

Guenter Schabowski's Press Conference in the GDR International Press Center

9 November 1989, 6:53-7:01 p.m.

Question: My name is Ricardo Ehrman, representing the Italian press agency ANSA. Mr. Schabowski, you spoke about mistakes. Don't you believe that it was a big mistake to introduce this travel law several days ago?

Schabowski: No, I don't believe so. (Um) We know about this tendency in the population, this need of the population, to travel or to leave the GDR. And (um) we have ideas about what we have to bring about, (such as) all the things I mentioned before, or sought to mention in my response to the question from the TASS correspondent, namely a complex renewal of the society (um) and thereby achieve that many of these elements... (um) that people do not feel compelled to solve their personal problems in this way.

Those are quite a number of steps, as I said, and (um) we can't start them all at once. There are series of steps, and the chance, through expanding travel possibilities ... the chance, through legalizing exit and making it easier to leave, to free the people from a (um) let us say psychological pressure... Many of these steps took place without adequate consideration. We know that through conversations, through the need to return to the GDR, (um) through conversations with people who find themselves in an unbelievably complicated situation in the FRG because the FRG is having a great deal of trouble providing shelter for these refugees.

So, the absorptive capacity of the FRG is essentially exhausted. There are already more than, or less than provisional (um), that these people have to count on, if they are put up there. (um). Shelter is the minimum for constructing an existence. Finding work is decisive, essential...

Beil: (softly) ... integration...

Schabowski: ...yes, and the necessary integration into the society, which cannot happen when one is living in a tent or an emergency shelter, or is hanging around unemployed.

So, we want... through a number of changes, including the travel law, to [create] the chance, the sovereign decision of the citizens to travel wherever they want. (um) We are naturally (um) concerned that the possibilities of this travel regulation—it is still not in effect, it's only a draft.

A decision was made today, as far as I know (looking toward Labs and Banaschak in hope of confirmation). A recommendation from the Politburo was taken up that we take a passage from the [draft of] travel regulation and put it into effect, that, (um)—as it is called, for better or worse—that regulates permanent exit, leaving the Republic. Since we find it (um) unacceptable that this movement is taking place (um) across the territory of an allied state, (um) which is not an easy burden for that country to bear. Therefore (um), we have decided today (um) to implement a regulation that allows every citizen of the German Democratic Republic (um) to (um) leave the GDR through any of the border crossings.

Question: (many voices) When does that go into effect?... Without a passport? Without a passport? (no, no)—When is that in effect?... (confusion, voices...) At what point does the regulation take effect?

Schabowski: What?

Question: At once? When...

Schabowski: (... scratches his head) You see, comrades, I was informed today (puts on his glasses as he speaks further), that such an announcement had been (um) distributed earlier today. You should actually have it already. So, (reading very quickly from the paper):

1) “Applications for travel abroad by private individuals can now be made without the previously existing requirements (of demonstrating a need to travel or proving familial relationships). The travel authorizations will be issued within a short time. Grounds for denial will only be applied in particular exceptional cases. The responsible departments of passport and registration control in the People’s Police district offices in the GDR are instructed to issue visas for permanent exit without delays and without presentation of the existing requirements for permanent exit.”

Question: With a passport?

Schabowski: (um...)(reads:) “Permanent exit is possible via all GDR border crossings to the FRG. These changes replace the temporary practice of issuing [travel] authorizations through GDR consulates and permanent exit with a GDR personal identity card via third countries.”

(Looks up) (um) I cannot answer the question about passports at this point. (Looks questioningly at Labs and Banaschak.) That is also a technical question. I don’t know, the passports have to ... so that everyone has a passport, they first have to be distributed. But we want to...

Banaschak: The substance of the announcement is decisive...

Schabowski: ... is the ...

Question: When does it come into effect?

Schabowski: (Looks through his papers...) That comes into effect, according to my information, immediately, without delay (looking through his papers further).

Labs: (quietly) ...without delay.

Beil: (quietly) That has to be decided by the Council of Ministers.

Question: (...Many voices...) You only said the FRG, is the regulation also valid for West Berlin?

Schabowski: (reading aloud quickly) “As the Press Office of the Ministry ... the Council of Ministers decided that until the *Volkskammer* implements a corresponding law, this transition regulation will be in effect.”

Question: Does this also apply for West Berlin? You only mentioned the FRG.

Schabowski: (shrugs his shoulders, frowns, looks at his papers) So ... (pause), um hmmm (reads aloud): “Permanent exit can take place via all border crossings from the GDR to the FRG and West Berlin, respectively.”

Question: Another question also: does that mean that effective immediately, GDR citizens—Christoph Janowski, Voice of America—does that mean that effective immediately, all GDR citizens cannot emigrate via Czechoslovakia or Poland?

Schabowski: No, that is not addressed at all. We hope instead that the movement will (um) regulate itself in this manner, as we are trying to.

Question: (many voices, incomprehensible question)

Schabowski: I haven't heard anything to the contrary.

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Question: (many voices, incomprehensible)

Schabowski: I haven't heard anything to the contrary. I'm expressing myself so carefully because I'm not up to date on this question, but just before I came over here I was given this information. (Several journalists hurry from the room.)

Frage: Mr. Schabowski, what is going to happen to the Berlin Wall now?

Schabowski: It has been brought to my attention that it is 7:00 p.m.. That has to be the last question. Thank you for your understanding.

(um...) What will happen to the Berlin Wall? Information has already been provided in connection with travel activities. (um) The issue of travel, (um) the ability to cross the Wall from our side, ... hasn't been answered yet and exclusively the question in the sense..., so this, I'll put it this way, fortified state border of the GDR.... (um) We have always said that there have to be several other factors (um) taken into consideration. And they deal with the complex of questions that Comrade Krenz, in his talk in the— addressed in view of the relations between the GDR and the FRG, in ditto light of the (um) necessity of continuing the process of assuring peace with new initiatives.

And (um) surely the debate about these questions (um) will be positively influenced if the FRG and NATO also agree to and implement disarmament measures in a similar manner to that of the GDR and other socialist countries. Thank you very much.

[Source: Author's transcript of television broadcast. Translated for CWIHP by Howard Sargeant.]