

# Hastily Arranged Marriage: Political Attitudes and Perceptions in Germany Twenty Years after Unification

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# HASTILY ARRANGED MARRIAGE

*Political Attitudes and Perceptions in Germany Twenty Years  
after Unification*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Explanations for the roots and cures of the continuous divergence between East and West German political cultures tend to fall into two camps: socialization and situation. The former emphasizes the impact of socialization before and during the GDR era and ongoing (post-communist) legacies derived from Eastern Germans' previous experience, whereas the latter focuses primarily on economic difficulties after the unification that caused dissatisfaction among the population in the Eastern parts of Germany. The article argues that in order to explain the persistence and reinvigoration of an autonomous political culture during the last two decades in the new Länder, we need to synthesize the two approaches and to add a third aspect: the unification hypothesis. Although the communist period brought about a specific political culture in the GDR, the German unification process—based rather on transplantation than on adaptation—has caused it neither to diminish nor to wither away. On the contrary, the separate (post)-communist political culture was reaffirmed and reinstalled under novel circumstances.

## Keywords

East Germany; Unification; political culture; socialization

## Political Divisions in Unified Germany Twenty Years Later

On 9 November 2009, the city of Berlin and Germany as a whole commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall with



impressive festivities. Along the way from Potsdamer Platz, in front of the Brandenburg Gate and up to the Reichstag, students, artists, and former dissidents erected over a thousand decorated dominos to re-create the path of the wall that used to divide the city and the country. The pictures on the dominos mostly conveyed thoughts about freedom and overcoming division in a witty manner, such as an East German Trabi automobile breaking through a wall or a portrait of Erich Honecker with vampire-like teeth. Only a small number of images were critical: one depicted prejudices among Eastern and Western Germans and was entitled “Against the Wall in the Head” and another, similarly, displayed jokes about “Ossis” and “Wessis.” That evening crowds of cheering people congregated alongside the domino wall and, after official speeches by German and allied luminaries, watched the dominos rolling over to illustrate the “domino effect” of the communist regimes collapsing one after another during the miraculous year of 1989.

Such grand celebrations would suggest that the unified Germany represents a happy couple of Eastern and Western Germans married twenty years ago after one half had finally gotten rid of an abusive and loathed spouse. Yet, if we look more deeply at what the husband and wife say about the union now lasting two decades, the reality appears much gloomier. In this vein, the German government commissioned a survey to assess how Germans evaluate the events of 1989. As Table 1 shows, one of the most striking answers from April 2009 relates to the question about life in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). In the poll, 49 percent of Eastern Germans say that the GDR had more positive than negative sides (“there were some problems but people could live there well”) and 8 percent of Eastern Germans say that the GDR had overwhelmingly more positive sides (“people lived there happily and better than today in the unified Germany”), while only 40 percent of Eastern Germans look at the life in the former Eastern Germany more or overwhelmingly negatively. On the other hand, about 78 percent of Western Germans have a negative view and 18 percent of Western Germans have a positive view of the life in the GDR.

**Table 1:** Retrospective Assessments of Life in the GDR (in percent)

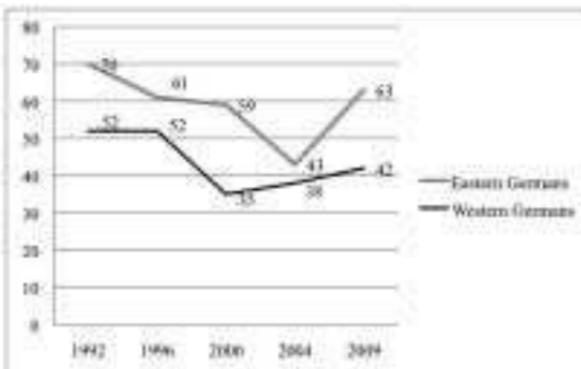
	Overall	Eastern Germans	Western Germans
The GDR has overwhelmingly bad sides. People lived under a dictatorship and there were shortages in many areas.	22	8	26
The GDR had more bad than good sides. There were many problems but, if need be, people could cope with the situation.	48	32	52
The GDR had more good than bad sides. There were some problems but people could live well.	20	49	13
The GDR had overwhelmingly good sides. People lived happily and better than today in unified Germany.	5	8	5
No answer.	7	3	4

Note: deviation from 100 percent is caused by rounding.

Source: TNS Emnid, 20-23 April 2009, available at [http://www.bmvbs.de/jsp/fotoreihe/fotoreihe\\_einzelbild.jsp?doc-id=1083277&curr\\_img\\_nr=5&sprache=de](http://www.bmvbs.de/jsp/fotoreihe/fotoreihe_einzelbild.jsp?doc-id=1083277&curr_img_nr=5&sprache=de); accessed 18 July 2010.

In addition to these findings, the Allensbach Institute inquired into how Eastern and Western Germans feel about each other and their common state. That firm regularly asks whether Western and Eastern Germans perceive differences or similarities between themselves. In April 2009, 63 percent of Eastern Germans emphasized the differences, while only 42 percent of Western Germans did so. The percentage indicating the differences is unusual as it shows a change in a promising trend. As Figure 1 highlights, since the early 1990s, the trend was declining from 70 percent in 1992 to 43 percent in 2004 among Eastern Germans agreeing that there are more differences than similarities. Yet, twenty years after unification, we can observe an increase by 20 percent again.

**Figure 1:** When you compare Germans in the East with Germans in the West of the country, do differences or similarities prevail? (“differences prevail” in percent)



Source: Allensbacher Archiv, IfD poll Nr. 10036, Allensbach, 2009.

Allensbach also conducted a survey in October 2009 about the outcomes of the unification process. Although 85 percent of Westerners and even 91 percent of Easterners agree that unification was the right decision to make (12 percent in the West and 8 percent in the East thought it was the wrong decision), 60 percent of Western Germans and 23 percent of Eastern Germans think that unification served mainly to benefit Easterners, while 18 percent of Western Germans and 34 percent of Eastern Germans see the benefits mainly for Westerners. Moreover, only 8 percent in the West and 27 percent in the East think that unification benefited both.<sup>2</sup>

These data clearly show that Eastern Germans are much more nostalgic for the old times in the GDR than one might expect. In fact, more than a majority of the respondents sees the previous regime in a more positive than negative light. This finding goes hand-in-hand with the other poll arguing that there are still vast differences between East and West. Although neither group regrets unification as such, it is interesting to note that Eastern Germans largely assume that Western Germans benefited from unity and vice versa. Although perceptions can differ from the reality—the Eastern parts of Germany, for example, certainly benefited from the large financial transfers from the West—perceptions matter, particularly with respect to the subtler issues, such as political culture, mentalities, and identity. From the polls we can thus conclude that, despite the spectacular celebrations in 2009 and 2010, Germany is still a country divided—not by a physical wall, but by an inner wall of perceptions and in minds.

This article discusses various theoretical explanations that seek to identify both the root causes and cures for the continuous divergence between the Eastern and Western German views of their common state. The focus is on attitudes and perceptions towards the common state and, in particular, why Eastern Germans are unhappy with it twenty years after unification. Although my work draws on the insights from the political culture literature,<sup>3</sup> the emphasis here is on perceptions and attitudes without making claims regarding the causal power of these attitudes. Indeed, the perceptions and attitudes of Germans, particularly those in the East, are the dependent rather than the independent variables of the analysis. It is not an article about “Ostalgie” per se, although nostalgia for communism clearly feeds into any understanding of Eastern Germans’ attitudes to unified Germany, but rather to common experiences after 1990. There is a lingering resentment amongst Eastern Germans who see that Western Germans remain much better off today and therefore conclude that the process was driven by Western Germans for the benefit of the West. Moreover, some political forces have tended to capitalize on such resentment. Indeed, for-

mer communists, the PDS/Left Partry in particular, have played on these attitudes for political gain.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this article considers such sentiments as signs of deeper divisions that require a thorough clarification.

The two schools of thought used to explain the divergence between the new and old Länder can be labeled “socialization” and “situational.” The first group of scholars, “culturalists,” emphasizes the impact of socialization before and during the GDR era and ongoing (postcommunist) legacies derived from Eastern Germans’ previous experience; the latter group of “rationalists,” on the contrary, focuses primarily on postunification economic difficulties that caused and sustained dissatisfaction within the population in the Eastern parts of Germany.<sup>5</sup> After outlining the two theoretical approaches, the article offers a third hypothesis: the major problem of the new Länder rests in the persistence and reinvigoration of an autonomous Eastern German political culture during the last two decades. Although the communist period brought about a specific political culture in the GDR (as well as in other countries of the former Soviet bloc), the unification process—based on “transplantation” rather than on “adaptation”<sup>6</sup>—has caused that regional culture neither to diminish nor to wither away. On the contrary, the separate (post)communist political culture was reaffirmed and reinstalled under novel circumstances. These, at times conflicting, analyses provide diverse answers to questions that also concern policy-makers: what is the future of unified political culture in Germany? What can be done to induce completion of “inner unification”?

## Socialization and Historical Theories

The explanation that the “socialization school” offers is of a long-term nature, stretching back far into the past. In contrast to their Western neighbors, Eastern Germans were not too lucky. Not only did they suffer under the politically restrictive communist regime, but real-existing socialism was unable to produce true modernization. It generated only a “fake modernity.”<sup>7</sup> Modernization accompanied by urbanism, secularism, and industrialism did not occur in the GDR to the same extent as it did in the Federal Republic of Germany.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the Eastern German population currently is trying to make up for lost time in a process deemed *nachholende Modernisierung* (catching up modernization).<sup>9</sup> As a reaction to transformation shocks, a withdrawal from the public to the private sphere, previously typical of the Romanticist period,<sup>10</sup> is repeating itself among contemporary Eastern Germans. Moreover, due to “cultural lag,” both the Eastern and

Western German “communities of experience”<sup>11</sup> constitute two *Varianten des Deutscheins* (variants of German being)<sup>12</sup> still in the twenty-first century. This perspective, therefore, sees the existence of two different political cultures on German territory and suggests that this divide will take a long time to overcome.

Some scholars argue that the former GDR represents the *deutsche* Deutschland (more “German” Germany).<sup>13</sup> In historical perspective, the former East German citizens value “good old German” qualities—such as commitment to the family and home, respect for authority, the virtues of fulfilling duties at work and elsewhere, etc.—much more than Western Germans do. In general, the *Untertanengeist* (spirit of servility) that traditionally was considered one of the major traits of Germanness and “Prussianness” in particular, did not disappear. In fact, it was even reinforced and deepened throughout the communist period. In this respect, one should not forget that the former GDR and new Länder partly occupy the areas of previously Prussian territories.<sup>14</sup> Since “cultural values ... do not simply wither and fade away with institutional, organizational, economic, and political transformations,”<sup>15</sup> historical legacies interact and fuse with new developments. Therefore, certain social and cultural continuities have persisted in the Eastern parts of Germany until today. One of the consequences, for example, is that the old German dualism between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) prevailed during GDR times. From this point of view, it is then understandable why Eastern Germans keep favoring life in small groups over individualism, politeness over effectiveness of communication, and work as a duty over a job as a means of achieving career and self-realization goals.<sup>16</sup> In institutional terms, the former East Germany also preserved presocialist residues in several sectors such as railways and the postal system. There was no need to nationalize them by the communist governments, as these sectors were in public hands already in the pre-war period.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, after unification, these economic segments were not privatized either.

According to the “culturalists,” there is no real hope of resolving the differences in political cultures between the Eastern and Western parts of Germany in the short term. Yet in order to avoid a potential German-German *Kulturkampf*, the eventual long-term solution toward social integration should not be outward-looking—“looking outward to the putative deficits of “the other””<sup>18</sup>—but a “context-based and multidirectional process in which dynamic coalitions determine outcomes rather than single and static forces.”<sup>19</sup> The timing indeed corresponds with the divergent phasing-in of political unification vis-à-vis nation-building and social integration. In prac-

tice, it is advisable not to blame “the other” but search for *gesamtdeutsche Themen* (common German-wide topics)<sup>20</sup> that would contribute to the inner unification of the public sphere. Ironically, joint disagreement of both German populations over U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East over the Iraq war, has produced convergence at least at the political level. At an individual level however, researchers calculated that it would take twenty to forty years to make the difference between Eastern and Western Germans disappear almost completely. Whereas generational change would suffice for about one third of the convergence effect, the actual change in individual preferences would account for the remaining two thirds.<sup>21</sup> For the time being, a minimal consensus and tolerance are essentially needed.

Dieter Fuchs’s proposal of a normative socialist model of democracy is a variation on the socialization perspective.<sup>22</sup> For Fuchs, Eastern Germans’ dissatisfaction with the reality and performance of German democracy stems from their deeply embedded ideal of socialism that emerged over the years under communist rule. Socialism is, in their eyes, associated primarily with social rights. Despite Eastern Germans’ support for democracy as a form of government, 73 percent of them feel that the “right to work” should be guaranteed and 65 percent of them think the “right to kindergarten” should be assured as well.<sup>23</sup> The “all-embracing welfare state” is how citizens of the new Länder imagine the most desirable political system. The postunification situation in Germany is nonetheless incongruent with the socialist idea, corresponding instead to the liberal democratic model. The major condition for successful political consolidation, i.e., the formation of a political culture consistent with the institutional structure, is thus lacking in the Eastern parts of Germany. In the same way, Robert Rohrschneider and Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck<sup>24</sup> distinguish between socialism as a welfare system and socialism as a systemic alternative. They are, however, much less optimistic regarding Eastern Germans’ choice of the former over the latter. At any rate, disillusionment in the new Länder should not be considered only collateral damage produced by the necessary transformation that would vanish over time. Rather, in this view, Germans will have to come-to-terms with the fact that German political culture will continue to be heterogeneous in the long-run, encompassing two autonomous political subcultures.

## Situational and Postunification Theories

David Conradt is the leading scholar who argues in favor of the situational hypothesis.<sup>25</sup> He proposes that system performance is the key variable

influencing Eastern Germans' satisfaction with the current democratic system. Conradt illustrates the likely Eastern German "output dependence" on the Western German case. After World War II, the Allies were strongly dedicated to altering Western German attitudes and perceptions through strict re-education policies and economic transformation. Reconstruction and economic development went hand in hand with restructuring West German society to emulate the Western democratic political and social model.<sup>26</sup> Even though it took nearly a quarter of a century until West Germans became satisfied with democracy in the Federal Republic,<sup>27</sup> in the end they acquired characteristics culturally resembling contemporary "Westerners," such as Americans, rather than old Prussians. Moreover, the fact that for Western Germans there was no viable political alternative other than pursuing democracy throughout the Cold War helped to stabilize the system in the FRG in the long-run. Under such a constellation of forces, it was "an easy birth and infancy for German democracy"<sup>28</sup> capable of "changing the effects of history"<sup>29</sup> and transforming Western German attitudes and perceptions.

From this sociological point of view, the two political cultures thesis is indeed incorrect—there is actually only one political culture in Germany. The *Performanzverdrossenheit* (disillusionment with performance),<sup>30</sup> especially in economic terms, is the major difficulty that needs to be surmounted. As Thomas Ahbe<sup>31</sup> puts it, "Erfolg verbindet, Misserfolg trennt" (success binds, failure separates). Therefore, inner unity will be attained as soon as the output convergence between the Western and Eastern parts of Germany takes place. Even though Eastern Germans might be objectively better off than they were some twenty or thirty years ago, the contemporaneous social comparison with Western Germans (and not the temporal contrast with their own past) is what psychologically matters. Thus, if the German government achieves economic and social consolidation in the East, political culture will adjust itself nearly automatically. From this theory of democracy viewpoint, Easterners favor neither a liberal nor a socialist democratic model; they are simply *Ergebnisorientierte Demokraten* (result-oriented democrats)<sup>32</sup> preferring, a bit cynically, the political system that delivers them the most.

This "situational postunification" category of theories, which clarifies the differences in political culture in the Western and Eastern parts of Germany, includes two special subgroups. The first hypothesizes that the East-West divergence is actually equivalent to regional diversity in other states, whereas the other subgroup assumes that the challenges of Eastern Germans correspond to the difficulties that immigrants and minorities face in

multicultural societies. From the first point of view, the German East approximates the Basque region in Spain or the Mezzogiorno in Italy with their cultural traditions being fairly different from the rest of each respective country. Gisela Trommsdorf and Hans-Joachim Kornadt<sup>33</sup> make a similar analogy when they compare the West and East of Germany to the North and South on both the national and global levels. The regionalism hypothesis becomes even more relevant when it is applied on the post-communist party (PDS/The Left Party) and its electoral support.<sup>34</sup> Until recently, the Left Party was popular almost exclusively in the new Länder, while it was practically absent in the old FRG. Nevertheless, other aspects of regionalism, such as a linguistic uniqueness that exacerbates national disunity elsewhere in Europe, do not exist in Germany. It might nevertheless serve as a warning to Germans that regional disagreements, if not tackled early, can persist and intensify over time and may eventually lead to calls for independence and, at times, to violence.

Toralf Staud's<sup>35</sup> idea to look at Eastern Germans' troubles in the unified Germany through the lenses of an immigrant experience is one of the most compelling approaches. After unification, the entire social world changed dramatically for Eastern Germans. The value of their human capital rapidly decreased—they had to learn a foreign “capitalist language,” acquire new educational credentials, learn previously unknown customs and habits, etc. This is what all immigrants have to do when they settle down in an unfamiliar environment. In contrast, for Eastern Germans there is no chance to go back to their homeland, not even for a vacation, which makes their situation more complex. For Western Germans, nothing significant has been altered in their everyday lives since 1990. In other words, the entire adult East German population became a nation of expatriots in one moment. As Staud puts it: “East Germans immigrated without having moved; the new country came to them.”<sup>36</sup>

It is only natural that citizens of the new Länder are going through a culture shock similar to one that many tourists and visitors experience when they travel abroad for a few days. The typical reaction to profound cultural transformation is an effort to preserve at least something from the original identity. Therefore, Staud considers the wave of the so-called *Ostalgie*<sup>37</sup> to be a temporary grief over the losses that will gradually cease. On the other hand, the *Zurückerrinnern an das Ostdeutsche* (remembering or recalling *the* East German)<sup>38</sup> will not die out easily. As with young Muslims born in Europe whose parents decided their destiny for them and changed their country of origin, second and third generation Eastern German re-settlers might be reviving some artifacts of the GDR as symbols of

their extinct culture. At the theoretical level, the unification of West and Eastern German political cultures becomes a matter of choice between assimilation and a multiculturalist model. Staud, therefore, pleads for an approach that would enable Eastern Germans to function properly within the unified society and, at the same time, would allow them to keep their traditions and values.

Not all the theories, however, hold such a negative view regarding the prospects of political culture change in the Eastern parts of Germany. Lawrence McFalls<sup>39</sup> argues that since 1989 Eastern Germans have built a new political culture that is actually ahead of Western German political culture. Easterners today represent the vanguard of an all-German society. In particular, after unification, Eastern Germans had to learn quickly how to cope with heightened geographic and social mobility, employment insecurity, communication through mass electronic media, increased possibilities of consumption, etc. These are all highly postmodern factors that are becoming central to a globalizing world. According to a similarly “revisionist” perspective on Eastern German political culture in the *Financial Times*,<sup>40</sup> the East is a German “ideas laboratory” and “national beacon” due to its flexibility in the face of turbulent change. For instance, some Eastern Germans have switched careers several times since 1990, which contrasts with the rigidity of many career paths in the Western parts of the country.<sup>41</sup> Even political leaders such as Chancellor Angela Merkel and former Social Democratic Party chief and current prime minister of Brandenburg Matthias Platzeck—both Easterners—emphasize Eastern Germans’ “openness to change” that can provide pointers to Westerners who should draw lessons from the Eastern experience. The implication for political culture is clear: only when Germany is prepared to take the best from both the East and West will it fully embrace its identity as a unified nation.

## **The Devil is in the Unification: The Synthesis of Socialization and Situation Theories**

The previous sections of this article outlined various theories as to why the Eastern German political culture has not as yet converged with the Western one even after twenty years following unification, and discussed the reasons behind unfulfilled predictions. Some scholars argue that a split political culture appeared only due to the distinct socialization under the GDR regime and will vanish in the course of time with generational changes. Others underscore the burden of present-day economic difficul-

ties and the healing effects of potential positive systemic performance in the new Länder.

Although both approaches have their merits, one highlights the legacies of communism and emphasizes the difficulties of transcending the past, whereas the other stresses economic performance in shaping attitudes and perceptions. Nevertheless, neither of them satisfactorily explains why the majority of Eastern Germans still twenty years after unification claims that the GDR was more positive than negative, why about two thirds of Easterners consider themselves different from Westerners, and why one third of them thinks that unification benefitted only Western Germans, as the surveys at the beginning of this article showed. If the explanation depended only on Eastern Germans' postcommunist heritage, one would have to find comparable results to similar questions in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries that also used to be a part of the Soviet bloc. This is not the case, however. For instance, as Table 2 highlights, the Eurobarometer survey asked whether "the situation that prevailed in Central and Eastern European countries before 1989 was better than today's." On average, 59 percent of Central and Eastern Europeans disagreed with this statement, while 28 percent agreed with the statement (13 percent did not know).

**Table 2:** Was the situation in Central and Eastern European Countries before 1989 better than today? (in percent)

	Agree	Disagree	Don't know/No answer
Hungary	43.1	40.4	16.5
Latvia	38.2	40.3	21.5
Bulgaria	36.9	39.2	23.9
Romania	36.5	50.6	12.9
Slovakia	28.0	56.5	15.5
CEE Average	27.9	58.8	13.3
Lithuania	22.4	52.8	24.8
Slovenia	22.3	70.1	7.7
Estonia	19.9	63.1	17.0
Czech Republic	21.4	70.5	8.0
Poland	19.3	70.3	10.4

*Source:* Flash Eurobarometer no. 257, "Views on Enlargement," European Commission (2009): 19, 67.

Similarly, in the Czech Republic, a country that endured as hard-line communist rulers in the 1970s and 1980s as the GDR did,<sup>42</sup> nostalgia for the communist period is not as high as in the new Länder. For instance, a poll conducted by the Czech Academy of Sciences asked whether the change in 1989 was worth it. In 1999, 56 percent of Czechs replied "rather" or "definitely yes," (32 percent answered "rather" or "definitely not") while

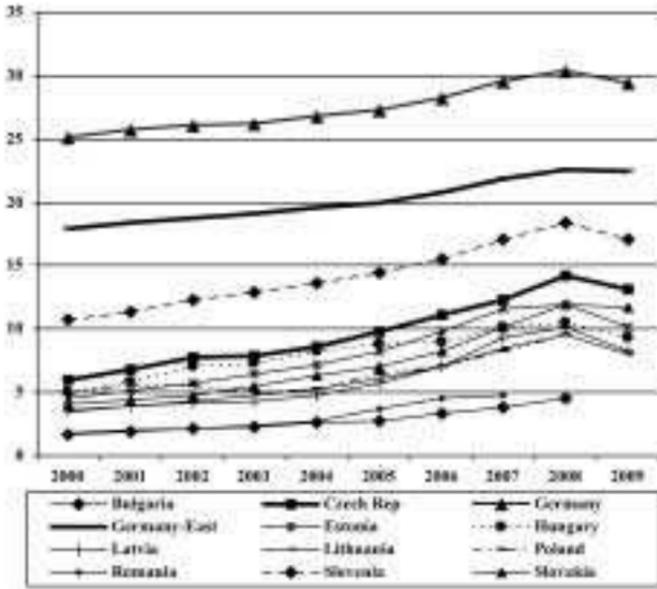
in 2005, 60 percent, and in 2009 69 percent agreed (25 and 23 percent disagreed).<sup>43</sup> Clearly, Czechs are much more enthusiastic about the changes after 1989 than Eastern Germans are.

It is certainly true that there were significant variations in the nature of communist regimes throughout the former Soviet bloc.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, some systems, such as “goulash communism” in 1980s Hungary, were rather mild<sup>45</sup> (which also might explain the lowest levels of satisfaction with changes after 1989 among Hungarians as Table 2 revealed). If we compare results from the polls conducted among Eastern Germans with polls among populations of CEE countries, however, the difference is striking. Citizens of these countries (with the possible exception of Hungary) are much happier with developments after 1989 than their Eastern German counterparts. This is all the more surprising since Eastern Germans, given the swift transfer of democratic political structures and money from the West after unification, had a much more favorable starting position than the other CEE countries had. As Joachim Gauck observed: “a few years ago, I read a poll in which Eastern Germans were the most dissatisfied population even after Albanians. It is eminently surprising since Eastern Germans had objectively the best starting position and were in the best situation from the legal and economic point of view.”<sup>46</sup> The socialization account, therefore, is unsatisfactory in explaining not just the continuing levels of *Ostalgie* but, as the polls at the beginning show, why the levels of nostalgia in the new *Länder* are much higher than in many other postcommunist states.

On the other hand, if the culprit was on the output side of the German system, as the situational theorists argue, we should observe convergence in recent years, particularly since the Hartz IV reforms took effect. In the 1990s and the first half of 2000s, the new *Länder* were plagued by the high unemployment rate, which was deemed to be one of the major causes of discontent among Eastern Germans. Richard Schröder, one of the GDR opposition leaders, described the situation as follows: “After the sudden collapse of our economy, even those Eastern Germans who did not find the GDR especially good became unemployed. Not only those who one would wish to have lost their jobs became unemployed ... not only Krenz became unemployed.”<sup>47</sup> Yet, despite the recent economic and financial crisis, the unemployment rate declined from its peak of 20.6 percent in 2005 to 13.4 percent in 2010, the lowest rate since 1992.<sup>48</sup> Convergence in political attitudes based on economic convergence is thus not happening either, as the current increase in Easterners suggesting that there are more differences than similarities between East and West indicates.

Similar to the criticism made of the legacies-based approach, if we compare economic development in the new Länder with the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, we see relatively high levels of growth, development, and investment in the former East Germany. For instance, Figure 2 compares the levels of GDP per capita in Germany and ten CEE countries.

**Figure 2:** Per Capita GDP 2000-2009 (in thousands of EUROS at market prices)



Source: Eurostat Statistics, 29 July 2009, available at [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search\\_database](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search_database); accessed 13 December, 2010; and Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder. Author's calculations for Germany-East (including Berlin); data for 2009 as of 30 June 2009, available at [http://www.vgrdl.de/Arbeitskreis\\_VGR/tbls/tab01.asp#tab07](http://www.vgrdl.de/Arbeitskreis_VGR/tbls/tab01.asp#tab07); accessed 13 December 2010.

This graph clearly shows that the new Länder enjoy much higher levels of the economic welfare than other states in the postcommunist Europe even if we take the two richest CEE countries—Slovenia and the Czech Republic—as comparisons. In the situationalist-based account, higher levels of income should lead us to expect higher levels of satisfaction in the new Länder than elsewhere in the CEE region. Yet, as the previous polls in the article showed, Eastern Germans are much more skeptical about the recent developments than their regional counterparts and, therefore, the economic performance-based theories do not hold either. The most probable reason why Eastern Germans' attitudes and perceptions are much gloomier despite their relative economic well-being is that they take as

their reference point the old Länder rather than the rest of the former communist bloc. Richard von Weizsäcker noted: “people in Saxony tend to compare themselves to their fellow Germans in Bavaria.”<sup>49</sup> This was true under communism and is even more so after unification. Indeed, as Lothar de Maizière argued: “Eastern Germans have always had an alternative in front of their eyes. They could go from one Germany to another Germany.”<sup>50</sup> The process of unification only fueled the resentment provoked by this direct comparison because Eastern Germans saw the process of unification as driven by Westerners. Hence, it is not so much the existence of the unified Germany per se, as the poll asking whether or not the unification was the right decision indicated, but the manner in which the common state was forged that matters. Therefore, neither the socialization nor the situational theories fully explicate the puzzle.

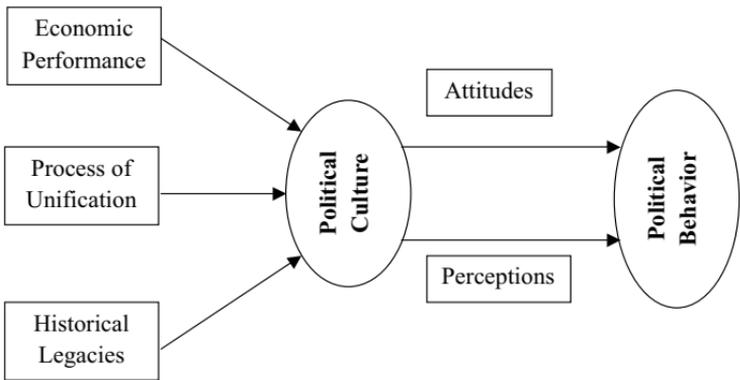
An alternative explanation combines both the socialization and situational analyses: communist systems produced specific political cultures, both in the former GDR and in other countries of the former Soviet bloc, the inheritances of which the entire region can feel until today. Nevertheless, in contrast to other CEE countries, the method of integration with West Germany reinforced these communist legacies, continuing to influence even younger generations of Eastern Germans today. Thanks to the way in which unification proceeded, a performance improvement can only reduce the impact of the (post)communist heritage on political culture in the Eastern parts of Germany, but economic progress by itself cannot cause it to disappear. Similarly, generational turnover will not change the situation as much as hypothesized unless the consequences of the way in which the unification process took shape are ameliorated.

This “unification hypothesis” not only synthesizes the two theories discussed above, but, crucially, adds a key factor that bridges both socialization and situational theories. In this view, the former legacies-based explanation is too historically determinist, while the latter performance-based one is too ahistorical. There is a missing middle position in that neither account places enough emphasis on the radical transformations of 1989-1990—the process of becoming a single state. Key questions are how the process was carried out, how it was perceived to have been done, and who the driving forces behind the process were. In some respects it is surprising that none of the schools of thought focused on the importance of the process as such given the fact that unification not only brought East and West Germany together, but was also a critical and profoundly unsettling historical experience. Indeed, since founding of the GDR, its dissolution was the most significant event in lives of the affected population. Most Eastern

Germans probably felt similar to Platzeck: “1989-1990 was the most thrilling year of my life. In October 1989, East German police wanted to arrest me. In February 1990, we were welcomed by Helmut Kohl at the governmental airport in Cologne/Bonn, and in October 1990, the unification came... In just a few weeks, everything changed so much.”<sup>51</sup> By pointing to the significance of the method of unification, this article’s theory thus fills a gap in academic accounts.

This explanation does not dismiss the validity of the other theories, but merely stresses that they are insufficient by themselves to provide a satisfactory explanation of Eastern Germans’ attitudes and perceptions towards their past, common state, and fellow Germans. Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between the three explanations behind the attitudes and perceptions that influence Eastern German political culture until today.

**Figure 3:** A Unified Model of Eastern German Political Culture



There was no caesura in 1989, because historical (communist and perhaps even precommunist) legacies continue to have an impact on the attitudes and perceptions of Eastern Germans, as well as other Central and Eastern Europeans. The unemployment rate (albeit declining) and comparably lower levels of economic well-being in the East than in the West of Germany matter as well. More importantly, Eastern Germans tend to view unification as being a takeover in which they were accorded little opportunity to influence the process. Indeed, already during the negotiations of the Unification Treaty, due to the emphasis placed on speedy unification, there was no time to take into account the requests of the democratic East German leadership for at least symbolic changes of the German political system, such as a new constitution. Acceding to the West German *Grundgesetz* made the process feel like a large multinational taking over a small struggling firm. In fact, only a very small number of the East German

demands eventually were included in the final treaty, such as rules on dealing with the Stasi files, pushed forward particularly by Gauck.<sup>52</sup> Simultaneously, the influence of East German actors in each stage of the unification process shrank—from those who “pulled down the Wall” to those who dissolved their state and joined another. Hans Misselwitz, an East German negotiator in the 2+4 negotiations, explained the inevitable loss of East German influence on the unification process:

if you represent a state that is going to cease to exist, then you obviously have a problem... in reality, the institutions of West Germany continued to exist, while the GDR institutions were transferred to West Germany. The GDR had in fact a minuscule status in negotiations... it was historically a unique and rare situation in which one of the negotiating partners in the end does not exist anymore and gives up itself... [unification] was a quasi-gift from the perspective of the GDR.<sup>53</sup>

Resentment about the unification process thus helps to link together not just nostalgia for the communist period and for the GDR, but also feeds into the feeling that united Germany is run largely for the benefit of Western Germans.

Although Eastern Germans were not excluded from the process—indeed, some Eastern Germans such as Merkel or Wolfgang Thierse became quite prominent—they were not driving the process of change. Some of the East Germans dissidents who were unenthusiastic about rapid unification were soon pushed to the side, whereas other Eastern Germans who favored unification found their views frequently marginalized by Western German advisors who claimed that they had better knowledge and understanding of the functioning of the democratic system. Marianne Birthler, postunification educational minister in Brandenburg, noted:

It was sometimes difficult when we had our own ideas; our advisors told us that it would not work because they had already tried it out [in West Germany]. The advisors were often right but we wanted to make our own decisions [we were] like teenagers for whose long-term development it is better if they are allowed to make mistakes.<sup>54</sup>

A similar case in the point is a comment by Hans-Joachim Meyer, Birthler’s colleague from Saxony, who talks about Eastern Germans’ lacking a “creative role” in shaping democracy and the transformation of the state in their part of the country.<sup>55</sup>

More broadly, as is frequently the case in processes of integrating two entities, one of which is seen more developed than the other (such as Czechoslovakia after World War One),<sup>56</sup> expertise was drafted from West Germany and directed to East Germany to manage emergent democratic state structures. Due to such personnel transfers, not only was there resent-

ment towards the fact that the Westerners were in leading positions, but also from the fact that job opportunities in the East did not seem to attract the cream of the administration: “civil servants (*Beamte*) from the West who came to the East were often shortly before their retirement and still wanted to do something new or were careerists and incapable who suddenly had a chance to get promoted.”<sup>57</sup> Moreover, even many years after unification, Western Germans predominated in certain positions and sectors. Platzeck, who was minister for environment in Brandenburg in the early 1990s, was the very first to employ an Eastern German as secretary of state in 1994. Platzeck added: “today, we still have to say that there are Western Germans in over 90 percent of the key administrative posts.”<sup>58</sup> The low level of satisfaction with postunification changes among Eastern Germans is thus clearly related to the fact that the immediate transformations in the social and political environment were not accompanied by empowerment of the local democratic Eastern elites because the unification process was driven so clearly by Westerners. The socialization and situation hypotheses therefore explain only a part of the story—the “unification” explanation must be added to the mix.

## **Conclusion: A Hasty Marriage with Consequences**

In contrast to the other CEE countries, the Eastern part of Germany neither had to create new democratic constitutional structures from scratch, nor did it have to rely on its own resources during the economic transition from a centrally planned to a free market economy. Because of the diverging paths taken during the initial transformation, the situation should have been easier for Eastern Germans later on to overcome the postcommunist legacy and transform their political culture. Even though the conditions in the new *Länder* initially were more advantageous than those elsewhere in the region however they have not seemed to result in more favorable outcomes when it comes to the attitudes and perceptions of Eastern Germans. Although the Eastern parts of Germany enjoyed the benefits of a swifter and less painful start of the democratization process, the building of the new political culture has so far been more intricate than expected and the results are more ambiguous.

This article reviewed two main scholarly approaches that conceptualize differences in attitudes and perceptions among Western and Eastern Germans and proposed a synthesis of the two with an addition of a third variable. This argument recognizes the merits of both the socialization and

situation schools of thought, but also links them up with an explanation based on the unification process. Clearly, a satisfactory elucidation of Easterners' attitudes to the common state twenty years after unification owes something to the legacies of the past and to the economic conditions in the new Länder. Nevertheless, this article maintains that the split in German political culture is neither just the product of one of these factors nor indeed just a fusion of the two, but a mixture of three ingredients. The reason why "inner unification" has not occurred so far is due to the way in which political unification took place. The process was based on transplanting West German political, economic, personnel and legal structures to the East.<sup>59</sup> As de Maizière confirms: "the transformation process in CEE countries was a self-steered process, while unification was to a certain extent a process steered by foreign forces because of the legal, financial, social, and economic transfers."<sup>60</sup> This evoked feelings of exclusion among Easterners and hindered Eastern German efforts for self-reform.

Thus, Easterners' disillusionment with postunification developments is not just because of economic and material factors, but to the ownership of the process. Although East Germans in their demonstrations were instrumental in putting the issue of unification on the table, it was West Germans who managed and directed the process. In the end, the transplantation of the unification process did not help to eliminate or even reduce (post)communist legacies, but actually conserved and strengthened them in the unified country. The process introduced "lock-in" mechanisms that have helped to entrench divisions between Eastern and Western Germans. It will be difficult to unlock these mechanisms unless the repercussions from the unification process are dealt with, such as giving more powers to local Eastern German actors in areas such as politics, state administration, academia, etc. German authorities could draw lessons from the accession of other CEE countries to the European Union and initiate training of Eastern German officials, which could lead to a kind of "affirmative action" to support geographical balance between Easterners and Westerners in the state administration. But, this is also not something that can be fixed overnight. As Birthler formulated it: "forty years of separation needs forty years of reconciliation."<sup>61</sup>

To return to the matrimonial metaphor, we can see that the wedding ceremony was a little too hurried without having enough time to engage in sufficient planning. Although wanting to get married, one of the spouses felt a bit ignored and mistreated by the other when it came to the wedding preparations and service. Although the happy couple already has lived together for two decades, there is still lingering resentment on one side that affects the harmony of the marriage. Notwithstanding the possibility

of concluding a new marital agreement, the counseling service would certainly give advice to the couple to renew their nuptials and, this time around, to let the discontented spouse choose at least the colors and flower decorations, if not the music. If the husband and wife do not do this, there might be a danger that they might not overcome their differences in the long run and one of them might surprise the other by filing for divorce. Let us hope though that they will sort out their troubles and will stay together “til death do they part.”

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## Notes

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  6. Tereza Novotna, “The Transplantation and Adaptation Types of Political Integration: The Case of the German Unification in Parallel with the Eastern Enlargement of the EU,” *Perspectives: Review of International Affairs* 16, no. 2 (2008): 77-102.
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  8. Stephen Kalberg, “The Far Slower and More Conflict-Ridden Path to German Social Integration. Toward a Multicausal, Contextual, and Multidirectional Explanatory Framework,” *German Politics and Society* 17, no. 4 (1999): 41.
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  10. Stephen Kalberg, “The Origin and Expansion of Kulturpessimismus: The Relationship between Public and Private Spheres in Early Twentieth Century Germany,” *Sociological Theory* 5, no. 2 (1987): 150.
  11. Lawrence McFalls, “Eastern Germany Transformed. From Postcommunist to Late Capitalist Political Culture,” *German Politics and Society* 17, no. 2 (1999): 16.
  12. Thomas Ahbe, „Die Konstruktion der Ostdeutschen. Diskursive Spannungen, Stereotype und Identitäten seit 1989,“ *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 41-42 (2004): 12.
  13. Greiffenhagen (see note 8), 9.
  14. Although it is worth mentioning that the former GDR was also Thuringia, Saxony, and Mecklenburg.
  15. Kalberg (see note 9), 152.
  16. Greiffenhagen (see note 8), 12, 19 argues that East Germans, due to their higher sense of obligation, indeed value work more than West Germans who are more *freizeitorientiert* (leisure-oriented). Besides, East Germans tend to see the work as a “must” and not as a source of personal accomplishment and satisfaction, as for example is often the case in the U.S.
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  19. Ibid, 47.
  20. Christoph Dieckmann, “Deutschlands Medien und ostdeutsche Öffentlichkeit,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 40 (2005): 7.
  21. Alberto Alesina and Nicola Fuchs-Schündeln, *Good bye Lenin (or not?): The effect of Communism on people’s preferences* (Cambridge, 2005). The authors ask why Eastern Germans are more likely to favor state intervention than Western Germans. They reached the conclusion that only one-third of Easterners prefer redistribution because they are, in fact, the main beneficiaries after unification. The other two-thirds have preferences that are caused by direct experiences with the communist state’s involvement in social matters, including social security. It will, however, take up to forty years to change these preferences. See also Stefan Svallfors, “Policy Feedback, Generational Replacement, and Attitudes to State Intervention: Eastern and Western Germany, 1990-2006,” *European Political Science Review* 2, no. 1 (2010), 119-135.

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23. *Ibid.*, 22. Similarly, even if Eastern Germans did not miss the GDR as such, they miss some of its features, for example the slower pace of life or nudist beaches.
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25. David P. Conradt, "Political Culture and Identity: The Post-Unification Search for 'Inner Unity,'" in *Developments in German Politics* 3, ed. W. E. Paterson and G. Smith (Durham, 2003), 269-287; David P. Conradt, "Political Culture in Unified Germany, The First Ten Years," *German Politics and Society* 20, no.2 (2002), 43-74.
26. See Wade Jacoby, *Imitation and Politics: Redesigning Modern Germany* (Ithaca, 2000).
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28. Conradt, "Political Culture and Identity," (see note 24), 275.
29. David P. Conradt, "Changing German Political Culture," in Almond and Verba (see note 26), 213.
30. Gerd Picken, *Jugend und Politikverdrossenheit. Zwei politische Kulturen im Deutschland nach der Vereinigung?* (Opladen, 2002), 385.
31. Ahbe (see note 11), 20.
32. Michael Edinger and Andreas Hallermann, *Politische Kultur in Ostdeutschland. Die Unterstützung des politischen Systems am Beispiel Thüringens* (Frankfurt/Main, 2004), 75-82.
33. Gisela Trommsdorff and Hans-Joachim Kornadt, "Innere Einheit im vereinigten Deutschland? Psychologische Prozesse beim sozialen Wandel," in *Transformation Ostdeutschlands. Berichte zum sozialen und politischen Wandel in den neuen Bundesländern*, ed. H. Bertram and R. Kollmorgen (Opladen, 2001), 365-388.
34. See Hough (see note 3); Jonathan Olsen, "The Dilemmas of Germany's PDS," *German Policy Studies/Politikfeldanalyse* 2, no. 2 (2002), 290-317; William E. Paterson, Dan Hough, and James Sloam, eds., *Learning From the West? Policy Transfer and Programmatic Change in the Communist Successor Parties of Eastern and Central Europe* (London, 2006).
35. Anke Mueller, "Ostdeutsche sind Immigranten ohne Heimat. Ein Interview mit Feature-Autor und ZEIT-Redakteur Toralf Staud," 23 February 2006; Toralf Staud, "Die ostdeutschen Immigranten," in *Das neue Deutschland. Die Zukunft als Chance*, ed. T. Busse and T. Dürr (Berlin, 2003), 266-281.
36. Staud (see note 34); Similarly, Conradt, "Political Culture in Unified Germany" (see note 24) refers to Eastern Germans as a "national minority" that is disadvantaged, neglected, and exploited after unification. The major reason why it happened this way was because unification proceeded not as a merger of equals, but as assimilation of a minority on the majority's terms.
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38. Staud (see note 34), 275.
39. McFalls (see note 10).
40. Hugh Williamson, "From burden to beacon: how eastern Germany is becoming an unlikely pace-setter for reform," *Financial Times*, 9 March 2006.
41. In the same vein, Yvonne Hammes in *Wertewandel seit der Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland. Auswirkungen des Wandels gesellschaftlicher und politischer Wertorientierungen auf die Demokratie* (Frankfurt/Main, 2002), 101 talks about "Generation Flex," the flexible youth, that is willing to move and adjust in order to get a better education and job.
42. Richard Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century—And After* (London, 1997).

43. Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění: pd91103c, available at [http://www.cvvm.cas.cz/upl/zpravy/100965s\\_pd91103c.pdf](http://www.cvvm.cas.cz/upl/zpravy/100965s_pd91103c.pdf); accessed 13 December 2010.
44. Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, *Democracy after Communism* (Baltimore, 2002); Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, 1996).
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47. Author's interview with Richard Schröder, Berlin, 4 December 2007.
48. The unemployment rate is calculated from the total non-self-employed civil work force. Federal Statistical Office, Labor Market Section, Registered Unemployed, Unemployment Rate by Area; available at <http://www.destatis.de/jetspeed/portal/cms/Sites/destatis/Internet/EN/Content/Statistics/TimeSeries/LongTermSeries/LabourMarket/Content100/lrab003ga.templateId=renderPrint.psml>, accessed 19 July 2010.
49. Author's interview with Richard von Weizsäcker, Berlin, 27 November 2007.
50. Author's interview with Lothar de Maizière, Berlin, 4 December 2007.
51. Author's interview with Matthias Platzeck, Potsdam, 12 December 2007.
52. See Wolfgang Schäuble, *Der Vertrag. Wie ich über die deutsche Einheit verhandelte.* (Stuttgart, 1991).
53. Author's interview with Hans Misselwitz, Berlin, 6 November 2007.
54. Author's interview with Marianne Birthler, Berlin, 18 December 2007.
55. Author's interview with Hans-Joachim Meyer, Berlin, 13 December 2007.
56. Tim Haughton, *Constraints and Opportunities of Leadership in Post-Communist Europe* (Aldershot, 2005); Karen Henderson, *Slovakia: The Escape from Invisibility* (London, 2002).
57. Author's interview with Guenther Nooke, Berlin, 27 November 2007.
58. Interview with Platzeck (see note 49).
59. Novotna (see note 5)
60. Interview with de Maizière (see note 48).
61. In German: "Vierzig Jahre Teilung brauchen vierzig Jahre Heilung." Interview with Birthler (see note 52).