

Now it's our turn, right?

Thirty years after reunification, some Germans feel that the country is as divided as ever. In truth, the East is just finally asserting itself

BY MARTIN MACHOWECZ

Over the past several years, there's one question that has dumbfounded western Germans as they gaze eastward: How is it possible that the whole "growing together" thing hasn't worked out, even more than 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall? Or, rather: Why are Germany's eastern states – the ones that once formed the GDR – still so different?

In 2020, the fact that much continues to distinguish East from West is hard to deny. A glance at election results shows that the increasingly radical right-wing extremist AfD party receives three times as many votes in the East as in the West. The leftist Linke party is also much stronger in the East than in the West. Yet people's attitudes in the East toward politicians, parties, institutions and capitalism are different and, generally, far more critical. Should we just accept that the East will never become more like the West?

No. This is precisely the wrong approach to the issue. For several years now, many eastern Germans have been asking themselves why on earth they should become more like the West. They have grown more accepting of their history and have even developed an air of serenity with regard to it, their nature and their origins. Their new-found approach effectively says: "We might indeed be the smaller and less developed part of this country, but we're most certainly not the worst part of it."

If we look a little bit closer, we see that it's this growing self-confidence on the part of eastern Germans that may actually lead to a more placid coexistence of the two Germanies. With a little bit of luck, Germany's future strength might just lie precisely in the differences between the country's two sides. After all, doesn't meeting eye-to-eye involve a healthy dose of confidence on both sides?

When musing on the fact that eastern Germans are different from western Germans, we must first and foremost consider that life in the East is quite different from life in the West – in both good and bad ways.

Let's start with the good. At the moment, eastern German cities generally look better than their western German counterparts, having blossomed over the 30 years since the fall of the Wall. Rents are lower and there are free and open spaces everywhere. Many eastern Germans would argue that eastern Germany is the more vibrant and attractive part of the country today.

But – and this is where things get difficult – it's also the poorer part of Germany.

To this day, there are significant income gaps between East and West (see chart on page 10). In recent months, one particularly unsavory example was revealed, when employees at Bautzner, a long-standing mustard manufacturer in the East, went on strike. Just like the famous Löwensenf, which is made in Düsseldorf, Bautzner belongs to the Devey Group. But employees living in Bautzner doing the same job – that is, making mustard for Devey – were being paid annually between €8,000 and €12,000 less than employees with the same mother company living in Düsseldorf. This phenomenon can be seen in almost all industries and at most large companies.

But no matter how much the West invested, they have argued, eastern Germans remain unsatisfied, ungrateful and have even begun voting en masse for populist parties!

Of course, the whole situation looks much different from an eastern perspective. The fact is that four million young and well-educated eastern Germans moved to the West after 1990. The sweat and toil of these young people contributed to western Germany's increasing prosperity in the post-reunification period. Ulrich Blum, the former president of the Halle Institute for Economic Research, once did the calculation and concluded that eastern Germans largely paid for unification

their colleagues from the CDU and SPD: If you don't change anything, the AfD in our states will become even stronger!

This explains why Germany's exit from the production of brown coal is now proceeding entirely in line with conditions set by the East. As all open-pit mines and power plants are shut down in the coming decades, roughly €17 billion will flow into the Lausitz region alone as compensation. Why? Because the economy there is entirely dependent on coal – and because it is also one of the regions with the highest share of AfD voters.

In the past 30 years, eastern Germans have done everything they could to attract attention to their concerns – and now, the AfD has delivered precisely this attention. If the other political parties seek to take the wind out of the AfD sails, the only way to succeed is to shine the spotlight more prominently on the East, to give eastern Germans a stronger sense of being heard and even to give them power. But anyone hoping to empower the East must be ready and willing to actually share power.

To this day, Germany's Federal Court of Justice, which is based in Karlsruhe, has resisted relocating a large number of its judges to Leipzig, as was originally intended in the Unification Treaty. Moreover, Germany's public broadcasters have refused to relocate key positions – such as editors-in-chief – to the eastern states.

Yet, in spite of all that has happened in recent years, there are still a number of good – actually, very good – developments to speak of. Eastern Germans no longer simply accept their situation as fate as they hide out from the developments around them. And, eschewing the Western slur for Easterners' "non-stop moaning" or *jammern*, they no longer moan and complain. They're getting more involved, mixing things up a bit, questioning a number of fundamental "truths." There is no doubt that the Federal Republic will have to become more eastern in the coming years. And if western Germans are smart enough to recognize the opportunities that arise when two sides meet on truly equal footing, there's no doubt that the 40th anniversary of German reunification will provide great cause for celebration.

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There is hardly any private wealth in the East today, and not one DAX company is based in the former GDR. Most of the apartments in major eastern German cities belong to investors from western Germany and the rest of the world; eastern Germans who own valuable real estate are an exception. According to a 2019 study by the German Institute for Economic Research, on average, eastern Germans don't even possess half as much wealth as western Germans.

Fundamental differences also persist with regard to the distribution of power. Germany has 106 universities and, at last count, only two university presidents are from the East. There are practically no eastern German court presidents – not even in the East itself – and a negligible number of eastern German chief physicians. Apart from Chancellor Angela Merkel herself, there is only one other eastern German in the federal cabinet. The heads of most major federal departments are western Germans, and Germany's army, the Bundeswehr, is headed up almost exclusively by western Germans. These facts bring us closer to the core of the East-West conflict, which remains fueled by a fundamental misunderstanding.

Over the past few years, many western Germans have continued to argue that they invested endless amounts of money in the East, opening up branches and production facilities in the East and pumping billions into infrastructure and city landscapes.

themselves, precisely by enabling this immense gain in highly productive workers for the West and by completely opening up eastern Germany as a new market for West German companies.

At the same time, eastern Germans began noticing a trend: despite our skills and strengths, our new bosses are reticent to share power with us, we don't have any access to wealth or property, and our political influence is limited, even if Angela Merkel – one of us – became chancellor and is now a major figure in global politics.

Taking all of these factors into account allows us to interpret support for the AfD as aggressive resistance to the political framework. While it's far from true that all AfD voters in the East are racists, right-wing extremists and unemployed persons, a party that is able to attract almost one-third of the electorate is obviously resonating among a broad swathe of the population. Over the past several years, the AfD has managed to give eastern Germans one feeling in particular: If you vote for us, you'll finally get the attention you deserve!

And, unfortunately, all other political parties must now admit that the AfD has kept this promise. Eastern Germany has never held as many cards in its hand as since the rise of the AfD and the values it embodies. Minister presidents from Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania to Saxony suddenly possess a form of political capital they can leverage. In other words, they can now threaten

A wound neglected

Understanding eastern Germany's shift to the right requires revisiting the moment its path forward was set

BY WOLFGANG ENGLER

Eastern and western Germany continue to drift apart in political terms, despite economic achievements (i.e., growth, employment, wages, pensions, etc.) in the former states of the GDR. While voters in the West are increasingly going green, voters in the East are leaning toward blue: the right-wing terrorist group NSU was based in the eastern city of Jena, the anti-immigration movement Pegida with its militant marches and unabashedly racist slogans has its origins in Dresden and Leipzig, the right-wing AfD party has enjoyed one electoral success after another, often winning more than 20 percent of the vote in the five so-called "new" federal states

(comprising the former GDR territory). Concerns are growing as to how long this situation will continue and whether it might even take a turn for the worse. What's going on in the East?

The prevailing and essentially western German narrative blames the GDR for the malaise, attributing it to the knock-on effects of the second German dictatorship.

After 1945, the argument goes, unlike the citizens of West Germany, people in the East stumbled from one totalitarian regime into the next within a short period of time. Both outwardly and inwardly, they adapted to the customs and norms of a largely "closed society," developing a collective habitus that bore unmistakably authoritarian characteristics.

After the upheavals of 1989, the argument continues, eastern Ger-

mans were unexpectedly thrown into an "open society," a shock to the system that prompted them to cling to their mental legacy as a means of coping and surviving. By doing so, however, they prevented their own inner arrival in the West, their integration into the "liberal democratic basic order." Their aversion to new things, foreign things and foreign people, their phobias, their latent and occasionally manifest racism – all of these, so the story goes, are expressions of the fact that eastern Germans continue to schlep around the heavy baggage that they acquired during the GDR and have refused to discard ever since.

The question arises as to why this toxic legacy was not disposed of over the course of the past three decades of joint eastern and western German history, or if

not entirely removed, then at least worn down a bit. This question is aimed directly at the ability of the new, post-1989 German society to win over eastern Germans and gain their support. The idea of avoiding this chapter in history by simply skipping over it as if it weren't worth a closer look – and instead stubbornly continuing to blame the GDR as the sole cause of the malaise will only exacerbate the discord.

To be sure, up until 1989, East Germans lived in an ethnically and culturally homogenous society. Its precipitation into economic globalization as well as cultural and religious diversity was often unsettling, and it led to defensive reactions that escalated for the first time in the early 1990s. The fact that it was mostly adolescents and young adults at

the forefront of these xenophobic attacks points indeed to the GDR as the source of the behavior.

However, as time leaves that era ever further behind us, the more problematic this ascription of blame to the GDR becomes. The average age of eastern Germans today is well below 50; most have lived the majority of their lives in a post-Wall world. Some of the people taking their conservative and right-wing extremist sentiments to the streets have actually lived their entire lives in the new Germany.

Anyone who insists on attributing the behavior and attitude of eastern Germans solely to the legacy of the GDR makes a three-fold mistake. First, they would be infantilizing eastern Germans by declaring their experiences since 1989 to be irrelevant, as if their

living conditions *after* the GDR have left no psychological traces whatsoever. Second, they would be guilty of a one-dimensional interpretation of the GDR's heritage, labeling it as a handicap and burden rather than as a legacy in all of its contradictions. And, finally, they would be justifying the mistakes and injustices that were part and parcel of the upheavals after 1990, which threw countless people either temporarily or permanently off track. The notorious disregard for post-Wall history, especially when looking for the root causes of the "susceptibility" of eastern Germans to right-wing ideas, does enormous harm to the process of unification.

To this day, the stories told by most of the eastern Germans who experienced the initial years after

EAST IS EDDEN