum of German science, because it is exclusively focused on medical and natural sciences.

According to Simon, designating the national voice to an existing regional academy could avoid a constitutional conflict over the traditional *Länder* autonomy in cultural affairs. But he sees only the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy, formed in 1993, as suitable for the purpose.

"Being an efficient working academy with a nationwide and international membership, Berlin-Brandenburg is much more than just a learned society of elderly men," says Simon. "And, unlike other *Länder* academies, we are professionally organized, with a full-time president."

Decentralized and reunified

Germany has never had a true national science academy, and after the Second World War the prospect of one being formed became unlikely. West Germany's new decentralizing constitution placed responsibility for all cultural matters firmly in the hands of the newly created regional — or *Länder* — governments, six of which either inherited or created their own academies.

As a result Germany has no single voice that can represent national opinion on scientific issues either to the outside world or to German politicians. This is a point of concern for both Rüttgers and many scientists.

Reunification left Berlin, the former and future capital, with two academies of science. A relatively new, and very small, west Berlin academy fell victim to the political animosity of reunified Berlin's socialist-Green party coalition, which closed it down in 1991. The coalition also closed down the learned society section of the former East German Academy of Sciences, despite a clause in the reunification treaty that specified that it should be preserved "in appropriate form".

The Senate of Berlin considered that the "moral damage" imposed by the Communist regime, which used the academy as a political tool, could not be repaired. Rubbing salt into the wound, it gave the learned society's valuable archives and libraries to the Berlin-Brandenburg academy when it was founded in 1993. This continues to be a source of bitterness for eastern academics.

IMAGE
UNAVAILABLE
FOR COPYRIGHT
REASONS

The Leopoldina (above) is one of several bodies claiming a new role as a national academy.

Herbert Wöltge, a former spokesman for the east German learned society, compares the affair to the effect of a neutron bomb "killing the people, sparing the material assets".

The Leopoldina, on the other hand, came out of the Communist era with fewer scars. A supranational learned society with 940 members divided among 17 scientific and 17 medical sections, the Leopoldina has roots in all the German-speaking countries, and was generally believed to have come through with its moral integrity intact.

"The [former East German] government had regarded Leopoldina as a prestigious tool to demonstrate its supposed open-mindedness to the rest of the world," says Parthier. Because of this, it had a strong measure of independence and, unlike the learned society section of the East German Academy of Sciences, it was free to choose its members according to scientific merit rather than on the basis of loyalty to Communist doctrines.

Surveillance by secret police

But unpleasant truths have recently come to light — the Leopoldina had been the object of extensive surveillance activity by the STASI, the East German secret police. Parthier has found more than 5,000 pages of STASI records in the 'Gauck' office, where all STASI files are now archived and available for access by persons believed to be the object of surveillance. The files detail an 11-year campaign targeting the Leopoldina, which was code-named 'Komet'.

"We knew that all our meetings were infiltrated by informers, but we were naive enough not to see that even private conversations in our rooms were constantly bugged by the STASI," says Parthier.

The files show that the STASI became particularly active during visits from prominent west German scientists such as the physicist Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker and the biologist Heinz Staab, former president of the Max-Planck Society. "Such persons were invariably sounded out by STASI informers under the guise of science," says Parthier. □