

JIS



The Journal of
International
Service

Vol.1, Issue 2

Spring 2021



School of
International
Service

American University
Washington, DC





JOURNAL of INTERNATIONAL SERVICE

2020-2021

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Sustained Effects of Germany's Reunification and Their Contribution to the Rise of Far-Right Ideology in Former East Germany

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Background

Germany's reunification and the resulting economic and social disparities between the East and West have fostered the rise of far-right ideology seen in the country today. Although the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was created in 1949 as a Soviet Union satellite state and existed until Germany's reunification in 1990, the effects of the Soviet communist occupation and its demise still remain. Since reunification, the former GDR's economy continues to lag behind that of former West Germany; unemployment remains higher, at times by almost 10%;ⁱ and average wages remain lower by over 8,000 USD a year.ⁱⁱ Although these gaps are narrowing,ⁱⁱⁱ these issues, along with an aging population and a heavily skewed male-to-female ratio, continue to shape the political views of eastern Germany's citizens to this day. This potent combination of social and economic grievances expressed by this population must be addressed in order to hinder support of far-right movements. Immigration is a viable solution to the economic inequality of the East because it stimulates the economy, fills labor shortages, and increases gross domestic product (GDP). However, many East German residents strongly oppose immigration. Reducing opposition to immigration and minimizing the economic disparities between East and West Germany are two viable solutions for curbing the spread of far-right ideology in the former GDR.

Economic Disparities

The GDR, or the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (DDR), was informally referred to as East Germany. Although it was established out of a political merger of Communists and the Social Democrats, the GDR was under a Soviet dictatorship from its inception. The Federal Republic of Germany (*Bundesrepublik Deutschland*), informally known as West Germany, was

also created in 1949, under the Allied occupation. Although West Germany did experience negative effects from reunification, these effects were minor compared to those impacting the East. Both West and East Germans began paying a solidarity tax or *Solidaritätszuschlag* in 1991, often referred to as the “Soli”, to help pay for the costs of reunification and infrastructure investment in the East. At the time, the Soli was 5.5% of income tax and corporate tax,^{iv} but because West Germany was experiencing more economic success, its overall tax burden was larger. A report from the London Business School in 2000 reviews the impact of reunification on West Germany’s economy and concludes that

the process of unification represents a formidable shock to the West German economy, qualitatively similar to a sudden 26% increase in the low-skilled portion of the population... The adjustment process seems to be slow and it is unclear how many years it will take unified Germany to catch up with the economic performance of the former West Germany and, indeed, whether this level will ever be attained.^v

In 1991, the former East’s GDP had dropped by one-third.^{vi} After reunification, many companies in East Germany went bankrupt because they were unable to compete with the productivity of their more energy-efficient West German neighbors. In some East Germany towns today, roughly 1 in 5 buildings sit vacant.^{vii} Few major corporations are headquartered in the eastern part of Germany,^{viii} and none are listed on the DAX-30, the stock market index made up of 30 major German companies that trade on the Frankfurt Stock Exchange. Absent major corporate players in eastern Germany, the region faces considerable limitations for GDP growth.^{ix}

The fall of the Berlin Wall also sparked the emigration of many young people from the East to the West, with East Germany ultimately losing 10% of its population.^x This mass exodus had two major effects on eastern Germany's economy: First, the outflow contributed to an aging population. In the town of Bitterfeld-Wolfen, with a population of less than 50,000, there are two deaths for every person born. By 2060, the population in eastern Germany is estimated to decrease over 30% from 2016, falling from 12.5 million people to 8.7 million.^{xi}

Second, the emigration of young people from the East significantly decreased the labor supply in former East Germany, negatively impacting businesses and ultimately contributing to the decline of economic sustainability. Lacking a young workforce, entry-level positions are difficult to fill, and businesses have turned to recruiting migrant workers to fill these vacancies.^{xii} Bankrupt companies in the East also put thousands of people out of work after reunification. This mass exit from the market can still be felt today, as the eastern region has a higher unemployment rate than western states consistently. In 1994, when the Soviets completely exited the East, unemployment was at 14.8% compared to 8.1% in the West. In 2005, the former East's unemployment hit a rate of 18.4% while the former West only rose to 8.5%.^{xiii} The effects of these higher levels of unemployment have led to further gaps between eastern and western states in average monthly earnings, GDP per capita, and disposable income.

In 2000, the average gross monthly earnings in the eastern states were 2,400 USD, compared to 3,000 USD in the west – a difference of over 7,000 USD per year. In 2017, the respective averages were 3,300 USD and 4,000 USD, increasing the gap to a difference of over 8,000 USD a year.^{xiv} The disposable income for former East Germany was 86% of that of former West Germany in the same year.^{xv} In 2018, the eastern states, excluding Berlin, had a range of GDP per capita between 32,000 – 38,000 USD. The GDP per capita for the majority of the

western states was between 38,000 – 56,000 USD, with Bavaria, Hamburg, and Bremen at 56,000+ USD.^{xvi}

Citizens in the eastern states who continue to experience this income inequality blame the reunification of Germany for the economic decline. Not only were companies put out of business, but state subsidies provided by the communist dictatorship were also removed after the reunification. The price of electricity was increased to match rates in West Germany, tripling its cost for East Germans.^{xvii}

Cultural and Political Disparities

This economic decline following reunification fueled the development of anti-leftist views in the former East. According to Rick Noack of the *Washington Post*, “[m]any people were disillusioned by Western capitalism, but few wanted a return to communism. Right-wing politicians were quick to fill the void. The great majority of eastern Germans, of course, are welcoming.”^{xviii} There is a larger population of Nazi sympathizers and those in the eastern states are twice as likely to support the Alternative for Deutschland (AfD), a far-right political party that has gained prominence.^{xix} The party’s stance on immigration and nationalism contains echoes of Nazi ideology. Consider the following passage from its 2017 “Manifesto to Germany”:

The AfD is committed to German as the predominant culture. This culture is derived from three sources: firstly, the religious traditions of Christianity; secondly, the scientific and humanistic heritage... and thirdly, Roman law... The ideology of multiculturalism is blind to history and puts on a par imported cultural trends with the indigenous culture, thereby degrading the value system of the latter. The AfD views this as a serious threat to social

peace and the survival of the nation as a cultural unit. It is the duty of the government and civil society to confidently protect German cultural identity as the predominant culture.^{xx}

Today, AfD is the strongest political party among men in the eastern states. In fact, “The East Rises Up!” is one of AfD’s slogans.^{xxi} It is also currently the third-largest party in Germany.^{xxii}

The growth of Nazi sympathizers and supporters of AfD, and other far-right groups threatens the stability of democracy, the safety of minorities, and the peaceful co-existence of different cultures that exists in Germany today. But the appeal of these groups to their supporters comes from a number of factors, including the East’s economic downfall after reunification. After the Wall fell, East Germany was consumed by West Germany, an event that is often described with the term ‘*geschluckt*’ meaning ‘swallowed’.^{xxiii}

Western Germany, which had been culturally predisposed to western European traditions such as globalization and capitalist ideas, launched the East into a rapid reintegration process that included membership to the European Union (EU); the EU has noticeably less support in the East. 72% of those in the former West hold a positive opinion on the EU, as opposed to only 59% in the former East.^{xxiv}

Attitudes towards Immigration

During the communist occupation of the GDR, East Germans were disconnected from the international stage. Their access to television channels and radio broadcasts was restricted, so they received limited exposure to other cultures and ways of life. In fact, the city of Dresden and its surrounding region is commonly referred to as “*Tal der Ahnungslose*,” meaning “Valley of the Clueless.”^{xxv} This seclusion has contributed to negative views on immigration. Therefore, it

is understandable that some east Germans are skeptical of the EU and its fluid borders among member countries.

The anti-immigration views of the East have led those immigrating into Germany today to disproportionately take up residence in the western states, further limiting cultural exposure to the citizens in the eastern states. This limited exposure increases animosity towards immigrants and asylum seekers, a phenomenon called the Contact Hypothesis. The Contact Hypothesis suggests that “the more foreigners one is exposed to the less hostile one becomes to them... [t]he inverse is that the less interaction between groups the more hostility one could expect.”^{xxvi} This theory helps explain why immigrants in Germany tend to gravitate towards the West versus the East.

The welcoming of immigrants and asylum seekers by Germany’s government has also been a cause for heightened tensions. After the Berlin Wall fell, many wealthy Germans from the West moved to the East, encroaching on the existing inhabitants. Today, many eastern states feel they are third-class citizens because of the compounding effects of decades of economic and social disparities. Those in the GDR who saw the Wall fall are now, in their eyes, witnessing immigrants receiving benefits and luxuries that they were unable to enjoy before. A male AfD supporter sums up this attitude in a simple sentence: “First there are western Germans, then there are asylum seekers, then it’s us”.^{xxvii} This hostility generated in the eastern states has not only resulted in higher hate crimes per capita but has also motivated disaffected East German residents to support extremist movements and political parties such as the AfD.

In addition to the AfD, there are other far-right movements proliferating in former East Germany. One notable group is the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamitisation of the Occident, *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*, (PEGIDA). PEGIDA

is a wider movement that originated in Dresden as a march against the deterioration of the German identity due to immigration. Weekly marches continue today with participants chanting their slogan, “*Wir sind das Volk,*” or “We are the people.”^{xxviii}

In addition to the cultural and economic hostilities in the east, another factor influencing support for the far-right, specifically for men, is the mass exodus that occurred after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Of the 10% of the population that left the GDR for West Germany, two-thirds were women,^{xxix} resulting in an unprecedented imbalance in the ratio of men to women in eastern German communities. “In large swaths of rural eastern Germany, men today still outnumber women, and the regions where the women disappeared map almost exactly onto the regions that vote for the Alternative for Germany today.”^{xxx}

The scarcity of women in the region has contributed to the increase in the population of single men living in East Germany. There is evidence to suggest that this loneliness and frustration contributes to their affectation towards the far-right movement. In a letter written to the minister of integration in Saxony, a PEGIDA supporter wrote, “if you get me a wife I will stop marching with Pegida.”^{xxxi} This unusual, imbalanced gender ratio has been further exacerbated by the influx of immigrants and refugees, many of which are Middle Eastern men.

This anti-immigration sentiment has gained enough strength to have a tangible impact on legislation. When the Syrian refugee crisis began, Germany was one of the first and only countries to be welcoming, and the phrase *wilkommenskultur* or “welcome culture” was coined.^{xxxii} In August 2016, Germany enacted the Integration Act and the Regulation on the Integration Act. This legislation aimed “to facilitate the integration of refugees into German society” and to “provide for more integration classes, vocational training, employment and

training opportunities, [and] assignments of a place of residence to avoid concentration in select areas.”^{xxxiii}

Increased threats from the far-right have caused Germany to withdraw its policy of hospitality. “The public backlash has pushed Germany's centrist parties to crack down on immigration, particularly Merkel's Christian Democrat Union and its Bavarian sister party, Christian Social Union (CSU).”^{xxxiv} Some of this backlash was provoked by serious crimes committed by refugees in Cologne, a town in the west, and the town of Chemnitz, which is in the east. Still, as of June 2018, the “overall crime in Germany [was] at its lowest level since 1992. It fell 10 percent in 2017 compared to the previous year.”^{xxxv} Although those who committed these crimes of course do not represent the character of every refugee or immigrant who comes to Germany, they proved to be sufficient focusing events that allowed the AfD and the far-right to gain more support and even take away votes from the CSU.

The Current Situation

Although economic disparities still exist between former East and former West Germany, there are discernable indicators that the gap is closing. There has been a boom in employment opportunities within the green energy sector in eastern Germany, a promising sign for GDP.^{xxxvi} In 2018, the unemployment rate narrowed to 6.9% in the East and 4.8% in the West.^{xxxvii} The gap in GDP per capita has decreased by 4.2% over the last decade.^{xxxviii} Life satisfaction levels in the East are catching up to those in the West. In 1991, on a 10-point scale, 15% of East Germans rated their life satisfaction as a 7 or higher, with West Germans rated at 52%. In 2019, 59% of former East Germans selected a 7 or higher, and former West Germans were at 64%.^{xxxix}

Despite the favorable socioeconomic trends mentioned above, the support for established far-right political parties continues to increase. The number of fringe and extremist groups has doubled in the last two years.^{xl} The state of Thuringia, which was once a part of the communist East, more than doubled its support for AfD between the 2014 and 2019 elections.^{xli} The Internet has also provided a multitude of platforms for potential supporters to be influenced and radicalized. “The AfD is huge on social media, bigger than any other German party, using emotional language that’s become a moral contagion. It has been the right that has shaped public discourse in the years after 2015.”^{xlii} The utilization of message boards and encrypted messaging applications also makes it easy for recruiters to spread propaganda and share their ideology. As reported by *The Telegraph* in April 2019,

Authorities are currently surveilling 33 individuals or fringe groups with the potential of carrying out terror attacks, up from 22 just two years ago. Such individuals are predominantly male, around 30 years old and have been obsessed with news reports about refugees and Muslims since 2015, the peak of the refugee crisis. Germany's far-right Alternative für Deutschland party (AfD) has capitalized on such anti-immigrant sentiment, which propelled it to becoming the third largest party in the German parliament after the 2017 election.^{xliii}

To address the increase in support for far-right movements and ideology, Germany’s government is taking initial steps to disrupt its momentum. The grievances of far-right supporters are being heard and recognized in a democratic platform, and the government is reacting to their concerns. However, accommodating the far-right is not a reliable, long-term solution. “Accommodating the radical right is a double-edged sword as it is unclear how many voters

established parties can actually win back with these strategies. More worryingly for European democracies, there is reason to believe that accommodation might even strengthen the radical right in the long run.”^{xliv} Addressing grievances of far-right supporters is a necessary first step to prevent radicalization and decrease support for such movements, but a more sustainable solution necessitates eliminating the incentives for far-right support.

Establishing a Counternarrative

Monitoring online activity is a step in the right direction, but it is a reactive measure, as the individuals spreading extreme ideologies are already supporters themselves. Counternarratives must be put in place, as far-right narratives are a detriment to minorities and GDP.

Counternarratives have been created and employed in western countries such as the United States to battle disinformation and propaganda spread by extremist movements. For example, the Redirect Method, created by the Anti-Defamation League, Moonshot CVE and Next Gen Foundation, is used to counter online violent extremist activity by automatically routing users that search for such content to counternarrative videos.^{xlv xlvii} Although its true impact on users is difficult to assess, “[a] limited evaluation of the [method] suggests that the implementers are able to use advertisements linking to counterextremist videos to effectively expose individuals searching for violent jihadist or violent far-right content to content that offered alternative narratives. Users clicked on these ads at a rate on par with industry standards.”^{xlviii} Online platforms in this case represent a powerful tool against the spread of far-right narratives, and a viable means for Germany’s government to control the conversation:

Over the past few years, there have been more discussions about the *Obergrenze*, the limit on the number of migrants who should be accepted into the country, than there have been about Germany's manifest need for immigrants to sustain its system of retirement and provide the necessary workforce... The perceived threat to German society from a tiny minority of potentially dangerous extremists among the refugees has become the cornerstone for most discussions about immigration in general.^{xlvi}

Another possible solution is the adoption of the "Contract for the Web", which has been proposed by Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, and has already been endorsed by Facebook, Google, and Microsoft. According to Berners-Lee, "[t]he contract sets out ways to improve system design to eradicate incentives that reward clickbait or the spread of disinformation [as] [t]argeted political advertising is giving political parties the ability to subvert the debate."^{xlvi} Governments can also fund campaigns that educate local communities on the benefits of immigration to discredit far-right efforts. Additionally, firms can create working environments for their employees that positively promote integration.

Reviving Openness to Immigration

In terms of Germany's economic troubles, particularly in the eastern states, immigration presents itself as an ideal remedy: it can increase the population, balance the age ratio, and help fill the labor void. With a decreasing population that is also aging, the country will not be able to keep its current economic pace. According to a calculation by the Bertelsmann Foundation, a non-profit think tank in Washington, D.C., there will be three workers for every person over the age of 65 in 2020, but in 2035 that ratio will be 1:1.¹ By 2060, it is possible that with the aging

population that the total number of workers could decrease by 40%.^{li} Of those that are entering Germany, 60% are 25 years or younger.^{lii}

With a shrinking native population, Germany desperately needs those young people.

“If Germans want to maintain their economic well-being, we need about half a million immigrants every year,” said Wolfgang Kaschuba, former director of the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research. “We need to guarantee that our society stays young, because it’s aging dramatically.”^{liii}

Many refugees have been able to take advantage of the apprentice system in Germany that dates back to the middle ages. Under these systems, companies sponsor vocational education and supply on-the-job training with the intentions of eventually hiring the apprentice.^{liv} Regarding deportation, the Integration Act and the Regulation on Integration Act were put in place in 2016 to ensure refugees and the companies that use these programs do not feel as though their investment will be wasted. “This so-called 3+2 rule is meant to facilitate integration and to reduce the risks for companies that they lose a skilled worker after having invested in his or her training.”^{lv}

Studies have demonstrated that refugees have contributed significantly to Germany’s economy. The German Institute for Economic Research (*Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung* (DIW) found that Germany’s GDP has increased 0.2% on average between 2011 and 2016 from immigration into the EU.^{lvi} Additional economic benefits include keeping firms from having to increase wages or increase hours. During an economic boom,

[d]omestically, firms can either increase wages in order to attract people not already in the labor force, which reduces productive efficiency and drives a cost to the consumer, or increase the hours of part-time workers to roughly the same cost. EU workers, on the other hand, can come in to fill the gaps left by the domestic workforce, without the need to artificially drive costs up but also, and crucially, without depressing the wages of the current employees.^{lvii}

Encouraging immigration to increase economic productivity in Germany is not unprecedented. In the 1950s and 1960s, West Germany's economy was growing but did not possess the population needed in order to sustain its growth. "Gastarbeiter", or guest workers, were invited from nearby countries such as Turkey to fill the void. These guest workers "... boosted tax revenues and social security contributions" and significantly increased production.^{lviii} Without them, Germany would not have achieved the economic miracle, or "*Wirtschaftswunder*" that followed World War II. But even then, native Germans refused to immediately recognize the societal contributions made by migrant workers.^{lix}

Germany's economy continues to benefit from immigration today, as immigrants are not only entering the labor market, but also making up a significant portion of the country's consumer base. This increase in consumption has contributed to the increase of Germany's GDP over the years. A boost in East Germany's economy could reduce the economic divide and attract an influx of native Germans. This would not only create an additional economic boost, but it could potentially improve the region's gender ratio, alleviating the loneliness of the local, single men.

The positive effects of immigration, however, are difficult for citizens in eastern Germany to see in their day-to-day lives.^{lx} Because of this, the far-right advertises negative threats that hit

“closer to home” to bring legitimacy to their message. This gives the movement opportunities to promote their narrative, providing them with an advantage despite how infrequent or insignificant these threats are to the overall well-being of Germany’s population.

Conclusion

There are several lessons to be learned from this far-right political uprising. Germany provides an excellent example that offers a model to determine or confirm risk factors that can increase the likelihood of individuals supporting far-right movements. These risk factors include a shared economic hardship that spawned from a determinable event, high unemployment, and an imbalanced gender ratio. The effects of these risk factors are heightened by the close proximity to a population that is considered equal but does not suffer from similar disadvantages; in this case, that population is western Germany. In fact, research already shows that “higher rates of unemployment provide a favorable environment for these political movements.”^{lxi}

Germany’s example also demonstrates that risk factors are more easily traceable and identifiable when populations can be evaluated in isolation. This model can also be replicated to determine risk factors for far-right support in the United States by narrowing in on the communities themselves and comparing economic events that impacted those communities. Ultimately, this method can provide a number of economic and social warning signs that can assist in identifying populations that may become vulnerable to far-right ideology and extremism. For example, when the next migration crisis occurs, nearby countries that expect to receive a significant influx of refugees can prepare to be proactive by educating their populations with positive narratives and how immigration can positively affect their economy.

Additionally, Western nations like the United States that have aging populations and lower birth rates can look to Germany on how to increase GDP while facing these challenges. According to a study by the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, “the largest positive impact on employment and GDP would come from increasing the net flow of immigrants.”^{lxii} Research also shows that between the years of 1990 and 2014, “U.S. economic growth would have been 15 percentage points lower without the benefit of migration. In the U.K. it would have been 20 ppts lower and in Southern Europe 20-30 ppts lower.”^{lxiii}

From GDP, unemployment, and lower wages to isolation, an aging population, and a lack of women, the numerous effects of the end of Soviet Occupation and the reunification of Germany have mobilized far-right ideology in the eastern German states. And even though the gap between the East and West is closing, the impact of these effects still remains. If the grievances of the far-right are not addressed, Germany’s government will continue to pull back on its position as a welcoming country. Possible courses of action to stem the tide of far-right ideology include creating and disseminating counternarratives for far-right narratives, adopting the “Contract for the Web”, funding communities and public schools to educate citizens on the benefits of immigration, and incentivizing companies to promote integration positively in the workplace.

If Germany fails to take the necessary steps to address these grievances, then the negative effects of refusing to utilize immigration to boost its economy could contribute to an economic decline similar to that in East Germany after reunification. The emigration of native Germans, high unemployment, and low GDP present the ideal environment for the far-right movement to gain support across the entire country. Germany must heed its own warnings to prevent itself from repeating its history.

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