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THE PROCESS AND CONSEQUENCES OF EAST GERMAN SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AFTER GERMAN REUNIFICATION

Abstract
More than three decades after the reunification of Germany, significant differences between East and West Germany remain visible. The transformation process in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) left lasting marks across various aspects of life for its citizens and the inhabitants of the new federal states within the Federal Republic of Germany. This article aims to analyse the course and assess the consequences of East Germany's social transformation following reunification. It begins by outlining the theoretical framework underpinning the East German transformation, including key definitions, major theories, and prevailing research directions, alongside a brief overview of the reunification process itself. The central focus is on the trajectory and outcomes of the transformation, particularly in the social sphere. This includes examining issues such as unemployment, labour market challenges, wage disparities, demographic issues – including the emigration of young, skilled workers to the wealthier western states, and the resulting depopulation of numerous towns and villages. Additionally, the article explores the development of a distinct East German identity and the phenomenon of Ostalgie – nostalgia for life under the GDR – as well as electoral tendencies.

Keywords: German reunification; East German transformation; disparities between the federal states of the Federal Republic of Germany; East German society after 1990; Ostalgie

Introduction

The transformation process in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) differed in many respects from the changes experienced by other Central and Eastern European countries formerly within the Soviet sphere of influence. The reunification of Germany, which took place on 3 October 1990, was undoubtedly a historic success for the German nation, which had been divided for over four decades into two states with profoundly different political, economic, and social systems. However, uniting the two German states also brought with it significant challenges. In the immediate years following reunification, Germans were confronted with a range of difficulties stemming from the deep-rooted disparities between the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). In particular, the integration of two different cultures and mentalities posed a great challenge for both the authorities and ordinary citizens of the reunited Germany.

Even though the reunification of Germany resulted in the political and economic unification of the country, to this day, 34 years after the unification of the two states, differences between the eastern and western parts of Germany persist. These differences are multifaceted. They manifest themselves not only in the pace of economic development, but also in social trends. The territories of eastern Germany suffered greatly as a result of the transformation, which entailed significant social costs, particularly due to mass unemployment. Moreover, many former citizens of the GDR feel that a foreign way of life – imported from West Germany – was imposed upon them, and consider themselves victims of the unification process. They had expected the development of a new, common system, adapted to the conditions of a united Germany. Many believed in and hoped for a repetition of the 'economic miracle' (*Wirtschaftswunder*) of the Federal Republic of Germany following reunification. For many of them, the process of transformation in East Germany became a cause of disappointment and dissatisfaction (Dobrowolska-Polak, Jackowska, Nowosielski, and Tujdowski 2013, p. 7).

In the literature on the subject, the East German transformation is regarded as a 'special case' of systemic change through reunification. This process was described in considerable detail in both German and international literature during the first two decades after reunification. However, over time, interest in the continued course of this process has significantly declined and has not resulted in a broader body of literature. In particular, the consequences of social transformation in East Germany over the past twenty years remain insufficiently described and largely unfamiliar to readers.

In the professional literature, there are diverse opinions on the issue of social and economic integration. Many authors point to differences that continue to persist. However, the vast majority of experts in the field argue that significant progress has been made in the new federal states over the more than three decades since reunification. The disparity in living standards between the two parts of the reunified country remains noticeable. It should be emphasised, however, that over time, the lives of East German citizens have become increasingly similar to those of their compatriots in West Germany. The gap between eastern and western Germany has narrowed considerably.

The aim of this study is to present the course and assess the consequences of the social transformation in East Germany following German reunification. The main research hypothesis is as follows: the transformation of East Germany has left its mark on various aspects of life among former East German citizens and residents of the 'new federal states' of the Federal Republic of Germany. More than 30 years after German reunification, differences between East and West Germany remain evident. This article seeks to answer the following research questions: What was the process of German reunification like? What was the process of social transformation in East Germany, and what impact did it have on the citizens of the unified German state? What are the social consequences of German reunification? What are the differences between East and West in united Germany? Where do differences between the 'old' western and the 'new' eastern federal states remain visible?

The following research methods have been employed in the preparation of this article: institutional and legal analysis, comparative analysis, and critical content analysis.

Transformation – Definition, Theories, and Research Directions

In Central and Eastern Europe, following the collapse of the communist system in 1989, a profound process of systemic transformation was initiated. In each country within this region, the process unfolded differently, depending on a range of factors – primarily history and political culture, traditions, cultural heritage, and economic development. Nevertheless, a common feature of post-communist transformation was the shared experience of rejecting and negating the communist system and its legacy. The transformation processes were marked by their diversity and intensity, broad scope, and global context (Sakson 2009, pp. 7–8). The concept of 'transformation' can be generally defined as a process of change or conversion into something else, relating to various areas of socio-economic life and practices. Transformation is a process aimed at altering the existing order or system, and occurs under the influence of internal forces – including political, economic, and social ones (Kowalczyk 2019, pp. 9–37; *Transformation*).

In the social sciences, the term 'transformation' is understood as a long-term process of civilisational and systemic change. This concept is often accompanied by related terms used to describe the nature of these phenomena, such as: evolution, reform, progress, development, transformation, change, metamorphosis, and modernisation (Gmuła 2002, pp. 259–267). We are dealing with a post-communist transformation, understood as a specific form of major social change aimed at bringing about institutional changes in the social, cultural, economic, and political spheres. In the case of social and cultural transformation, this involves the building of civil society and the promotion of freedom and pluralism in culture (Hildebrandt 2006, pp. 10–22).

The side effects of post-communist transformation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe – including East Germany – included major social changes, characterised by the emergence of new forms of risk and threat. These included, in particular, rising unemployment and fear of job loss, the erosion of social security, a significant reduction in the welfare functions of the state, and increasing crime, including organised crime. Other challenges involved contact with ethnically and culturally different groups – primarily immigrants and refugees – as well as the deterioration of living conditions (e.g., a decline in living standards, the loss of prestige among certain social groups, persistent inflation, and poverty). Additionally, the transformation led to a new

perception of previously existing problems and a different approach to the memory of selected events from the past (Sakson 2009, p. 9).

From 1989 onwards, particularly during the first two decades, numerous studies were conducted on the transformation – also referred to as East German studies or integration studies – which analysed the reasons behind the difficulties in achieving genuine reunification. However, already by the mid-1990s, with the completion of large-scale research projects, the German mass media and a significant number of politicians began to promote the thesis that the systemic transformation had been successfully completed – despite the growing diversity within both parts of German society. The goal of unification had been internal integration – institutional, political, economic, and social. The progress of East Germany's transformation was assessed primarily in terms of the degree to which the 'new' federal states had adapted to the level of the 'old' federal states of the Federal Republic of Germany. From the second half of the 1990s onwards, comparative studies increasingly focused on this dimension. After 2000, more and more German scholars and politicians began to question whether further analysis was still necessary, and whether the phenomenon of a 'divided society' in reunified Germany continued to warrant attention from the social sciences. Despite a marked decline in interest in this subject, a small number of researchers – primarily from Germany – have continued to examine the consequences of this process. Their work has largely focused on areas such as economic and regional development, unemployment, demographic changes and migration, civil society, and cultural and political identity (Bojenko-Izdebska 2011, pp. 14–16).

Scientific and political assessments of Germany's internal unity – regarding political, social, and economic change – have evolved over time. Nevertheless, three main positions regarding the progress of integration between the two German states can be identified (Schroeder 2006):

1) reunification is regarded as a success, with the differences between eastern and western Germany perceived as marginal and merely reflecting the country's regional diversity;

2) differences in political culture and the emergence of a distinct East German identity are interpreted as an enrichment of the cultural landscape of a united Germany;

3) existing differences are viewed as fundamental, and East German identity is seen as a potential threat to Germany's democratic political culture (see more: Schroeder 2006; Zapf 2000, pp. 160–174; Reißig 2000, pp. 73–88).

The research was conducted on the assumption that the political, social, and economic changes occurring in eastern Germany were unique. This process has been referred to as transformation through reunification, which, in practice, meant that the democratic, institutional, and economic system of the Federal Republic of Germany was extended to East Germany through massive financial and personnel transfers from the 'old' federal states. In fact, more than three decades after the reunification of the two German states, it can be said that the process of institutional stabilisation has been completed. However, the same cannot be said of the economic system, social integration, and political culture, as differences between East and West Germany remain clearly visible (Bojenko-Izdebska 2011, pp. 15–16).

The West German political scientist Max Kaase, along with many other German researchers, shared the view that the transition theory – originally developed by Philippe Schmitter, Guillermo O'Donnell, Laurence Whitehead, and Adam Przeworski – could be adapted in order to explain the East German transformation. According to this concept, the transition from a non-democratic to a democratic system occurs in distinct phases. The first is liberalisation, involving the destabilisation of the former totalitarian system. The second phase is democratisation, meaning the institutional transformation of the system into a pluralist democratic order. The third phase is the 'consolidation' of the new democratic system. The primary aim of this theory was not to examine the underlying causes of democratisation processes, but rather to analyse their course in order to identify the problems and behaviours of the actors involved. It should be noted that some German political scientists also applied major contemporary social science theories, particularly the macro-sociological systems theories of Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann, as well as modernisation, structuralist, and rational choice theories. However, sociological concepts have sparked debate and controversy among many researchers studying the transformation process. Research in this area has been largely dominated by modernisation theory and the role of social actors (Kaase 2001; Merkel 1996, p. 32; von Beyme 1996, p. 142; Bojenko-Izdebska 2011, pp. 18–19).

The directions of transformation research have evolved over time as the process itself has developed. In general, German political scientists and sociologists – particularly Rolf Reißig and Raj Kollmorgen – support the periodisation of the transformation process in East Germany using a three- or four-phase model (Reißig 2009;

Kollmorgen 2001; Kollmorgen 2005). At this point, it is worth citing the classification proposed by these two scholars.

According to Rolf Reißig's periodisation, the first phase spans the years 1990 to 1993. During this period, the social sciences treated the transformation as a "natural experiment in accelerated social change" or a "great social experiment." Political science and sociological research often overlapped, focusing on the analysis of biographies, life situations, and social mobility within the former GDR. They also explored the dynamics of change at the intersection of the state, politics, and the economy – specifically, the establishment of political institutions in the new federal states, the development of party systems and political parties, political culture, the formation of political elites, and the construction of administrative and municipal structures.

The second phase, spanning the years 1993–1994, was characterised by a more cautious approach to the previously one-sided research on transformation, as well as the emergence of initial theoretical generalisations and the systematisation of observed phenomena. Researchers demonstrated that earlier expectations regarding the course of the transformation had not been fulfilled – the process proved to be less predictable than initially assumed – and that the differences between eastern and western Germany were, in many respects, deepening, primarily due to ongoing economic and social dynamics. In the third phase, at the turn of 1994 and 1995, a continued revision of transformation research took place. This period also saw the growing influence of the Anglo-Saxon academic discourse on transformation in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly concerning the phases of democratisation. The fourth phase, which began in 1995 and is, in essence, still ongoing, is marked by a focus on theoretical analysis and studies approached from historical and comparative perspectives, both internationally and regionally. Today, research is primarily concentrated on regional studies (Reißig 2009; Bojenko-Izdebska 2011, pp. 19–27).

According to Raj Kollmorgen, the transformation process can be divided into four phases, with a slightly different timeframe than that proposed by Reißig. He termed the first phase "Beginning and Enthusiasm," covering the years 1989–1991/1992. This period was marked by surprise, euphoria, and hope for rapid academic engagement with the East German transformation – primarily through case studies and empirical research. The main focus of this research was to explain: the causes and course of the collapse of the political and economic system in the former GDR; the turning point and the

specific nature of the German case; systemic changes and institutional aspects of transformation through reunification; electoral attitudes; value systems and political orientations; and the consequences of social and economic change in areas such as the market, employment, and social security.

The second phase, "Boom and Turn," occurred between 1992 and 1996. It was characterised by extensive empirical research, analytical debate, and a growing interest in theoretical frameworks. During this period, research initiated in the first phase was continued, with a particular emphasis on topics such as the transfer of institutions and elites from West Germany, demographic dynamics, and sociocultural change – including the deepening of social inequalities and intra-German cultural and identity conflicts.

The third phase, "Fall and Harvest," covered the years 1996–1999. During this period, the largest multi-year research projects were completed, and funding for further research was significantly reduced. Alongside the continuation of earlier studies, a paradigm shift took place. Research interest shifted towards recognising and explaining the socio-cultural specificity of the former GDR, as well as political and economic issues in the context of the activities of key actors and institutions. There was also an increasing tendency to examine the problems facing eastern Germany in relation to broader changes occurring throughout the society of reunified Germany and in the context of global transformations taking place across Europe and the world.

The fourth phase, referred to as "The End of Exceptionalism and Reorientation," began around 1999–2000 and essentially continues to this day. In connection with the tenth anniversary of German reunification, this period witnessed intense debate about the reunification process and the transformation, accompanied by the publication of numerous summary works on the subject. Since 2000, research has increasingly focused on the broader issues of post-socialist transformation, while new impulses and perspectives on East German matters have also emerged (Kollmorgen 2001, pp. 4–18; Kollmorgen 2005; Bojenko-Izdebska 2011, pp. 27–29).

Reunification of Germany

After Germany's defeat in World War II and the fall of the National Socialist dictatorship, the German state, including its capital Berlin, was divided into four occupation zones. On 23 May 1949, the Federal

Republic of Germany, with its capital in Bonn, was established from the British, American, and French occupation zones. Later that year, on 7 October, the German Democratic Republic was established in the Soviet occupation zone and remained dependent on the Soviet Union. The eastern part of Berlin became the capital of the GDR. Due to the numerous escapes of GDR citizens to West Berlin – which served as the gateway to the Federal Republic of Germany – the East German government began constructing the Berlin Wall in 1961 (Jaskułowski 2010, p. 17). This contributed to the deepening division of Germany and the isolation of the East German state. The Berlin Wall became a symbol not only of Germany's division and the border separating the GDR and the FRG, but also of the broader Cold War.

Democratic changes in Central and Eastern Europe, coupled with the perestroika reforms in the Soviet Union, provided the citizens of the GDR with an opportunity to demand their rights. In East Germany, mass demonstrations began on 4 September 1989. Demonstrations took place every Monday in many cities. Thousands of people demanded the unification of the two German societies, divided by the decisions of the Allies, carrying the slogan "Wir sind ein Volk" (We are one people) on their lips and banners, as well as an end to the rule of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany and the freedom to travel to the Federal Republic of Germany without restrictions (Fiszer 1996, p. 73). Demands for radical political and social changes, as well as for the unity of Germany, were growing. On 9 November 1989, the borders were opened, and the Berlin Wall was breached. The citizens of the GDR then called for the annexation of their country by the Federal Republic of Germany and immediate material aid from the West (Jaskułowski 2007, pp. 213–266).

On 28 November 1989, the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Helmut Kohl, announced a ten-point plan for the reunification of the two German states in the Bundestag.

Among other measures, this plan led to the implementation of the monetary, economic, and social union agreement in July 1990. The East German mark was replaced by the West German mark (Cziomer 2011, pp. 235–238). However, with the consent of the world powers at the Moscow "Two Plus Four" conference, an agreement was signed to regulate the issue of German reunification. Following the Unification Treaty of 31 August, Germany was officially reunified on 3 October 1990. Officially, the GDR, together with the four sectors of Berlin, joined the Federal Republic of Germany. Berlin became the capital of the unified state. Pursuant to Article 23 of the Basic Law for West

Germany, this law came into force in the new federal states following their accession to the Federal Republic of Germany (Fiszer 1996, pp. 73–74).

Unification became a fact. With it began the difficult process of integrating the two German states – a long and complex endeavour to merge the structures of the rich, developed, democratic West with the poor and underdeveloped, post-communist East. This involved implementing West German institutions as well as political, social, and economic systems in East Germany. The democratisation of the eastern part of Germany began, along with the process of reducing the differences in economic development and living standards between the eastern and western German federal states (Jaskułowski 2010, pp. 470–471).

The reunification of Germany, the unification of the GDR with the FRG, is widely regarded as a major success with profound historical significance for the political landscape of Europe and the German economy. However, many former GDR citizens do not look back on the transformation of East Germany with fondness, and to this day some feel like 'second-class citizens,' disappointed and unfulfilled by the realities of life in a united Germany. As a result of the transformation, social, economic, and political changes in East Germany were particularly rapid and radical. The inhabitants of East Germany had to face the consequences of these changes and adapt to new political, economic, and social conditions. The transformation caused a social shock. While East German society accepted the adoption of democratic state structures from the Federal Republic of Germany without major problems, the introduction of West German economic and social systems met with considerable difficulties and was often poorly received. They had to assimilate principles from previously unfamiliar legal, economic, social, and political systems. Many inhabitants of the former GDR considered (and some still consider) these changes as complete submission to the principles of 'reunification' dictated by the authorities of the 'old' Federal Republic of Germany, without the possibility of creating new, common systemic rules (Sakson 2009, p. 10; Oschmann 2024).

Helmut Kohl, known as the "Chancellor of Reunification," aimed to transform the former GDR into "flourishing landscapes." However, the transformation in East Germany did not proceed as quickly as expected. As a result, the costs of unification proved to be much higher than initially anticipated. The FRD authorities mistakenly

assumed that the political and economic system would function as smoothly in the 'new' federal states as it did in the 'old' Federal Republic of Germany shortly after incorporation. The first signs of economic and social crisis appeared rapidly – budget deficits, slowing economic growth, deterioration of the demographic structure of German society, rising unemployment, depopulation, and so forth. Appropriate reforms to adapt the economic and social system to the new conditions were not implemented promptly. Only the most necessary, yet insufficient, changes were made. All of this impacted the social conditions of the inhabitants of eastern Germany.

Transformation in East Germany and its Consequences – Differences Between East and West in United Germany

The period of World War II and the post-war years was marked by very significant and diametrically opposed changes in the structure of German society, including the division of the state and huge waves of migration. As a consequence, two separate German societies were formed. The two German states developed fundamentally different political, economic, and social systems. West Germany experienced dynamic economic growth during the 1950s and 1960s. It was a time of prosperity for the Federal Republic of Germany and its society, with a noticeable reduction in inequality and poverty. However, in the German Democratic Republic, as in other communist countries, there was significant economic backwardness compared to the Federal Republic of Germany (Geißler 2006).

In the early 1990s, following the reunification of the German state, Germany faced an economic and social crisis. As a result of the economic and ownership transformations that accompanied unification, East German society shifted from an industrial working-class society (a 'worker-peasant' society) into one in which the majority of people worked in the service sector. About 65% of economically active people living in the former GDR (a slightly higher percentage than in the 'old' FRG) work in the service sector. In the second half of the first decade of the 21st century, more people in western Germany than in eastern Germany considered themselves to be part of the upper class. This proportion remains similar to this day. There are still clear differences in the distribution of the middle and working classes between the two parts of Germany. From a temporal perspective, the

upper and middle classes are growing in eastern Germany, while in western Germany there is a tendency in the opposite direction – that is, subjective identification with the upper and middle social classes is decreasing (Nowosielski 2013, pp. 19–28; Ahde 2008, pp. 61–66). Despite these differences, Agnieszka Łada believes that German society is slowly becoming more unified. The education system plays a significant role in this regard: "The older generation, raised in the previous system, differs significantly in this respect and cannot be changed so easily. […] The next generations of Germans will certainly become increasingly closer to each other regardless of their region of origin" (Krzysztoszek 2020).

a) Transformation of the economy and work, unemployment, wages and incomes

A consequence of German reunification was the rapid adoption by the eastern federal states of the democratic state and political structures from the 'old' Federal Republic of Germany. The 'new' federal states also began to adopt the West German economic and social system. The state was unified not only politically but also economically. These changes significantly influenced the everyday lives of the inhabitants of the former GDR. To this day, persistent differences remain between the eastern and western federal states of united Germany. These differences manifest both in the pace of economic development and in social trends.

According to the annual reports on the state of German unity (*Jahresbericht zum Stand der Deutschen Einheit*), which have been reissued in recent years, it remains clear that the poorest federal states of the 'old' Federal Republic of Germany are still wealthier than the richest eastern federal states – the territories of the former East Germany. No East German state has yet reached the level of the Western German state with the lowest gross domestic product. Viewed over several decades, the narrowing of these differences has progressed significantly, but much more slowly than expected after the country's unification (*Zum Stand* 2023; Krzysztoszek 2020; Jakubczak 2021). Already by the second half of the 1990s, it was evident that significant disparities persisted and that full national unity would not be achieved in the near future, but would require many more years. It is safe to say that the process of full economic and social integration between both parts of Germany is still incomplete.

The unification of the country faced numerous challenges, especially in the economic and social spheres. Germany, particularly during

the first 15 years after reunification, experienced serious economic difficulties. The main problems included weak economic growth, persistently high or even rising unemployment levels, and a substantial state debt related to the costs of reunification. To address these issues, economic reforms were implemented. The need for reforms was also influenced by intensifying processes such as globalisation in the world economy, European integration, unemployment, and migration. The ongoing economic transformation had a profound impact on social conditions in East Germany. For several decades after German reunification, the East German states would not have been able to function without financial support from the West. In recent years, funding for the new federal states has continued, but the scale of support has significantly decreased.

In 1990, the reconstruction of the former GDR's economy began. This economy, which had been centrally planned and controlled, was gradually adapted to the principles of the West German economic system. The conversion of the East German economy to a free market system brought about far-reaching changes. Between 1990 and 2002, over 3,600 unprofitable industrial plants were closed down in the new federal states of Germany. As before, the reunification of Germany, agriculture and the production of agricultural products still predominate in the eastern territories of the country, while the West dominates in the industrial sector, employing state-of-the-art technology. It is worth adding that different types of agriculture prevail in the two parts of Germany: in the new federal states, arable farming predominates, whereas in the old federal states, livestock breeding is more common (Romiszewska 2011, pp. 86–91). According to Artur Nowak-Far: "The main economic base of Germany remains in the West, while in the East there are few innovative enterprises that are the engine of economic growth" and "it is mainly the western Länder, being much more developed in this respect, that are currently responsible for the added value of the German economy" (Krzysztoszek 2020). It should be noted that the eastern federal states have been attracting new investments in the last decade, such as the Tesla car factory in Brandenburg. Although the regions of eastern Germany still exhibit lower economic development indicators than those of western Germany, more intensive economic growth has been observed for several decades. Since reunification, the German authorities have been implementing many measures aimed at supporting the growth of innovation in the eastern territories of the country.

After the reunification of Germany, in order to mitigate the effects of the transformation of the former GDR territories – especially in the first two decades – huge sums from the federal budget were allocated annually (tens or even hundreds of billions of marks, and later euros) to reduce unemployment, fund social services, and rebuild cities and infrastructure. It is estimated that over the past thirty years, total support amounted to between 1.5 and 3 trillion euros (Krzysztoszek 2020; *20 Jahre* 2010; Romiszewska 2011, pp. 86–91; Deszczyński 2008, p. 133). For more than a decade, federal budget subsidies have been systematically reduced, which may indicate an increasingly improved economic situation in the 'new' federal states.

In eastern Germany, one of the most important consequences of the transition from a centrally planned economy to a free market economy was the rapid changes in the employment structure – a reduction in employment and, at the same time, a persistently high unemployment rate.

Unemployment remains one of the most pressing problems of the German economy, significantly impacting not only the standard of living and social sentiment but also, to a large extent, influencing the voting preferences of German citizens. From the early 1990s until the second half of the first decade of the 21st century, unemployment in Germany – particularly in the eastern part of the country – remained at a very high level. The unemployment rate in the East was, on average, twice as high as in the West, reaching its peak in 2005, after which it began to decline gradually. This improvement can largely be attributed to the success of labour market reforms implemented between 2003 and 2005. As early as 1993, the number of unemployed exceeded 3 million; by 1997 it had reached 4 million, and in 2005 it peaked at nearly 5 million (Budnikowski 2011, pp. 205–206; Budnikowski 2008, p. 215). In the years that followed, as shown in Figure 1, the unemployment rate began to decline. Since 2016, with minor fluctuations – particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic – it has stabilised at around 2.5 million (± 300,000).

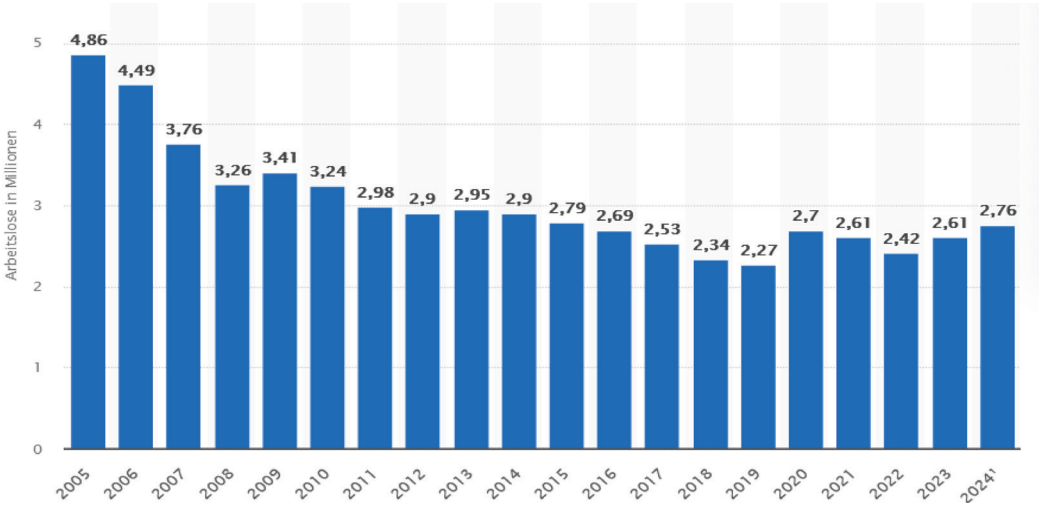

Figure 1. Average number of unemployed persons in the Federal Republic of Germany between 2005–2024 (in millions)

Source: *Statista 2024. Arbeitslosenzahl in Deutschland im Jahresdurchschnitt von 2005 bis 2024 (in Millionen)* https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1223/umfrage/arbeitslosenzahl-in-deutschland-jahresdurchschnittswerte/

The GDR pursued a policy of full employment, and in cases of job loss or inability to find work, no financial benefits were provided. Following German reunification, a previously unknown phenomenon emerged in the former East German territories: declining employment – manifested in rising unemployment and mass emigration to the West. These developments posed a significant challenge to the newly unified German state. In the first years after reunification, the most significant changes occurred in the employment structure of the former GDR. The vast majority of people employed in agriculture, forestry, and fishing were laid off. Cooperative and state farms underwent ownership transformations, leaving many individuals without work or means of subsistence. As a result of these shifts, the populations of towns and villages declined considerably, and the phenomenon of depopulation emerged (Berger, Bulmahn, and Hinrichs 2009, pp. 33–61). It became necessary to halt mass migration and to provide those laid off from unprofitable enterprises with financial support – such as unemployment benefits, pensions, and health insurance – funded by the federal budget, primarily from West Germany. A series of reforms was implemented in this regard, which, over time, began to yield positive results. On the one hand, the employment structure in the eastern federal states

gradually became increasingly similar to that of the 'old' Federal Republic of Germany. On the other hand, not only were social benefits provided to individuals affected by unemployment, but the wages of part-time workers were also subsidised in order to avoid redundancies and prevent a drastic decline in wages. Individuals who lost their jobs could receive a cash benefit amounting to approximately 70% of their previous net salary (Budnikowski 2008, p. 216). Meanwhile, those at risk of unemployment were offered short-term employment opportunities, with a portion of their salaries subsidised from the federal budget. The highest numbers of individuals employed in such short-term positions were recorded in the new federal states, where the manufacturing industry remains dominant, while the lowest figures were observed in states where the service sector prevails (Budnikowski 2011, pp. 184–211). From the perspective of more than 30 years after German reunification, the most significant instruments of German labour market policy include: short-time work, job creation schemes, early retirement options, and continuing education aimed at improving qualifications. The implementation of welfare state mechanisms in reunified Germany – including social security, labour market protections, healthcare, disability and retirement pensions, income redistribution between individuals and regions, and housing benefits for tenants – accounted for approximately half of the total cost of reunification. These measures significantly mitigated the social costs associated with the transformation of eastern Germany (Żukowski 2011, p. 234).

In the early years following reunification, there were substantial wage disparities for equivalent work between the two parts of Germany. Employees in the former East Germany – supported by trade unions – advocated for wage adjustments to bring salaries closer to Western standards. In the new federal states, the average East German gross wage was lower than West German wages by between several tens of percent and nearly 50 percent, depending on the occupation and economic sector (Budnikowski 2011, p. 181). To address these disparities and promote equal opportunities in the unified German labour market, the German government introduced a statutory, gradual alignment of tariff wage rates in the eastern federal states. In Germany, tariff autonomy is constitutionally guaranteed, meaning that wage conditions are determined within the framework of industrial relations through negotiations between trade unions and employers' organisations. A statutory national minimum wage

was only introduced in 2015 and is not uniform across both parts of the country. It is worth noting that the equalisation of wage rates was originally expected to be achieved in the second half of the first decade of the 21st century. However, (usually small) differences in salaries between the East and West still persist. The average wage in eastern Germany is currently around 86% of that in western Germany (*Zum Stand* 2023, p. 174).

As early as the 1990s, the standard of living in both parts of Germany began to gradually converge. Nevertheless, the new federal states still lag somewhat behind the western Länder in terms of household wealth. The average household income in eastern Germany is more than 10% lower than in the western regions. Moreover, there remains a higher proportion of high earners in the old federal states compared to the new ones. This gradual income equalisation has been accompanied by a convergence in expenditure patterns. As infrastructure improves in eastern Germany, the standard of durable consumer goods in households is also becoming increasingly similar (*Beauftragter* 2024; *Zum Stand* 2023, pp. 17, 168–169).

b) Demographic problems

Following German reunification, significant economic difficulties emerged in East Germany. In particular, young people of working age faced high unemployment and limited life prospects. As a result, many of them – including a considerable number of women, often the most highly educated and creative individuals – migrated to the West in search of better opportunities in the local labour market. This mass migration to western Germany had a profound impact not only on those who chose to leave, but also on those who remained in the East, particularly middle-aged and elderly residents.

The largest wave of people leaving for work in the western part of Germany occurred during the reunification and transformation of the country, particularly in the 1990s and the few years that followed. During this period, an estimated 1.5 to 2 million people left the former GDR territories (Deszczyński 2008, p. 133; Hinrichs 2001, pp. 752–753). In particular, the loss of jobs in former East German factories prompted many residents of industrial towns to move West in search of employment and better living conditions. Migration to the federal states of the 'old' Federal Republic of Germany in pursuit of better prospects has, in fact, continued to this day. However, the scale of these movements has declined over the years and is now significantly smaller than, for example, two decades ago. It is worth

noting that this east-to-west migration is often referred to as the new *Ostflucht* (flight from the East) – a term used to describe the ongoing movement of people from the eastern regions of Germany to the more prosperous western parts. As a result of intra-German migration, many local and regional communities in eastern Germany have been experiencing depopulation and deurbanisation. This depopulation occurred on a large scale. Major cities such as Magdeburg, Schwerin, Rostock, Chemnitz, Cottbus, and Halle, as well as medium-sized towns like Eisenhüttenstadt and Hoyerswerda, have seen significant population declines. Over the years, these cities have been deprived of their most active, predominantly young inhabitants – the qualified workforce – as well as important tax revenues. Meanwhile, the western part of Germany benefited from the influx of working-age migrants from the East, which helped to halt the decline in the workforce potential in the 'old' Federal Republic of Germany.

Only a small number of western Germans chose to relocate to the eastern regions, primarily senior officials, entrepreneurs, and scientists. Thousands of officials from the former Federal Republic found employment in Berlin, the new capital of unified Germany.

As a consequence of the problems arising from Germany's transformation, the birth rate has dropped drastically. In eastern Germany in particular, there are still more deaths than births, although this gap is gradually narrowing. Women want to remain active in the labour market (as was the case during GDR times), so they choose either not to have children or to have them later in life (between ages 30 and 40). Moreover, for several decades there has been a clear overrepresentation of older people, which places a greater burden on the pension and healthcare systems – leading to increased federal spending. German society is ageing increasingly, a trend especially evident in the new federal states (Żukowski 2008, pp. 222–229).

Ageing is a global phenomenon and a challenge faced by many modern societies. The population of the Federal Republic of Germany is among the oldest in Europe. The depopulation trend in today's united Germany is being countered by immigration and the influx of foreigners, which effectively mitigates the country's rapidly growing demographic challenges. Currently, over 26% (approximately 21.2 million) of the FRG population has an immigrant background – more than half of them (around 53%) hold German citizenship but were born outside Germany (*Aussiedler* or *Spätaussiedler*, a term for resettlers or late resettlers from Russia, Poland, Romania, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, etc.), while over 12% are

foreigners without German citizenship (*Statistisches Bundesamt* 2019, pp. 194–195; Dobrowolska-Polak, Jackowska, Nowosielski, and Tujdowski 2013). In eastern Germany, the percentage of foreigners is much lower than in western Germany. The old federal states of the Federal Republic of Germany have a much longer and richer history of immigration than the territories of the former GDR. In East Germany, foreigners were rare and essentially invisible in society. GDR citizens had little opportunity to interact with foreigners on a daily basis or become accustomed to their presence.

c) Ostalgia – longing for the times of the GDR

In reunited Germany, a distinctive difference between West and East Germans is the persistent feeling of being 'second-class citizens' among a significant portion of the population in the former East Germany. This was especially pronounced in the early years following reunification. However, to this day, a segment of the former GDR society, particularly older people, still feel they are 'inferior' citizens. They believe the reunification process was carried out rapidly and in a 'top-down' manner, without consultation with East German society, and they feel betrayed because they were promised a swift equalisation of living conditions between East and West Germany. Despite this, differences in wages, incomes, and material standards continue to persist. The East German economy was dismantled, and state property was privatised at a very rapid pace. The economic reforms imported from West Germany effectively amounted to the destruction of the East German economy, a process often referred to as the 'sell-out of the East' (Oschmann 2024; *United Germany* 2004, pp. 39–41), which led to numerous social problems. The effects of the transformation were felt particularly strongly by the inhabitants of the former GDR territories. A profound social transformation occurred, significantly impacting behaviour, orientation, culture, and material living conditions. In contrast, these changes were barely perceptible and generally did not affect the daily lives of citizens in the old federal states of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Following reunification, a new society began to emerge in the former GDR, differing structurally from the existing society and distinct from West German society. The most pressing issue in the new federal states was, and remains, unemployment. This issue directly or indirectly influences the situation and attitudes of a large part of East German society. Employment status often determines individuals' material conditions, social situation, and even their voting preferences.

It is evident that a distinct East German identity began to take shape during the 1990s. It is not a rejection of the all-German nation or community, but rather a reaction to the manner in which the former GDR was transformed during the unification of both parts of Germany, and an expression of feelings of undervaluation and inferiority towards the wealthier western part of Germany and its inhabitants.

This sense of a distinct identity was shaped by poorer living conditions, difficulties in finding employment (high unemployment), and lower earnings (wage and income disparities). Moreover, the highest-ranking positions are predominantly occupied by Germans who arrived from the West after reunification. Most individuals in senior roles within politics, administration, or education come from the western part of Germany. They are often perceived by many inhabitants of the former GDR through predominantly negative stereotypes, which serves to maintain or reinforce the existing divide between the so-called *Wessis* (Westerners) and *Ossis* (Easterners). It is worth noting that many Germans from the old federal states do not regard those from the new federal states as equal partners; some believe that *Ossis* are lazy, unintelligent, and ungrateful for the substantial financial support (enormous Western subsidies) provided by Westerners to help equalise economic and living standards in the East (Görtemaker 2009, pp. 69–70).

The above-mentioned facts have caused frustration and a characteristic form of *Ostalgia* (a combination of the words nostalgia and Ost, meaning East) among a large portion of East German society for several decades. This term broadly refers to a longing for the times of the GDR and life under communism – primarily for a perceived sense of stability, including guaranteed employment and social protection. The GDR era is often idealised, while its negative aspects tend to be marginalised or omitted. Ostalgia also represents a protest against the poorer living conditions and the lack of equalisation between East and West in reunified Germany. Four decades of division between the two parts of Germany have proven difficult for many to overcome. Those who struggle more with adapting to the realities of a market economy – typically the less qualified and lower earners – often feel that reunification has failed to meet their expectations (Krzysztoszek 2020).

This distinct sense of identity and the phenomenon of ostalgia among a significant segment of the eastern German population manifest as a form of protest, which is reflected in voting behaviour, frequently in support of extreme or populist parties, particularly far-

right and far-left parties. Young and middle-aged individuals who are unemployed or face difficulties finding employment – and who are frustrated by factors such as the high cost of living, taxes, inflation, and the influx of migrants and refugees in unified Germany – are especially vulnerable to the propaganda of these parties.

An analysis of election results since 1990 shows that support for extreme parties is greater among eastern Germans than in western Germany. These parties enjoy strong backing across all five new federal states, achieving significantly better electoral results than in the rest of the country. For several decades after reunification, The Left (Die Linke) – which has its roots in the democratic-socialist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), itself formed from the transformation of the East German communist Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) – enjoyed considerable popularity in eastern Germany. Furthermore, since the mid-1990s, far-right parties such as the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) and the German People's Union (DVU) have also received notable support. In recent years, the new anti-establishment, anti-immigrant far-right Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) has experienced growing popularity for over a decade, effectively replacing these earlier far-right parties. Since early 2024, the new populist party Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (*Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht*) has been gaining support among some previous voters of both the AfD and Die Linke (*Deutscher Bundestag* 2024). This development may represent a significant alternative and a serious challenge, particularly to these parties. To paraphrase Adam Krzemiński, the success of these types of parties "is not a reflection of their strength, but of the weak condition of the major parties" (Krzemiński 2006, p. 58).

Conclusion

It can be stated that, even more than 30 years after German reunification, the transformation of East Germany continues to leave its mark on various aspects of life among former GDR citizens, and differences between the eastern and western parts of the reunited country remain visible. The cost of reunification was significant, yet it brought long-term benefits to the entire nation and society. Politically and economically, the challenging integration of the less developed, post-communist East with the wealthier and more developed West can be considered largely successful. Furthermore, it is worth noting

that the average 'Easterner' now lives almost as well as the average 'Westerner.' Although the unemployment rate in eastern Germany remains higher and wages are lower, these disparities are increasingly comparable to those in the West (*Zum Stand* 2023). The extension of the social safety net of the 'old' Federal Republic to the new federal states has significantly mitigated many of the negative effects of this profound socio-economic transformation. However, the process of full social integration between the two parts of Germany remains incomplete. The anticipated fusion of the two societies has not yet materialised. Beyond the undeniable improvement in the material living standards of East Germans, the reunification also brought about numerous adverse phenomena that continue to influence the attitudes of the inhabitants of the former GDR. Addressing social integration between the eastern and western federal states will remain a challenge for successive German governments in the years to come. A key priority is the civic education of the former GDR's population, aimed at strengthening their sense of social cohesion, eliminating the perception of being 'second-class citizens' prevalent among many, and reducing or resolving the persistent disparities between citizens living in both parts of united Germany. Nonetheless, it will require many years of dedicated effort to bridge the divisions rooted in the separate histories of the two German states and the enduring effects of the East German transformation – particularly in terms of social mentality.

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