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Bezirke on Scale. Regional and Local Actors in East German 'Democratic Centralism'

Lena Kuhl & Oliver Werner [*]

Abstract: *»Bezirke on scale. Regionale und lokale Akteure im ostdeutschen 'demokratischen Zentralismus'«.* The article examines the potential of the scale approach in the analysis of the former socialist dictatorships in Middle- and Middle-East-Europe based on the case of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Obviously, the communist claim to power always relied on highly centralised chains of command. Nevertheless, regional state functionaries were occasionally able to realize their specific interests by scalar strategies like forming horizontal alliances or 'jumping' over the official channels through vertical personal networks. Focussing on processes with different patterns of top-down- and bottom-up-interactions, the scale approach reveals the fragile construction of the GDR's 'Democratic Centralism': By taking responsibility for regional or local interests and trying to streamline them with central politics, state functionaries at the same time stabilized and undermined the political system. Despite gaining temporary leeway for acting in their own interests, regional and local authorities remained bound to the directives from the central leadership till the end of the GDR in 1989/90.

Keywords: Politics of scale, regional planning, regional government, local government, dynamics of administration, GDR.

1.   Introduction[1]

Research on the German Democratic Republic (GDR) has paid little attention to the role of so-called *Bezirke* and subordinate districts (*Kreise*) as regional and local actors. In 1995, Gero Neugebauer summed up the state of the art by noting that *Bezirke* and *Kreise* "had no history of their own" and "could be grasped only as part of the history of the larger state apparatus" (Neugebauer 1995, 537). More recent studies have not revised this interpretation. Instead, it has endured and at times led to further confusion. Veit Scheller, for example, characterised campaigns of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) to

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[1] Translated by Benjamin Restle.

mobilise East German workers as a form of "grassroots statesmanship" (Scheller 2009, 82).

This instrumentalist perspective matches the GDR's view of the administrations of the *Bezirke* and *Kreise* as "regional bodies of state control" responsible for implementing the national economic plan. This understanding encompassed the belief that these administrations ought to articulate their interests in ways that correspond to state directives (Staatsrecht 1977, 395-401). A "unity of interests" was proclaimed.

Today, it is well known that dictatorships never constitute monolithic entities and that a centralised system of rule must continuously reassert and renegotiate centralised power. This insight has been gained from the past two decades of research into German National Socialism in particular. Yet thus far, this insight has not been heeded in studies of East Germany's system of rule and planning (John 2007; Lindenberger 1999). This article discusses the limits to East Germany's dictatorship, the vertical integration of state levels, as well as the influence exerted by the model of state socialist rule on the organisation of the state and territory, and on the relationship between the central state and inferior levels (Lobao 2009). This attention to scalar strategies within East Germany's centralised system of rule sheds light on mechanisms that resulted out of regional and local actors' administrative practices which lent precarious stability to the system in the medium-term. This perspective complements analyses of socialist reform dynamics by adding a spatial dimension, thereby producing a more nuanced assessment that accounts both for the commonly diagnosed inability to undertake reforms and also for the system's conspicuous accomplishments, for instance in the housing sector.

This article discusses the significance of scalar strategies for the spatial organisation of East German state socialism by drawing on the examples of centrally initiated plans, programmes, and local strategies. Specifically, this contribution illustrates both top-down and bottom-up processes by examining instances of economic planning, the "Construction work in Berlin by the *Bezirke*" (*Bezirke bauen in Berlin*) programme, the political instrument of municipal associations (*Gemeindeverbände*), and the widespread phenomenon of illicit construction work (*Schwarzbauten*). These four fields of regional and local decision-making provide a nuanced picture of the way in which various different levels of East Germany's administration (co)operated. This novel historical account of East Germany's administrative practices also ties into debates over and analyses of 'spaces of engagement' and 'politics of scales.'

2.   Centrally Initiated and Organised Processes

In the centralised planning system of East Germany, decision-making was principally based on the state's overall goals, which were defined and refined

by high-ranking party and administrative authorities. At any given time, state goals could be afforded priority over other binding decisions, forcing decision-makers on the level of *Bezirke, Kreise* or cities to comply, if, for instance it had been decided that additional housing stock needed to be built in East Berlin. Warnings by regional party officials that ministries should "not override local decision-making bodies" did nothing to change the system. Subordinate institutions had to draw on informal means to make up for such interventions.[2] Decision-makers on the *Kreis*, municipal (*Gemeinde*) and city level could never be sure if their interests were being taken into consideration.

The SED leadership only recognised regional interests directly linked to the GDR's central economic plan. As early as the late 1940s, it postulated that federal state (*Länder*) and municipal (*Gemeinde*) administrations held a unique responsibility for improving economic matters and supply situations in their respective realms in accordance to the economic plan, albeit without assistance from central leadership (*Aufgaben* 1948). Central party and state bodies referred to this as the "mobilisation of regional reserves." In early spring 1951, Bruno Leuschner, head of the state planning commission, declared that this represented a key responsibility of subordinate administrative levels (Leuschner 1951).

Hopes that mobilising regional reserves would take pressure off central leadership and yield additional resources were also tied to the dissolution of the inherited federal state structure, and the creation of a new system of *Bezirke* and *Kreise* in its place. GDR Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl, for instance, expected in August 1952 that "dissolving the structure will free resources needed to strengthen the state" (Werner 2017, 152). Indeed, personnel and material resources in particular, were desperately needed to achieve the ambitious goals set forth in the first five-year economic plan which was valid until 1955. The plan stipulated that *Bezirk* Frankfurt (Oder) would become East Germany's industrial centre, while *Bezirk* Cottbus would become an energy hub. These regional investment foci were to be organised and supported by the entire East German state. These mammoth tasks placed an extraordinary strain on the administrations of the newly established *Bezirke* and *Kreise*. The limited ability of East Germany's political system to reflect upon and evaluate itself, and its unwillingness to alter its power structure, initially prevented "regional bodies" from adapting to these administrative and economic demands (Kornai 1992).

The SED leadership began initiating comprehensive reforms only after the erection of the inner German border wall in August 1961. Until 1965, new regulations were introduced in the context of the "New Economic System" (*Neues Ökonomisches System*) which seemed to grant more autonomy to the *Bezirke*. Early drafts of a respective decree were however criticised by the

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2   Report by SED *Bezirk* leadership Frankfurt/Oder "concerning additional construction work on the F 109," July 20th 1973 (Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Rep. 730/4328).

SED's first secretary Walter Ulbricht for granting too much democratic self-determination and neglecting the element of centralism. Leadership, in his opinion, was always a top-down affair.[3] As such, the final decree, published in 1965, granted very little autonomy (*Gesetzblatt der DDR* 1965). Institutions like the "Bureau for Territorial Planning" (*Büros für Territorialplanung*) emerged out of regional, urban, and village planning bureaus and assumed responsibility for spatial and infrastructural planning. This meant a considerable concentration of planning expertise on the level of *Bezirke*. The bureau's administrative competences remained ill-defined, however, allowing central leadership to intervene at will and putting economic goals first.

Party and state leadership granted a certain degree of regional autonomy with specific expectations in mind. Specifically, its relationship vis-a-vis subordinate administrative tiers was linked to the expectation that this would yield additional resources. At all times, decision-makers on the level of *Bezirke* and *Kreise* were bound the state's overall economic plan. There existed no dependable, official way to have regional interests recognised unless these were directly connected to the economic plan.

By the 1960s, the SED leadership had achieved its most important objective, namely to install functionaries on the level of the *Bezirke*, *Kreise*, and cities who had fully accepted the unquestioned priority of central directives. This meant that even supposedly unambiguous terms like "self-responsibility" were no longer understood by subordinate party and state functionaries to imply genuine autonomy. Instead, they understood such terms to mean regional and local efforts to "use independent thinking, initiative, and all available forces and resources available in the territory to meet state goals" (Böhme 1969, 115).

2.1 "Complex Consultations" on Economic Planning (*Komplexberatungen*)

Central decision-makers welcomed the fact that loyal functionaries were now installed on the level of *Bezirke* and *Kreise*. This represented an opportunity to increasingly involve them in planning processes.

The state planning commission (*Staatliche Plankommission* or SPK) had begun in the mid-1960s to sporadically consult representatives from the *Bezirke* with regard to the planning of large-scale projects. This was sensible from a technological perspective, and even more so from one of political power, as representatives from the *Bezirke* had to justify levels of investment to the *Kreise*.[4] Moreover, the head of the SPK observed that "many *Bezirke* and or-

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[3] Walter Ulbricht to Klaus Sorgenicht, May 5, 1963 (ibid., DY 30/IV A 2/13/109, 305-6).
[4] „Konzeption für die Entwicklung des Gebietes Schwedt/O zur vorrangigen Sicherung des Erdöl-Chemiekombinates und seiner Folgemaßnahmen" from August 1963, presented to the

ganisations are under the illusion that the GDR has at its disposal an abundance of funds for investment" and that regional functionaries should therefore "vigorously confront these subjective [meaning: inaccurate] beliefs prevalent among several architects and functionaries."[5]

These consultations soon became regular complex consultations on the *Bezirk* level in which responsible actors from the central government, regional administrations, and combine directors negotiated the respective territorial part of the national economic plan. In establishing new procedures, it was common practice to select a *Bezirk* and to generalise from experiences gained there. In mid-May 1966, complex consultations were held in *Bezirk* Cottbus from which the SPK derived binding "conclusions […] for ensuring uniform developments in different branches and territories." The SPK demanded that future talks "begin with increasing the efficiency of centrally and regionally directed construction efforts," as "construction efforts by the *Bezirke* do not match economic requirements and existing capacities." The SPK apparently considered such talks an effective means of revealing instances where *Bezirke* displayed "inadequate planning and management of construction efforts" or an "inappropriately generous use of investment funds."[6]

It soon transpired, however, that talks with representatives from the *Bezirke* concerning the feasibility of realising certain large-scale projects could also impact planning by party and state leaders. Regional representatives, for instance, repeatedly criticised the sluggish "balancing of resources available throughout the state" which, depending on the respective branch, lay in the responsibility of the central ministries for industry.[7] Such comments resulted in the need for novel coordination efforts, forcing central institutions to adapt accordingly. They also lead to checks by centrally coordinated task forces to assess whether untapped regional 'reserves' existed in order to prevent future interventions by the regions.[8]

By the early 1970s, these talks evolved into regularly held complex consultations involving all *Bezirke*, granting regional functionaries and industrial

GDR government by Harry Mönch, Chairman of the *Bezirk* Council Frankfurt (Oder) (ibid., DE 1/48293).

[5] Erich Apel on July 2, 1964 at the „Beratung der Kommission des Politbüros des ZK der SED und des Ministerrates der DDR zur Ausarbeitung des Perspektivplanes bis 1970" (ibid., DE 1/49278, 26).

[6] „Schlussfolgerungen aus der komplexen Beratung in Cottbus am 16.5.1966 für die Vorbereitung und Durchführung komplexer Beratungen in wichtigen Bezirken zur Sicherung der Übereinstimmung der Entwicklung der Zweige und Territorien," May 23, 1966 (ibid., DE 1/53064, 2-4).

[7] Information provided by the SPK's department for territorial planning "regarding the organisation of the complex talks," September 8, 1966 (ibid., 31).

[8] Minutes prepared for talks between the SPK Chairman with ministers and representatives from *Bezirk* Magdeburg "to clarify problems regarding construction work as decided by the Council of Ministers," June 12, 1966 (ibid.).

combine representatives a formal say in the drafting of the annual economic plans. At the same time, the *Bezirke*'s administrations were urged to "mobilise output and efficiency reserves in order to fulfil and to exceed state targets" (Kinz 1989, 335). In actuality, agreements reached in these talks were often undermined through spontaneous but economically sound changes to the economic plan. The complex consultations nevertheless provided informal channels for representatives of the *Bezirke* to secure certain benefits for their *Bezirk* from East German decision-makers.

Functionaries who had represented their *Bezirk* in such complex consultations recall the intensity and tensions: "It was nerve-racking each time!" (Münch 2000, 332). Those able to stand their ground could call for the modification of state targets by referring to resource scarcity in the *Bezirk*.[9] This, however, required that representatives from the *Bezirke* engage in a delicate balancing act whereby they would call for modifications of the economic plan, point to 'regional reserves,' and simultaneously display a fundamental respect for the central economic plan. If they failed to achieve this balancing act, if planned investments were too important, or if an example had to be made of a *Bezirk*, agreed targets could be radically increased by superior institutions.

After East Germany's leadership for instance decided to curb illicit construction work in April 1978[10] it underscored this decision by making an example of *Bezirk* Magdeburg. First secretary of Magdeburg's SED *Bezirk* administration had declared, somewhat thoughtlessly, that "no unlicensed construction work exists in the *Bezirk*." A task force, headed by SPK Chairman Günter Mittag, was deployed by East Germany's leadership and quickly refuted this claim and in turn accused functionaries in *Bezirk* Magdeburg of "lacking the necessary in-depth and broad overview of and grasp on economic processes and problems."[11] The task force revealed that materials had been wasted and that "substantial efficiency reserves" existed in *Bezirk* Magdeburg, which could be utilised to meet economic targets set forth in the central plan. This made it impossible for representatives of *Bezirk* Magdeburg to request a lowering of state targets in the subsequent round of complex consultations, which were repeated under the auspices of the task force, with Mittag stating that these complex consultations were a "state-wide affair" and an "instrument" to "better realise the principle of democratic centralism."[12]

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[9] Verbal statements by former deputy secretary of the SED administration of *Bezirk* Berlin, Helmut Müller, and by former secretary for construction of the SED administration of *Bezirk* Berlin, Gerhard Poser, on October 17, 2013.

[10] Decision by the GDR government about „Ergebnisse der Kontrolle zur Einhaltung der Beschlüsse und gesetzlichen Bestimmungen bei Initiativvorhaben durch die Räte der Bezirke und Kreise," April 13, 1978 (Bundesarchiv, DC 20/I-3/1482).

[11] Report of the Magdeburg task force, appendix to minutes produced for the politburo meeting on January 30, 1979 (ibid., DY 30 /J IV 2/2/1763, 22).

[12] Ibid., 31 and 75.

GDR party and state leaders were entitled to rescind agreements made with the *Bezirke* at any given moment, thus undermining the possibility for regions to effectively represent their interests at the complex consultations. While some regional representatives were occasionally able to assert their particular interests, the complex consultations nevertheless never acquired sufficient momentum to permanently alter the relationship between local, regional, and central institutions.

2.2 The Campaign "Construction work in Berlin by the *Bezirke*" (*Bezirke bauen in Berlin*)

East Germany's leadership would curtail the vertical devolution of power, and the potential autonomy of regional and local actors, depending on the significance of its political or economic objectives. This becomes apparent in the context of the "Construction work in Berlin by the *Bezirke*" programme which obliged all East German *Bezirke* to build housing stock in East Berlin. In this context, the GDR leadership pursued an uncompromising top-down strategy, backed with leverage vis-a-vis state and party functionaries in the *Bezirke*.

Since the 1960s, Berlin's construction sector had been able to meet targets set forth by GDR planners by deploying ad hoc measures, drawing on other region's resources. Such measures were never deployed as part of a comprehensive campaign, however. Occasionally and for limited durations only, resources were also diverted from East Berlin to support large investment projects in other *Bezirke*, such as the major building sites Eisenhüttenstadt and Schwedt in the *Bezirk* Frankfurt (Oder).[13]

2.2.1 The Programme

In the summer of 1973, a comprehensive decision by the politburo and a new law expanded the duties of the *Bezirke*'s construction sector concerning the SED's "housing construction programme" (*Gesetzblatt der DDR* 1973). Since its inception, the programme ensured that the GDR capital of East Berlin enjoyed preferential treatment regarding the allocation of building materials. It soon advanced to become the symbolic centre piece of Erich Honecker's policy of "economic and social unity," posing an unprecedented challenge for regional decision-makers and placing a strain on efforts to mobilise construction resources.[14] A subsequent politburo decision in early 1976 further emphasised East Berlin's unique status, stressing that its development is "of special im-

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13 Verbal statement by Harry Mönch, who chaired *Bezirk* Council Frankfurt (Oder) between 1963 and 1969, on April 4, 2014.
14 „Entwicklung des komplexen Wohnungsbaus für die Jahre 1976 bis 1980 und Konzeption zur Errichtung des Palastes der Republik in der Hauptstadt der DDR," decision by the politburo on March 27, 1973 (Bundesarchiv, DY 30 /J IV 2/2/1440, 14-45).

portance for shaping the developed socialist society of the GDR."[15] This decision was allegedly reached with "active participation from central and regional state bodies" which should underscore "that developing the capital into a socialist metropolis lies in the responsibility of the entire republic" and that "all *Bezirke* are providing support to realise this endeavour" (Morgenstern 1981, 93).

To guarantee this 'support,' it was decided by the early 1970s that "important investments in industrial construction and other areas pertaining to the *Bezirke* would be postponed until an undetermined date 'after 1975' in order to support the 'development of the capital city'." Skilled engineers were "deliberately settled" in East Berlin and "construction combines situated in other *Bezirke* [...] obliged to undertake a specific number of construction projects in a certain time period" in the GDR capital (Palutzki 2000, 304).

Moving resources from the *Bezirke* to the capital and trying to compensate for this loss caused major problems. Even greater problems resulted from the procedures applied to divert workers and building materials to East Berlin. Arbitrarily raised construction targets and a persistent uncertainty whether regional and local interests were respected, placed a permanent strain on the relationship between the administrations of *Bezirke* and *Kreise* and the SED leadership.

Representatives from the *Bezirke*'s planning commissions had suggested during the programme's implementation phase that resources diverted to East Berlin should also be tied a reallocation of investment funds from the industrial sector to the maintenance of infrastructure within the *Bezirke*. This suggestion was, however, rejected by the SED leadership which had decided to raise targets for industrial construction.[16] This meant in effect that the *Bezirke*'s administrations were granted no additional powers whatsoever to regulate the outflow of building resources from their *Bezirke* to East Berlin. They, in turn, had to pass the resultant resource scarcity on to the subordinate *Kreise* and had to accept the strict allocation of investments and the subsequent exacerbation of problems in the *Bezirke*.

In spring 1977, the *Bezirke*'s targets for undertaking construction work in East Berlin were further specified. It had been decided that until 1980 East Berlin should receive "over 15 billion marks worth of construction work, of which 4,4 billion marks worth of construction work will be contributed from collectives from the *Bezirke* and centrally coordinated construction combines." This investment sum encompassed not only housing construction but also "necessary construction work in Berlin's industrial sector, in transportation and

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[15] „Aufgaben zur Entwicklung der Hauptstadt der DDR, Berlin, bis 1990," decision by the politburo on February 3, 1976 (ibid., DY 30 /J IV 2/2/1602, 30).
[16] „Entwicklung des komplexen Wohnungsbaus für die Jahre 1976 bis 1980 und Konzeption zur Errichtung des Palastes der Republik in der Hauptstadt der DDR," decision by the politburo on March 27, 1973 (ibid., DY 30 /J IV 2/2/1440, 23).

infrastructural improvements" (5. *Tagung* 1977, 98). Thus, East Berlin was to profit from those exact resources that were denied to the *Bezirke*. This was justified with the capital's unique status, entitling it to preferential treatment.

2.2.2 Consequences

East Berlin's preferential treatment vis-a-vis the *Bezirke* soon also found expression in institutional arrangements. East Berlin's city council (*Magistrat*), was to coordinate the *Bezirke*'s building efforts in the city. In the mid-1980s the city council established a coordination task force to institutionalise a channel of communication with representatives from the *Bezirke*. The task force closely cooperated with the GDR ministry for construction to clarify all details and to denounce to the higher authorities those *Bezirke* which had failed to meet their respective construction quotas.[17]

There was no way for the *Bezirke* not to comply with these political, administrative, and technological demands. So they agreed to provide building resources, yet passed this responsibility downwards onto the *Kreise*. This largely robbed the latter of the means to engage in construction or modernisation efforts of their own, causing small towns and urban quarters in the provinces to fall into disrepair. This imbalance strained the relationship between East Germany's regions and the capital in the mid-term, overshadowing ritualistic references to the "vigour of the entire republic" which, supposedly, was manifested in the development of East Berlin.

A fierce conflict in the late 1980s between the Berlin based SED leadership and SED administrators in Dresden illustrates how severely mere mentions of regional construction needs were punished. In January 1989 Hans Modrow, first secretary of Dresden's SED leadership, pointed out the dire housing situation within his *Bezirk*, requesting a reduction of Dresden's contributions to building efforts in Berlin. This resulted in discussions and the dispatching of a task force to Dresden by the SED's central committee to investigate the 'causes' of the housing situation. The task force then published a report and the *Bezirk*'s leadership was summoned to Berlin and harshly reprimanded (Niemann 2007, 325-36).

This example illustrates how little freedom *Bezirke* were granted by the GDR leadership regarding construction efforts in East Berlin. This had a detrimental effect on East German regions. Wolfgang Junker, who acted as the minister for construction at the time and thus held partial responsibility for this situation, admitted on November 9, 1989 (the day the Berlin wall fell) that in hindsight requiring "*Bezirke* to engage in such intense and prolonged building efforts in Berlin [...] was a mistake." This excessive strain on resources had

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[17] Minutes produced for talks of the *Arbeitsgruppe Gesamtkoordinierung* (Landesarchiv Berlin, C Rep. 110-08/15).

"undermined plans for urban development in many cities." A "core problem," according to Junker, consisted in the leadership's view on "the construction sector in the *Kreise* as a permanent reserve [...], which could be exploited any time investments in complex housing or the industrial sector were behind schedule, or when the budget needed balancing." This attitude had "greatly undermined the population's trust in assurances made by regional councils" (Hertle 2012, 255-6).

Nevertheless, this account by a high-ranking functionary must not tempt readers to assume that the endeavour to undertake wide-ranging construction work in East Berlin was at any time ever seriously questioned. Instead, what this period illustrates is the simultaneity of construction efforts, the erosion of regional resources, and of administrative ties. The marginalisation of East German regions and disappointing planning outcomes significantly contributed to the collapse of the GDR.

3.   Local Practices

In East Germany's hierarchically organised system, cities, districts (*Kreise*) and municipalities (*Gemeinden*) faced very different contexts. The formal status of a municipality played a decisive role. A municipality that was subordinate to its *Kreis* could not, for instance, attract sufficient attention and labour force for its projects, whereas capitals of the *Bezirke* and independent cities were able to draw from their self-administered resources. There were a number of towns of political or economic importance that grew and benefited from exceptional funding. Yet over ninety percent of municipalities experienced above average demographic shrinkage (Ostwald 1989, 124; cf. Kress 2008, 237-77). The fact that investments were concentrated on certain focal points exacerbated inequalities. In general, mid-sized towns and large cities displayed above average growth. Workers and young families moved to industrial centres where jobs and newly built apartments were provided for them, while the elderly remained in inner cities and rural settlements. Here, shrinkage and urban decay were widespread. Socio-spatial inequalities in the GDR were said to derive from the historical development of bourgeois society. Paradoxically, when centrally planned programmes coordinated urbanisation processes in the GDR, new spatial disparities resulted (Bernhardt 2006).

After an initial period of structural and industrial programmes, under the rule of Erich Honecker, socio-political factors became the prime focus of territorial and city planning. After twenty years, immediate improvements had to be made. In 1973, the residential construction programme promoted the unity of industrial construction, on the one hand, and the maintenance of existing historic buildings, on the other. Notions of concentration and rationalisation put an end to the extensive programmes of the 1950s and 1960s (Boenisch 1982; Kind

1997; Kuhl 2015). The political leadership intended a new concept of territorial planning, a re-orientation in terms of urban development and housing construction, and a re-organisation of communal politics to improve the quality of life and housing throughout the GDR. The housing programme focused not only on East Berlin but rather sought to raise standards of living throughout the entire GDR, thus targeting all *Kreise* and municipalities. This seemed to be good news for small towns that so far had not benefited from state planning.

3.1 Growing Importance of the Regional Level

In the 1970s, settlement patterns that had evolved historically and existing buildings were considered crucial resources of and starting points for future structural planning (Urban 2010). Likewise, preserving and modernising the built environment was deemed relevant in rural settlements and inner city quarters, in which barely any new construction work was being undertaken. Territorial and state planning institutions hoped that a decentralised settlement pattern and strengthened links between urban centres and their surroundings would produce nationwide improvements. Nevertheless, most investments remained earmarked for the centres of the respective *Bezirke*. The new concept explicitly rejected maintaining and developing small-scale settlements, judging this to be uneconomical (Ostwald 1975).

The onus of development work was placed on *Bezirke*, *Kreise* and municipalities: On the one hand, they held responsibility for building settlements according to the plan. On the other hand, politicians, planners, and administrators could not one-sidedly focus on urban centres alone and were tasked with managing the entire territory, including those regions neglected by territorial planning programmes. Large building combines (*Wohnungsbaukombinate*) on the regional level were specialised in industrial construction techniques to be utilised in new development areas out in the open country. Conservation and maintenance in the inner cities were the principal task of small *Kreis* building companies. Yet after neglecting maintenance work for decades, they were completely overwhelmed by these obligations and unable to meet the new local and regional needs.

Since the 1970s and especially in the 1980s, central initiatives tried fostering local initiatives to compensate for a lack of resources. Municipalities were obliged to get crafts, small-scale trade and commerce involved in the construction sector, and to foster (private) local initiatives to engage in the field of renovation, repair, and maintenance as well as in the construction of private residences. During this time in particular, a compensatory function was ascribed to the local level. Municipalities were to encourage the local population to develop their own initiatives and to take an active part in the 'socialist democracy.' In addition to mobilising local support for state duties, the GDR

leadership sought to foster so-called territorial rationalisation though its programmes.

The concept that improvements ought to be made without using additional resources was hence turned into official policy. The state pursued a scalar tactic to delegate responsibility by re-structuring municipal politics.

3.2 Municipal Associations (*Gemeindeverbände*)

The establishment of the new GDR administrative structure in 1952 was accompanied by a political discourse championing the empowerment of regional and local bodies. The state leadership initiated numerous campaigns and reforms to improve the work of the administration. The aim was to grant regional and local bodies greater freedom in organising developments within their respective realms and for them to implement central directives more efficiently and in a self-responsible way.

An example for this were moves to strengthen municipal associations, which brought together numerous small municipalities caught up in precarious circumstances, with the intention of enabling them to effectively fulfil their respective duties. In 1974, the GDR Council of Ministers (*Ministerrat der DDR*) introduced municipal associations as a novel instrument for organising politico-municipal affairs, given that the GDR was made up of many small and shrinking municipalities at the time (Püttner 1997, 222).[18] Unlike West Germany, which reorganised local governance structures on a large scale, East Germany pursued a different approach. Beginning in the 1960s, it began fostering cooperation among municipalities, allowing them to fulfil their respective duties. This "socialist cooperation" (*sozialistische Zusammenarbeit*) was regarded as an evolution in socialist democracy and as a means to better tackle and "implement the municipalities' and economic goals" (*Gesetzblatt der DDR* 1985). Various different formats were chosen to pursue this approach: contracts were agreed upon between municipalities and local cooperatives, "purpose-oriented associations" (*Zweckverbände*) with clearly defined targets were established, as were municipal associations for the purpose of broad, long-term cooperation. The East German law from July 12, 1973 on local representation and related bodies decreed that the local level should address a broad spectrum of tasks pertaining to municipalities. Among these: fostering settlement policy, industry and agriculture, and "improving living and supply situations, repair, and other services, as well as cultural and social services" (*Gesetzblatt der DDR* 1973; Rau 2016).

The SED leadership expected that this "territorial cooperation" (*territoriale Zusammenarbeit*) would make investments and work flows more effective. As

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[18] „Entwicklung sozialistischer Kommunalpolitik auf Grundlage des Staatsratsbeschluss vom 16.4.1970" (Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Chemnitz, 30413_2/6804).

such, it was intended that certain facilities be shared among several municipalities at once. Similarly, it was intended that one municipality conduct road cleaning and repair work in numerous municipalities. It was expected that municipalities now act with a certain degree of autonomy. The notion that "local reserves" (*örtliche Reserven*) would be freed up evolved into a narrative that significantly influenced the behaviour of *Bezirke*, *Kreise*, cities and municipalities. *Municipal* politics was now equated with the politics of local services, aimed at fostering crafts, services, and cooperatives. This new politics was also associated with stimulating citizens' engagement and freeing up local reserves.

This idea that this particular instrument of municipal associations would allow the central government to task subordinate governance levels with implementing its strategies is illustrated by the example of a 'sharing of experiences' among municipal associations in Karl-Marx-Stadt (today's Chemnitz) in 1976.

Heinz Arnold, Chairman of the *Bezirk* Council (*Vorsitzender des Rates des Bezirkes)*, hence argued that working together was a means of increasing efficiency and was "increasingly becoming an inseparable aspect of municipal politics." The elements of cooperation and competition were emphasised as ways for improving the work of local bodies: comparing achievements and encouraging a "sharing of experiences" (*Erfahrungsaustausch*) among different municipalities and associations was intended to increase productivity and efficiency. It was claimed that contributing to this territorial rationalisation was not an end in itself but a way to improve the local status-quo:

> This process guarantees that the social life in every city and municipality will flourish, that citizens' political participation and initiatives in the context of participatory competitions (*Mach-Mit-Wettbewerbe*) will increase, and that varied cultural and sportive activities will develop.[19]

Starting point and goal of this process, from the perspective of the East German leadership, was to improve and rationalise administrative procedures, and to focus resources and investments. The focused use of funds and capacities towards the "harmonious development of settlements" was intended to not curtail the autonomy of citizens' assemblies. The process sought to empower municipalities to fulfil their responsibilities and to support citizen initiatives, like for instance regarding "individual housing construction" or maintenance efforts (Kintzel 1988, 57-60). Practical problems and programmatic targets were afforded high priority. Accordingly, Chairman Arnold stressed the significance of the housing construction programme for the municipalities by noting that the SED central committee had declared "that until 1980 all cities and municipalities must have improved living conditions through either modernising or building housing stock." Given that the *Bezirk* insisted on a concerted maintenance and modernisation effort to "reconstruct old housing areas in *Kreis* and medi-

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[19] „Gemeindeverbände 1976" (Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Chemnitz, 30413_2/14082).

um sized towns" using funds which had been planned and approved, the remaining cities and municipalities were forced to participate in the programme utilising their own resources. Local citizen initiatives, economic collectives and agricultural production cooperatives (LPGs) had to be directed to address the respective tasks accordingly:

> We are of the opinion that the councils must direct the after hour work brigades (*Feierabendbrigaden*) and retiree brigades (*Rentnerbrigaden*) in order to implement the measures according to the order determined in the long-term plan.[20]

Therefore, local bodies, from the perspective of central leadership, were not only responsible for realising programmes and measures determined by central leadership but simultaneously for improving local conditions. These processes were intended to be "linked to effective solutions to set targets, quick responses to everyday challenges, and to everyday problems. For this, potentials and reserves, as well as workers' creative capacities, must be comprehensively utilised and mobilised." According to Chairman Arnold, "ideological clarity and effective support from *Kreis* councils" would determine what shape these measures would take and whether they would be successful.

Following this logic, local bodies alone held responsibility for realising centrally determined targets using these new instruments of territorial reorganisation, along with their "creative labour" (*schöpferische Umsetzung*). Even though the political discourse regularly referred to local interests, obstinate practices and divergent strategies, which displayed too much self-will, were immediately halted on the local level (Lindenberger 1999, 2015). It was assumed, yet again, that local interests had been integrated into and found expression through GDR state policies:

> Solutions to questions in the interest of citizens and pertaining to their everyday lives, to life in villages, municipalities or cities must be found. Harnessing the advantages of socialism means achieving visible and tangible improvements in the lives of the people through cooperative efforts and by mobilising all available reserves. This requirement is no excuse for ignoring state plans or the principle of democratic centralism. [*sic!* LK] Fulfilling the economic plans decided by the *Kreis* assembly (*Kreistag*) has priority. If this has been achieved and if additional material resources remain, then projects on the municipal level can be realised.[21]

Fulfilling the state's plans remained paramount. Local projects could only be addressed if additional capacities could be mobilised.

These municipal associations exemplify the state's scalar tactic of delegating responsibility for territorial duties and local living conditions to subordinate levels (Kintzel 1985, 56). *Kreise*, cities, and municipalities functioned as a resource pool for the state's social policies by proving building resources,

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

utilising available infrastructure, and mobilising local reserves. However, *Kreise*, cities, and *Gemeinden* received neither additional resources nor powers to match these extra responsibilities.

3.3   Illicit Construction Work (*Schwarzbauten*)

Municipal associations were formed on the basis of a centralised plan to fulfil state goals. Yet subversive practices and unconventional approaches to address local issues also emerged, albeit without centralised state coordination. Illicit construction work that was undertaken in disregard of the official plan and instead in the interest of local actors, became surprisingly common and was often tolerated by the central leadership (Schneider 2001). The broad notion of "creative implementation" (*schöpferische Umsetzung*) was left deliberately vague by political leaders as to grant leeway to the local level, provided the (ill-defined) general interest of the people was not undermined. Knowledge of and solutions to specific local problems were a prerogative of local administrations. This strategy was widespread throughout the GDR and also encompassed informal negotiations as an element of the state's planning system. Such informal negotiations gradually became institutionalised as an element of state rule.

Illicit construction work matched functionaries' notion of local responsibility, helped achieve partial improvements on the local level, and in this sense helped precariously stabilise the overall system. Again and again, it was made clear to local actors that, due to the GDR's economic circumstances, not everything could be realised. The parameters of the planned economy rendered many projects unfeasible. As such, local initiates became increasingly important for *Bezirke*, *Kreise* and municipalities. After all, projects codified in the state's overall plan did not guarantee that all pressing issues would be resolved. Many urgent projects depended on the efforts of citizens, the administration and the economy to be realised. Consequently, local administrations grew more assertive, taking on greater responsibilities and developing managerial skills on the regional level. On an intermediary level, local administrations began considering themselves problem-solving agents (Bahr 2016).

In the following, three distinct types of illicit constructions will be discerned:

1) Prestige projects, which were mostly initiated by high-ranking *Bezirk* functionaries. Hospitals, hotels, and opera houses were built, cable cars modernised, ministers and combine directors brought onboard, services bought from abroad, etc.;
2) Mid-range projects such as renovating the external plaster of castle Augustusburg. This brought together construction functionaries from the *Bezirk* and its *Kreise* to realise a project that was not part of the state plan with resources provided by local cooperatives and partners;

3) Innumerable instances in which nursery schools were built, train stations were renovated, or city centres were spruced up by citizens and/or efforts of a municipality. These were genuine initiatives conducted in the context of competitions like "Making Cities and Municipalities beautiful" (*Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden*) and by after hour work brigades.

Nevertheless, projects of this kind always bordered on illegality. This applied not just to after hour work brigades who were often paid and worked off the books. Likewise, citizens' projects in support of their local municipality or efforts to build one's own weekend house could violate existing laws and result in punishment.[22]

Type 1: Representative projects in *Bezirk* capitals

Looking back, Harry Mönch, Chairman of the *Bezirk* Council Frankfurt (Oder) emphasised that he succeeded in implementing several important projects for the *Bezirk* in the 1960s. Among them, building a hotel in the *Bezirk* town Frankfurt (Oder) and a hospital in Rüdersdorf, despite very little support from central leadership from the start. Even though his initiatives did not comply with administrative principles, it all worked out given that the regional level was expected to mobilise resources and show initiative. With the help of Mönch's apparatus, experts, and networks, local projects were realised and approved. Mönch stated that "many things were achievable. We accomplished many things" and that the *Bezirk* held responsibility. In sum, Mönch noted that "we were in charge."[23]

Even *Bezirke* with an abundance of resources were confronted with projects that needed urgent attention. In the 1980s, the state's plan did not entail the modernisation of the opera house and cable car leading to the skiing region in Karl-Marx-Stadt. When both objects fell into disrepair, Chairman of the *Bezirk* Council Lothar Fichtner established teams comprised of actors from the *Bezirk* and sympathetic functionaries from central leadership, who were able to obtain resources through unofficial channels, to tackle the necessary repairs.[24] A major advantage consisted in the ability of leading functionaries from the *Bezirk* to tap into their political capital to draw on *Kreise*, cooperatives, and central actors to create project-based task forces and networks to address various goals.

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[22] „Schriftverkehr des Bezirksratsvorsitzenden mit den Vorsitzenden der Räte der Kreise und Stadtkreise und Oberbürgermeistern der Städte," 1968-9 (Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Chemnitz 30413/7210).

[23] Verbal statement by Harry Mönch, who chaired *Bezirk* Council Frankfurt (Oder) between 1963 and 1969, on April 4, 2014.

[24] Verbal statement by Lothar Fichtner, Chairman of the *Bezirk* Council Karl-Marx-Stadt between 1981 and 1960, on April 21, 2015.

Type 2: *Bezirk* and *Kreise*

Lothar Fichtner explained that he was able to gain the support of *Kreis* councils chairmen for projects of the *Bezirk* because he, in turn, backed initiatives dear to the *Kreise*. Under the auspices of the *Bezirk*, the façade of castle Augustusburg in *Kreis* Flöha was renovated, even though the plan did not call for this. The provision of scaffolding and workers was agreed upon at a meeting of *Kreis* construction directors (*Kreisbaudirektoren*), the *Bezirk*'s construction department (*Bezirksbauamt*), and other actors from the *Bezirk*. Initiatives like these hence depended on leading regional functionaries and administrative staff coming together to organise resources necessary for a project that had not been included in the state plan.[25]

Within East German regional politics, projects like these had an ambivalent character. On the one hand, party and state leaders depended on the ability of functionaries on the level of *Bezirke* to take initiative of this kind. On the other hand, regional and local decision-makers had to refrain themselves from finding too many additional construction resources as this would cause the state's central planning department to suspect that materials were being withheld deliberately.

Type 3: Municipalities (*Gemeinden)*

Citizens and political representatives took matters into their own hands elsewhere, too. In the village of Stützengrün, in *Bezirk* Karl-Marx-Stadt, citizens met to establish an expert task force to build a gymnasium, which had been demanded for years. The village mayor had not been involved in this initiative. The *Bezirk* council, however, reigned in this otherwise acceptable initiative, integrating it into state structures. It was decided that the initiative should be planned with support of the *Kreis* and then agreed by the *Kreis* council or by the council of *Kreis* representatives. Chairman of the *Bezirk* Council Arnold stressed that the idea was not to oppose the citizenry but that initiatives had to adhere to the state's framework and be subject to its control.[26]

In March 1976, *Kreis* Hainichen assembly decided to address local grievances, rather than merely adopt the economic plan, as was customary. Drawing inspiration from a campaign in Torgau, the assembly opted to add the creation of a nursery school for 72 children to the plan. This unexpected project could not be swiftly realised, however, as the building which was to host the nursery school was inhabited by numerous families. A replacement building for them was difficult to find, leading to the postponement of the ambitious nursery

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[25] „Schriftverkehr des Bezirksratsvorsitzenden" 1968-9 (Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Chemnitz, 30413/7210).
[26] Ibid.

school project. This, in turn, provoked the ire of the *Bezirk* administration, causing the *Kreis* council representative to admit that "we learnt that only well-prepared, scientifically grounded projects can be added to the plan and that spontaneous changes to the plan – no matter how well intentioned – will not be tolerated." Several months later, the town mayor wrote to Arnold that the "much criticised nursery school" had now been built with support from "after hour work brigades and the citizenry."[27]

When state functionaries and leading economic cadres met in task forces, resources at the disposal of central leadership were concealed, mobilised, or diverted elsewhere. Looking back, Mönch and Fichtner emphasise that if nothing had changed in their *Bezirk*, criticism would certainly have ensued. The central leadership expected problems to be solved. In fact, constructive efforts by council chairmen, which infringed against existing laws and contradicted the central economic plan and its procedures, later often earned praise instead of provoking punishment. Often such projects (like constructing or renovating hotels, hospitals, cable cars, opera houses, and nursery schools) were then inaugurated with central functionaries in attendance.

One's position within East Germany's governance structure determined one's options available to proactively realise such projects, as well as the requirements one had to meet to do so. Often, what mattered most was an actor's political capital, access to local networks and leading figures. Other examples illustrate that the strategy of "jumping scales" (Smith 2007) was successfully deployed to switch between different state levels to achieve specific aims. While illicitly constructed buildings were mostly built using informal channels, formal complaints (*Eingaben*) lodged by citizens or municipalities to East Germany's highest committees often helped solve regional problems (Werner 1996). Once central leadership had been alerted to an issue within a *Kreis* or *Bezirk* that was not being adequately addressed, this accelerated the problem-solving process. It was for this reason that local actors deliberately opted for this instrument if issues dear to them were not being processed as desired via the usual administrative channels.

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[27] Ibid.

4. Scalar Strategies in East German 'Democratic Centralism'

4.1 Politics of Scale? Agency in Vertical Networks and Administrative Culture Instead of Self-Interest

Local actors utilised networks to advance local interests. Assessing and situating such processes remains a matter of debate, however. In the debate on scalarity, Kevin Cox, for instance, has problematized the implications of "politics of scale." He instead prefers the terms "networks of association" and "spaces of engagement," which encompass several scales and premise a political model that is less compartmentalised in terms of space and scale (Cox 1998). His approach is helpful for grasping East Germany's politics, as it questions the notion of compartmentalised political realms on the local, regional, and state levels. A more contemporary understanding of the GDR as a system wherein state interests were vertically integrated and where project-based networks existed illustrates that political agendas, political influence, and the shaping of state policy, planning, and administrative efforts were not by default confined to distinct scales or areas (Marston 2000, 226).

Scalar tactics evolved within specific contexts. Programmes implemented by central leadership determining the duties of local bodies can be conceptualised as social constructs of subordinated state levels, as well as instances of politics of scale. Local tasks and instruments shaped actors' self-image. Delegating responsibility to the local level for local affairs formed part of the state's overall system of rule, serving as an effective means of integrating the local level into state governance. Spatially-oriented scalar strategies pursued by the local level were based on the demand and need for problem-solving capacities. It was not just a compartmentalised spatial and scalar orientation which determined goals, strategies, and practices. What mattered equally was the kind of political culture pervading the administration, which was marked by loyalty towards the socialist state (Kuhl 2016). While local authorities were concerned with their territory, seeking to solve local problems, they rarely questioned the legitimacy of the system at large. Instead, they were proud to contribute to small or far-reaching improvements under the given and accepted situation of resource scarcity. Regarding the tasks assigned to them, they enjoyed room for manoeuvre and various possibilities to improve their situations, something that was politically desired and intended to enable problem-solving on the local level. While they implemented central directives, local authorities – supported by networks and informal strategies – significantly contributed to East German urban development, which was framed by technological, economic, and widely acknowledged political parameters.

4.2   Structural Flaws as Limits to Scalar Compensation Efforts

In the hierarchical GDR state structure, municipalities were subordinate to and bound by central directives, bearing the brunt when resources were withdrawn from them to serve greater political, economic, or social purposes. This meant that resources were no longer available for local projects. Nevertheless, administrators on the state and *Bezirk* level subscribed to the ideal that municipalities should be empowered. This scalar approach to politics is hence an example for "(inter)municipal learning processes, representing a precarious attempt to reconcile supra-municipal challenges with the particular traits of various municipalities" (Luks 2014). Such attempts encompassed cooperative, divergent, and orchestrated strategies to tackle local issues, like forming municipal associations, sharing experiences, or holding competitions but also included engaging in more subversive or more informal practices.

While such practices did occur, one should not underestimate the limits to local autonomy in East Germany. Local initiatives could not rely on unwavering political support and urban development programmes determined how much leeway was granted to them.[28] Projects of great practical or symbolic importance could only be realised if specific conditions were met, and were dependent on local constellations and networks of individuals.

Building housing stock had been afforded highest priority, leading to a withdrawal of state leadership from central and comprehensive structural programmes, granting greater responsibility to local bodies to realise the housing programme in Berlin and elsewhere on the local level. While it had been declared that cities and municipalities would benefit equally from the housing programme, in reality resources were focused on political and economic centres in *Bezirke* and *Kreise*. This meant that some settlements and entire cities received no funds at all from the *Bezirke* or *Kreis*, forcing them to mobilise resources of their own to realise the housing programme. As such, centrally instigated programmes often depended on tapping into and straining local resources. In addition, centrally instigated programmes constituted the defining frameworks for all construction efforts and could not be offset through local initiatives.

By the shift of responsibility for local affairs to local bodies, the state systematically devalued local interests, as demands to realise local needs now could no longer be directed to superior authorities. Specifically, this devaluation of local interests consisted in the assumption that local interest should be met though the actions of local actors themselves. This increased responsibility was not, however, accompanied by reduced economic planning and fewer demands vis-a-vis subordinate levels. Rather, this merely implied that centrally

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[28] Verbal statement by Karl Joachim Beuchel, city architect in Karl-Marx-Stadt from 1974 to 1984, on April 28, 2015.

instigated programmes had to be implemented by subordinate levels at their own cost.

4.3 Chains of Command and Precarious Rooms for Manoeuvre

Against the backdrop of the precarious stability of the East German system, this article examined organisational models, practices, and limits to administrative action and planning in the GDR's vertically integrated governance structure. Central and peripheral actors' scalar strategies played an ambivalent role within this system: scalar tactics on the regional level simultaneously contributed to and undermined the stability of the overall system.

An approach that takes into consideration the interplay of different scales can methodically account for particular interests on the local level, efforts to increase participation, and mechanisms for generating legitimacy within East Germany's socialist polity. Informal strategies, the practice of 'jumping scales' and partial autonomy granted to the local authorities afforded some room for manoeuvre to subordinate levels. Scalar tactics pursued by subordinate levels yielded a certain leeway that often matched the interests of central leadership. Likewise, the state's scalar tactics were also successful, if to a lesser extent, as its interests partially overlapped with those of the lower levels. Contrasting points of departure do not account for the success of scalar tactics. Instead, influence gained though scalar tactics is better understood as the result of matching interests and productive negotiations within a scalar system that retained the ability to integrate different elements on the basis of shared political values and basic tenets. Thus, networks and scalar tactics can be understood not just as manifestations of particular interests but also as integral elements of East German governance. Networks and scalar tactics constituted an element of administrative culture, conformed to the notion of collective socialist work, and reflected the functionaries' understanding of their own function in the administrative system.

Scalar tactics were pursued within and outside of the GDR's command economy. Such top-down and bottom-up impulses were of a dynamic nature. Local problem-solving capacities lacked a stable framework, however: On the one hand, such capacities were supported by the higher echelons of political leadership. On the other hand, they were achieved on the local level by deliberately acting counter to the official economic plan and political procedures. Nonetheless, one cannot attest a strategic shifting of power towards the local level. Mid-level institutions remained bound to programmes, laws and concepts decided by central leadership (Werner 2015).

Regional practices and networks were able to address many problems in an assertive and semi-independent manner. This partial autonomy was only of limited use, however, as all initiatives had to conform to predetermined political programmes. They influenced matters of communication and determined

how everyday political matters were understood. The notion that planning was based on rational considerations strengthened the political power of the leadership vis-a-vis subordinate institutions. The SED's official stance carried tremendous weight – very little influence was granted to experts or local politicians to influence how the country should be ruled, how the economy should be run, and how citizens should lead their ordinary lives. Demonstrating unity did little to stabilise the system of rule in the long-term. Subsystems were restricted to realising state targets in various ways. Innovative approaches and fundamental improvements, however, would have required an open, honest, and radical exchange of opinions, as well as the willingness to engage with dissenting views.

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