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The eastern inheritance of united Germany

History, political culture and social conditions of the former communist region repay close attention

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Nov 9, 2024

Welcome back. It's been quite a week in Germany. On Wednesday the ruling three-party coalition collapsed, paving the way for snap national elections, probably early next year.

Hours before, Donald Trump won the US presidential election — a result that threatens the already shaky liberal democratic world order on which Germany built its security and prosperity after 1945.

As if that wasn't enough, the authorities announced on Tuesday that they had discovered another [far-right plot](#) to overthrow German democracy. You can find me at tony.barber@ft.com.

A doomed three-party experiment

A useful way of understanding Germany's domestic troubles is to consider the east — the five Länder, or states, that made up communist East Germany and became part of the Federal Republic upon reunification in 1990.

The more closely we look at the current political instability, the more clearly we see the influence on modern Germany of the history, political culture and social conditions of the east.

The [collapse of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition](#) happened primarily because of disputes among the three parties over fiscal and economic policies.

But the problem all along was that Germany has practically no experience — at national level, as opposed to the 16 federal states — of three-party coalitions and the compromises needed to make them work.

It was an experiment that ran into difficulties soon after Scholz's Social Democrats formed a government with the Greens and liberal Free Democrats following the 2021 Bundestag elections.

Eastern parties and voters

However, there was a reason why this coalition came together in the first place. It was one of the few plausible ways of amassing a parliamentary majority on a party landscape that had become increasingly fragmented because of developments in eastern Germany since reunification.

To start with, the east was the electoral heartland of Die Linke, a radical leftist party with roots in the old East German communist dictatorship. But no other party wanted to share power at national level with Die Linke.

Over the past decade or so, many eastern voters have turned to a new party equally abhorred by its mainstream opponents — the far-right Alternative for Germany.

And since the start of this year, yet another party with a particular appeal to eastern identity has emerged — the [Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance](#). Named after its founder, a former communist and Die Linke politician, this party is sometimes called “leftist” — but in my view that is a misleading label.

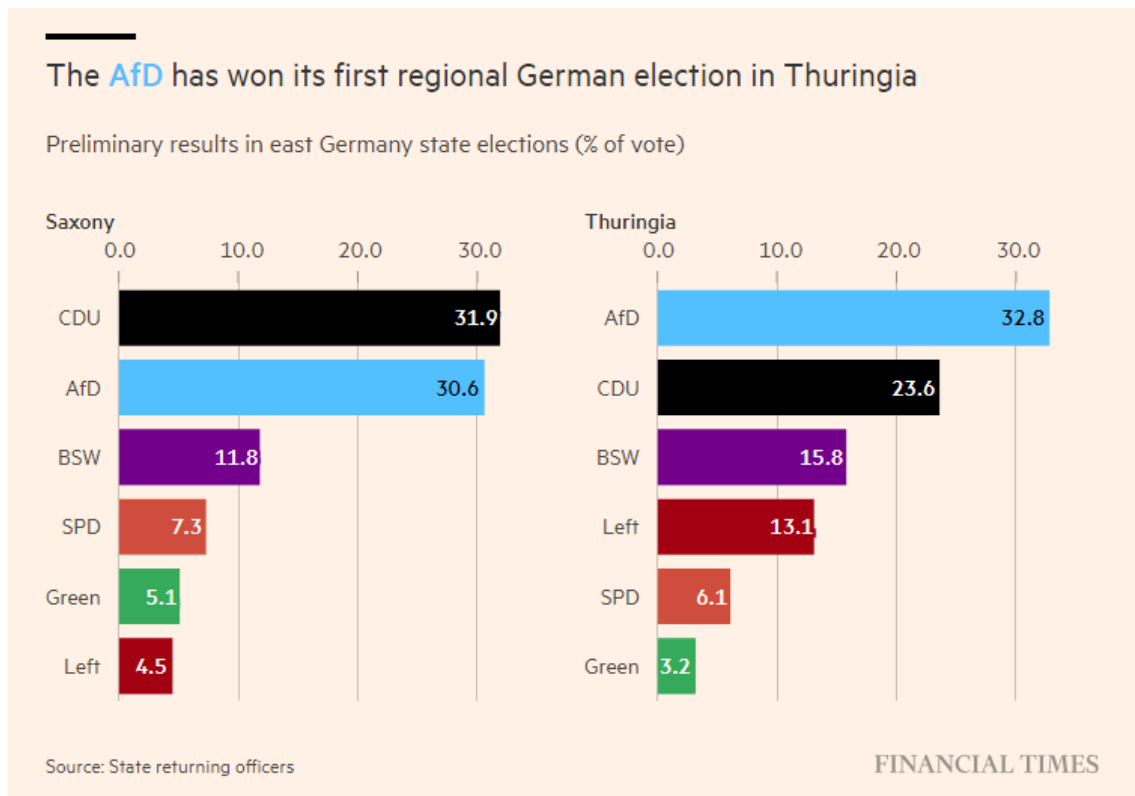
[In this article for Social Europe](#), the Princeton University political scientist Jan-Werner Müller gets it right:

Her party is designed to fill what she sees as an unoccupied political space — nationalism combined with socialism — in Germany’s multi-party landscape, and she has seized on wedge issues to split other parties apart.

One such issue is the war in Ukraine, on which her opposition to German support for Kyiv attracts Russophile voters in the east.

The east shapes the national scene

The point is that both the AfD and the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance are now fixtures on Germany’s political stage. In September, the AfD became the first far-right party [to win a state election](#) since the Federal Republic’s birth in 1949 when it cruised to victory in the eastern state of Thuringia.



Each of the two upstart parties has drained public support from Scholz's coalition. Indeed, the AfD now lies [second in national opinion polls](#), making it more popular than the SPD, Greens or FDP.

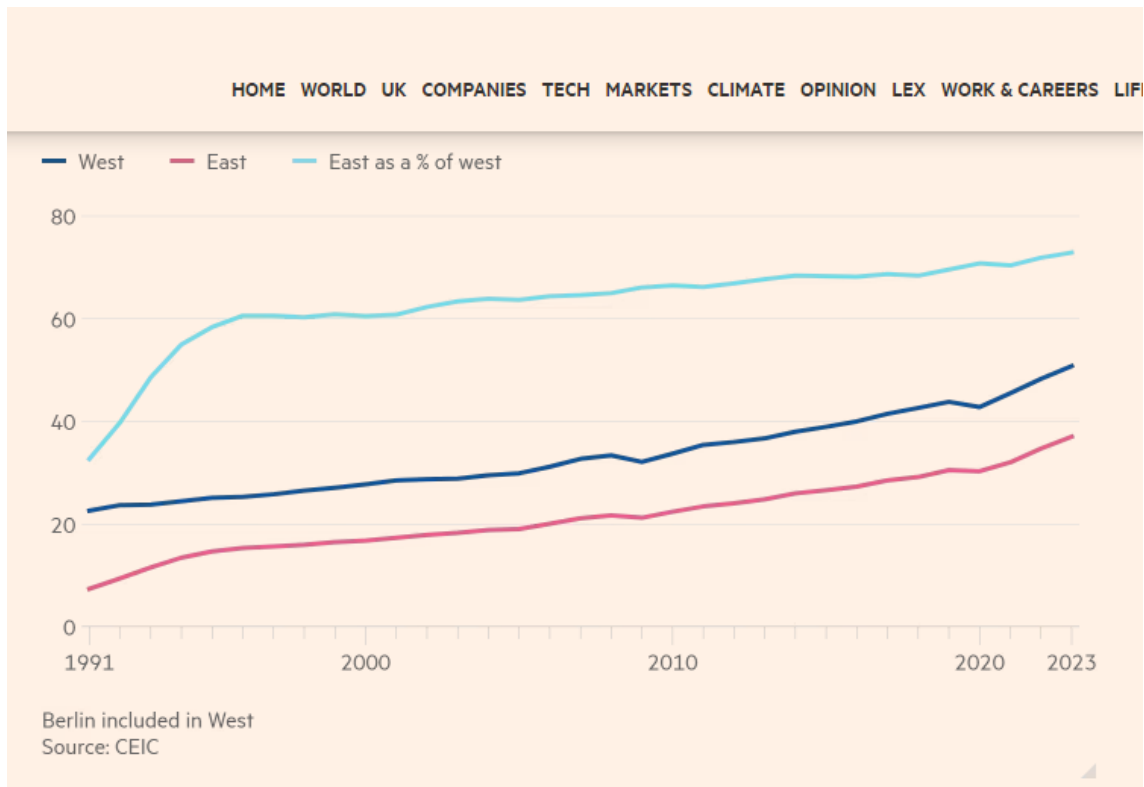
After the next elections, the task of forming a viable coalition government could turn out to be no less difficult than it was after 2021 — given the distaste of the mainstream parties for the two largely eastern-based parties, and their own difficulties in getting on with each other.

In this way, eastern German trends have played a part in undermining the nation's political stability.

The east: older, less prosperous and shrinking in population

Why have things turned out like this in the east?

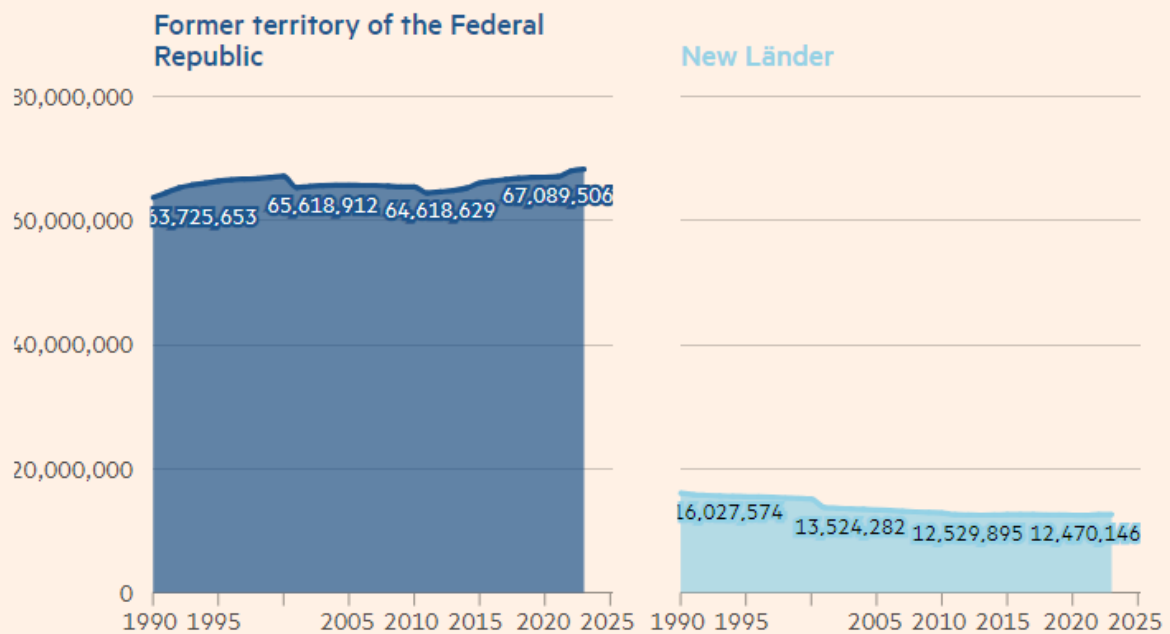
Two charts, shown below, offer clues. In the first, we see that GDP per capita in the east, though it's risen since reunification, has consistently trailed that in the west.



In the charts below, we see that eastern Germany's population is not only older on average than that of the west, but it has fallen significantly since reunification — from 16mn in 1990 to 12.6mn in 2023. That's largely explained by people moving to west and low birth rates.

Eastern Germany's population has declined while that of the west has increased

Population by territory, 1990-2023

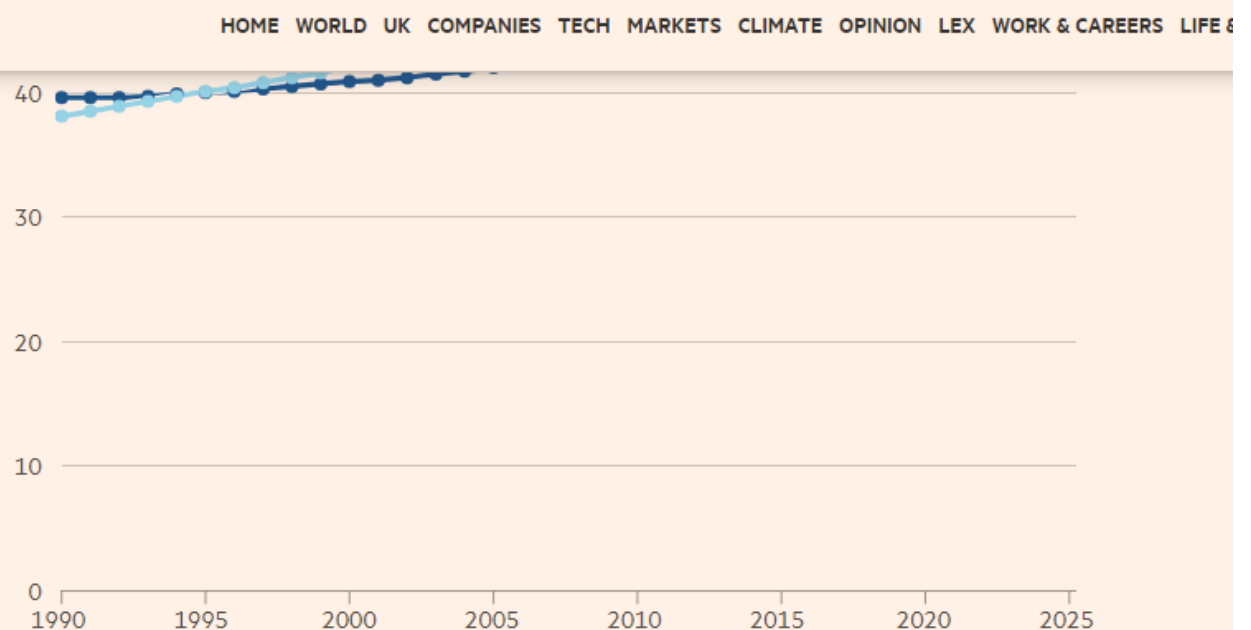


FINANCIAL TIMES

Source: [Destatis](#)

The population of the New Länder territory has a higher average age

Age in years, 1990-2023



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Source: [Destatis](#)

Also noteworthy is that the east is home to fewer migrants and others of non-German origin than the west. The multiculturalism that is a feature of western German society is much less obvious in the older, less prosperous east.

The AfD and the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance owe part of their appeal to the desire of many east Germans to keep foreigners out.

Political extremism and plots

Does all this mean that the east is a place whose history and political culture make it a more fertile breeding ground for extremism?

Mathias Döpfner, chief executive of the Axel Springer media group, [caused an uproar](#) last year when he suggested exactly that. Glibly, he described east Germans as either fascists or communists because between 1933 and 1989 they had experienced nothing but those two forms of totalitarian rule (he later issued an apology).

For easterners, Döpfner's remarks were an unpleasant reminder of how, from the early years of reunification, many west Germans saw themselves in a self-righteous way as tutors in capitalism and democracy to a poor, misled people.

True, the far-right plot uncovered this week was indeed rooted in the east, and an elected AfD local councillor was among those arrested in connection with it.

However, a similar conspiracy that was snuffed out in 2022 brought together plotters from the whole of Germany. Some of those arrested were active or former members of the armed forces and police.

The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung made the point this week that, whereas the 2022 plot involved conspiracy theorists nostalgic for the pre-1918 German empire, the latest one was led by young neo-Nazis motivated by racist ideology.

Reunification blues

Today is the 35th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the event that opened the door to reunification (see my colleague Guy Chazan's superb piece [here](#)). Permit me to share some memories of those times.

Reporting from East Berlin on the mass demonstrations of October and early November 1989 that preceded the Wall's fall, I remember how the protesters' chants evolved from "wir sind das Volk" ("we are the people") to "wir sind ein Volk" ("we are one people").

It was the sign that east Germans no longer wanted just democracy but reunification as well.

As 1989 turned into 1990, it became clear to me that reunification was taking place in an atmosphere that left many east Germans feeling like second-class citizens.

In March 1990, for example, I watched a West German TV show that poked fun at East Germany's main car model — the tiny, ugly, noisy Trabant — by trying to squeeze a “world record” 14 east Germans inside. Doubtless that made west Germans laugh, but it wasn't so funny for east Germans who could afford nothing but a Trabant and used to wait years and years to buy one.

More than three decades later, questions linger over the achievements of reunification. Carsten Schneider, the German government's minister of state for the east, put it like this last year:

“Reunification is completed, even if it is not perfect.”

Whitewashing East Germany?

How historians should judge the former East Germany is a source of much controversy, as became apparent in the arguments that erupted over Katja Hoyer's 2023 book *Beyond the Wall: East Germany 1949-1990*.

Although she is no apologist for East German communism, some critics accused her of whitewashing a police state that was totally subservient to the Soviet Union and fell apart as soon as Mikhail Gorbachev, then the Soviet leader, made clear he would no longer prop it up.

East Germany's darker side is portrayed in *Beautiful New Sky*, a new book by Ines Geipel about secret state-run scientific experiments that I reviewed [here](#).

Last month, the retailer Ikea agreed to pay €6mn to former prisoners in East Germany who were compelled to work producing its furniture. Ikea was not the only western company before 1989 to profit from forced labour in the east, according to this Deutsche Welle report.

For decades, the legacy of Nazism hung over democratic West Germany — and over the east, though the regime was loath to admit it. Today, the legacy of the east's communist era is no less evident in united Germany.

More on this topic

The persistent lack of strategic convergence between France and Germany — an essay by Barbara Kunz for the Internationale Politik Quarterly