

# From Ostpolitik to Putinpolitik: The AfD's Affinity for Russia

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This project aims to identify why pro-Putin or pro-Russia sentiments are more common among Alternativ für Deutschland (AfD) members from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). The project contributes to the ongoing discussion on populism, economic nationalism, and right-wing extremism by using the AfD in Eastern Germany as a case study. Using historical materialism as a theoretical lens, the paper investigates how the historical and material conditions in Eastern Germany contributed to pro-Putin sentiments among Eastern AfD members. The study analyzed social media posts and public statements from AfD members in the German parliament (Bundestag) to classify all 80 AfD MPs in the Bundestag on a scale from pro-Putin to anti-Putin. The study then utilized thematic coding, regression analysis, and content analysis to investigate the relationship between the pro-Putin MPs and economic, historic, or social conditions that may contribute to the AfD's support for Russia. This project argues that Eastern German MPs are more likely to advocate for pro-Russia policies due to historic and economic conditions in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) and post-reunification. By examining AfD MPs' statements in favor of Russia or Putin, this project demonstrates how the historical, social, and economic conditions during and after German reunification have affected German politics today. Ultimately, the research contributes to a better understanding of the political divide between Western and Eastern Europe, demonstrating how the legacy of the Cold War still influences contemporary European politics.

Key Words: populism, Germany, far-right politics



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After more than 30 years since Germany's unification, the former East and the former West still differ significantly in terms of culture, politics, and quality of life. The fall of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the subsequent reunification in 1990 left many Eastern Germans with a sense of animosity towards the Western part of the country. In 2019, almost 60% of Eastern Germans reported feeling like second-class citizens, claiming *die Wende* ("the turn") was more of an annexation than a reunification (Köpping, 2019). Following reunification, Eastern Germany experienced the highest rate of deindustrialization in the post-socialist region, and the mass privatization of companies forced many Eastern German jobs to the West, creating a cycle of poverty and unemployment (Weisskircher, 2020). As Eastern Germany struggles to catch up to the West economically, the quality of life for Eastern Germans has stagnated while poverty and unemployment have risen (Laczó & Gabrijelčič, 2020; Weisskircher, 2020). The feeling of economic and cultural disenfranchisement in Eastern Germany worsens the East-West divide and pushes many Eastern Germans to define their cultural and political identity in opposition to the Western states. Right-wing populism is gaining popularity in the region as Eastern Germans distance themselves from "Western liberalism" and the concept of European collaboration.

The *Alternativ für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD) has emerged as Germany's most popular far-right party, garnering the most support from the states in the former GDR. The AfD gained much of this popularity by capitalizing on Eastern German resentment in political campaigns that highlighted the New States' economic stagnation and worsening cost of living crisis. During the 2021 German elections, the AfD finished second in the Eastern state of Brandenburg with 18% of the vote, but one year later, support for AfD had risen to 24%, tied with the ruling Social Democratic Party (Hoyer, 2022). In 2022, the AfD enjoyed 27% support in the polls in the Eastern federal states, nearly double the reported 15% nationwide support (Europe Elects, 2022). The AfD boldly declares on its official website, "*Unser Land zuerst - Wir stehen an Deiner Seite!*" ("Our country first - we stand by your side!"), playing on the rising discontent and the current economic struggles the majority of Germans experience (Alternativ für Deutschland, 2023). The AfD enjoys a stronghold in former East Germany, a region burdened with economic hardship and a fractured identity post-reunification. The AfD's nationalism and emphasis on fighting against the liberal West politically align the party with other illiberal European figures, especially Putin.

Since the party's founding, the AfD has increasingly demonstrated a pro-Russian stance, with several prominent members openly advocating for closer ties with Moscow. This trend has sparked concerns about Russia's potential impact on German politics, especially due to the party's growing electoral popularity. Tino Chrupalla, the AfD co-chair, accused Chancellor Olaf Scholz of fighting an "economic war" against Germans, urging the Social Democrat-led government to lift sanctions against Russian leaders (Schum-

acher, 2022). Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, the state parliamentarian in the Eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt, has repeatedly voiced open support for Putin, describing the Russian leader as an “authentic bloke, a real man with a healthy framework of values” (Connolly, 2022). The use of the word “war” in reference to the invasion of Ukraine sparked a dispute among AfD party officials, and the party conference in June of 2022 ended abruptly after the party failed to reach a consensus on whether to improve ties with Moscow (“Germany’s far-right AfD,” 2022). A major party in the German parliament expressing sympathetic views towards an autocratic leader like Putin may cause further wedges in German politics, especially if the AfD continues to gain parliament seats. The AfD could leverage Germany’s position as a key leader in the European Union and NATO to impede the adoption of sanctions and other legislation meant to penalize Russia.

This paper argues that AfD members from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) are more likely to espouse pro-Putin sentiment compared to their counterparts from Western Germany. In part, this populist sentiment comes from a lingering sense of Eastern German resentment, stemming from the collapse of the GDR and the subsequent German reunification process. A feeling of neglect from Western Germans, combined with few economic opportunities and a historical friendship between the GDR and Russia, leads to pro-Russia sentiment developing in the Eastern New States. The literature review examines how economic and historical factors contribute to political differences between Central-Eastern Europe and Western European countries, including diverging styles of populism and nationalism. Through thematic coding and regression analysis, this study investigates AfD Bundestag members’ social media posts and public statements to determine the potential causes of pro-Russia stances in the party. Using content analysis of secondary literature, the project examines how historical events and economic conditions in Eastern Germany may have led to the development of pro-Putin sentiment in the former GDR. By investigating this dilemma through a historical materialist lens, the study aims to bring to attention the urgent need for Eastern Germans’ enfranchisement within the German political system. The paper argues that the German government must seriously address the economic and political disenfranchisement of Eastern Germans to combat the growth of populism and far-right extremism.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Historical Materialism

Previous research investigated possible connections between capitalism and nationalism by examining how the collapse of the USSR economically affected Central and Eastern European countries in the 1990s. Researchers framed Central and Eastern European nationalism through the lens of historical materialism, studying how right-wing movements formed their

post-socialist national identities around economic scarcity in the region. In *The Impact of Russia's Historical Economic Position on Russian Identity and Nationalism*, Gökirmak (2015), identified key features of Russian nationalism and suggested Russia's economic developments throughout history directly influenced the formation of national identity. The author compared the economic policies and nationalist sentiment of three main periods of Russian history: Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and post-USSR collapse under Yeltsin and Putin, and argued a historic and economic analysis is crucial to understanding the development of Russian nationalism:

Predicting the implications of these developments and Putin's choices on the stability of political regime in Russia is not very easy but a historical analysis can help enhance our foresight. Therefore, the historical role of the economic factor on Russia's modernization and evolution into a nation-state should be revisited. (Gökirmak, 2015, p. 37)

This project contributes to previous literature that used Russia as a case study to analyze nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe from a historical materialist perspective by applying the same lens to the context of Eastern German right-wing nationalism. By incorporating a historical materialist theoretical framework, this project considers if the lack of economic advancements in Eastern Germany and the historic legacy of being a post-socialist state may contribute to a rise in nationalism.

Economic and social disparities between capitalist and socialist European countries in the 20th century similarly shaped divergent styles of populism on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Researchers have revealed a separation between Eastern and Western European-style populism, indicating a link between each style of populism and the historical and economic conditions of the respective regions. Political scientists compiled the political positions of several Western European political parties and determined the ideological frameworks and rhetorical tactics populists use to bolster support. A key characteristic of Western European populism is a crisis with the status quo, wherein a political party addresses the fears about the limits of representative democracy, and there is a divide between the "true country" and the "out-of-touch elites" (Taggart, 2004). Western European populists embrace transgressive behavior, preferring to speak directly to ordinary citizens in simple, sometimes vulgar, language—often with the intention to upset establishment politicians and position themselves as part of the "true people" (Ostiguy, 2017). However, Stanley (2017) distinguishes Central and Eastern European populism as having additional aspects: an overall cynical political culture, opposition to the dominance of *any* establishment parties rather than the ideological position of establishment parties, and hostility toward the political system as a whole. This research examines the AfD's synthesis of populist rhetoric and tactics from both Western and Central-Eastern Europe

and places it within the historical context of the post-socialist area. The study aims to build on existing literature by investigating how AfD politicians foster pro-Russia sentiment in the region, particularly by framing the economic or historical conditions in Eastern Germany through a populist lens.

Previous literature compared the emergence of right-wing populism in Eastern Europe to their Western counterparts and noted how the different historical contexts in each region change the priorities of each region's far-right populists. Scholars note key differences in how historical contexts change the motivations behind the respective regions' far-right populist movements. For example, Pirro (2013) points out how Western European far-right populists draw on the legacy of the 1968 student protests as a "silent counter-revolution," emphasizing issues such as immigration and a "return to European values." Far-right movements in Central-Eastern Europe instead tap into a "post-communist" syndrome, focusing on nostalgia for authoritarianism (read: social order), and resentment towards liberalism's broken promises to stabilize the region post-socialism (Pirro, 2013, p. 621). While Western European far-right populists generally still support democracy as an institution, Central-Eastern European far-right populists indicate dissatisfaction with democracy, even controlling for negative opinions toward specific politicians or parties (Allen, 2017). This project contributes to existing literature by analyzing Eastern Germany through a Central-Eastern European lens rather than a Western European lens. By assessing Eastern Germany's distinctive identity as a post-socialist region incorporated into a Western country, this project hopes to clarify potential cultural or historical factors that contribute to a comparatively higher rate of far-right populism.

This project combines existing research on European right-wing populism and economic nationalism with an examination of the socioeconomic conditions in regions most prone to far-right populism. While previous research has examined the differences between Western European-style populism and Eastern European-style, the goal of this research is to broaden current debates on far-right extremism in post-socialist Europe by including Eastern German right-wing populism in the discussion. By incorporating a historical materialist perspective, the project explores the popularity of the AfD and Russia in Eastern Germany through the context of being a post-socialist region rather than merely part of a Western European country. The study uses definitions of populism and economic nationalism (see above) to identify how the AfD MPs perpetuate anti-Western and pro-Putin attitudes in their rhetoric. This research adds to existing research investigating why far-right politics are more prevalent or distinct in former socialist countries compared to the West. As the impact of economic nationalism and Euroscepticism grows throughout Europe, far-right politics continue to threaten the stability of democracies and disconnect nations from the European Union. This project aims to provide a nuanced analysis of the historical and econom-

ic factors that may contribute to the AfD's popularity in Eastern Germany as well as highlight which factors may fuel the rise of pro-Putin far-right populist movements across Europe.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Quantitative Analysis

To collect primary data for this study, I gathered demographic information, including age, gender, and birthplace, for each of the 80 AfD members of parliament (MPs) serving in the 2021 Bundestag parliament. Using keywords in both German and English, I collected information from publicly available online sources. I searched for key demographic data on publicly available websites, such as the self-reported official Bundestag biographies on Bundestag.de, the MP's social media accounts, and campaign websites. I conducted a search on the politicians' social media websites and Google using each MP's name along with keywords such as "Putin," "*Russland/Russia*," "*Russisch/Russian*," and "*Russen/Russians*," to identify news article scandals or social media posts that may suggest a pro-Putin stance. I then recorded each result in the Excel spreadsheet and assigned each member a numerical code (the "Putin codes") based on their public stance towards Russia (see Table 2). Conducting searches on the easily accessible and publicly available official websites and social media accounts allowed for a consistent approach to gathering data across all AfD Bundestag members, minimizing the risk of selective reporting. Compiling and organizing demographic information into one spreadsheet built a dataset for regression analysis to analyze potential demographic patterns within the pro-Putin MPs.

I utilized content analysis of news stories and social media posts from AfD MPs to determine their stance on Russia or Putin. After examining each politician's statements, news articles, and social media posts, I thematically coded each politician and documented the rationale for each code. I coded a politician as pro-Putin for overtly praising Russia or Putin or spending a significant amount of time defending Russia, particularly in the aftermath of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. A politician received the neutral code if they either did not express a strong stance on Russia/Putin, both defended and attacked Russia/Putin, or if there was no clear evidence of their stance on Russia. Politicians received the anti-Putin code by repeatedly condemning Russia/Putin, expressing strong pro-NATO or pro-USA opinions (especially in the context of NATO or the USA as an alternative to Russia), or by repeatedly using negative descriptors for Russia or Putin (e.g., "autocracy," "repressive," or "dictator"). By applying a systematic method of coding to each politician, I established clear and objective criteria for categorizing each politician's stance on Putin. Compiling data into a spreadsheet built the data set for regression analysis.



The study used regression analysis of the data from the Excel spreadsheet. This regression analysis organized the quantitative data to identify potential correlations among AfD members according to each member's demographic categories and views of Putin. I imported the collected data from my Excel spreadsheet into the statistical software STATA. I then conducted a regression analysis of the "Putin codes" alongside the MPs' data to identify which demographic characteristics were most predictive of an AfD politician's support for Russia. I then collected the regression output to statistically analyze which demographic details were the strongest predictors for an AfD member's stance on Russia. Regression allowed for a quantitative analysis to determine the strength of the relationship between demographic variables and the politicians' stances on Putin, providing statistically significant evidence to support or reject potential correlations. This method provided a statistical basis and a visual representation to identify which characteristics are most strongly associated with support for Putin among the German far-right party.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

To supplement the quantitative analysis, the second phase of data analysis examined historical and geopolitical events to explore the roots of pro-Russian sentiment in Germany. While regression analysis provided insight into the relationships between demographic variables and pro-Putin sentiment among AfD politicians, the qualitative phase of data analysis allowed for an exploration of historical and contextual explanations for these relationships. I consulted primary and secondary sources, such as news articles, academic papers, and historical texts to examine the historic, economic, and cultural factors in post-socialist countries that may have influenced the rise of the far-right in these regions. The historical analysis investigated how key events in German and European history, such as the division of Germany during the Cold War, the fall of the USSR, and German reunification may have affected Eastern German culture and pro-Russia sentiment in the region. Content analysis also examined how the economic impact of German reunification, the 2008 financial crisis, and the impact of anti-Russian sanctions on the German economy may have contributed to Putin-friendly views among AfD members and Eastern Germans. This project aims to provide a more thorough understanding of the causes influencing pro-Putin beliefs in the AfD by adding a qualitative analysis in addition to the quantitative analysis. The historical and economic examination adds to the results of the regression analysis by providing background information for the social and political context in Germany.

To explore potential explanations for AfD MPs holding pro-Putin views, I compiled, translated, and analyzed politicians' public statements and social media posts. I used thematic coding to organize and classify the MPs'

posts and statements by the subject matter the politicians discussed. I analyzed the collected data I earlier used to code each politician on the “Putin code” and thematically coded each statement or post by themes such as “economics,” “history,” or “sociocultural identity.” To ensure consistency throughout the project, I translated all statements and posts into English. I then compiled a spreadsheet of each statement or post and included the date of each statement, the original German statement, the translated English statements, and the URLs to the corresponding posts. By compiling the politician’s statements and quotes, I was able to contextualize the qualitative secondary sources about the region with direct insights into the beliefs of politicians from the region. By thematically coding the statements and social media posts, I was able to compare the primary sources with the secondary sources to identify patterns within the pro-Putin politicians in the AfD.

## ANALYSIS

### The German East/West divide

AfD members from Eastern Germany are more likely to support Putin or otherwise display pro-Russian sentiments. The regression results showed a statistically significant correlation between an AfD Bundestag member being from the former GDR (or another former Warsaw Pact state) and demonstrating pro-Putin or pro-Russia beliefs. Specifically, the regression in Figure 1 indicates AfD MPs from the Eastern New States are about 0.62 units more likely to support Putin than MPs from the Western states, which was statistically significant with a P-value of 0.00. Of the 80 AfD members of the 2021 Bundestag, only seven received the “anti-Putin” code (-1), with all having been born and raised in former West Germany. Other variables, such as gender, age, or level of education, had P-values greater than 0.05 and thus did not show a statistically significant correlation with AfD politicians’ attitudes toward Putin or Russia, indicating the East/West variable is the strongest predicting factor to determine if an MP is friendly toward Russia or Putin (see Figure 1). The regression results support the hypothesis that AfD MPs from the Eastern New States are more likely to espouse friendly views toward Putin and suggest geographic and sociocultural identity as *Ossis* (Eastern Germans) may be more significant predictors of friendliness to Putin within AfD MPs in the Bundestag. The prevalence of pro-Russian views within the AfD likely stems from a variety of factors, including the economic, social, and historical conditions of Eastern Germany before and after reunification.

Sociocultural and historical factors, namely a distinct *Ossi* identity and resentment towards former West Germany, may be contributing factors to pro-Russian views in the New States. By bringing up *Ossi* political and historical tensions with the West, AfD politicians reinforce an East/West divide and position Russia as a like-minded “Eastern country,” a natural ally against, and fellow victim of, the predatory West. Many Eastern Germans



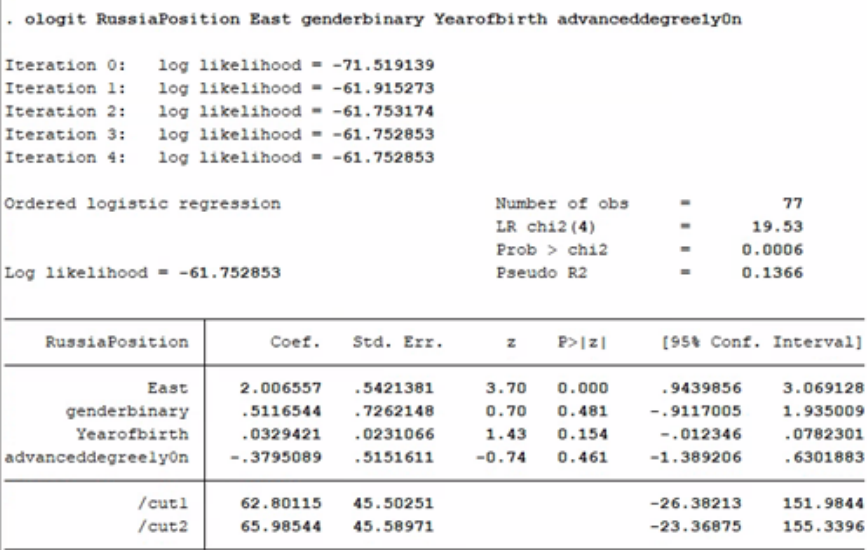


Figure 1: Regression results

saw reunification as an expansion of West Germany rather than a proper unification of two equal states, as the West took over nearly all decisions regarding reunification and administration of the newly unified country (Ther, 2020). Petra Köpping, a member of the Saxony state parliament and an East German who lived through reunification, summarized the popular Eastern sentiment during post-unification as “a scam by West German capitalists against the East German proletariat who had been so hopeful at unification” (Köpping, 2018). Still today, two-thirds of people living in Saxony, the most economically successful of the New States, believe East German achievements are underappreciated or ignored and feel forbidden to express any positive opinions about the GDR (Pickel & Pickel, 2023). Rather than promoting an East/West cultural unification, this sense of Eastern resentment has perpetuated a distinct *Ossi* identity, defined in opposition to the West. AfD politicians from the former East bring up this *Ossi* identity and hostility towards the West when defending Russia or criticizing Western countries.

AfD politicians from the Eastern New States frequently invoked Eastern German frustration with the West when speaking about Putin or Russia. MPs commonly cited an Eastern German identity and a feeling of disrespect from the West while expressing friendly views toward Putin and advocating for increased cooperation with Russia in social media posts and speeches. On social media, AfD MPs often frame pro-Russian opinions within the context of the East/West divide as an opportunity to connect with potential vot-

ers. Tino Chrupalla,<sup>1</sup> an MP from the Eastern German town of Weißwasser wrote on Facebook, “Studies show that one in five East Germans feels dissatisfied and unappreciated with what has been achieved. We in the AfD are not satisfied with what has been achieved either” (Chrupalla, 2020). Some Eastern AfD MPs, like Jürgen Pohl, overtly state their Eastern resentment and frequently discuss feeling silenced or censored by Westerners (see Table 1). Though Easterners like Chrupalla and Pohl speak out against a perceived Western German superiority complex, Eastern Germans express a sense of marginalization and social dissatisfaction not just with Western Germans but with the West as a whole. This anti-Western sentiment of an unappreciated and neglected Eastern Bloc further solidifies a sense of solidarity between Eastern Germans and Russia.

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| <p><b>Jürgen Pohl, MP from Magdeburg:</b></p> <p>“Instead, Mr. Wanderwitz stands out above all because he flatly belittles his East German compatriots. But this hardly serves as a distraction from his poor current account. Because even during his tenure, the gap between Eastern and Western Germany in terms of wages and income has hardly melted. Worse still, the West has now unassailably overtaken the East in the distribution of wealth. In short: the poorer Germans still live in the new federal states; the CDU still bears the main political responsibility for this.”</p> <p>“But 30 years of German unity also mean the loss of jobs, the loss of credibility in politics, the theft of homeland and freedom of opinion.”</p> |
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Table 1

Some AfD politicians leverage this Eastern animosity to explicitly advocate for closer relations with Russia, occasionally meeting with Russian officials or Russian state media. Another example of an Eastern AfD member publicly embracing anti-West sentiments is Eugen Schmidt, a *Russlanddeutsche Spätaussiedler* (“Russia German late repatriate,” ethnic Germans born and raised in the former USSR) from the Kazakh SSR. According to Fromm’s documentary, *“Russlands deutsche Propaganda-Krieger”* (2023), Schmidt earned the nickname, “Putin’s propagandist in the Bundestag” among the German press for overtly voicing Eastern discontentment, advocating for Russian interests, and working closely with Russian media. Two days before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Schmidt, who is fluent in Russian, told the Russian newspaper *Комсомольская Правда*:

There is no democracy in Germany. This means that a unified opinion is being imposed, by the ruling elite, and all other political opinions are being suppressed by all possible means: on the Internet, in the

<sup>1</sup> All MPs mentioned are from Eastern German towns or other former socialist countries unless stated otherwise.

media, including physical assaults on those who think differently. (Fromm, 2023)

Schmidt's interview with the *Комсомольская Правда* aligns with Putin's propaganda strategy (highlighted in the introduction) to undermine German democracy and encourage distrust in Western institutions. Eugen Schmidt's comments highlight how populist rhetoric and distrust in Western countries and institutions contribute to an AfD politician's affinity for Russia.

While Eugen Schmidt has received international media attention for disseminating Russian propaganda, some MPs from Western Germany are equally as infamous for collaborating with the Russian government. Specifically, Markus Frohnmaier, a member of the ethno-nationalist AfD wing *Der Flügel*, is one of the party's most well-known MPs with credible accusations of ties to the Russian government. Frohnmaier, from the Stuttgart region,<sup>2</sup> visited pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk and met with Putin advisor and neo-fascist philosopher Aleksander Dugin ("Wie Putin die AfD," 2019). In 2019, the European media outlets BBC, ZDF, and Der Spiegel accused Frohnmaier of being a Russian plant, after leaked Kremlin documents revealed plans to support his 2017 election campaign and have an "absolutely controlled MP in the Bundestag" (Gatehouse, 2019). Though Frohnmaier vehemently denies direct ties with the Kremlin, the politician has repeatedly defended Putin and advocated for pro-Russian interests, including vocally supporting Russia's annexation of Crimea (Schmidt, 2019). However, while Easterners like Schmidt often cite an *Ossi* identity and Eastern resentment as reasons for supporting Russia, Frohnmaier seldom posts about Eastern Germany, preferring instead to speak out against immigration, globalism, and Islam from a unified German perspective. Though Frohnmaier is a Westerner with strong pro-Putin beliefs, Frohnmaier's affinity for Russia likely stems more from an anti-globalist and anti-liberal ideology rather than an anti-Western sentiment.

Even decades after reunification, Eastern Germans continue to express feeling disadvantaged and insulted by Western Germans, reinforcing a sociocultural divide between the East and the West. Recent comments by AfD politicians highlight this Eastern political and cultural frustration, which leads many Eastern Germans to look to Russia for solidarity against the Western world. For the past 25 years, 55 to 60% of Eastern Germans have consistently reported feeling disproportionately disadvantaged regarding the standard of living, compared to around 35% of Western Germans (Pickel & Pickel, 2023). As time went on, two stereotypes about the East and the West emerged: the *Besser-Wessis*, or know-it-all Westerners who look down upon the *Jammer-Ossis*; the "whiny Easterners" annoyingly complaining about reunification despite being the comparatively luckiest demographic in

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<sup>2</sup> Frohnmaier was born in post-socialist Romania but was adopted by a German couple and raised in Weil der Stadt, a town located in the Stuttgart metropolitan area.

the former Warsaw Pact (Ther, 2020). In social media posts, AfD politicians reaffirm this sentiment and regularly cite experiences of discrimination and contempt from the *Besser-Wessis* (see Table 2). Comments by Eastern MPs demonstrate how the legacy of the Berlin Wall still contributes to distinct East and West identities and negative stereotypes, worsening Eastern resentment and anti-Western sentiment. Many Eastern German MPs see Russia as a potential ally against this paternalistic and neglectful West, which contributes to Eastern German politicians being more pro-Russia.

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| <p><b>Tino Chrupalla, MP from Weißwasser:</b></p> <p>"[At the] celebration of 30 years of German unity: Steinmeier gives a divisive speech and Claudia Roth can't stand sitting next to an East German. She had the seat card swapped next to me."</p> <p>"Again and again, country bashing, village bashing, East bashing and especially Saxony bashing: Either from the perspective of pseudo-intellectual, 'urban', 'cosmopolitan' capital city journalists, you bash 'the East' or the allegedly backward people in rural regions, or you pretend to understand the East, who wants to take 'the worries and needs of the people' first – of course always with the goal of leading the 'progress rejecters' and 'modernization losers' ultimately into the brave new multicultural world."</p> |
| <p><b>Jürgen Pohl, MP from Magdeburg:</b></p> <p>"And it is precisely these East Germans who suffer from low incomes, high unemployment, low pensions, and who now also have to be lectured about democracy and 'basic values,' although they – unlike the West Germans – already proved with the peaceful revolution of 1989 that they understood democracy."</p>  |
| <p><b>Steffen Kotré, MP from East Berlin:</b></p> <p>"We East Germans know what paternalism and what ideology mean."</p>  |

Table 2

**Post-socialist resentment toward the West**

After the end of the Cold War, most post-socialist countries looked forward to joining the liberal Western world. Yet, decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, many Central and Eastern Europeans from former socialist countries still do not feel fully accepted by Western countries, leading to some AfD politicians advocating for greater cooperation with Russia. According to Kratsev and Holmes (2020):

Having escaped from Moscow's imperial grip and been promised that they could join the liberal world as politically equal partners, the formerly communist countries of the region felt that they were being treated with casual condescension as if they belonged to the non-Western 'rest,' as if they were not really 'Europeans' after all, but should be grouped alongside the peoples of Africa, Asia and the Middle East. (pp. 68)

As NATO grew to accept more post-socialist countries throughout the 2000s, some Russian politicians, including Putin, advocated for Russia's entry into NATO and the EU as part of a continent-wide European cooperation movement (Rankin, 2021). Alexander Gauland, an AfD MP from Chemnitz, also pushed for more European cooperation with Russia, complaining to the Russian newspaper *Комсомольская Правда*, "Russia is part of Europe, unlike all sorts of strange countries in the Middle East with which it cannot be compared" (Chesnokov, 2019). To many in the AfD, the West would rather cooperate with "non-Europeans" than fully accept post-socialist countries as equal political partners in the liberal world. Therefore, some Eastern Germans express sympathetic views toward Russia due to a shared experience of exclusion from the Western world.

Many Western German MPs, on the other hand, have adopted the opposite stance towards Russia compared to Eastern German party members. Several Western MPs in the AfD, such as Jörg Schneider and Rüdiger Lucassen, proudly support Germany's place in NATO and promote continued close ties to the West. Of the 80 AfD members of the Bundestag, only seven exhibited overtly anti-Putin views, representing just 0.09% of the party currently in parliament (see Figure 1). MP Jörg Schneider, from the Western German town of Solingen, was one of the few AfD MPs to openly support Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, posting on Facebook, "Whoever still says 'warmonger NATO, peace angel Putin' is – with respect – absolutely nuts!" (Schneider, 2022; see Table 3). Western MP Rüdiger Lucassen, another staunch advocate for NATO and Ukraine, defied the party line of German neutrality, pushing for continued military support to Ukraine and calling Russia "a notoriously corrupt and undemocratic oligarchic system" (Lucassen, 2022; see Table 4). The East/West divide often leads to Eastern MPs supporting Russia, while Western MPs tend to be more openly critical of Russia, likely due to the established participation of Western systems and West Germany's historic affinity with the US. As long-standing members of the Western Bloc, Western Germans are more likely to express support for Western institutions, such as the EU or NATO, whereas Eastern Germans often feel resentment and exclusion from these organizations.

**Jörg Schneider, MP from Solingen (Western Germany)**

I envy the people of Ukraine [for having] this president. And those who call for Ukraine's surrender "to avoid bloodshed": After a surrender, there would be a Russian puppet government, summary courts, executions, ... [sic] I myself served as a soldier for twelve years. And [I would] not lay down my arms in the event of an attack on my country!

**Table 3**

**Rüdiger Lucassen, MP from Westerholz (Western Germany)**

“The responsibility for the current energy crisis lies with Angela Merkel and Vladimir Putin – not NATO. Socially, Russia’s notoriously corrupt and undemocratic oligarchic system cannot be an ally either. The frequently voiced, justified criticism of Western decadence and decay of values, as well as Russia’s reference to its Christian occidental heritage, do nothing to change this. Those who use Islamist hordes against a Slavic-Christian brother nation, who have one of the highest abortion rates in the world and who use non-cultural migrants as a weapon against Europe have no moral credibility. To bet on Russia is to bet on a loser.”

**Table 4**

While Westerners like Lucassen and Schneider praise NATO and the US, many Eastern Germans look to Russia as an alternative to the United States’ dominant position as a unipolar world superpower. In part, the Central and Eastern European right-wing push towards multipolarity and advocacy for less US involvement in Europe stems from a distrust of the West. As a result of the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the 2008 financial crisis, many Germans became disillusioned with US hegemony and began to view Russia as a potential alternative to Western political dominance in Europe, advocating for Germany to be a neutral mediator between the US and Russia (Kundnani, 2015; Newnham, 2017). In a survey about the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, nearly 59% of Eastern Germans agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement, “NATO provoked Russia for so long that Russia had no choice but to go to war,” compared to roughly 35% of Western Germans (Lamberty et al., 2022). On social media, AfD politicians frequently endorsed these anti-American sentiments and further cooperation with Russia, even in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Schmidt, 2022; see Table 5). After the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Eastern AfD politicians continued to blame the invasion on NATO and the US and downplayed Russia’s role in the war, demonstrating a growing disappointment in the US and increased tolerance toward Russia. As Germans’ confidence in the West (particularly the United States) dwindles, Russia’s popularity as a diplomatic alternative to Western hegemony increases, bolstering Putin’s popularity in AfD strongholds like Eastern Germany.

**Jürgen Pohl, MP from Magdeburg:**

Oct-22

“Russia is not our enemy and America is not our friend.”

“Since February 2022, the terrible war between the Slavic brother nations has been raging, especially in the southwest of Ukraine, which, as pawns of American great power interests, have bloodily attacked each other.”



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| <p><b>Petr Bystron, MP from Olomouc, Czechoslovakia:</b></p> <p>“Why doesn’t this play a role in the current discussions?”</p> <p>(Referring to a quote from then-senator Joe Biden in 1997 saying, “What would force Russia to a hostile reaction is an expansion of NATO onto the Russian border.”)</p> <p>“NATO made a promise to the USSR, didn’t it?”</p>   |
| <p><b>Steffen Kotré, MP from East Berlin:</b></p> <p>“In addition, regarding my statement that American think tanks are working out plans on how best to destabilize Russia, I would like to draw attention to the following source from the RAND Corporation. This is a large American think tank, which was funded with 350 million US dollars in 2020 alone (55% of which came from the US Department of Defense).”</p> |
| <p><b>Rene Springer, MP from East Berlin:</b></p> <p>Feb-23</p> <p>“For the US imperialism into the 3rd world war? Not with us! Do we as Germans really want to go into World War 3 for the preservation of global US imperialism?”</p>  |
| <p><b>Tino Chrupalla, MP from Weißwasser:</b></p> <p>Press conference, 18 May 2022</p> <p>“This war also has several fathers. The role of NATO and the role of the German government must also be discussed here, of course.”</p>  |
| <p><b>Christina Baum, MP from Mühlhausen:</b></p> <p>May-19</p> <p>“THE USA LEAD A PERMANENT WAR. POPULAR WARS, for which Hitler’s generals were sentenced to death and hanged in Nuremberg!!!! The USA brings no prosperity, no democracy to the sanctioned, the bombed countries, but only DESTRUCTION, only HUNGER, only HARSHIP.”</p>  |

**Table 5**

Despite warnings from the United States about Putin’s authoritarian tendencies, many Germans, especially in the AfD, still advocate for increased ties between Russia and the European Union. Cooperation with Russia has remained popular in Germany throughout the 2010s and into the 2020s, especially in the Eastern New States, fueled in part by Russia’s natural gas supply to Germany. Fifty-six percent of Easterners and 71% of AfD voters agreed or somewhat agreed with the populist statement, “Putin is going

against a global elite that is pulling the strings in the background" (Lamberty et al., 2022). According to a public survey in 2017, 78% of Germans favored more cooperation with Russia, only slightly below France, the first country, and far above the US, which had fallen to last place after the 2016 election of Donald Trump (Fix, 2020). Many AfD MPs endorse the idea of Russia as a misjudged country that the West often unfairly uses as a scapegoat, with MP Enrico Komning (2022) posting:

When you hear representatives of the old parties talk like this, you get the impression that the energy crisis is a great misfortune, for which the "evil" Putin from the Kremlin is mainly responsible.

Eastern AfD members' hesitance to criticize Russia and tendency to downplay the Kremlin's aggression further demonstrates the region's worsening alienation from the West. By utilizing populist language positioning Putin as an Eastern anti-elite leader fighting against the corrupt West, AfD MPs advertise Russia as an attractive alternative to US world hegemony.

### **Cultural affinity**

After roughly 45 years of separation, cultural values on each side of the Iron Curtain had already diverged. Many former socialist countries, including Eastern Germany, experienced a sense of disappointment with Western progressivism following the end of the Cold War and thus turned to Putin's Russia as a leader of traditional values. Many Poles, for example, celebrated the end of the USSR as a victory for Christianity and traditionalism, and became disappointed when realizing "Western 'normality' means secularism, multiculturalism, and gay marriage" (Kratsev & Holmes, 2020). Similarly, Eastern Germans were once eager to join the liberal West, but now many consider the West lost to "cultural decadence and Islamization," a threat only the Russians seem to be brave enough to fight—or as Alexander Gauland said, "Germany needs Russia as a Christian bulwark against an Islamic invasion" (Pates & Leser, 2021; Troianovski, 2017). AfD politicians voice this disappointment with the West for not living up to Central and Eastern European expectations, and consequently, many in the AfD turn to Russia to fulfill conservative and religious expectations (see Table 6). Dissatisfaction with Western secularism and liberal values has exacerbated the alienation many Central and Eastern Europeans feel from the West. Many AfD politicians have begun to view Putin as a strong leader against the comparatively more liberal and progressive values prevalent in the West.

**Enrico Komning, MP from Straslund, quoting an article:**

"The weakness of the West is self-inflicted! Whoever gives up their identity, their culture, their ability to defend themselves, and their reproductive power shouldn't be surprised when they are duped... 'Putin knows that he is dealing with pussy states in the EU, with decadent, submissive, and self-conscious cultures in decline...they are sacrificing their national-cultural identity to vital immigrants who are advancing practically without a fight, and the nucleus of society, the family, to twisted ideologues.'"

**Christina Baum, MP from Mühlhausen:**

"The decadence of the West is Putin's strength. The West has not considered that Russia feels like a humiliated great power."

**Table 6**

Though Eastern German MPs vocally denounce Western progressivism, admiration for Russia's traditional cultural values is not exclusive to Eastern Germans. In fact, two Western AfD MPs, Stefan Keuter and Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, have become infamous in German politics for their strong pro-Russia stances, stemming mainly from anti-liberalism and a disdain for multicultural or inclusive social values. Keuter, an ethno-nationalist who has repeatedly downplayed Nazi atrocities and sent neo-Nazi memes on WhatsApp, personally met with Russian politicians and oligarchs, denounced "anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian propaganda," and served as an election observer in the 2021 Russian election (Bensmann & Löer, 2018; Becker, 2022). Hans-Thomas Tillschneider was being observed by the *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, BfV) for right-wing extremism, antisemitism, and vocal pro-Putin beliefs ("Höcke, Kalbitz, und Tillschneider," 2020). In September 2022, Tillschneider traveled with four other AfD politicians to the Russian-occupied Donbas region of Ukraine as part of a pro-Russia propaganda trip (Connolly, 2022). Although pro-Putin MPs are not exclusively from the East, pro-Putin Westerners like Keuter and Tillschneider are outliers and have a different motivation than Eastern MPs for supporting Russia. Tillschneider and Keuter's tendencies toward Nazi apologia show that these Western MPs praise Putin not out of a sense of post-socialist camaraderie or Eastern resentment, but rather out of admiration for Russia's right-wing nationalism.

**Historical solidarity**

Eastern MPs may be friendlier to Putin due to East Germany's historical ties to Russia during the Cold War. The GDR maintained very close political ties to the USSR, and East German citizens enthusiastically embraced Russian culture. This friendly relationship developed in part due to a feeling of mutual equality between East Germany and the USSR. Unlike many other Warsaw Pact countries, the GDR was not subject to Russification (the forced

assimilation to Russian language and culture), and as a result, East Germans were eager consumers of Russian media, culture, and language (Hoyer, 2022; Knight, 2022). Many Germans still hold positive opinions of Russia because of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's role in facilitating Germany's peaceful reunification (Schlögel, 2020). After Gorbachev died in 2022, Matthias Moosdorf posted a tribute to the Soviet leader on Facebook, praising the relationship between Germany and Russia, saying "Gorbachev reminds us of what Germany owes to the Russian empire. Above all, reunification" (Moosdorf, 2022). This historic connection between the two former allies fostered a feeling of mutual solidarity and contributed to lasting favorable sentiments towards Russia among many Eastern Germans. AfD politicians continue to draw on this historical relationship when defending the Russian state's actions.

Even after reunification, fondness for Russian culture and enthusiasm to continue cooperation with Russia persevered in the Eastern New States. Due to this close historical relationship between East Germany and Russia, Eastern AfD politicians often extend this goodwill toward modern Russia. According to Hoyer (2022), although most Eastern Germans report negative feelings toward the GDR, they do not associate the Soviets or Russians with the oppressive elements of the East German regime (such as the Stasi). On the contrary, many Eastern Germans still view the Soviet Union as liberators from Nazism rather than occupiers during the days of socialism and express deep remorse for the Nazi regime's aggression against the USSR (Hoyer, 2022). AfD MPs from the East frequently brought up positive feelings towards Russia, as well as a sense of historic solidarity between East Germany and Russia when discussing modern Russian-German relations (see Table 7). The close relationship between East Germany and Russia, as well as lingering guilt from Germany's atrocities during World War II, causes many Eastern German MPs to be more hesitant to criticize Russia. Eastern German AfD MPs speak positively about the USSR and modern Russia, and members show an enthusiasm to continue cooperation and close diplomatic ties with Russia.

**Petr Bystron, MP from Olomouc, Czechoslovakia, quoting a tweet from Roger Köppel:**

"German tanks are rolling toward Russia again. Is this the belated thanks for the Soviets peacefully withdrawing their troops from East Germany and allowing the Germans to reunify without bloodshed?"

**Tino Chrupalla, MP from Weißwasser:**

"Today we celebrate the #reunification of Germany. We thank those who made this possible. For me, these are primarily the former citizens of the GDR, but also the Russians, whose contribution to reunification has recently been greatly downplayed."

**Steffen Kotré, MP from East Berlin:**

"80 years after the beginning of the German-Soviet War in 1941, our Federal Chairman Tino Chrupalla traveled to Russia. An important sign for peace and détente between two European peoples. This visit is now problematized by parts of the federal executive committee. Thus, one stands against their own program. There is neither support nor backing for this from us. We Germans know that we can never go against Russia, but only with it."

**Table 7**

Many Eastern Germans feel a sense of post-socialist solidarity with their former comrades in Russia. Eastern German politicians, including former chancellor Angela Merkel, have expressed a sense of familiarity with Russia, stemming from a common history during the Cold War and following the collapse of socialism. Many Eastern Germans empathize with Russians, owing to a shared experience of economic and social turmoil after the socialist collapse in the 1990s, as well as a modern feeling of unequal treatment by the West, which is an experience the capitalist Western Germans do not understand (Knight, 2022). This feeling of friendship lasted throughout much of the 2000s, with the leaders of the two countries also sharing a common GDR past and fluency in each other's languages—Chancellor Angela Merkel learned Russian growing up in the GDR, and Russian President Vladimir Putin learned German while stationed in the GDR for five years (Newnham, 2017). AfD MPs echo this feeling of solidarity with Russians and describe a shared post-socialist struggle against Western mistreatment in the aftermath of the USSR collapse (see Table 11). Many Eastern Germans feel a mutual understanding with Russians as East Germany's longtime ally and country that shared the post-socialist experience. Eastern German AfD MPs, like Moosdorf and Kotré, allude to this historic bond and anti-Western frustrations when advocating for increased cooperation with Russia.

**Matthias Moosdorf, MP from Leipzig:**

"After all, it was the political weakness of an economically run-down world power that [West] Germany and the United States found so appealing; they had won the Cold War and that was how it was to remain."

"The concessions wrested from Gorbachev were like gold treasures paid for with glass beads, first politically and later, under Yeltsin, economically as well. The West, primarily the USA, began to stock up on everything that was needed or of value, like a junkie who had broken into the drugstore. How we loved the Russians for that!"

**Steffen Kotré, MP from East Berlin:**

"We East Germans know what a loss of homeland means."

**Table 8**

### Economic conditions

Another contributing factor to pro-Russian sentiment within Eastern German AfD members is the poor economic situation in Eastern Germany. The AfD, a vocal critic of the German economic system, frequently blames Eastern Germany's poor economic conditions on the European Union's financial policies and the post-reunification economic liberalization process in the region. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, people in post-socialist nations enthusiastically embraced liberalism, believing it to be the best system to promote freedom and liberty (Kratsev & Holmes, 2020). However, adhering to the notion of "shock therapy neoliberalism," West Germans economically transformed the New States with very little East German input, believing, as Margaret Thatcher said, "There is no alternative" (Ther, 2020). The implementation of shock therapy neoliberalism and Merkel's defense of austerity measures as "*alternativlos*" (without alternative), inspired Eurosceptic economics professor Bernd Lucke to found the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in protest of the German government's Euro bailout and the poor economic situation (Jahn, 2013). The "*alternativlos*" economic policies were made on behalf of Eastern Germans, ultimately creating economic disenfranchisement and resentment towards the Westerners who implemented the measures. The consequences of the Western German-led shock therapy neoliberalism in the East have therefore made Eastern Germans more receptive to cooperation with Russia as a means of bolstering the region's struggling economy.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, mass privatization and neoliberalization in Eastern Germany resulted in widespread job loss and economic hardship in the region. During the reunification process, the West German government created the *Treuhandanstalt* (trust agency) to oversee the mass privatization of East German businesses. Because Eastern Germans had little input in this liberalization process, the financial difficulties following mass privatization furthered feelings of bitterness towards the West. The *Treuhand* preserved only every fourth job in Eastern Germany, and by 1994, the agency had sold roughly 80% of East German assets and enterprises to West Germans, 14% to foreigners, and only 6% to former GDR citizens (Ther, 2020; Köpping, 2018). Industrial production in Eastern Germany declined substantially by the mid-1990s, dropping to 27% of the 1988 level, which was the steepest drop of any post-socialist country in Europe, including the war-torn Bosnia and Herzegovina (Pates & Leser, 2021). *Ossis* in the AfD frequently cite this poor economic situation when venting frustrations about the German reunification process, blaming much of Eastern Germany's economic conditions on a callous and greedy West (see Table 9). During reunification, Eastern Germans experienced mass unemployment and poverty while Western Germans gained jobs and industry, creating a deep sense of resentment toward liberal Western countries. Feeling unappreciated by the West, many Eastern Germans have sought out alternative economic allies, such as Russia.



**Tino Chrupalla, MP from Weißwasser:**

"There you also read: 'the average economic power of the new federal states, measured in terms of gross domestic product per capita, reached a level of almost 73 percent of the overall German average in 2019.' The federal government is seriously selling this as a success – in 2020!"

**Jürgen Pohl, MP from Magdeburg:**

"The Treuhand 'privatized' 12,000 state-owned enterprises, selling off many of them for far less than they were worth, sometimes in dubious ways. 4,000 companies were liquidated altogether. Two-thirds of East German jobs were eliminated and employees laid off. This is how the East Germans paid for unification with their national wealth. They were left with none of the profits they realized, which all flowed to the West. Behind these figures, however, is the traumatic experience of an entire generation in East Germany. People were deprived of their prospects in life; one could also say that they were cheated out of their future."

**Table 9**

The dismantling of East German public sectors and welfare programs during the German reunification process further contributed to a sense of socioeconomic inequalities and injustices between the East and the West. This perceived injustice and comparative inequalities between the two regions further fueled Eastern animosity and reinforced an "East versus West" mentality. According to Petra Köpping (2018), after reunification, East German *Arbiture* (roughly equivalent to a high school diploma), college degrees, and other educational qualifications were mass devalued after a West German federal judge ruled a mass recognition of GDR degrees would "de facto devalue West German degrees." Eastern Germans felt a sense of betrayal after the German reunification process dismantled GDR-era social safety nets, such as the healthcare system, unemployment benefits, and pensions (Köpping, 2018). Jürgen Pohl wrote, "Where is the promised and long overdue harmonization of East and West pensions? ...Why are the pension entitlements of divorced women in the GDR still not recognized?" (Pohl, 2019). In typical populist fashion, Pohl embodies the "voice of the unheard people," speaking out for Easterners who still feel a sense of disenfranchisement from the Western government. By leveraging this Eastern frustration and speaking favorably of the Russian government, a vocal critic of the West, AfD politicians like Pohl perpetuate a sense of division between the "Eastern world" and the "Western world."

The fall of the GDR and the subsequent economic restructuring of the 1990s contributed to current economic disparities between the Eastern states and the Western states. These poor economic conditions perpetuate a feeling of Western advantage over the East and contribute to the popularity of the AfD, who blame the West for the New States' comparative poverty and vocally advocate for closer ties to Russia. For East Germans, the *Treuhand* be-

came a symbol of the “brutal turbo-capitalism” that deliberately eliminated potential competition from the East and bankrupted the region (Köpping, 2018). For many Eastern Germans today, the *Treuhand* still represents the colonialist, predatory capitalist Western German who orchestrated a massive asset transfer from the East to the West (Pates & Leser, 2021). In a Facebook video, MP Tino Chrupalla spoke about the negative economic impact the *Treuhand* had over the Eastern states, urged the Bundestag to let the AfD lead an investigation committee for the *Treuhand*, and angrily refuted accusations of right-wing extremism in the AfD as Western condescension (Chrupalla, 2020; see Table 10). Many in the AfD feel Eastern Germans have very little authority over their economy and are therefore worse off compared to the West. AfD MPs voice this feeling of comparative disadvantage to promote closer ties to Putin, who they feel would better advocate for the economic interests of a fellow post-socialist state.

**Tino Chrupalla, MP from Weißwasser:**

“30 years of German unity: Instead of tackling the economic and social problems, the established parties accuse East Germans of being inclined towards right-wing extremism. First, you took the people’s entire national wealth with the *Treuhand* and now you are defaming them.”

**Table 10**

Eastern Germany has still not recovered economically from the reunification over thirty years ago. Many Eastern Germans accuse the West of mishandling the reunification process, attributing the poor economic situation in the New States to the liberal German government both in the 1990s and today. Of the 17,500 millionaires in Germany, only 105 live in the former GDR, with the majority being Western Germans who moved to the East (Köpping, 2018). The average income of Eastern Germans is nearly 20% lower than in the West, with a third of Eastern Germans earning less than €10 an hour (Pates & Leser, 2021). AfD politician Jürgen Pohl regularly calls out the current German government for an alleged apathy towards Eastern Germany and continued mishandling of the economy at the expense of Eastern Germans (Pohl, 2022; see Table 11). Eastern Germans like Pohl regularly express a sense of desperation as their economic situation has still not improved since reunification. This feeling of neglect from the West further fuels hostility towards Western Germany and the European Union, contributing to Eastern German AfD MPs aligning themselves with Putin’s Russia, which offers an alternative economic, cultural, and political alliance.

**Jürgen Pohl, MP from Magdeburg:**

"The Greens don't care about the middle of Germany! We in the East are losing jobs! We in the East are losing the future of our families! We in the East are being driven into poverty!"

"30 years of German unity means that in the east of the republic, incomes are lower, unemployment is higher, the risk of poverty is higher, and the gross domestic product is lower than in the west. It also means that no East German heads a German university, that only two East Germans chair the 100 highest-turnover German companies, and that no East German presides over the federal courts."

"I used this opportunity to explain the positions of the #AfD and emphasized that the gap between East and West is still immense after more than 30 years of reunification. A special economic zone east and a strengthening of rural areas are therefore required."

**Table 11****DISCUSSION****Historical Materialism**

By analyzing how neoliberalization after reunification affected the Eastern German economy and the region's historical friendship with Russia, historical materialism provides a framework to understand the reasons for Eastern German disillusionment and resentment from the West. Western Germans' unfamiliarity with the history and economic conditions of the region has alienated *Ossis*, worsening the rise of Eastern German populism and pro-Russia sentiment. According to historical materialism, historical and economic conditions establish the political and ideological frameworks of all societies (Ehrenberg, 1984). The historical conditions of being a socialist country and Soviet ally, along with the post-reunification financial disparities between Western Germans and Eastern Germans, created an Eastern German political culture distinct from the West but comparable with Russian political culture (Levine & Sober, 1985; Pickel & Pickel, 2023). Historical materialism emphasizes the dialectic relationship between history and material conditions, wherein material conditions directly influence a society's historical events, and in turn, those events likewise influence material conditions (Resnick & Wolff, 1982). Using historical materialism allows for an analysis of the political and ideological motivations behind pro-Putin AfD members in the context of Germany's post-unification political landscape, such as a sense of Eastern disadvantage and anti-Western sentiment. This research presents a practical application of historical materialism, demonstrating how a holistic and dialectical approach can illuminate contributing factors to political issues like worsening populism and extremism.

Through historical materialism, we can understand how the unequal distribution of resources in the 1990s allowed Western Germans to profit off

reunification while living standards in the East deteriorated. According to historical materialism, conflict between social classes with different interests and the developing forces of production have driven all societal evolution throughout history. Historical materialism posits that groups with power and resources create economic and political systems to preserve this power and extract more resources (Resnick & Wolff, 1982). As populism is a “problem of social integration,” the wealth disparity between the two Germanies exacerbates East/West polarization and pushes many Easterners to political extremism (Weisskircher, 2020). Eastern AfD MPs frequently decried the poor material conditions and lack of economic opportunity in the East, worsening the sense of comparative disadvantage to the West. Contextualizing the East/West divide as a struggle between two social classes and competing interests reveals the historical conditions that contributed to Eastern Germany being disproportionately populated by “have-nots.” Examining both historical and contemporary class struggles in Germany highlights how economic conditions still influence the East/West divide and perpetuate widespread social acceptance of right-wing populism in the region.

### Political enfranchisement

Mainstream political parties in the Bundestag should make more of an effort to establish a presence in the former GDR by listening to and advocating for *Ossis* in the federal government as well as prioritizing involvement in Eastern communities. By increasing party presence in local government, campaigning in the region, and bringing Eastern German concerns to the Bundestag, the other mainstream parties in parliament would increase political enfranchisement of Easterners. Today, the AfD positions itself as the “voice of the East,” the only party in the Bundestag willing to advocate for the interests of the New States (Pickel & Pickel, 2023). Although some smaller parties attempt to represent the East (with minority leftist party *Die Linke* advocating for an Eastern German quota), majority parties like the Social Democrats (SPD) or the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) rarely advocate for Eastern interests (“Ost-Quote in Bundesbehörden,” 2019; Somaskanda, 2019). Social media posts by AfD MPs (such as Pohl’s Facebook post complaining that the Green party does not care about Eastern Germans<sup>3</sup>) exemplify a mentality many Easterners have: the AfD is the only party that truly cares about the East. Political extremism in the region stems from an Eastern feeling of exclusion; therefore, increased representation could work to politically enfranchise more Eastern Germans. Involvement by other political parties in Eastern German communities would promote political inclusiveness and diversity of opinion, offering *Ossis* viable political alternatives to the AfD.

Rather than dismiss Eastern resentment as political posturing by the political extremists, Bundestag MPs must recognize and admit to the rep-

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<sup>3</sup> See Table 11 in the analysis section.

representational discrepancies of the Western-dominated German government. The AfD's popularity in the former GDR, as well as the region's pro-Russia sentiment, stems from the genuine sense of disenfranchisement and underrepresentation many Eastern Germans feel. To address the lack of Eastern Germans in positions of power, the German government should include Easterners in affirmative action policies, such as Article 3 of the German Basic Law. After reunification, many Western Germans were skeptical of Eastern Germans, considering them susceptible to authoritarianism or otherwise unqualified for politics (Souris, 2019). Angela Merkel and other Eastern German politicians had to downplay their *Ossi* identity or "emulate Western elites" to gain political significance and remain in power, leading to a dearth of Eastern perspectives in many positions of power (Yoder, 2010; "30 Jahre Mauerfall," 2019). Eastern German citizens see *Ossis* in leadership roles, like AfD MPs, being treated with condescension and dismissive attitudes, worsening the "us versus them" mentality and solidarity with Russia. By automatically treating Eastern Germans with suspicion, Western Germans have inadvertently created a cycle wherein *Ossis* do not rise to positions of power, including politics. Eastern Germans thus turn to the AfD and Russia out of a feeling of neglect by Western Germany (including the German government), but greater *Ossi* participation in the unified government and increased cooperation from Western Germans could reduce the appeal of political extremism. By recognizing the disadvantages Eastern Germans face and taking steps to increase representation, the German government can encourage true German reunification and begin healing the East/West divide.

### **Economic enfranchisement**

To address persistent economic disparities between Western and Eastern Germany, the German government should implement infrastructure investment and job creation programs. By expanding the *Soli* tax, the German government can fund an economic revitalization effort and implement an oversight committee to ensure the Eastern New States receive the revenue. In 1991, the Western German government created the *Soli*, or "Eastern solidarity tax," to cover the costs of reunification and invest in Eastern German infrastructure, and since its introduction, Western Germany has invested roughly two trillion Euros in the East ("Germany largely abolishes," 2019). The German federal government eliminated the *Soli* for 90% of taxpayers in 2019, arguing the tax failed to address inequality; yet the German government collects more money from the *Soli* than it spends on Eastern Germany's infrastructure and economy ("Is Germany's government done," 2019; see Figure 2). Due to the massive asset transfer from the East to the West after reunification, 93% of Germany's 500 largest companies today remain headquartered in the West, leaving few economic opportunities for *Ossis* to bolster their own economy ("Eastern German economy," 2019). Although the *Soli* was intended as a temporary measure to support the reunification

of Germany, this research shows the full reunification of Germany is still incomplete. Expanding the *Soli* and investing the revenue in infrastructure and job creation measures will help alleviate the income inequality between the East and West as well as decrease the rates of unemployment and poverty in the East.

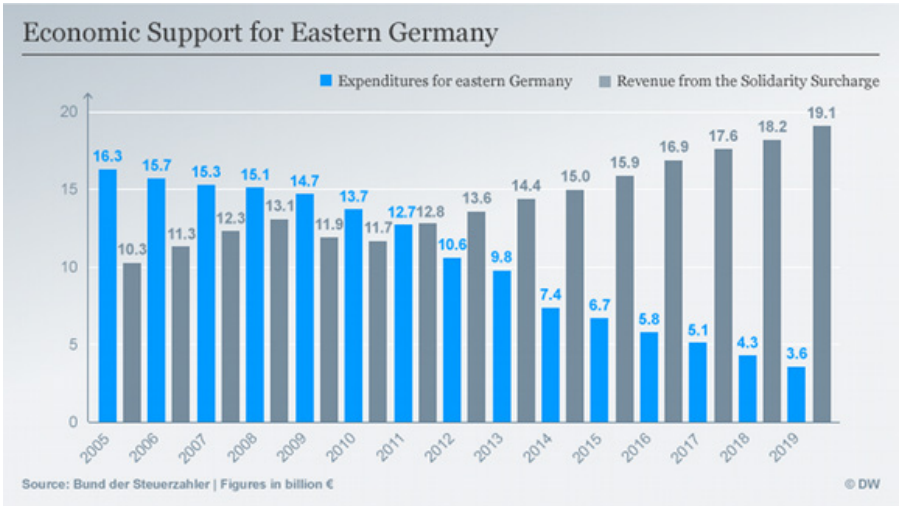


Figure 2

The German government could also promote economic recovery in the East by developing a green energy industry in the region. By building renewable energy plants, developing green energy infrastructure, and creating pollution clean-up jobs, the government would revitalize the Eastern German economy and ensure Germany meets its climate goals. The German government’s pledge to entirely phase out coal energy by 2038 led to backlash from the AfD and worsened economic anxieties in the Eastern mining communities (Wecker, 2018). Not only do coal jobs in Eastern Germany offer some of the highest levels of job stability, wages, and benefits, but much of the region also lacks the necessary infrastructure to transition away from coal (Saraste, 2020). To many Eastern Germans (including Eastern MP Jürgen Pohl), the coal phaseout is another example of the Western government making decisions on behalf of *Ossis* while continuing to shut down jobs in the East (Chase, 2018; see Table 11). This green energy project would address *Ossis’* economic anxieties while giving the region a solid infrastructure to promote environmental sustainability and decreased reliance on Russian gas and oil. Additionally, bringing back ecological and well-paying jobs in the region would foster a sense of pride and East/West cooperation.



## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I argue that Eastern German AfD MPs are more likely to espouse pro-Putin rhetoric than Western Germans because the historical and material conditions after the German reunification led to a feeling of comparative disadvantage and anti-Western resentment. Eastern German AfD MPs frequently discussed feelings of frustration towards the Western-dominated German government, expressing feelings of neglect and contempt from Westerners. This feeling of disregard, coupled with the frustration of feeling unheard, cause many Eastern Germans to feel a sense of solidarity with Russia, another post-socialist power they believe understands the Eastern struggle. Additionally, the hastiness of the German reunification process resulted in a lack of economic opportunities in the East, trapping *Ossis* in a perpetual cycle of poverty and worsening far-right extremism and division. Finally, growing anti-US and anti-NATO sentiment across Germany has led many in the AfD to portray Putin as a populist hero fighting against the Western global elite. Germany is one of the key leaders of the European Union and an important country in the democratic world. As the far-right continues to grow worldwide, the presence of a divisive and openly Eurosceptic party in the German parliament weakens the EU from within. Putin's continuous power grabs, anti-democratic meddling in foreign nations, and alleged cooperation with far-right parties in the EU pose a threat to regional and global stability. Without understanding the root causes of right-wing populism, including the material and historic conditions of the region, the far-right will continue to gain in popularity worldwide, and we will likely see the reemergence of fascism in our lifetimes.

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