

# ***The Division Wall in Mind: An Analysis of the Continuous East-West Divide in Germany after Reunification***

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**Abstract:** German elections have attracted the attention of stakeholders from all over the world over the past few decades. This article will focus on the important role played by the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party in the German election process. German Alternative für Deutschland's support in national polls, as well as its success in regional elections, has posed an alarming threat for many Germans. Ruling parties and foreign countries have unanimously expressed their concern over this mass-based success, labeling it as the turning point of German politics. The paper will attribute the contrasting support rates in the East and West Germany to the lasting regional divide in economy, society and culture, and reveal the historical reasons behind respectively. There is no coincidence that the Right ideology is again gaining grounds in German politics, since the division period and reunification policies have both left irreversible impacts on the unified country, making voters vulnerable to AfD promises.

**Keywords:** German Alternative, Germany, German Reunification, east-west divide.

## **1. Introduction**

The 2024 European Parliament election in Germany brought the rise of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Alternative for Germany) into the center of attention. Securing 14 seats in the European Parliament, AfD captured 16 percent of the vote and became the second largest party of Germany in EU.

However, the rise of AfD is not simply a rise of irrational and radicalism. The major success of AfD also tells a story about Germany's internal divide that has never been resolved even after the Unity Day. From polling data, AfD secured twice as much support in the east than in the west, again drawing a division line on the German map, which coincides with the East-West divide. In fact, the divide of voting preferences and political choices unveils the deep-rooted divide in economy, society and culture. Instead of simply classifying the divide as coincidence or smart campaign movements, the main section will present the multifaceted divide and trace the reason back to history. It seeks to prove that, apart from the pre-World War II differences persisting, more than 40 years of divide widened the divergence, and the reunification policy worsened the situation between the east and west, which both contributed to today's economic, social and cultural divide. The following discussion part will deal with other possible, insightful factors contributing to the divide proposed by other scholars and prospects for Germany. The final section will summarize the paper and emphasize the importance of the research.

A Divided Germany emerged out of the post-World War II arrangement, when Allied powers met at Potsdam and decided to divide this strong powerhouse into four occupation zones, one for each allied nation. From the start, the Soviets ran their occupation zone very differently, leading to rifts between Soviet and western powers. Tension escalated into Berlin Blockade, and when Americans, British and French finally broke it, they decide to merge the territory, creating the West Germany. In October of 1949, the Soviet Union responded with the establishment of a Communist state known as East Germany. To stop further fleeing to West Germany, the Berlin Wall was built in 1961, serving as the symbol of divide. The reunification movement also started with the Berlin Wall in 1989 when it was demolished, followed with more cooperation and dialogues between the East and West Germany. The wall never really disappeared. What the East and West Germany agreed upon under that historical situation, was the resolution of accession. German Unification Treaty signed on 31 August 1990, provided for the rearrangement of the GDR's administrative districts into five federal states that would accede to the Federal Republic of Germany according to the terms of Article 23 of the West German Basic Law [1]. The underlying indication was that East Germany was dissolved, become part of West Germany, and subject to West German Constitution. Therefore, instead of saying two independent countries reunified after divide, doubts arose among scholars, stating that East Germany was "annexed" with West Germany expanding its territory. The way or the method Germany used to achieve its reunification has left unexpected legacy on today's divide which will be discussed in the following.

In the field of political science and history, there has been intense research around 1990s focusing on the process of transformation and the achievement of reunification. Scholars in the first few years after reunification have observed positive trends of convergence and predicted that there was hardly any possibility of two differing identities establishing themselves in Germany, and a distinctive east German identity would continuously loose footing. It was believed that through socialization and generational change, the divide would soon be eliminated [2]. Therefore, interest in this topic gradually faded away since 2000s, with the belief that the two parts would soon merge into one national state. In recent years, due to indications of an ongoing and even intensified divide as well as the persistent presence of AfD in eastern Germany, the topic regained academic and public awareness [3]. Research focus on political culture analysis, national identity formation and economic divergences. Analysis of the reasons behind this divide hasn't been the main focus, with scholars such as Manes Weiskircher, Sascha O. Becker, Lukas Mergele and Ludger Woessmann touching upon the topic. This paper tries to present the manifestations of the divide in various fields and explore the contributing factors of these divergences in a more historical and comprehensive way.

## 2. Analysis

This article approaches the question using qualitative methods. I collect data in the form of literature, texts, statistics and interviews from scholars and researchers, then analyze them by content analysis, thematic analysis and textual analysis, to provide a logical and comprehensive answer to the east-west divide. The research results will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Three pillars of AfD include anti-immigration, addressing inequality and evoking East German identity. This newly established party failed to sit in the Bundestag in 2013 when first established but won seats in European Parliament in 2014. In 2017, with the "refugee crisis" sweeping across Europe, AfD won 94 seats in German federal election and exhibited sharp divergence among regions. In 2021, AfD experienced a slight fall in the nationwide election but the state elections in Saxony, Thuringia, and Brandenburg, all territories of former GDR, had a remarkable success. 2024's European Parliament election with AfD becoming the second largest party, again signaled a robust return.

All the election results point to one concern: Why is there still an invisible division wall? Why does AfD hold such strong base in eastern Germany? Apart from pragmatic campaign policies, the

political preference is more of a manifestation of existing strong wall in economy, society and culture between eastern and western Germany. AfD wisely taps into those feelings shared by eastern Germans.

## 2.1. Economic Outcome

Top: According to data from Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, compared to 1991, the economic gap has been significantly narrowed. In 2019, GDP per capita in the east was at around 70 percent of the level in the west of the country, while the number was only 32 in 1991. Economic output is at 75 per cent of that of the west, compared to 43 per cent in 1991 [4]. Although a series of aid programs guaranteed an annual flow of net assets from the federal government to eastern states since mid-1990s, eastern Germany still struggles to catch up [5], fueling mass dissatisfaction. What factors are stopping the economy from progressing? The Soviet communist rule clearly made a difference. After reunification, a shocking fact was that labor productive capacity in East Germany was only one-third of the West and self-employment rate was extremely low in the east. The centrally planned economy ripped off entrepreneurship and productivity, engines of a prospering economy, and promoted reliance on government control. What's more, most of the capital stock of the former East Germany was out of date or unusable for production in a market economy [6]. The industrial base of economy Soviet Union left for East Germany was flawed and stagnant. The policy followed with reunification also contributed to the economic divide. Apart from large amount of helpful financial aid, federal government took steps to gain control of those eastern companies. It was conducted in the form of Treuhand (Trust agency) privatization, with often formerly publicly owned enterprises that cannot compete in an open, liberal market in communist Germany being privatized, which meant, being annexed and often shut down, by western German business entities [7]. For a few years after this policy, eastern Germany ranked first in de-industrialization rate, higher than other newly independent countries in the post-communist zone. The forced economic transformation led to increasing unemployment rate and mass emigration of younger generations. Ever since the transformation started in 1989, some regions in the east witnessed the loss of half their populations, mainly the young. Loss of labor force quickly led to the downfall of many rising industries. The increasingly wider economic divide indicated personal economic insecurity and public low productivity, all making AfD vote choice more likely, who drew attention to issues like income inequality, eastern Germany left behind and economic recession.

## 2.2. Society and Immigration

Aside from economy, it is the issue of immigration which separates the east and the west of German society most sharply. In 1999, registered violence committed by those from right-wing political backgrounds were substantially higher in East German than West German states. At the extremes, out of 100,000 inhabitants, in average 3.04 reported violent riots would happen in the state of Sachsen-Anhalt (East Germany). On the other hand, the Saarland (West Germany) was estimated to have only 0.19 violent acts for the same amount of people [8]. Many western residents still recalled the riots of antimigrant emotions prevailing in the east. According to an interview conducted by New York Times, Ms. Adomako, who spent her childhood in West Germany, shared her feeling with many peers who were still afraid to travel in the East, which remained largely white. The rising support of AfD in the east often coincided with government's lenient policies towards immigrants. A recent survey by DW showed that about 65% of AfD supporters considered AfD's critical stance on immigration as their reason to vote for the party, and this attitude was more prevalent in the east [9]. This discriminatory stance can be traced back to GDR period. Strong national identification with Germany and Soviet restriction policy on immigrants or outsiders led to a culturally homogeneous

population structure. Unlike West Germany, who experienced labor migration from southern Europe and Turkey after World War II, GDR remained detached to other parts of Europe, and only received laborers from socialist ‘sister countries’—such as Vietnam and Mozambique. Right after reunification, it was recorded that foreigners accounted for about 8 percent of the West German population, while in the east one can only find 1 percent of foreign residents[7]. Today, only about 5 percent of foreign citizens in Germany live in the east. The demographics of immigrants for the last few decades indicates that citizens from the east, especially elderly generations in the east have significantly less intercultural experience. And research on intergroup contact has demonstrated the crucial role of intergroup friendship and the explanatory power of intergroup contact in reducing ethnic prejudice [8]. Apart from a lack of cultural interactions, the dissatisfied emigration conditions for eastern Germans after reunification also fueled discrimination. With mass emigration from the East to the West in the years following 1989, some eastern regions faced serious aging problems, with young blood being attracted by the prosperous West. Residents in the East were wrapped in demographic anxiety which has sharpened the sense of a threat to identity. AfD’s statement of reviving the ‘East Identity’ is designed to answer to this urgent problem. Therefore, the anti-immigration stances of east may have more to do with hollowness caused by mass emigration than immigration from other countries.

### 2.3. Cultural Divide

The cultural divide refers to eastern Germans’ differing identities and values. Identity exhibits how a group of people view themselves in an integrated society. In the ten years since the reunification of the two Germanies, questions about German identity have increasingly permeated national consciousness. More than 60 per cent of the respondents said in a survey conducted in Saxony in 2018, that, ‘as East Germans’, they treated themselves ‘as second-class citizens’ when confronted with West Germans[10]. Similar recognitions are found in nationwide surveys. Surprisingly, the feeling of inferiority is not recognized personally, since Eastern German citizens generally agree in 2004 and still in 2019 that reunification was beneficial for them and the living condition has been improved. Instead, the feeling takes the form of a disadvantaged group—disadvantaged not personally, but collectively [11]. The reunification policy no doubt contributes the biggest share to the collective disadvantaged identity. The fact that East Germany had no say in creating unified German symbols, such as Constitution, anthem, flags led to the feeling that Eastern German participation was not valued or respected. And large amount of east German symbols was eliminated, from the demolition of the Palast der Republik in 2003 (Palace of the Republic) to the massive sweep of western brands and lifestyles. Shocking changes brought insecurity and Ostalgie to east Germans, who saw all social changes as unequal treatments of the West.

Cultural divide also takes the form of values mainly shared by Eastern Germans. Values encompasses a wide range of attitudes and opinions. One differing issue is no doubt a set of values concerning democracy. Some may quote the survey in 2020, in which researchers found that more than 9 out of 10 interviewees from both West Germans and East Germans considered democracy as the best and most suitable rule of state [11]. The result demonstrated strong consensus on democracy and democratic regimes. Then why Eastern Germans and Western Germans still differ in political behaviors and participation. The paper argues that 40 years of division has left more legacy for East Germans than a remote autocratic rule. For 40 years, people collected everyday experiences and received narratives in different political and social discourse. Socialist era was only history, but remains of socialism are perceptible among east Germans till today. A survey focusing on ranking political values, conducted a few years after reunification showed that those values promoting liberal democracy ranging from freedom, rule of law to democracy headed the list in the west and egalitarian values such as gender equality and social welfare were given less emphasis. East Germany had the

reverse order of importance, with equality in higher applause than liberal democracy [2]. East Germans may lose faith in building a communist regime long time ago, but values connected to socialism had deep roots in east Germans. Those egalitarian values subconsciously influence east Germans' voting behaviors when they stress on equality issues and applaud for AfD's policies of radically addressing inequality. Furthermore, social trust toward other people as well as the government is lower in East Germany [12]. Apart from the trauma brought by failure of communist rule, post-reunification arrangements worsened the situation of trust, when East Germans were struck by their deficit in representation in almost every top position in businesses, research, media, and the military. Distrust grew more prevalent when the current government could not solve the problem eastern Germany was undergoing, especially during "refugee crisis". The AfD, while doggedly stoking that mistrust, echoed with voters' need for an alternative to today's party in power.

Cultural divide is reflected in identity and values recognized by eastern Germans. The Cold War division and the dissatisfying post-reunification experience expanded preexisting divergence in German culture, making people recognize themselves as disadvantaged group develop a new set of attitudes towards democracy and struggle with trust issues.

### 3. Discussion

Since the end of World War II, the experience of division and reunification policy has had unpredicted impacts on economy, society and culture in today's Germany. Some scholars also propose the idea that the East and West German populations didn't even exhibit many similarities before World War II. In the paper written by Sascha O. Becker etc., data showed that people in what would later become the communist East were less likely to be self-employed, more likely to be working class, and more likely to vote for the communist party [12]. It is reasonable that East-West differences in reunified Germany cannot only be interpreted as an effect of communism and reunification, given the proof of convergence before the post-war arrangement. But this paper puts more emphasis on the experiences after the division period, which contributed heavily to the intensification of the preexisting situation.

The sharp difference in people's minds and voting preferences also suggest the power of narrative, which was always underestimated in previous studies. German citizens from the east received a totally different narrative during the division period, compared to their counterparts so they rarely have shared ideas on certain issues, which ripped off their sense of belonging. One of the most critical issues is antifascist movements. The denazification program was launched by the Allied powers after the end of the war by rendering those who had been members of Nazi Party powerless. In West Germany, the 'cleansing' progress was slow, because member from the Nazi still maintained positions of power in several important government departments. Denazification was considered as an impediment for rebuilding West Germany by the new West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer [13]. In contrast, East Germany was harsher in opposing Nazism, due to the personal experience of high-level East German government officials who had long ago claimed themselves to be enemies of the Nazi. From around 1958, things started to change in West Germany when more antifascists stood up and exposed the truth. Then the narratives of West Germany took a big turn with West Germans massively reflecting on their past deeds and atoning for their "sins". On December 7th, 1970, with West German Chancellor Willy Brandt falling to his knees during a visit to a war memorial in Warsaw, West German was conveying a powerful message of deep reflection to the whole world. This point of view left deep roots in several generations of West Germans, compared to East Germans who involved much less in atonement and deep sorrow. The difference of two kinds of narrative was reflected in people's attitudes towards the rise of far-right, which remained West Germans of the Nazi history. Protesters have expressed their concern to Vox, saying "the AfD has no right to exist, for the way they think and the hatred they stir up" [14]. While most eastern Germans tended to consider supporting AfD simply as expressing their frustration for the current government. The division period



inevitably shaped people's political narratives, leading to their contrasting views of the right and today's voting behaviors.

With the world news warning Germany of the return of the far-right, the voting results in fact exhibit the deep-rooted East-West divide that was usually ignored and not fully resolved. The unexpected success of the AfD may not be a complete curse, since it also exposed the problem in German society, when eastern Germans still suffered from their mistreatment and insufficient representation. The mainstream parties had adopted policies of competition, deterrence and cooperation, but none of those policies can utterly settle the concerns for the government. Recognizing the divide and seeking to collect the voices of the people should be the first step to take.

#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, the paper analyses the manifestations and reasons of today's East-West divide in Germany, brought to the surface by the electoral results in recent years. The rise of AfD points to the divide in political preferences, and unveils the deeper divide in economy, society and culture. The divide in economic outcome, shown in GDP per capita, income, and economic output can be explained by the Soviet rule and privatization method after reunification. The divide in immigration issues can be seen in people's contrasting attitudes towards immigrants, mainly due to lack of cultural interaction during the division and mass emigration after reunification. Culturally, the divide is much harder to narrow, with differing understandings of identity and values. Identity issues refer to the feeling of inferiority, being the result of reunification policies that showed no respect for East Germans. Values including attitudes towards democracy and trust, created by communist ideologies and dissatisfying situation after 1990. AfD wields its economic, social and cultural policies to fill in the void and manages to maintain a strong base in eastern states. Political behaviors are also representations of bigger issues hidden behind the surface. To understand German regional politics today, it is always crucial to lay emphasis on the divide in other fields and trace the history back to the last century for answers.

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