

# Postcommunist Germany

*Comparing Eastern Germany and Central and Eastern Europe's Political Development*

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Hadas Aron

Political Science and Women's Leadership Program, George Washington University

**Abstract:** This article situates Germany within postcommunist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) to explain current political outcomes, particularly, the disproportionate success of the AfD in eastern Germany. Similar to CEE, politics in eastern Germany is fragmented and volatile compared to western Germany; the political system in the east reflects conservative social values; and east German patterns of discontent are similar to CEE. However, in CEE, party systems were new and thus volatile and susceptible to populist mobilization from both mainstream and radical parties. Conversely, East Germany integrated into the developed West German party system and adopted its traditional parties, lowering the east's potential for volatility and polarization. Moreover, since the east is a minority within Germany, its relative volatility has limited impact on the German system.

**Keywords:** Alternative for Germany (AfD), Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), economic development, German unification, party system, political parties

*I*n the past few years, the differences between eastern and western Germany have been at the center of media and scholarly debates. The disproportionate success of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) in the eastern states of Germany highlights the lingering, and perhaps even growing, gaps in identity and values between east and west. The concern of observers is that the incomplete integration of eastern Germany may result in growing polarization and problems of governability in a political system that has long been characterized by high levels of political consensus.<sup>1</sup>

East Germany was effectively the first postcommunist country to join the European Union, but it made the transition to democracy and capitalism along with other countries in the region. In East Germany's neighborhood—Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia—populists have been electorally successful and headed the government in the past decade; and radical right parties were a part of the government in three of the four. A vast



body of literature has been dedicated to political outcomes in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), underscoring key features of the political systems that have contributed to the success of populism and of the populist radical right. Party systems in CEE are fragmented and volatile, facilitating the entry of or takeover by radical parties; elites in some CEE countries are deeply polarized on social and cultural issues and the meaning of national identity; and discontent with the transition from communism and subsequent European Union accession is turned against liberals. These political features reflect the complex legacies of pre-communist and communist experiences, the transition and EU accession processes, and their postcommunist development.<sup>2</sup>

Considering the unique process of its democratic transition even within the region, and its idiosyncratic pre-communist history, this article examines the extent to which contemporary eastern Germany shares underlying causes of the emergence and electoral success of radical right populists with CEE countries. I find that as in CEE, politics in eastern Germany is fragmented and volatile compared to western Germany; electoral outcomes reflect differences in social and cultural values; and patterns of discontent are similar between CEE and eastern Germany, which explains the success of the AfD in the eastern states.

However, situating eastern Germany within the postcommunist region also reveals key differences in its trajectory. In CEE countries, the entire party system was new, making it volatile and susceptible to radical parties. Moreover, both the old communist regime and the processes of political and economic transition generated deep polarization within the elite that facilitated the rise of radical populism. In contrast, East Germany joined the established West German system. The deeply institutionalized parties of West Germany became the most successful in the east, and local political elites did not develop. As a result, the potential for volatility and polarization in the east is both attenuated by traditional West German parties, and has limited impact on the system as a whole, because the east is a minority within Germany.

## **Postcommunist Party Systems in Central and Eastern Europe**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the different countries that transitioned from communism varied greatly in their political outcomes. While some postcommunist countries became liberal democracies with well-developed market economies, others went through much more limited political and economic reforms. Based on this variation, political science literature theorized on the factors necessary for successful democratization,

democratic consolidation, and economic reform in the region.<sup>3</sup> These accounts were divided on the causes, but they generally agreed that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic states have become the most successful liberal democracies.

In Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, communists lost the first democratic elections, and the political and economic transition was off to an auspicious start. Relying on Freedom House scores, Milada Vachudova finds that by 2001, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic were the most democratic and economically liberal countries in the postcommunist sphere. Slovakia, though lagging behind, was still significantly more democratic and economically liberal than many other CEE countries (e.g., Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia), and all Eastern European (e.g., Ukraine, Belarus) and Central Asian countries.<sup>4</sup>

Due to this postcommunist trajectory, geographic proximity, and comparable experience during and exiting out of communism, the CEE countries in East Germany's neighborhood—Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia—are employed as comparators in this article.

Despite the early success, three decades following the collapse of communism, democracy is facing challenges to varying degrees in all four CEE cases examined here. In particular, populist parties have formed governments in all cases, and have either threatened democracy or even dismantled liberal democratic institutions. Many scholars point at the challenge that populists pose for democracy.<sup>5</sup> Populists view the world as a Manichean division between corrupt elites and the good hardworking people, who are insufficiently represented in politics.<sup>6</sup> In the name of representing the "real people," they delegitimize their political opponents, and both build on existing polarization and exacerbate it.

In Hungary, the right-wing party Fidesz has turned away from its liberal roots and become a radical right populist party.<sup>7</sup> Since its decisive parliamentary supermajority victory in the 2010 election, Fidesz has transformed the political arena in Hungary. Most notably, the ruling party wrote a new constitution in 2011, without input from the opposition or civil society;<sup>8</sup> it curtailed the constitutional court by replacing justices, controlling nominations, and limiting standing rights and the scope of court decisions;<sup>9</sup> and it nearly eliminated independent media through a combination of centralization of media regulation and targeted taxation of unfavorable outlets.<sup>10</sup> In Poland, ruling party PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Law and Justice), that recently lost the 2023 elections, is a breakaway party from the center right. Since winning an absolute parliamentary majority in 2015, the party has launched a similar attack on the constitutional court. Through a series of

controversial steps, from judicial nominations through transformation of court procedures to discipline mechanisms against judges, PiS effectively stripped the constitutional court of power.<sup>11</sup> It has also taken steps to bring the media under government control.

Slovakia has had the longest experience in the region with political populism. Vladimir Meciar, who dominated politics in the 1990s, was arguably a populist,<sup>12</sup> and the populist party Smer has led the government in 2006–2010, 2012–2020, and since 2023. Smer has been far less radical than Fidesz and PiS in the past, but Prime Minister Robert Fico, the party's leader, has turned toward illiberal rhetoric in recent years. Moreover, Smer formed a government with the radical right xenophobic SNS (Slovenská národná strana, Slovak National Party), and was accused of both corruption and the curtailing of media independence. In the Czech Republic, the populist party ANO 2011 (Akce nespokojených občanů, Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) led by billionaire businessman Andrej Babis, emerged in the last decade and immediately became a coalition member, and later formed the government in 2017–2021. Babis was implicated in multiple legal controversies including alleged fraud, alleged kidnapping, and alleged conflict of interests. He cultivated such deep polarization that after the 2021 election, although his party remained the biggest in parliament, he could not form a government because other parties refused to form a coalition with ANO, arguing that it posed a real danger to democracy.

Though populist parties have been gaining more electoral support in Europe as a whole, they have been more consistently successful in CEE, and more habitual in government (although Italy and Austria have also had persistent experience with populism and radical right populists in government). Several features of the postcommunist experience can account for these outcomes.

## **Volatility and Fragmentation in Central and Eastern Europe**

Most of the parties that were formed after the transition from communism were new and they struggled to build the same linkage with voters that traditional mainstream parties in Western Europe had. CEE parties were not tied to civil society organizations, party membership was low, and voters did not develop strong identification with the party brand.<sup>13</sup> This is in line with the general finding that civic participation is low in communist countries due to the effect of being educated under totalitarian systems.<sup>14</sup> In addition, by the time of the transition from communism, membership in traditional

parties in Western Europe was also in decline. Parties no longer based their mobilization on appeals to specific social groups or classes through trade or religious unions and thus lost their base of default members.<sup>15</sup> This explanation applies to CEE as well, where trade unions and religious affiliation were weak in most cases (with the exception of Poland), and parties did not build support through them. One outcome of low party loyalty is relatively high fragmentation and volatility of the system.

In many Western European countries in the postwar era, two dominant parties, a conservative or Christian democratic right and a social democratic left, drew most of the vote and to some extent alternated in government, even under proportional representation electoral laws. With the exception of a short period in Hungary, such political competition between two strong parties did not develop in CEE. As a result, multiple parties gained seats in parliament and coalition governments were common. In addition, new parties entering the system and immediately becoming one of the largest parties in parliament were common.<sup>16</sup>

Of the cases examined here, in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, fragmentation and volatility increased quite significantly over time, with more parties in parliament and new parties emerging and taking over the government. ANO 2011, the populist party of former Czech PM Andrej Babis, became an official party in 2012. It first ran for office in 2013, gaining 18.7 percent of the vote and becoming a member of the ruling coalition. In the 2017 elections, ANO became the largest party and the leader of the ruling coalition with 29.6 percent of the vote. In Slovakia, the former ruling party, 'Slovakia' (formerly named OĽaNO, *Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti*, Ordinary People and Independent Personalities), was founded in 2011. The party gained 8.5 percent of the vote in its first election in 2012, and 11 percent in 2016, and was the third largest party in parliament in both election cycles. In 2020, it became the largest party in parliament with 25 percent of votes. In both cases, it seems that the fragmentation of politics was particularly rapid and intense because of the initial weakness of mainstream parties.

In recent years, political fragmentation has significantly increased in Western Europe as well.<sup>17</sup> Successful new parties emerged in response to structural economic changes and demographic changes, the emergence of new issues, and disappointment with traditional parties.<sup>18</sup> In Italy and France, traditional parties have been completely marginalized; in other countries like Spain and Germany, new parties have entered parliament but traditional parties still lead the government. However, unlike in CEE, traditional and emerging parties in Western Europe are not targeting liberal institutions, eliminating checks on power, and transforming the political

arena in their favor once in power.<sup>19</sup> Though discontent and polarization have been increasingly significant, in some CEE countries they have turned into an existential threat to democracy.

## **Discontent and Polarization in Central and Eastern Europe**

For CEE countries emerging from communism, the potential for discontent and political polarization was high. To begin with, in most countries, former communist parties became a significant part of mainstream politics in the new regimes, and transitional justice questions—who is responsible for the crimes of the old regime? Should there be lustrations of party members and collaborators? Should communist secret police files be open to the public?—were highly polarizing and generated animosity and individual accusations.<sup>20</sup>

The transition to market economy was a second source of discontent that was later translated into political polarization. This transition was a moment of elation in CEE. Former Soviet Bloc countries were poor and their citizens lacked basic individual and political rights. In many respects, the transition and accession to the EU that followed fulfilled their promise. The economies of CEE have been growing at a higher rate than Western European economies. Between 2014 (after recovering from the financial crisis) and 2019 (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic), both Hungary and Poland's economies grew at an annual rate greater than 3 percent (in 2018 for example, Hungary's economy expanded by 5.5 percent and Poland's by 5.4). The Slovak and Czech economies grew over the same period as well, at slightly lower rates.<sup>21</sup> Inequality as measured by the Gini Index rose after the transition, but has also been in decline in most cases. Hungary is the exception—inequality has been on the rise again since the financial crisis, but the Gini Index is still similar to that of Poland, and of Western European countries like Germany (approximately 30 in the Gini Index).<sup>22</sup>

Despite this data, the feeling of being “left behind” shared by some CEE populations is more complex and connected to everyday lived experiences.<sup>23</sup> Even prior to the transition, unemployment began to rise, in particular in areas of heavy industries that were no longer profitable. In the following years, the process of economic reform that followed the collapse of communism had a significant human cost: the transition to market economy led to a sharp rise in poverty, unemployment, and inequality. In CEE, governments used targeted social policy to reduce poverty and inequality,<sup>24</sup> and thus the cost was far lower than in Russia for example, where the toll of reforms was the main reason for the collapse of democracy. Nonetheless, in the short

and medium terms, poverty, unemployment, and prices rose, as industrial output declined by 50 percent.<sup>25</sup>

Population loss after the transition contributed to the feeling of being left behind. Hungary, the most extreme of the four countries, experienced a 9 percent population decline from 1985 to 2021 (from 10.7 to 9.7 million residents).<sup>26</sup> Out-migration was accompanied by low birth rates, further increasing the decline. Internal migration trends were meaningful as well: in Hungary over the past decade, while the overall population declined, the population of Budapest grew by more than 2 percent; in the Czech Republic, after the decline of the first decade halted, the population overall grew over the last decade by approximately 2.5 percent, while during the same period, the population of Prague grew by 9 percent. The implication is that for those living outside large urban areas, population decline has remained significant. The combination of population decline, unemployment, and limited occupation opportunities generated a sense of relative deprivation compared to successful urban areas.

Similarly, accession to the European Union generated a sense of relative deprivation and loss of sovereignty that populists mobilized later on. Membership in the European Union brought significant funds and opportunities for CEE countries. Most citizens in the region view themselves as European and have favorable views on the EU.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, three decades after the transition and 15 years after accession, important differences between east and west persist.

CEE economies are poorer than the European Union average. The eleven postcommunist countries in the union are in its bottom 15 countries of GDP per capita (along with four Southern European countries: Cyprus, Spain, Portugal, and Greece). For the cases we examine here, Slovakia's GDP per capita was 68 percent of the EU average in 2021, Hungary's was 76 percent, Poland's was 77 percent, and the Czech Republic's was 91 percent.<sup>28</sup> The economies of the CEE countries are also highly dependent on the German economy. Following the collapse of communism, Germany developed a special relationship with the countries of the region. Germany employs the cheap and skilled labor force of the region. In 2010, wages in CEE were approximately 25 percent of those of German workers, and labor regulations in the region remain more lax than in Germany.<sup>29</sup> The German automotive industry, for example, relocated substantial parts of its production to the region. In addition, Germany is the largest trading partner of CEE countries. Equally crucial to CEE economies has been large-scale German foreign direct investment (FDI) in transportation, energy, communication, and manufacturing.<sup>30</sup>

Capitalizing on the dissatisfaction of some populations in CEE with the transition and EU accession, populists in the region translated grievances into an illiberal narrative. According to this narrative, liberals have collaborated with external forces (EU bureaucrats, transnational movements) to serve their own interests rather than the national interest. This liberal elite managed to stay in power even when they lost elections, through non-elected institutions (which populists portray as nondemocratic) like constitutional courts and the media. Moreover, liberals imposed foreign cosmopolitan values (e.g., LGBTQ rights, feminism) on the people of CEE and diminished the latter’s unique religious and national culture in the process. This narrative leads to an operative conclusion—to overcome the nondemocratic hold that liberals have on CEE and return the power to the people of the region, populists use unchecked executive power, which is a direct expression of the will of the people (through their elected leader).<sup>31</sup> Scholars have noted this populist backlash since the mid-2000s.<sup>32</sup>

One expression of the illiberal mobilization is increased polarization of the political arena over social and cultural values. Table 1 presents the gap between the views on a variety of issues of the two largest parties in parliament in the four CEE countries examined. The data is based on the 2010 Chapel Hill Expert Survey,<sup>33</sup> prior to the significant rise of populism in Hungary, to reflect the polarization of the system even before the Fidesz government and the 2015 PiS government transformed the political arena.

As Table 1 demonstrates, polarization on cultural and social issues was very high in Hungary and Poland (these trends were also consistent in surveys prior to 2010). In Slovakia, cultural differences were lower than in Hungary and Poland, but still present, reflecting a politicization of some cultural issues. Importantly, in the Slovak case, social and cultural issues did not form one

**Table 1:** Distance between two largest parties in parliament, 2010.

	<b>Economic ideology</b>	<b>Social and cultural values</b>	<b>Social lifestyle</b>	<b>Religion in politics</b>	<b>Urban/rural interests</b>
<b>Hungary</b>	0.8	3.4	4.1	6.4	2.8
<b>Poland</b>	3.6	4.3	4.7	3.0	4.3
<b>Czechia</b>	5.6	2.5	2.8	1.7	0.2
<b>Slovakia</b>	5.4	0.6	0.2	2.6	3.3

Data from the 2010 Chapel Hill Expert Survey. All variables were on a scale of 0–10. The numbers in the table reflect the difference between the two largest parties in parliament in terms of seat share.



consistent cluster—while the populist Smer was in favor of more representation for rural interests, it was less religious than its main rival, the Christian Democratic SDKU. In contrast, in Hungary and Poland, populist parties held consistently more conservative views in all issue areas. In the Czech Republic, cultural and social issues were not politicized between the two largest parties.

Hungary was also the clearest case of minimal difference between the largest parties on economic issues. This was consistent in most survey years. In the other cases, there were clear economic differences, especially in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia populists were more economically left-leaning than their opponents. This is in line with their message of discontent and grievances toward the “winners” of liberalization, and with protectionist policies they enacted in government like utility subsidies and direct transfers.

To conclude, following the transition from communism, in some CEE countries, new parties lacked strong ties with voters, leading to high fragmentation and volatility, and the ability of new, inexperienced, and sometimes more radical parties to gain electoral support and form governments. In addition, the legacy of communist regimes and the transition itself generated discontent and opened space and motivated elites to mobilize against liberals and polarize the political arena. The next section examines how relevant these features are to the politics of current day east German states and as a result to Germany as a whole.

## **The Party System in Eastern Germany**

In 1990, after a short period under a transitional government, the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) was reunited with the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) to form a single political unit. In the process of unification, five new (or renewed) states were added to the ten existing German states, and East and West Berlin were joined into one additional state. The new eastern German states, which today comprise approximately 17 percent of the German population,<sup>34</sup> were incorporated into West Germany’s legal and electoral systems.<sup>35</sup>

In the first free elections, the former communist party, the state socialist SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) transformed into the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), lost in all East German states in both national and state-level elections. The winners in these elections were one of the two traditional West German parties, the CDU (Christian Democratic Union of Germany) and the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany). The CDU

won state elections in four of the five new states in 1990, and the SPD won in one of them (Brandenburg).

### *Volatility and Fragmentation in Eastern Germany*

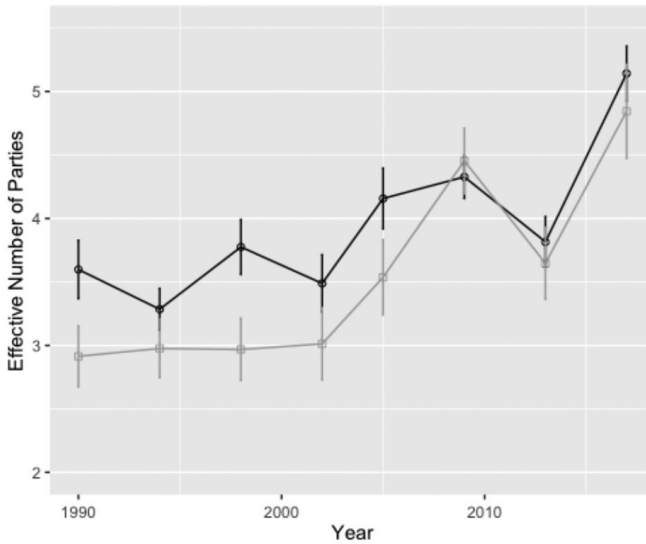
Though eastern German states adopted the very institutionalized party system of West Germany, some of the weaknesses observed in CEE are present in eastern Germany as well. Indeed, like in CEE countries, the linkage between parties and voters appears relatively low. As in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, one expression of low party identification is relative fragmentation. Following unification, east German states had more political parties than west German states. In 1990 in western Germany, the CDU and SPD controlled federal and state elections with some showing from the FDP (Free Democratic Party) and the Greens. On average, the effective number of parties at the time was still around 2.5 (Figures 1 and 2; The formula for effective number of parties is:  $ENEP = 1/\sum(p_i^2)$  where  $p$  is the share of votes in the election of the  $i$ th party).<sup>36</sup> These parties were also competitive in east German states. In addition, eastern states had unique postcommunist parties: the socialist successor party, the PDS, had significant support in eastern states; and in some cases Alliance 90, the union of East German opposition parties, managed to win state parliament seats as well. Thus, in the first election cycle, the effective number of parties was larger on average in the east than the west in both state and federal elections. The trend continued in following election cycles until 2005, although it was more prominent in federal elections (Figure 1).

As in other West European countries in recent decades, the effective number of parties began to rise in Germany, with some scholars pointing to the entry of the Greens into the Bundestag in 1983 as a turning point.<sup>37</sup> As Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, east and west German states show similar trends, but this dealignment of the system began slightly earlier and with greater intensity in east German states.

The 2005 federal elections were a crucial point for the German party system, with the two largest parties failing to win 70 percent of votes and turning to a grand CDU/SPD coalition out of necessity rather than choice.<sup>38</sup> As noted by Kopstein and Ziblatt, a minimalist right-wing coalition was possible in west German states, and a minimalist left-wing coalition possible in the east (SPD and the Left–PDS joint ticket).<sup>39</sup> The implication is that the rather similar fragmentation trends may be masking more substantial differences in voting patterns between east and west.

Several differences in voting patterns between east and west states are immediately apparent. First, support for the PDS (later the Left Party, Die Linke) has been consistently higher in the east. Second, both the Greens and

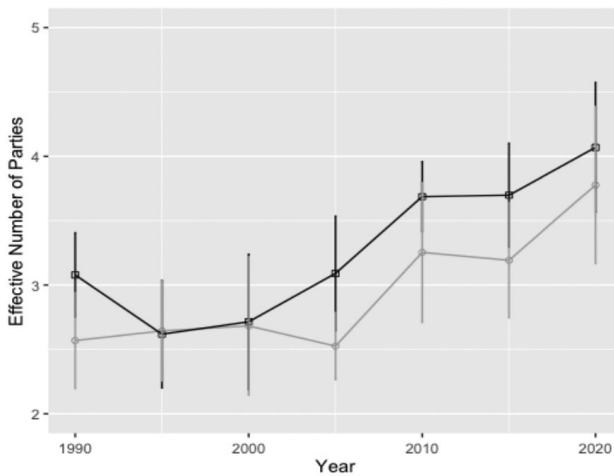
**Figure 1:** Effective number of parties in federal elections.



Effective number of parties in east (black line) and west (gray line) German states in eight federal election cycles between 1990 and 2017.\* The bars represent one standard deviation around the mean.

\* Due to its unique history and voting patterns, Berlin was excluded from the analysis.

**Figure 2:** Effective number of parties in state elections.



Effective number of parties in east (black line) and west (gray line) German states in the seven state election cycles between 1990 and 2020.\* The bars represent one standard deviation around the mean.

\* Berlin was excluded from the analysis. In addition, in Hesse there were eight election cycles between 1991 and 2018. the 2009 election was excluded from the analysis as it was held close to the 2008 elections.

FDP have poorer showings in eastern states than in western states. Finally, the development that gained most attention was the much higher support for the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) in the east than in the west. Both the PDS and AfD are discussed in more detail in a following section.

In the 2017 federal elections, the radical right AfD obtained 21.9 percent of the vote share in eastern states compared to 10.7 percent in western states.<sup>40</sup> It became the second largest party in the region both in the federal election and in all state elections since 2016, and was the largest party in the 2021 federal elections in Saxony and Thuringia, despite an overall decline in vote share. The ability of a relatively new party to gain so much support points to the relatively high volatility of the party system in eastern Germany compared to western Germany.

### *Discontent and Polarization in Eastern Germany*

The AfD is not the first far-right party to gain disproportional support in the east: the DVU (German People's Union) won 12.9 percent of the vote in the Saxony-Anhalt state elections, with at least half of the votes coming from previous nonvoters, demonstrating that voting for the party was a form of anti-system protest;<sup>41</sup> the NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany) gained seats in state elections in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Saxony; and the far-right PEGIDA movement gained high levels of support in the east.<sup>42</sup> One explanation for the far right's relative success in the east is that it is a protest vote of disaffected populations.<sup>43</sup> Discontent about the outcomes of the transition is the closest similarity between eastern Germany and CEE countries.

East Germany was the first postcommunist country to integrate into the EU, almost immediately upon transitioning from the communist political and economic system. The unification with West Germany in 1990 meant a rapid and complete replacement of the legal, economic, and electoral systems. This process entailed the displacement of individuals in many professions far beyond similar processes in CEE countries. Eastern elites were often replaced by western professionals,<sup>44</sup> leading to discontent and resentment. Though western Germany heavily subsidized the transition, and continues the high investment in the east, economic gaps, and a gap in GDP between the east and west, remain prominent, especially outside the big cities. Eastern German states' GDP per capita is 75 percent of the national average.<sup>45</sup>

Emigration from east to west Germany was even more prominent than in most of CEE. In the first decade, 1.74 million people migrated from east to west, nearly 10 percent of the former GDR population, and reverse

migration was uncommon. From 2001 to 2006, there were three million departures to the west but two million reverse migrants, many of them returning migrants.<sup>46</sup> In the last decade (2011–2021), while the overall German population grew by 3.7 percent, the population in four of five eastern states declined (the exception is Brandenburg whose population grew 2.8 percent).<sup>47</sup> Young populations, and in particular women, left eastern Germany, leaving behind older, less skilled, and more male communities, a demographic prone to far-right voting.<sup>48</sup> Though eastern Germans generally feel that the transition improved their lives, a sense of being second-class citizens is very common in the region.<sup>49</sup>

There is some logic in the AfD's (and other far-right parties') success in the east based on anti-immigration messages rather than these economic and social region-specific grievances. While local grievances "other" easterners from westerners and thus from German identity, the anti-immigration message is quite different. Opposing immigration positions easterners in the role of the protectors of German identity, or the "real" Germans, even more than western Germans who choose to give up unique aspects of German (or ethnic German) identity by encouraging immigration. Thus, instead of mobilizing support as second-class citizens who desire recognition of their status, AfD supporters can view themselves at the center of German identity. This is the logic of populist mobilization in general, but it resonates better with those who feel like underrepresented newcomers in the political system.<sup>50</sup>

The success of the AfD in the east has also generated differences in the values that the party system reflects in the east and west. Figures 3–6 compare values in east and west German states and in CEE as they are currently reflected in the federal party system. The positions of all political parties<sup>51</sup> on different issues were weighed according to the party's seat share in their national parliament in the elections held between 2015 and 2018. While CEE countries were treated as unitary, for Germany, the seats of east and west states in the 2017 elections were aggregated separately. Because of its unique history and voting patterns, Berlin was excluded from the analysis.

Eastern Germany and western Germany are not divided on economic issues (Figure 3), which means that the party system does not reflect an economic cleavage that overlaps with the geographic cleavage, but only cultural issues (Figures 4–5). The economic measure may be somewhat misleading. The AfD's economic left to right score is 7 out of 10 in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey used here. This right-leaning position balances out the Left Party (which has a 1.3 score on the same scale) in eastern states, where both parties are more successful. However, the AfD's economic position is rather blurred. Though it started as a libertarian party, it has moved away from

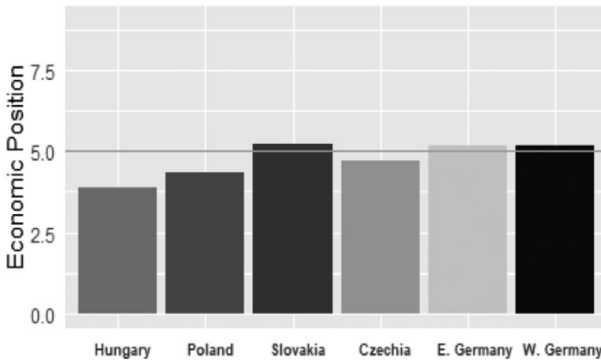
its economic ideological roots.<sup>52</sup> If the AfD had a lower score, the divide between east and west may have been larger. Second, if the AfD's stance on the economy is very right-wing as the measure evaluates, then indeed there is no economic divide between eastern and western Germany, but the divide within eastern Germany between the AfD and the Left is quite significant.

Figure 4 employs the GAL/TAN axis—views on cultural values<sup>53</sup>—to demonstrate a higher preference toward traditional and authoritarian values in eastern Germany compared to west Germany. Figure 5 demonstrates similar tendencies in regard to issues like the rights of the LGBT population.<sup>54</sup> The differences between east and west on these issues stem from the greater

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**Figure 3:** Economic position of parties in CEE and Germany.

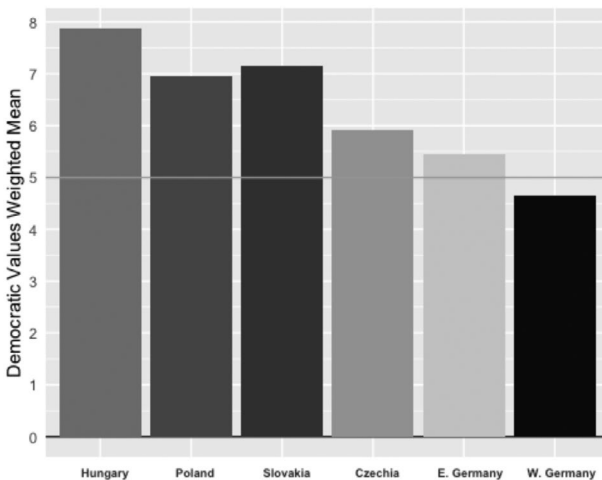
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**Figure 4:** Cultural values (GAL/TAN) positions of parties in CEE and Germany.

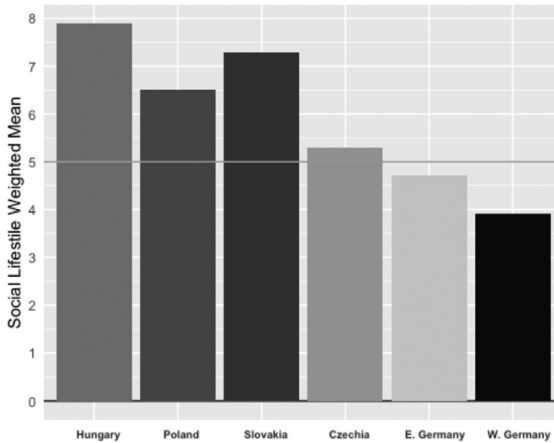
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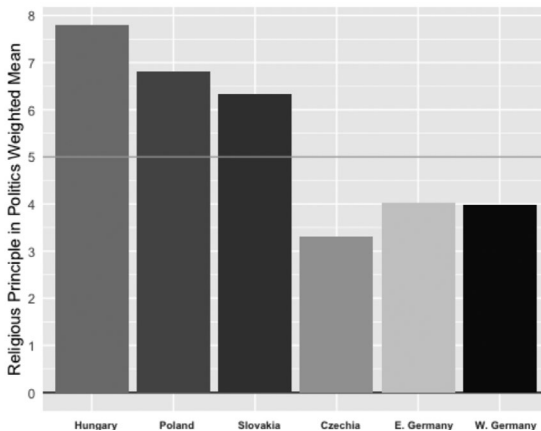
success of the AfD in the east, since the values are weighed according to seat share and the AfD’s radical right-wing position on cultural and social issues tilts the scores of eastern states to the right. Interestingly, there are no significant differences on the role of religion in public life (Figure 6), despite the fact that the eastern German population is more secular than that of west German states.<sup>55</sup> This is likely because the issue is not of high salience in the political system.

Both eastern and western Germany are more liberal than CEE countries overall, but the political system in Germany appears polarized between east and west states on certain cultural issues (Figures 4–5).

**Figure 5:** Positions of parties on social lifestyle in CEE and Germany.



**Figure 6:** Positions of parties on religion in public life in CEE and Germany.



### *Eastern Germany within Germany*

While there are some similarities in fragmentation and polarization of cultural issues between eastern Germany and CEE countries, the most fundamental difference is that East Germany assimilated into a well-established democracy and became a minority within it. The implication is that the relative electoral volatility we observe in the east did not result in a significant volatility of the German system as a whole. Moreover, unlike the new postcommunist countries of CEE, eastern Germany did not develop a unique and politically significant postcommunist political elite whose cleavages polarized the entire German system.

None of the political parties in Germany are eastern in composition of party elite, base of support, or issues agenda. Traditionally, the PDS was the unique party of eastern Germany. Between 1990 and 2002, the PDS was represented in all eastern state legislatures and in the Bundestag.<sup>56</sup> The PDS articulated the interests of the east. From very early after unification, the party protested against what it viewed as unfair terms of integration: the western German demand that easterners assimilate into the west, and the exclusion of those who are not economically successful and cosmopolitan.<sup>57</sup> Though the party was expected to disappear because of its strong association to the GDR, it actually managed to broaden its eastern vote share through the 1990s.<sup>58</sup> Over time, however, the PDS did not remain strictly the representative of eastern grievances.

After its defeat in the 2002 federal elections, the PDS managed to reinvent itself. As part of the attempt to appeal to more diverse populations, the party merged with dissident social democrats rooted in western trade unions (Labor and Social Justice—the Electoral Alternative, WASG) who were protesting against Gerhard Schröder's controversial 2003 economic reforms, Agenda 2010.<sup>59</sup> Thanks to the merger, the newly named Left Party (Die Linke) was able to gain support in the west in the breakthrough election of 2005. The agenda of the party no longer focused solely on eastern grievances, but tapped into some of the western discontent with Schröder's policies, and a sense of lost social solidarity.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, the stronghold of the party both in terms of organizational capacity and of popular support remained the eastern states even after this western appeal.<sup>61</sup>

Aside from the PDS, Alliance 90 (Bündnis 90) was the party that represented east German opposition groups after the transition. The party was not successful in the 1990 elections. In 1993 it united with the west German Greens, and its appeal and base of support declined in eastern German states.



More recently, as discussed above, the AfD has become prominent in the east. The AfD was formed in 2013 by economically right-wing, highly educated, mostly west German men.<sup>62</sup> Though the party was just short of a 5 percent share of the votes in the 2013 federal elections, it did gain seats in the European parliament in 2014, and in a few state elections in 2014 and 2015. In 2015, the AfD changed its original leadership, but its leadership remained mostly western. The party also pivoted toward a radical right anti-immigration agenda. In the context of the surge of refugees to Europe, and Germany's welcoming policy, the party gained significant support in Germany.<sup>63</sup> The AfD mobilized on a nativist agenda rather than the unique eastern social and economic grievances, but it did channel those grievances, discussed above.

In general, though there are a few prominent eastern figures including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, east Germans are underrepresented in leadership positions, including in eastern Germany, in politics, and even more so in law and economics.<sup>64</sup> Successful easterners often leave at a young age, and key positions are filled by westerners. The AfD is no different in this regard.

There are several reasons for the absence of separate eastern political elites. First, traditional parties, and in particular the CDU, are still strong and highly competitive in the east, and their organizational core is in the west. Second, unlike in CEE, the east in Germany is a minority and thus has less structural influence. As a result, there are fewer incentives for political entrepreneurs to compete strictly in the east (as evident by the choice of the Left Party to appeal more broadly). This point relates to emigration and the different meanings it has for CEE and for Germany. In CEE, as more liberal population leaves, those "left behind" become a more prominent part of society and the electorate. In Germany, emigration from the east similarly strengthens the radical vote in the east, but it also weakens the share of votes of the east within the German system and the incentive of politicians to make a unique appeal to eastern voters. Thus, where in CEE polarization between elites incentivized populists to construct an illiberal narrative that targeted their opposition, in Germany there is no real post-communist conflict between elites that would make illiberalism so politically salient. As a result, the potential for radical politics, even within the east, is far lower than in CEE.

## Conclusions

East Germany transitioned from communism, united with West Germany, and joined the European Union in 1990. As with other Central and Eastern European countries, the process had high prospects for success. The GDR communist elite was entirely defeated, and the tried and proven system of government of West Germany was adopted. Moreover, western Germany invested great funds and expertise in the development of the east. Indeed, these efforts paid off. After the transition, the life conditions of easterners significantly improved, and the east became democratic, demonstrating competition between established parties and peaceful transition of power on the state and local levels. After three decades, most east Germans view German unification positively.

At the same time, the past few years have revealed underlying failures of integration between the east and west. With ongoing economic and cultural gaps, and a sense of underrepresentation in positions of power, a growing number of eastern Germans chose to vote for the AfD, a party that rejects the establishment and the German politics of consensus.<sup>65</sup> Concern about this political development resembles the growing unease with the state of democracy and European integration in Central and Eastern Europe. Situating Germany within the postcommunist sphere helps clarify the causes and some possible trajectories for the German political system.

There are several key similarities between Germany and CEE countries. In CEE the new parties that emerged after the transition had limited linkage with voters, and loyalty of voters to parties has been low, leading to fragmentation of the party system and volatile electoral results, which facilitate entry of new and at times radical parties into the political system, and their rapid success. Similarly, the party system in eastern Germany has been more fragmented and volatile compared with the west, including the overperformance of the AfD in the eastern states.

Another important phenomenon in CEE is discontent with the outcomes of the transition from communism and EU accession. Populists have pointed at liberals and liberalism as responsible for relative deprivation and cultural marginalization in the region—in some cases, using this narrative to justify an attack on liberal institutions and elimination of checks on the executive. The grievances of CEE are present in eastern Germany as well, but political outcomes are quite different.

Eastern Germany is a minority within Germany, which has two important implications. First, the relative volatility of the east has limited impact on the federal state in terms of the composition of the Bundestag. Second,

there is limited electoral incentive for parties to develop an entirely separate eastern strategy. The PDS, which had such a strategy until 2002, ultimately changed direction due to electoral constraints. Moreover, the east did not develop a unique postcommunist political elite and most of the national political elite remains western. Thus, the strong populist backlash against liberalism that has been transforming CEE in recent years does not have significant presence in eastern Germany. Even uniquely postcommunist discontent over the status of the east within Germany is mostly channeled into national parties like the AfD.

The AfD is an interesting example in this regard, as it is not an eastern German party in leadership composition or the type of demands it makes of the state, nor is it similar to CEE populist radical right parties like PiS and Fidesz, which are also nativist but have a much stronger illiberal democratic agenda. At the same time, the AfD is notably not entirely similar to Western European radical right parties like Marine Le Pen's National Rally or the Sweden Democrats, which have adopted more mainstream rhetoric as their electoral support increased. Instead, the AfD has radicalized its agenda even more on immigration and on other issues like the coronavirus pandemic and the climate crisis. The radical agenda of the AfD is not necessarily the result of its eastern base of support, but may be connected to party leadership, or to the limited prospects of a radical right party entering the mainstream in Germany.

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**DR. HADAS ARON** is an assistant professor at the Political Science Department and the Women's Leadership Program at the George Washington University. She earned her Ph.D. from Columbia University and was a faculty fellow at the Center for European and Mediterranean Studies at New York University. Her research and teaching focus on populism, nationalism, right-wing politics, and de-democratization in Europe. Her work has been published in *Party Politics*, *Nations and Nationalism*, *Newsweek*, *Duck of Minerva*, and the London School of Economics US Politics Blog, and quoted in the *New York Times* and *Vox*.

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