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The Elephant in the Room: Problems and Potentials of the Workers' Party of Korea in a Korean Unification Scenario

Bong-Ki Lee & Hannes B. Mosler *

Abstract: *»Der Elefant im Raum: Probleme und Potentiale der Partei der Arbeit Koreas in einem koreanischen Vereinigungsszenario«*. This paper investigates how North Koreans today, after having lived under the rule of a particular one-party system, evaluate the role, performance, and potential of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) regarding future unification scenarios. This was done by analyzing survey data of North Korean migrants (N = 356) residing in South Korea, who serve as the best possible proxy for the North Korean populace. The survey comprises questions on the respondents' general assessment of and trust in the party as well as their opinions on the role and development of the party when they were still in North Korea and now; it also includes questions about possible modes of reform for the party in the case of unification. Normatively speaking, for peaceful reunification it would be desirable for the fate of the WPK to be left to the people and free democratic elections, like in Germany; however, the particular trajectories of Korean contemporary history, including the Korean War (1950–1953), loom over such a worthwhile procedure. This is also reflected in the results that show negative appraisal of and low trust in the party, and high favor for its forced dissolution, thus providing important insights into the state of mind of North Koreans, and an important stimulus for thinking about possible ways to prepare a smooth transition into a post-division era.

Keywords: Workers' party of Korea, North Korea, unification, North Korean migrants, survey analysis, Germany, Socialist Unity Party of Germany.

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1. Introduction

Political parties are central political institutions that aggregate the diverse interests of the people in a given polity and represent them in the institutionalized political arena. Their function is that of a conveyer belt, which translates people's wills into the political system's black box, and, thereby, they not only crucially interlink the system and the lifeworld (Habermas 1981), but also integrate society into a political community. While it is difficult to deny that political parties can have divisive effects too, in ideal terms they would have the effect not only of integrating society but also of legitimizing (the elected) government and, thus, the political system's stability at large. Despite the obvious fundamental differences, this is, nevertheless, true for multi-party systems in liberal democracies as well as for single-party systems in socialist autocracies. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that political parties' function of integration through representation also applies to more extreme cases of domestic conflict, including national division or the overcoming of such a fundamental cleavage. The role of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED; *Sozalistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*) in the unification process of Germany is one of the most representative examples regarding the alleviation of the alienation of the outlived system's citizens and, thus, for integrating people's hearts and minds (i.e., interests through representation; see Kang 2011, 72; K. Kim 2002, 47; Merkel and Croissant 2003, 310; Park et al. 2004, 75, 93; Pak 2000, 156; Song 2006, 275; Vogel and Best 2016, 347; Walter cited in Holzhauser 2018a, 614).[1]

Against this backdrop, this article empirically explores the facilitative potential of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK; *Chosŏnrodongdang*) in a process toward sustainable unification. Besides having served as the vehicle for heredity succession by securing the ruling power of the Kim family, like in many other socialist countries, the WPK represents the fundamental structure of the political system that permeates most areas of public and private life in North Korea (Pak 2017, 263-8). By implication, to understand how the North Korean people perceive this absolute state organization that reaches so deeply into society is crucial to our understanding of the potential role of the WPK in the future. Grasping the mindset of North Koreans regarding the Workers' Party is particularly relevant when when contemplating possible scenarios for change through reforms, as a precursor for overcoming the division of the Korean peninsula, if not an eventual reunification of North and South Korea. For at that

[1] Of course, at the same time, the authors cited here are well aware of the fact that, and point out that, the role of the SED or PDS had negative aspects too, and that an unconditional application to the Korean case is difficult, if not dangerous.

point, the role of the WPK could vitally contribute to a smooth and sustainable transition into a post-division era on the Korean Peninsula.

How do North Koreans make sense of the role of the WPK in the advent of Korean unification? To answer this leading question, we investigated how North Koreans evaluate the role and performance of the party in the past and present, and how they evaluate its potential for the future. In doing so, we surveyed North Korean migrants[2] residing in South Korea (N = 356) who – despite methodological difficulties (Jeong 2005; Song and Denney 2019) – serve as the best possible proxy for the North Korean populace. The survey is comprised of questions on the respondents' general assessment of, and trust in, the party, questions on their opinions of the performance of the party when they were still in North Korea and now, and questions about possible of party reforms in the case of unification. Whereas most survey-based studies on North Korean migrants focus on topics such as health, identity, employment, social life in South or North Korea, and attitudes toward the political system of South Korea (see An et al. 2018; An and Kim 2015; Cho and Kim 2011; Denney and Green 2018; Sung and Go 2014; Grzelczyk 2014; Hur 2018; Jeon et al. 2003; S. Kim 2012; Lankov 2006, Oh 2011), rather seldom research investigates their attitudes regarding North Korean political institutions, such as the WPK.[3] This is where the present study comes in by addressing the elephant in the room, thereby starting the difficult but necessary conversation on possible unification scenarios involving the WPK.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. We begin by introducing the genesis, change, and characteristics of the WPK to provide a general overview of the party and its function in North Korea's overall political system and society in order to understand its potential role in transition scenarios. Following this, we discuss the role of the SED and its successors in the German

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[2] There are various ways to name those people who left North Korea and eventually went to South Korea to lead their lives, such as North Korean "defectors" (*kwisunja*), "North Korean refugees" or "North Korean escapees" (*t'albukcha, t'albungmin*), "residents who escaped from North Korea" (*pukhan'it'aljumin*), and "new settlers" (*saet'ŏmin*), which all carry either some ideologically colored weight (see Y. Choi 2016; G. Choi 2018, 88; Chung 2008, 3-4; S. Kim 2012, 95-6) and/or are not sufficient in precisely denoting the particular group of people in mind. Others use "defector-migrant" (Denney and Green 2018, 1) as a compromise to encompass the notion of having turned one's back on a place negatively perceived by many belonging to this group, and who thus identify themselves by that fact. We decided to use the term "North Korean migrants" (*pukhan'ijumin*) because we think that it is the best possible objective, neutral, and precise way – at least in the English language, for an international audience, and regarding the research focus of this article – for describing this particular group of people.

[3] Of course, there are studies on North Korean society, culture, food supply, education, economy, and many more topics (Jeong 2005, 151-2), but attempts to shed light on North Koreans' perspectives of the WPK and its possible role in the process of unification have not yet been presented.

unification process, and then critically examine the feasibility of considering it as a reference for drawing lessons for the Korean case. In the next section, we explain the survey sample and its limits as well as introducing the selected survey questions that serve as a guiding grid for the subsequent main section in which we present the results of the analysis. We conclude the article by cautiously interpreting the findings, shedding light on the role of the WPK in the case of transition to a post-authoritarian state.

2. The SED in Germany as a Reference Case for the WPK in Korea

The ideal core functions of political parties in liberal democracies are to represent the interests of the people, provide participation opportunities for the people, and, thereby, contribute to legitimating the political system as well as integrating a pluralist society. In other words, political parties are crucial for practically realizing as well as maintaining stability and coherence of a democratic system and its society. This is why the role of political parties in the process of transition to democracy is a key element because it promises to facilitate a positive outcome if the transformation of political parties is successful. The transformation of the political parties during and after the unification process in Germany is a case in point, despite some fundamental differences between the two cases of division (see Maretzki 1994). Accordingly, this section first provides an overview of the WPK and its particularities and, second, briefly discusses the case of the SED as a reference case, including commonalities and differences between the two parties and cases.

2.1 The Workers' Party of Korea (WPK)

In general terms, the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) largely resembles regime parties of any other socialist political system – such as the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), or the People's Republic of China (PRC) – while at the same time featuring particular North Korean characteristics (see T. Yi 2007). The WPK was founded shortly after the establishment of North Korea's government in 1948. The WPK was an amalgam of various communist and leftist factions and parties that have existed since the 1920s as early communist movements on the Korean Peninsula. In 1925, the Communist Party of Korea (CPK; *Chosŏn'gongsandang*) was formed, and after the country was liberated from Japanese occupation in 1945, various communist factions continuously split and merged. At that time, the northern part of the peninsula was under Soviet military occupation, while the southern part was occupied by the US Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK). The CPK's headquarters was located in

Seoul and, in September 1945, was officially reinstated with Pak Hŏn-yŏng being elected as its chairperson (Sŏ 1995, 276-7). In October, a CPK's northern Korean branch office was established in Pyŏngyang; however, it soon began acting independently from its southern headquarters, and it was only a matter of time before it officially became a completely independent entity too. In early 1946, communist forces, which had been serving in the Communist Army of China, returned to northern Korea and established the New People's Party of Korea (NPK; *Chosŏnsinmindang*). Shortly afterwards, the NPK was merged with the CPK and that, in turn, was renamed the Workers' Party of Northern Korea (WPNK; *Pukchosŏnnodongdang*; Sŏ 2005, 177-8).[4] In late 1946, the People's Party of Korea (PPK; *Chosŏninmindang*) and the New People's Party of South Korea (NPP; *Namjosŏnsinmindang*) merged into the Communist Party of South Korea (CPSK; *Namjosŏnnodongdang*), only to be merged three years later, in June 1949, with the Communist Party of North Korea (CPNK; *Pukchosŏnnodongdang*) to form today's WPK. While officially proclaimed as an equal merger, the CPSK was in actuality absorbed by the CPNK (Yi 2007, 209-10).

Formally, the organization and its operations are based on the principles of democratic centralism, meaning a pyramid-like organization reaching from party cells, consisting of a few members, all the way up to the Party Congress (PCS), with more than 3,000 members. Lower organizational units are strictly subordinated under the higher organizational units, which have a decisional prerogative over the former. At the same time, all directing units are formally accountable toward the electorate and, overall, the principle of majoritarian decision-making abides. Nominally, the PCS is the highest body, with authorities such as electing the Central Committee (CCO) and the Central Auditing Commission (CAC), as well as selecting the party's chairperson (*wiwŏnjang*).[5] However, the PCS very seldom convenes; in the meantime, authority rests with the CCO, which holds sessions of its over 230 members at least once a year. The day-to-day operation and decision-making of the party is thus delegated to smaller organizational units, such as the Politburo (PBO) and the State Affairs Committee (SAC). The PBO consists of more than 30 members, out of which the three members of its standing steering committee have the actual authority for party internal decision-making. The SAC organizes and supervises all party undertakings, thus, making it the actual executive body guaranteeing the im-

[4] These developments that have occurred under the occupation of the Soviet Union and in the name of the People's Democratic Revolution can be understood in the same context as the forced merger of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD; *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*) and the SPD into the SED (Malychay and Winters 2009, 35) in East Germany in April 1946.

[5] Other responsibilities include examining the reports of the outgoing Central Committee as well as Central Auditing Committee, deliberating and enacting party policies, and revising the party's statute.

plementation of the party's enterprises. The SAC has fewer than 20 members who deliberate and decide on all internal and external issues related to the party. The National Defense Commission (NDC) is another core piece of the party because it supervises all policies and undertakings regarding the country's military forces. It consists of fewer than 20 members, most of which are selected from among PBO members. Beneath these high-level decision-making bodies, the party operates 19 departments responsible for diverse tasks relating to state affairs, such as industry, education, finance, economy, agriculture, and international relations. These are in charge of making sure that all respective units in government, society, the military, and industry follow the policies decided on by the party. To this end, the party is organized in committees operating at the levels of provinces, cities and counties, districts and villages, and party cells. At each level, party functionaries are dispatched to the respective decision-making units of government departments, social organizations, military units, and production facilities.

Besides some negligible satellite parties, the WPK possesses uncontested hegemony in the political and social system. Its organization permeates almost all levels of government and administration as well as production to ensure foremost control of the whole country. The WPK decides on policies, mobilizes resources, and keeps watch on all social organizations while the government organization has the function of implementing the party's policies as an executing body. To this end, the WPK provides four pillars to guarantee the North Korean regime's stability – legitimation, repression, co-optation, and funding (Pak 2017, 263-8). In actuality, the WPK functions strictly top-down with the undisputed power concentration in the position of the party's chairperson – presently Kim Jong-un. Chairman Kim is also a member of the PBO's standing committee as well as chairman of the SAC and – besides being the Supreme Commander of North Korea's armed forces – the chairman of the NDC. In this way, by occupying the most crucial nodal points of the WPK's power structure, the Supreme Leader (*widaehan suyrŏng*) is in control of any other organization in government, military, society, and the economy. In other words, the WPK is an organizational system that exists solely for the purpose of realizing the will of the Supreme Leader. This is achieved because the party organization is excessively centralized and bureaucratized, and the party itself permeates all parts of society from top to bottom (see Paik et al. 2007, 213-7).

While the overall adoption of the typical Leninist style resembles most other known socialist single-party designs and operations, its particularities become evident when regarding its function for enabling North Korea's particular leadership style: the sole leadership system (SLP; *yuiljŏk'ryŏngdoch'egye*). The SLP system is the essence of the "Party's Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Sole Leadership System," proclaimed by Kim Jong-un in 2013 to strengthen his rule by establishing that the SLP is an "ideological system and leadership system that makes the leader's revolutionary ideology the only instructing

principle and advances the revolution and construction under the guidance of the leader" (Kim 2013).[6] Kim Jong-un is explicit in what that means when he demands that

> The party's ten principles of the establishment of the party's sole leadership system should be put in place at every level of organizations to ensure that all functionaries, party members, and workers make the party's ten principles for the establishment of a sole leadership system their own bones and flesh, to their firm belief, and live and struggle according to the ten principles, no matter where and what they do.

Of course, what is meant is that every single person in North Korea has to obey the ten principles and live by them. In other words, the sole leadership system idea conceptualizes North Korean society as one organic whole with the leader at the top, and thus it demands total submission to and obedience of Kim Jong-un as the absolute and undisputable authority for the whole society. This is corroborated by him continuously idolizing his father, Kim Jong-il, and grandfather, Kim Il-sung, and their "great achievements" regarding the realization of the *chuch'e* and *sŏn'gun* ideologies that the people not only "must pass down," but also are required to inherit and complete (Kim 2013). This follows a simple but overwhelming logic that the ongoing revolution can only be continued and completed successfully if everyone adheres to the central ideologies and follows the orders and instructions of the central leadership figures, dead or alive (see C. Yi 2011, 221-33). The Ten Principles hold the strongest regulatory authority in the North Korean political system, and they even stand above the WPK's party statutes, the constitution, and ordinary laws and regulations. Only the leader's teachings (*suryŏng-ŭi kyosi*) can override the Ten Principles (Yi 2012, 92).

2.2 The SED in the German Unification Process

At the time of the East German Revolution in October 1989, many people in East and West Germany were worried that the East German Government would follow the Chinese Government's way of violent suppression as seen in the case of the student demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in June 1989. Egon Krenz, who had visited China after the Tiananmen incident, defended the Chinese armed forces' brutal actions against the demonstrators in a statement. If the East German Government had indeed resorted to suppression by force involving severe casualties, the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*) would not have been free from responsibility, and thus it would have

[6] This was a revision of the hitherto effective Party's Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Sole Ideological System that had been in place since the mid-1970s. See the appendix for the main articles. For an analysis of the changes and their meaning and implications, see Kang and Kim (2015) or O (2013).

been likely that, in the process of reunification, the people would have demanded its dissolution irrespective of legal regulations, which did not happen.[7]

There was controversy over how to deal with the SED, which had been the state party of the GDR for 40 years, but this never became a major issue mainly for two reasons. First, after unification, experts judged that the SED's successor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS; *Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus*), would either merely become a local, anti-capitalist protest party that maladjusted in the transition process, or a deficit party only supported by past communist bureaucrats; thus, once economic reconstruction of the former East German region was achieved, it would either soon disappear without the support of the people due to its political activities in the GDR, or be absorbed by another party, such as the Social democratic Party of Germany (SPD) or the Greens. And indeed, in the first general election after unification in December 1990, the PDS did not reach the minimum rate of 5% of the proportional representation distribution and, only due to an exemption clause, was able to receive seats in parliament according to its respective vote share (see Breuer 2007). Second, the SED procedurally accepted the new regime of liberal democracy, for example, when they decided to take part in the general elections, and when they agreed to the unification process. In early December 1989, the People's Parliament (*Volkskammer*) deleted the formally ascribed supremacy of the SED from the Constitution, and shortly afterwards – on the occasion of two consecutive party conferences – the party was renamed the SED-PDS; this included the declaration that the party irrevocably broke with Stalinism as a system. During this period, the party started to reform itself regarding personnel, organization, and programmatic contents. Afterwards, in early 1990, the party once again renamed itself, but this time only as the PDS. Fifteen years later, in the run-up to the general elections in 2005, it cooperated with the West Germany-based left wing party, Labour and Social Justice – The Electoral Alternative (WASG; *Arbeit und soziale Gerechtigkeit – Die Wahlalternative*), including heavyweight former SPD politician Oskar Lafontaine, and changed its name to *Die Linke*.PDS. After finally merging with the WASG in 2007, the newly formed party adopted the name The Left (*Die Linke*), which continues to exist today.

It is reasonable to assume that a forced dissolution of the SED, which had been garnering the support of about 2.5 million party members during the 40 years of East Germany's existence, would have led to protests, so it was appropriate to leave its fate to its own, and the electorate's, will for reforms. In this way, the SED transformed itself over time a political party that represented the interests of many people in the former GDR, thereby contributing to the quick and smooth operation of a democratic parliamentary system in a completely new Germany (see Kim and Hŏ 2014, 93). As is shown in Table 1 below, the

[7] See Pfennig (2011).

support rate at elections started relatively weak right after unification and has so far only topped the 10% line once (in 2009), but the overall trend is clearly of increasing support. For obvious reasons, this trend is more accentuated in the former East German regions; nonetheless, the tendency is similar in the former West German regions, and thus reflects steady support, if only by a small share of voters. At the regional level of the *Länder* (Federal States), the party's political and social relevance is even more pronounced, though it is less successful in the former West German regions compared to in the East German ones. In the latter, *Die Linke* is represented in all local assemblies; the party is part of the governing coalition in three cases, and even provides the governor in Thuringia.

Table 1: Polling Rates of the East German Socialist Unity Party of Germany's Successor Parties after Unification

Year	Polling Rate (%)			Seats in Parliament (of ca. 598)
	Nationwide	Former East German Region	Former West German Region	
1990	2.4	11.1	0.3	17
1994	4.4	17.7	0.9	30
1998	5.1	19.5	1.1	35
2002	4.0	16.8	1.1	2
2005	8.7	25.4	4.9	54
2009	11.9	27.2	10.3	76
2013	8.6	21.2	5.3	64
2017	9.2	17.4	7.4	69

Source: Bundeswahlleiter (www.bundeswahlleiter.de).

While the roles of the SED or its successor parties in the German unification process are not without their flaws and mistakes, the party's transformation and its effects have positively contributed to the overall process (see section 2.3 below).[8] It contributed to a relatively smooth unification process and a relatively sound post-unification development of party politics and political stability in Germany in general. Not only did the process involve democratic procedures, and thus let the people decide on the fate of the party, but also the fact that the interests of many people in former East Germany were acknowledged and given representation is important because it promoted the integration of hearts and minds.

[8] See Kim and Hŏ (2014, 94-107) for likewise obvious shortcomings of this development.

2.3 Utility and Commensurability of the German Case for Future Korean Scenarios

There is a wide array of literature on German unification and what lessons Korea can possibly draw from it, including the role the SED and its successor parties played in the process. The above discussion of the characteristics and development of the WPK and the SED showed basic parallels that suggest potential for relating the two cases. At the same time, caution is warranted for two reasons. First, it is not undisputed that the German case is a successful example of a political party playing a facilitative role in a process of social and political integration in the context of a national unification process, and thus worth emulating in the first place. Second, even if the German case can be evaluated as having been helpful rather than harmful for German unification, doubts remain as to whether it represents a reasonable reference case in respect to its commensurability with future Korean scenarios.

Regarding the assessment of the SED's role in the German unification process, the majority of research holds that the party's activities and effects were both hampering and helpful at the same time (Best and Vogel 2011, 2012 cited in Vogel and Best 2016; Kang 2011, 72; K. Kim 2002, 47; C. Park 2004, 75, 93; Pak 2000, 156; Song 2006, 275; Vogel and Best 2016, 347-8; Walter cited in Holzhauser 2018a, 614). For quite some time, the successor organizations of the SED continued with the former socialist autocracy's ideology, methods, and personnel, while now simultaneously being democratically legitimized by free and fair elections within a new political system. The problem with this, it is pointed out, is that it counters – if not contradicts – the democratic revolution and, thereby, the overcoming of the authoritarian regime. In addition, having initially only sufficient support to enter the institutionalized arena in the area of the former GDR, the PDS developed into a regionalist party that would have a divisive effect rather than one that would integrate the country. At the same time, however, many studies also acknowledge that besides potentially negative repercussions, the representation of these now partial interests is not only a necessary way of dealing with diversity and plurality in a truly liberal democratic society, but also helpful for integrating society by having a party that speaks and acts on behalf of a part of that society.[9] In other words, giving this minority a voice in the institutionalized political arena makes them feel less alienated from the new mainstream, and thus they are potentially prevented from resorting to other more extreme forms of protest, or complete exit strategies, which would have destabilized the unification regime far more than a forced dissolution of the SED would have. And last but not least, the party has

[9] Analyzing the cases of the German Greens and *Die Linke*, Holzhauser (2018b) demonstrates that this "domestication" of extreme or even anti-system parties can work well for a democracy.

developed over the past few decades into a critical leftist party with support in most of the regions of Germany and plays an important role as one of the strong minor parties.

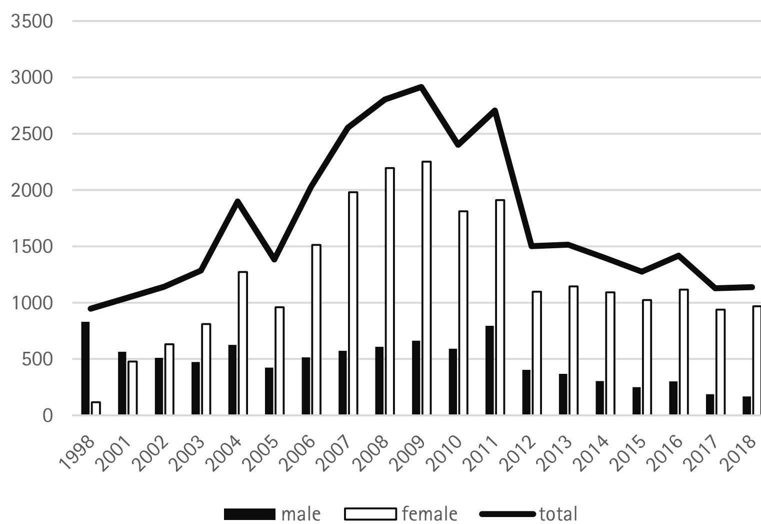
Regarding the appropriateness of the German case for drawing lessons for Korean scenarios, the literature is once again somewhat inconclusive. It is by now well-known that some fundamental differences exist between the cases which demands caution when referring to the German example (Kim and Hŏ 2014; Lee 2012). First of all, the conditions of the South Korean political party system are much worse compared to those in former West Germany regarding the lack of institutionalization of political parties, strong regional sentiments, corruption culture, weak consolidated democracy, and political parties' extreme organizational egoism, which make it far more challenging to support a unification process from a sound basis on the side of South Korea (see Merkel and Croissant, 304-5). In addition, economic conditions in North Korea are far worse than in East Germany at the time of unification. North Korea does not have the same degree of experience of democracy as East Germany either, and while East Germany enjoyed support from the USSR to the end of its existence, North Korea has been making every effort to make itself as autonomous as possible from the USSR and China (S. Yi 2012, 87-8). What is more, different from the East German bloc parties, no comparable parties exist in North Korea that could function as docking stations for South Korean parties in the transition process, which is also true regarding any other autonomous social or political organizations in North Korea that could possibly support building a new democratic political parties system (Merkel and Croissant 2003, 306). In addition, it is not only the experience and implications of the Korean War as a war between the divided parts of a nation that is yet another often-cited fundamental difference that has to be taken into account, but also cross-time differences – the fact that German unification has already taken place and exists as precedence as well as the different international constellations then and now – which can be instanced as discriminative indicators. Last but not least, the above discussion showed considerable differences between the WPK and the SED regarding their characteristics and political reach. However, despite these differences, German unification and the SED remain a viable case for cautiously drawing lessons regarding future scenarios on the Korean Peninsula, even if it is only to realize that there is hardly any other precedence one could think of as a constructive exemplar.[10]

[10] For a different opinion, see Lee (2012) who argues that due to the larger differences between Korea and Germany, a comparison with the case of Albania would be more helpful.

3. Sampling North Korean Migrants in South Korea

As of December 2018, more than 30,000 North Korean refugees reside in South Korea (Ministry of Unification 2019a). North Koreans usually leave their country by crossing the northern border into China, after which they spend several months or even some years in countries such as Cambodia, China, Mongolia, or Thailand before entering South Korea (see Figure 3.1 below). Before the North Korean migrants receive one-time settlement funds from the government and can begin their lives as newly naturalized citizens, they are thoroughly investigated by the National Intelligence Service for espionage and other crimes and have to undergo an obligatory three months of training at a designated government facility.

Figure 3.1 Yearly Numbers of North Korean Migrants Entering South Korea (persons)



Source: Ministry of Unification (2019b).

An opinion survey on North Korean migrants residing in South Korea was conducted in 2016 and returned a total of 356 filled out survey sheets which represent the basis for our analysis. The survey included 25 questions that asked for basic personal and socio-economic information as well as for the reasons for leaving North Korea and coming to South Korea. It also asked questions regarding membership of, opinions on, and trust in the WPK – both from when the respondent was in North Korea and in the present – as well as

questions concerning an assessment of future developments of the WPK in the case of post-authoritarian transition.

Most of the respondents arrived in South Korea in the second half of 2016, the majority of whom were women (n = 282; 79.2%), and with men being in the minority (n = 74; 20.8%). Regarding age, 14% were younger than 20 years of age, [delete: while] those in their 20s to 40s represented the largest share of 84.5%, and respondents who were 50 years and older accounted for 10.4% of the sample. As is typical for North Korean refugees, most of the respondents (81.5%) stemmed from the four North Korean border regions of Hamgyong-bukto, Yanggangdo, Chagangdo, and Pyonganbukto (see Hur 2018, 102-103; Denney and Green 2018). Former residents of Hamgyongbukto and Yanggang-do alone accounted for more than three-quarters (78.1%) of the respondents. In North Korea, most of them had been workers (34.6%), farmers (13.7%), or house persons (9%). Some were businesspersons (7.2%), and a share of 19.1% were unemployed. Put differently, almost half of the respondents (workers and farmers) belonged to the working class, and only 6% were professionals, employees, or teachers. Most of them received education until middle school (74%), while only 16.9% had attended a (vocational) college or higher educational institution. Similar to in other North Korean migrant samples (see Haggard and Noland 2011, 30; Hur 2018, 103), the largest share of the respondents (56.4%) said that their reasons for leaving North Korea and coming to South Korea were economic, while 23% quoted political freedom as an explanation. 'Receiving better education' (8.4%) was another rationale for coming to South Korea. As for the time that had passed between leaving North Korea and entering South Korea, 27.0% of migrants spent less than one year in a third country such as China, whereas about the same share, 28.4%, spent ten or more years in another country before they came to South Korea.

Against the backdrop of the above explanations of the sample, several limitations have to be pointed out. First, the sample's proportionate distribution regarding age, class, residency, education, and gender is not representative of the whole North Korean population. The most obvious difference is the origin of a major share of the respondents, almost all of whom came from the border regions. Even more obvious is the fact that these persons left North Korea because they were unsatisfied with their livelihood there to a high degree, which possibly distorts the sample regarding the questions on evaluating the WPK. Despite these shortcomings, this sample still remains the best proxy for exploring North Koreans' opinions on the WPK.

For the present case study, we selected the answers to the following questions for analyzing the sample's (1) evaluation of the WPK's past, (2) its present performance, and (3) the forecast of its future potential:

Evaluation of the WPK in the past

1-1. When you were living your everyday life at school or at your workplace in North Korea, what did you think about the WPK, which claims to be a party for the people's concerns?
1-2. When you were living in North Korea, how much did you trust the WPK?
1-3. When you were living in North Korea, who did you think the WPK was for?

Present evaluation of the WPK

2-1. When you think about it now, how do you evaluate the WPK?
2-2. When you think about it now, who do you think the WPK is for?

Projecting the future of the WPK

3-1. If North and South Korea unite, what do you think is the most desirable way to deal with the WPK?
3-2. If North and South Korea unite, what do you think is the most likely way the WPK will be dealt with?

4. Making Sense of the WPK's Past, Present, and Future

4.1 Evaluation of the WPK in the Past

The first set of questions is designed to find out how the respondents evaluate the WPK's basic trustworthiness, actual performance, and organizational purpose. Their assessment of the WPK can be understood as the basis on which the respondents form their judgment regarding the party's possible role in the future, which is discussed in subsection 4.2 below.

The first question (Q 1-1) asked how they rated the WPK's own claim of that they exist for the people and to facilitate harmony in social life at school and the workplace (see Figure 4.1). This question relates directly to concrete living circumstances, and thus judgment criteria are less abstract, assuming that answers can be given with less self-censorship. Only a small fraction of the respondents thought, when living in North Korea, that the WPK did fulfill its promise well (5.1%), whereas almost five times more respondents (27.8%) thought that the party was not living up to its own claim. Another 23.6% gave a neutral answer, saying that the WPK sometimes lived up to its promises, and sometimes not. More than one-quarter of the respondents (27.2%) abstained from providing an evaluation by saying that they did not judge the party at all, and just accepted it as it was. In other words, the North Korean migrants were clearly critical in their basic evaluation of the WPK party when they were living in North Korea.

Figure 4.1: The WPK's Performance as Judged While in North Korea (in %)

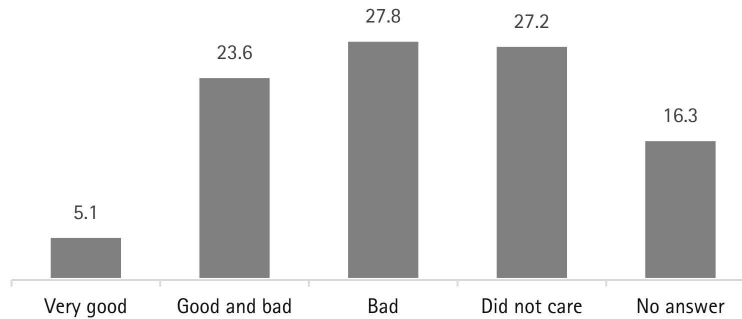
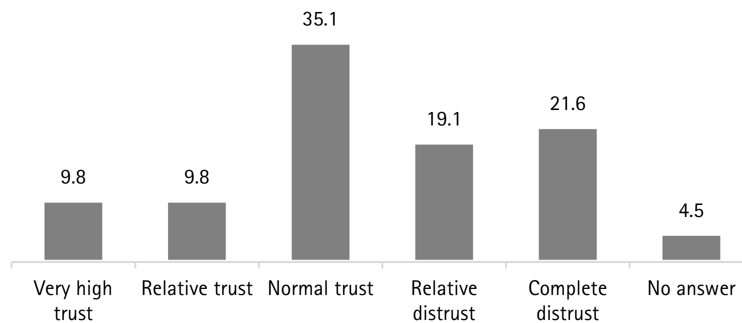


Figure 4.2: The WPK's Trustworthiness as Judged while in North Korea



The second question (Q 1-2) asked about how much the respondents trusted the WPK when they were still living in North Korea (Figure 4.2). Slightly more than half of the respondents (54.7%) said that they trusted the WPK, while 40.7% did not, reflecting a slight tendency to trust over distrust. A more detailed look at the distribution of the frequency of individual answers, excluding the rather neutral answer "normal," reveals distrust in the WPK ("did not trust at all" + "mostly did not trust"; 40.7%), accounting for twice as many respondents' evaluations as trust ("trusted very much" + "mostly trusted"; 19.1%). What this then means is that, when living in North Korea, a large share of the respondents did not have much faith (or none at all) in the WPK.

The third question (Q 1-3) was asked to find out what the respondents thought about the actual purpose of the WPK when they were living in North Korea. In other words, the question was aimed at finding out what the main reasons behind the positive or negative evaluation of the WPK were. Again, a minority of not even one-quarter (23.9%) of the respondents thought that the WPK existed for all or the majority of North Koreans. Meanwhile, the vast

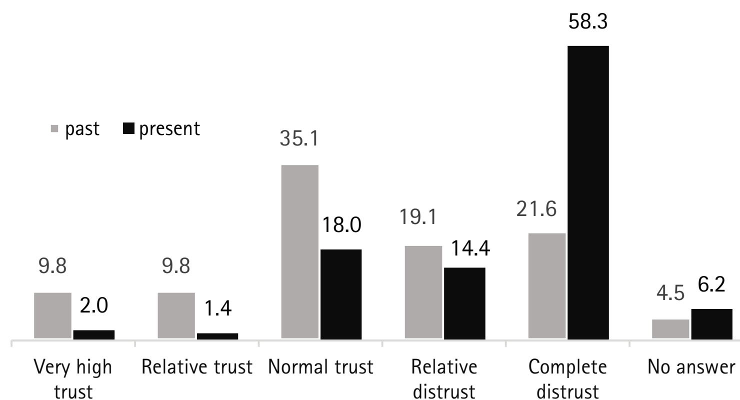
majority (69.6%) believed that the WPK's purpose was for a part of the elite or the Kim family only.

To summarize, all three variants asked about the respondents' evaluations of the WPK when they were living in North Korea, and the answers were all quite critical about the party regarding its performance, trustworthiness, and how it lived up to its claims.

4.2 Present Evaluation of the WPK

The second set of questions was on trustworthiness and the purpose of the WPK, but now asking the migrants for their current evaluation while living in South Korea. This way of rephrasing the question was to make the respondents consider possible changes in their assessments due to the differences in time and context. This is related to a possible future scenario in which North Koreans will have open access to information about the WPK and the freedom to form opinions on the party. Indeed, the answers reveal an even more critical judgment (Figure 4.3). "Complete" (21.6%) and "relative" (19.1%) distrust in the WPK (Q 2-1) almost doubled from 40.7% to 72.7%,[11] while "very high" (9.8%) and "relative" (9.8%) trust in the WPK shrunk by over 80%, from 19.6% to 3.4%; also, the relatively neutral answer of a "normal" level of trust almost halved from 35.1% to 18%.

Figure 4.3: The WPK's Trustworthiness as Perceived Then and Now (in %)

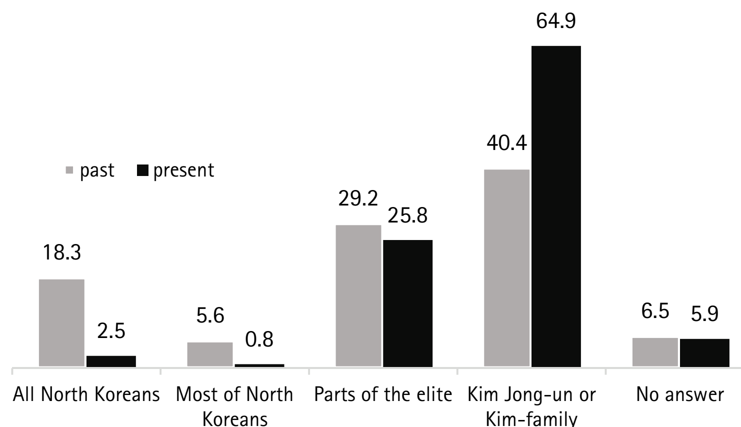


An even stronger trend can be observed with the answers to the question about whose party the WPK was (Q 2-2), where the total share of those who an-

[11] Here, "complete" and "relative" distrust accounted for 58.3% and 14.4%, respectively.

swered with "Kim Jong-un or the Kim family" (40.4% → 64.9%) and "parts of the elite" (29.2% → 25.8%) increased from 69.7% to as much as 90.7% (Figure 4.4).[12] Meanwhile, relatively positive answers, such as "most North Koreans" (5.6% → 0.8%) and "all North Koreans" (18.3% → 2.5%), dropped from 20.9% to 3.3%.

Figure 4.4: Thoughts on Who the WPK is For as Perceived in the Past and Present (in %)



Taken as a whole, the answers from the sample regarding the respondents' present opinion clearly point to a very critical evaluation of the WPK and do not leave much room for ideological illusions of the WPK by the respondents. At the same time, some of the respondents do not completely reject the WPK and still seem to stand by the party. For example, no less than 20.4% said that they presently trusted the WPK.[13] Admittedly, regarding opinions on the WPK's actual purpose, only 3.3% agreed that the party is for "all North Koreans" or "most North Koreans." However, even in so-called liberal democratic polities, there will be many who would rather answer that political parties are for "parts of the elite." In other words, while these results are telling in their clear critical tendency toward the WPK, there remains a small part of the sample that obviously still feels close to the party.

[12] Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that 86.8% of the respondents also said that they thought the WPK was "very" (47.5%) or "quite" (20.8%) corrupt.

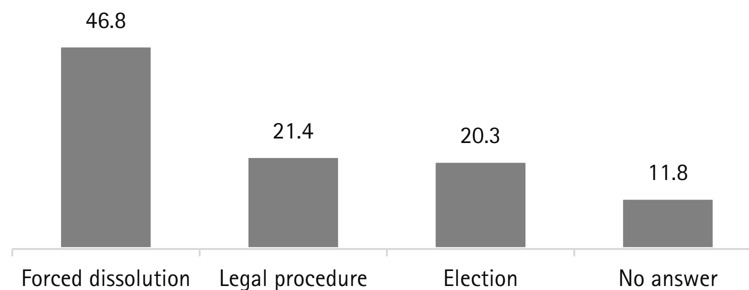
[13] This includes "very high" (2%), "relative" (1.4%), and "normal" (18%) trust.

4.3 Assessing the Future Potential of the WPK

The third set of questions is designed to find out how the respondents assess the potential and capacity of the WPK to play a facilitative role in the transition to, or under, a post-division regime. Their view on the matter can be assumed to be somewhat similar to the positions of other North Koreans, and thus can help to grasp to what extent it is important to deal with the WPK and in what way, once the present division is to be overcome. Respondents were asked how they thought that the WPK should be and will be handled in the case of unification. While the former question (Q 3-1) asks for a personal normative judgment, the latter (Q 3-2) asks for a personal forecast.

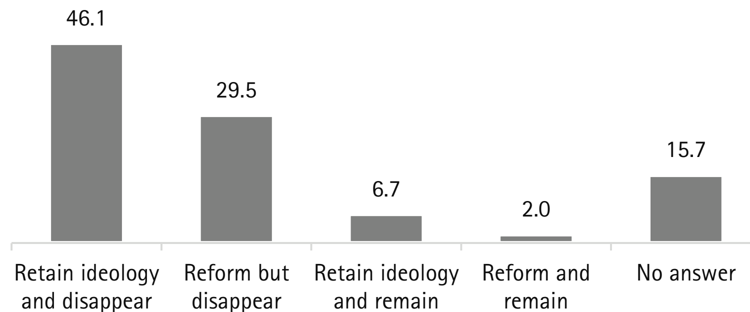
A relative majority of the respondents (46.8%) voted for unconditionally forcing the WPK to dissolve as a way of taking responsibility for its dictatorship (see Figure 5.1). Meanwhile, 21.4% wanted the WPK to be handled not by extralegal government intervention but solely on the basis of legal procedures. Another 20.3% opted for accepting the WPK as a legitimate political party and leaving the decision up to the people through elections. Put differently, while those in favor of dissolving the WPK forcefully accounted for about one-half of the sample (46.8%), the other half argued for a process based on legal regulation and/or natural selection through elections (41.7%).

Figure 5.1: Desirable Handling of the WPK in the Case of Unification (in %)



Relating to these answers, the second question asked what will likely happen to the WPK in the case that the party is not dissolved by force and its fate is put to the people. Most of the respondents (75.6%) predicted that the WPK will disappear due to loss of support from the people, either because the party will not reform (46.1%) or despite reforming (29.5%). Only 8.7% of the respondents thought that the WPK will continue to exist by sticking to their ideology (6.7%) or reforming (2%).

Figure 5.2: Likely Handling of the WPK in the Case of Unification (in %)



So, the large majority of the respondents do not believe that the WPK will survive in a unified Korea, regardless of whether the party does or does not reform. Regarding the way in which it will disappear, the sample is somewhat divided, while the largest share, in line with the overall negative evaluation of the WPK, advocates an unconditional dissolution of the party followed by legal procedure and selection by election. Again, these results present quite a clear picture of disapproval for the WPK; at the same time, however, a residual of at least 11.8% ("no answer"), when regarding the appropriate procedure[14], and 24.4%[15] when regarding the likely handling, do not straightforwardly join in on the rejection of the WPK.

5. Conclusion

The main aim of this explorative study was to understand how North Koreans reflect on the past, present, and future of the WPK in order to project its possible role in future unification scenarios. The results of the sampled North Korean migrants residing in South Korea indicated that the large majority of the respondents were critical toward the WPK's performance, trustworthiness, and fulfillment of its promises as a party for the people when they were still living in North Korea. This largely negative assessment by the North Korean migrants increased even more when they were asked to judge the WPK from their pre-

[14] While many of the respondents ticking the answer "election" (20.3%) may indeed have thought that the WPK would not survive free and fair elections anyway, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of these respondents may have been of the opinion that the WPK should be given a fair opportunity to prove itself in a liberal democratic system.

[15] This includes "retain ideology and remain" (6.7%), "reform and remain" (2%), and "no answer" (15.7%).

sent perspective, living in South Korea. Only a minority of the respondents answered the questions positively, thus confirming various other studies' results as well as commonsensically held expectations in regard to North Korean migrants' opinions on issues related to the North Korean regime.

An important reference for our investigation was the role and development of the SED's successor parties in the case of Germany, which had been facilitative to unification in the sense of integrating hearts and minds of an otherwise neglected and alienated part of society – those who felt and feel attached to the former regime and/or ideas related to it. Despite the apparent differences between the circumstances in the Korean and the German contexts, the basic ambivalent perception among the populace toward the former regime party's successors is very unlikely to differ much. While a large majority of Koreans will denounce and reject the WPK because of its dictatorial past and potential continuities in personnel and ideology, some will come to perceive it as one of the only ways to represent their interests in the new liberal democracy. The survey results indicated that even though the sample comprised people who deliberately left North Korea behind, not all of them completely rejected the WPK. A share of between 15% and 25% of the respondents do not completely reject the regime party, which is in line with surveys on how North Korean migrants adjust to life in South Korea regarding norms and ideas of a capitalist liberal democracy (see, for example, Chŏng 2016, 130). Put differently, in a unified Korea, there will be a strong, if minor, demand for representing interests closer to the former regime, which will have to be supplied in order to foster the overall integration of hearts and minds in a unified Korea (see Merkel and Croissant 2003, 310). Thus, it does not seem to be too far-fetched that, in a best case scenario of reforming the WPK in a Korean unification process – somewhat similar to the case of the SED in Germany – such a party could contribute to fostering the integration of people's hearts and minds as an important basis for and complement to integrating generations (Hofmann and Martens 2016) and the elites (Vogel and Best 2016). There are a myriad of preparations that are necessary to make for as sustainable a unification as possible, some more indirectly (see, for example, Mosler 2017), others more directly (Merkel and Croissant 2012, 307-13), which are related to institutionalizing and consolidating representative democracy. The issue of the WPK, too, should not remain the elephant in the room: an obvious and acute challenge that everybody hesitates to address because it seems so uncomfortably unresolvable. Against this backdrop, this article – despite its limitations – intended to contribute to starting the conversation necessary for considering future scenarios and possibilities before simply stumbling into history because nobody dared to break the silence.

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Appendix

The Party's Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Sole Leadership System (excerpt; 2013)

1. We must give our all in the struggle to model the whole society on Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism.
2. We must honor the Great comrades Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il with all our loyalty as the eternal leaders of our party and the people and as the sun of *chuch'e*.

3. We must make absolute the authority of the Great comrades Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il and the authority of the party, and defend it with our lives.
4. We must arm ourselves firmly with the revolutionary ideas of the Great comrade Kim Il-sung and comrade Kim Jong-il and with the party lines and policies, which are the manifestation of these ideas.
5. We must adhere strictly to the unconditional principle of obedience in carrying out the Great comrades Kim Il-sung's and Kim Jong-il's teachings, and accomplishing the party lines and policies.
6. We must strengthen from all sides the entire party's ideology and willpower and revolutionary unity, centering on the Leader.
7. We must follow the example of Great comrades Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, and adopt a dignified spiritual and moral look, revolutionary work methods, and people-oriented work style.
8. We must hold dearly the political life we were given by the party and the Leader, and repay the party's political trust and thoughtfulness with heightened political awareness and work results.
9. We must establish strong organizational discipline so that the entire party, nation, and military move as one under the sole leadership of the party.
10. We must pass down the great achievements of the *chuch'e* revolution and *sŏn'gun* revolution pioneered by Great comrade Kim Il-sung and led by comrades Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, inheriting and completing it to the end.

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