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The AfD's political party discourse on the National reunification of 1989: the phenomenon of AfD's success in East Germany

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History Department

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„Mein Gott, hilf mir, diese tödliche Liebe zu überleben"

From Dmitri Vrubel's Berlin Wall painting, 1990.

Because such unconditional love for freedom is so hard to explain as well as to survive from it.

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Resumo

Esta dissertação tem como principal objetivo analisar de que maneira o discurso do partido Alternativa para a Alemanha (*AfD)* aborda a reunificação alemã de 1989. Este estudo procura compreender de que forma o partido se apropria de uma revolução pacífica cujos desfechos e consequências complexas são usados para mobilizar apoio político. A análise centra-se na apropriação de memórias coletivas e na instrumentalização de eventos históricos que não pertencem diretamente à narrativa do partido, mas que se tornam relevantes no contexto político contemporâneo. A metodologia adotada combina abordagens qualitativas e quantitativas. Qualitativa através da identificação e análise de figuras de argumentação de certos autores e estratégias discursivas. Enquanto que, a nível quantitativo, baseia-se na utilização de dados económicos e gráficos relacionados com a reunificação e os impactos regionais causados.

Os resultados indicam que a *AfD* consegue explorar lacunas na memória histórica alemã, apresentando um passado complexo e pouco debatido como referência para fortalecer a sua legitimidade política, sem que grande parte do eleitorado perceba plenamente essa apropriação. O estudo revela ainda que este discurso se articula com temas mais amplos, como o federalismo, o regionalismo e elementos persistentes do passado Nazi, refletindo tensões históricas que permanecem pouco resolvidas na sociedade alemã.

As conclusões sugerem que a instrumentalização do passado pela *AfD* não apenas influencia percepções políticas contemporâneas, mas também ilumina a importância de compreender a memória histórica como um recurso político ativo.

Palavras-chave: Reunificação Alemã, *AfD,* memória*, Volksgemeinschaft*, RDA, RFA.

Abstract

This dissertation aims to investigate how the discourse of the Alternative für Deutschland (*AfD*) is framed around the German reunification of 1989. The study seeks to understand how the party appropriates a peaceful revolution with complex outcomes and consequences to mobilize political support. The analysis focuses on the appropriation of collective memories and the instrumentalization of historical events that do not directly belong to the party's narrative but become relevant in the contemporary political context. The adopted methodology combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative aspect involves the identification and analysis of argumentation Figures of certain authors and discursive strategies, while the quantitative aspect uses economic data and graphical representations related to reunification and the resulting regional impacts.

Results indicate that the *AfD* can exploit gaps in German historical memory, presenting a complex and under-discussed past as a reference to strengthen its political legitimacy, often without the electorate being fully aware of this appropriation. The study also reveals that this discourse is intertwined with broader themes such as federalism, regionalism, and persistent elements of the Nazi past, reflect unresolved historical tensions in German society.

The conclusions suggest that the *AfD*'s instrumentalization of the past not only influences contemporary political perceptions but also highlights the importance of understanding historical memory as an active political resource.

Keywords: German reunification, *AfD*, memory, *Volksgemeinschaft*, GDR, FRG.

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Glossary

AfD- Alternative für Deutschland

CDU- Christlich Demokratische Union

FAG- Finanzausgleichsgesetz

FRG- Federal Republic of Germany

GDR- German Democratic Republic

IWH- Leibniz-Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung Halle

NSDAP- Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei

SED- Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands

SFG- Solidarpakt-Fortführungsgesetz

SPD- Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands

Introduction:

The German reunification in 1990 marked a historical event with a large global significance, ending with decades of political, social and economic divisions between East and West Germany. Although the process was peacefully and in legal terms consolidated, it brought profound structural challenges for former East Germany, including economic reforms, social transitions, as well as the adaption of a new Western political system.

The *Treuhand* commission which was responsible for the mass privatizations of Eastern companies and the implementation of the Solidarity Pacts I and II by the federal government, illustrates the many strategic efforts done to integrate the East as much as possible. However, these programs faced limitations and hard consequences such as unemployment, bankruptcies, regional inequalities and widespread feelings of disappointment and lost hope among the Eastern population.

The economic and social consequences influenced directly the electoral behavior in East Germany. Decades after the reunification, the rise of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (*AfD)* demonstrates the impact of historical, economic and cultural factors on the emergence of new political forces. The party was initially founded with a Eurosceptic perspective. However, the party gradually expanded its agenda including populist and nationalist narratives, addressing issues related to immigration, cultural identity and national sovereignty. These characteristics invoke symbolically historical events like the *Friedliche Revolution* ("peaceful revolution"). The instrumentalization of East Germans collective memory reflects not only historical dissatisfaction with Western integration but also as an ongoing search for political representation aligned with experiences of the Eastern population.

This thesis aims to analyze the economic and social effects of German reunification and the emergence of new forms of political mobilization in the East, with a particular focus on the *AfD*. By exploring the relationship between economic integration policies, regional inequalities, and electoral discourse, this research seeks to understand how the recent history of East Germany continues to shape the contemporary political landscape, highlighting both continuities and disruptions in the post-reunification sociopolitical trajectory within the country.

State of the art: Contextualization of the chosen theme

Recent literature review done on electoral behavior and the political overview in East Germany after the reunification of 1990 demonstrates a complex evolution which has been shaped by historical transitions, socioeconomic challenges, and cultural transformations.

In the first federal elections of 1990, following the German reunification, moderate parties such as the *CDU* and *SPD* dominated the Eastern states, also as a reflection of the lack of variety of political parties which existed at the time in the German political system (Aron, 2023).

However, since 2012-2013, a distinct and controversial political phenomenon has emerged, the *AfD* party. It became a relevant political force, particularly in former East Germany states like Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia. In the 2017 federal elections, the *AfD* consolidated its base in the region of Saxony, for reasons which might be related to reunification issues and distrust on mainstream parties (Celine Schmock, September 24, 2024, in *NDR*). Cultural and identity factors, including regional pride and concerns about the lack of social cohesion, are concerns, which for outsiders, seem to be not relevant when it comes to political terms. However, they have been the reasons basis for the *AfD's* fertile ground in the East (Vees-Gulani, 2021; *Sachsen-Monitor, 2016*). Surveys from *Sachsen-Monitor 2016* showed that concerns about the future, social cohesion, and preservation of German culture were already pertinent concerns in 2016 which have increased even more in 2023, especially among younger Eastern Germans (*Sachsen-Monitor 2016; Sachsen-Monitor 2023*).

These trends are linked to persistent democratic distrust, shaped by the repressive history of the GDR, the limited effect of deliberative initiatives of the failed project *Rund Tische* or "round-tables" and perceptions that reunification did not guarantee equitable political representation as it was promised (Ute Scheub, Abril 23, 2024 in *Taz*; Aron, 2023; Kowalczuk, 2024).

According to Hansen & Olsen (2022) and Huber & Yendell (2019), the *AfD's* voter profile combines socioeconomic, cultural, and demographic characteristics: predominantly male, middle-aged or older, religious, and working-class who often reside in rural or economically disadvantaged areas. However, some of those characteristics are not precisely confirmed, since they have been hard to achieve when it comes to concretely defining party supporters.

Since the party's creation in 2012–2013, the main narrative has shifted from an economic and Eurosceptic platform to a radical rhetoric emphasizing historical events, national identity and anti-immigration policies (Lewandowsky, 2015; Hansen & Olsen, 2022). Moreover, little attention has been paid to the *AfD's* historical event appropriation, as a strategy for political

campaigns. For instance, the use of *"Friedliche Revolution im Wahllokal"* ("the peaceful revolution in the electoral section") and the slogan of *"Wende_2.0"* seem to provoke aspects related to collective memory, regional pride and perception of historical victimization (Jürgen Kaube, October 2, 2024, in *Deutschlandfunk* ; Källgren, 2019).

The *AfD*'s rise in East Germany can be considered as a multifactorial one: the outcome of historical, cultural legacies along with regional inequalities; democratic distrust, and the strategic use of collective identities. Despite its populist and radical orientation, the *AfD* reflects the perceived needs and grievances of Eastern citizens, which combine past traumas with present social and political concerns.

Research Question

The central Research Question guiding this Master thesis project is:

"To what extent has the *AfD* discourse on reunification and historical memory contributed to shape political identities and electoral behavior in East Germany since 1989?".

This question emerges from the observation of the patterns of the *AfD* electoral success in Eastern states, as well as from the historical and sociological factors through the analysis done. It aims as well to explore the connection between the political discourse of collective historical memory and regional identity. There is a recognition that East Germany supports the *AfD*, but it does not mean that the support comes only as a reflection from contemporary politics. The grievances related to reunification and to a concealed pain from the Nazi past, can be perceived as aspects which do indirectly reflect frustration and humiliation in today's German Democracy.

Focusing on the narratives constructed by the *AfD,* this study seeks to understand how historical events such as the *"Wende"* and the *"Friedliche Revolution"* are instrumentalized to appeal to the voter some things which seem to be missing for a very long time: identity, pride and social cohesion. The Research Question enables a wider investigation into social-demographic dimensions of the *AfD* support. There is as well, a consideration of certain aspects such as age, gender, education and particularly the case of younger and middle-aged voters in Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia.

Methodology

As revealed in the state of the art, there might be a gap in the understanding of the historical events and the *AfD*'s appropriation for their own political benefit. Therefore, this study adopts

a mixed study method, qualitative-discursive and quantitative-discourse research. The qualitative-discursive is present in all thesis chapters.

For the first chapter, there will be a sociological and psychological analysis on Nazi Germany's impact when it comes to the idea of a concealed pain for one nation. The opposite authors argumentation between Elias (1996) and Goldhagen (1996) show how Germany's position during Nazi Germany can be very critical when it comes to a moral reflection.

The second chapter will examine the background and in what might be the power of certain terms for the German Nation identity like *Volksgemeinschaft* and *Volk.* Authors like Klikauer (2020) and Wildt (2017) help us to contextualize the word's significance for today's Germany.

As for the third chapter, it will be presented an extended analysis about the reunification consequences in social and economic terms. There is a presentation as well of some of the author's arguments like Jürgen Kaube (October 2, 2024, in *Deutschlandfunk)* and Aron (2023) related to the social divisions between East and West Germany. In this chapter there is an introduction of a quantitative-discourse, related to numbers of economic conditions as well as the risk of poverty of certain regions of former East Germany. As a conclusion to the chapter, a series of maps pertaining the federal elections from 1990 to 2025 are presented. These maps are in correlation with a survey conducted in Saxony, which focused on social, cultural, future expectations, and democratic aspects within the country (*Sachsen-Monitor 2016; Sachsen-Monitor 2025*).

On the fourth chapter, there will be an analysis on the *AfD* inside the federal context. This chapter focuses on the qualitative content analysis of *AfD* electoral programs (2017 and 2025) and campaign materials of 2019 used in the regional propaganda for the state of Thuringia and in Leipzig.

The combination of both types of content analysis allows the study to link the discursive social, economic and cultural perceptions along with the voting behavior, providing a nuanced understanding of the *AfD*'s regional stronghold and its political resonance in East Germany.

1. Literature review

1.1. German identity between past and present: From Nazism to the understanding of a concealed pain

For this Master thesis about the *AfD's* political discourse on the German National reunification of 1989, it would be relevant to perceive as well, the impact and the legacy of the Holocaust event on present German society. The Holocaust is a theme which has to be highly considered when it comes to Germany's history narrative, which may help to understand the present cultural situation. It remains as one of the most traumatic events of Western history, where Germans were found as direct actors responsible for mass murder along with all atrocities committed.

After the end of the Second World War, Germany has been facing many cultural complexities when it comes to the actions done in the past, which have resulted into an identitarian crisis manifested with shame and humiliation according to Elias (1996). Even though West Germany fought for the reconstruction of political cultures in the country after the Holocaust and the Third *Reich,* there was still a traumatic past to survive (Minkenberg, 1993). The strong general effort on trying to forget the past, is a question which remains for the German Nation: how it is possible to manage and accept a complex past?

The process of understanding on how the Holocaust was possible remains on ideological terms, where Antisemitism and the idea of racial superiority gave strength to the rise of the Nazi Regime in 1933. As Roche & Pine (2023) argue, Germany was the most developed country in the field of Biopolitics. In addition, Uhlendahl et al. (2023) emphasize on how the Nazi Regime appealed for the "racial improvement" of the Nation, suggesting the elimination of the ones considered inferior genetically to construct an "Aryan" society. These "racial idealism" gave rise to an organized and consolidated mass murder system.

The question of how Germany can manage to reflect on her own past is not an easy question to answer, since it approaches many ethical, social and cultural dimensions. It is a sensitive theme which also led to many critical ideas, but no concrete conclusions. However, after some research, it is possible to present two distinct reflections of Germany's actions during the Second World War. The two reflections are based on the German sociologist Norbert Elias (1996) and the American professor Daniel Goldhagen (1996).

Both authors approach different perspectives on Germany's action during the Second World War, where Elias (1996) presents a more sociological perspective, emphasizing the aspect of temporary collapse of civilization. His claims that Germany should acknowledge its own past by having some debate about it, while at the same time, the country should create some space for development of the future German generations. This means that there is some confidence from the author's side for Germany to have some progress culturally, where younger generations can carry good old traditions and bring them to their present life. In contrast to Elias (1996), Goldhagen offers a different vision, a more psychological one.

For Goldhagen (1996), the Holocaust was only possible due to the active action of ordinary Germans which according to their radical rooted ideologies, supported the big complex murder system. According to the American professor, Antisemitism was a sentiment which was deeply rooted in Germans minds, and it made the whole extermination system possible to happen.

The issue of carrying complex memories and not having any public discussions on the Nazi period, may have influenced present political decisions, where Germans have been showing more interest to vote for the right-wing party *AfD* rather than moderate parties. The lack of debate on how to deal with a complex past (especially past actions when it comes to genocide) can be a strong base of a concealed pain which was never approached. The *AfD* political strategy may rely primarily on the problem of sustaining cultural memory such as the Nazi past. The party may have gained some support from those who might have wanted some discussion about the theme, or even from those who find their country's past hard to reflect and accept.

A sociological approach

Norbert Elias was a German sociologist born in 1897 in Wrocław (Dunning, 2008). During his career, Elias had a variety of projects, specifically projects based on European civilization and European mentalities from the 20th century. His famous book, which was chosen for this academic project: "The Germans: Power struggles and the development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries", published in 1996, reflects a relevant prediction of Germany's current political position, where extremist parties are gaining power very fast. At that time, in 1996, Elias suggested already about the lack of acceptance of the Nazi past as a big obstacle for a national progress.

1.1.1 The collapse of civilization and the hope for a humanistic renewal: Elias on Postwar Germany

Before we try to understand the *AfD's* success, we should consider the analysis of the German sociologist Norbert Elias. Elias (1996) examines the impact of the Nazi past on German identity and how avoiding this dark history contributes for an identity crisis, which is visible through the younger generations in Germany today. This chapter discusses how moral defeat should not be an obstacle to national progress for a country like Germany.

The German author drives us into a complex sociological analysis through the deep hole of the German sociology throughout the years. We meet some significant aspects which may be considerable to reflect before we think about the *AfD* not only as a political party in the German *Bundestag*, but as an opaque continuation of a violent and barbaric past. According to Elias (1996) some of the current psychological and emotional issues which co-exist in Germany come mainly from the actions of the *NSDAP* and their respective violence during their leadership in Germany from 1933 until 1945.

If we observe Germany nowadays, we can perceive it as resilient country. In addition, her economic position is an inspiration to be followed internationally. According to Elias (1996), her economic and social recovery since the end of the Second World War gave her some respect internationally. However, on German's psychological perspective, losing two world wars is not so easy to handle as it seems to be for outsiders.

The main problem, which is eventually preventing Germans of a national progress, begins with the lack of acceptance about Germany's dark past (Elias, 1996). The fact that Germans in general do not accept their past for future progress, is still a factor that has been carried throughout the years in their minds as suggested by Elias in his book: "But coming to grips psychologically with what happened is not easy for many Germans. Generations come and go. They have to struggle again and again with the fact that the we-image of the Germans is soiled by the memory of the excesses perpetrated by the Nazis (...)" (1996,16). This approach of the past reinforces more the German author's idea and desire for a past acceptance by having a necessary debate, which the author relates with the term *Wir-Bewusstseins* ("We-consciously") (1996, 429). The term is not used by the author lightly, because the term brings some controversial aspects, since it creates the indirect illusionary division between the "us" *versus* "others", whenever we are talking about a nation.

According to Elias (1996), twelve years of Hitler's leadership led a very "dangerous heritage" as well as a "stigma" for Germans to sustain, especially for younger generations who

were born after Nazi Germany. This kind of heritage is not light at all to accept, since it not only focuses on the violence caused by Nazism, but also on the existence of a "moral defeat" heritage as well. For this reason, younger generations who were already aware of their parents, grandparents or even their great-grandparents past, have inherited opposite perspectives and ideologies. This means that they inherited opposite beliefs considering their past generations. We can consider this as a value rupture by younger generations, mainly when it comes to political connections. For instance, Marxism and left-wing movements were political creeds to be absorbed and followed in order to swerve from Hitler's right-wing ideologies. However, Elias (1996) notes that not every young citizen adhered to this kind of left-wing trend, in fact, most of them avoided politics for a long time.

Although Germany tries to make a kind of a short acknowledge of Nazism in her national history, some of the Germany's neighbor countries did not forget about it at all, and it turns the "moral defeat" reflection of the past even more complex. Therefore, all these matters mentioned by Elias do subsequently raise identity questions such as what it means exactly to be a "German" before and after both World War conflicts, where the author recognizes a strong doubt about society's identity in general: "New generations are growing up in West Germany who are asking the meaning and value of the society they live in (...) In such a way, one only exacerbates one of the most severe problems which remains untackled in West Germany up to now- the crisis of identity. " (1996, 407).

The curious idea about this approach on Elias (1996) book, is in the way how he believes Germany is powerful enough to give herself a chance again, to rebuild the nation after the Second World War. He observes Germany as a country who should turn the experience of being "a German" into a very exciting one. He clarifies this idea by saying that this new Germany after 1945, is not the same Germany that Hitler dominated politically, socially and culturally. According to Elias, Germany is still able to fight in order to become a country where the good old German traditions can remain along with the new traditions brought by younger generations: "(...) The old Germany, as our fathers knew it at least since 1871, no longer exists. A new German state has come in into being, and we must pull together (...) perhaps in the future, a nation will form which continues the best of the old German tradition and at the same time creates its own tradition, so that for the younger generations and for those who will come after us it is pleasurable, exciting and meaningful to belong to this new Germany." (1996, 409).

This new conjuncture of good old traditions along with new traditions may be powerful enough to show that Germany is renewed in a humanistic way years after the end of Nazism, where all the violent attitudes remain in the past, and should not be considered as absolute.

A psychological approach

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen is an American professor in Harvard University (Wikipedia, 2022). He was born in 1959, in Boston, and some of his career projects gained controversy since they were related to the Holocaust and the morality of the Germans during the second World War. In his book, also published in 1996: "Hitler's Willing Executioners: ordinary Germans and the Holocaust" reflects how ordinary Germans adopted voluntarily and naturally an organized framework conjuncture of hate, rejection and elimination against the Jews. Goldhagen can be considered as a controversial author on these terms, since he focuses more on the actions and on the ideologies convictions which led to the whole process of murder of the Holocaust.

1.1.2 The roots of intolerance: Goldhagen's perspective on German identity and Antisemitism

For this chapter, there is a different presentation on Germany's past from the American professor Daniel Goldhagen. Goldhagen argues that antisemitism in Germany was deeply engrained in German culture and was intensified by the Nazis through the murder system, the Holocaust. He discusses about the lasting preconceptions carried by Germans after Nazism and how younger generations continue to inherit this heavy legacy. This enduring heritage may also play a role in the rise of the *AfD* in today's Germany.

On the other hand, for Goldhagen (1996), we do find a raw and unvarnished approach about the German attitudes, especially during the Holocaust period. Goldhagen reflects deeply in his book on how ordinary Germans were willing to build naturally a whole process of hate and murder inside their own Nation through their educational institutions, rules, laws and attitudes, as the author reveals: "In one university after the next, governing student associations were already, in the first years of the Weimar Republic, captured by nationalist, *völkisch, a*nd antisemitic forces (...)" (1996,83). In addition, Max Weber commented as well about the academic sphere in Germany: "(...) Max Weber, a few months earlier, commented in a letter that "the academic atmosphere has become extremely reactionary, and in addition radically antisemitic. (...)"" (Goldhagen, 1996, 83).

The main idea relies on the controversial and debatable fact that Germany along with its Native citizens, dismantled a racially negative perception of the Jews and their role in society over the years, where it is related with the term *Judenfrage* ("Jewish Problem") (Goldhagen, 1996, 80). Even those who strongly supported the liberal theory of the enlightenment were strongly influenced as well to assume that the Jews belonged to a community that had to be eradicated from society no matter what: "The toll of these decades of verbal, literary, institutionally organized, and political antisemitism was wearing down even those who, true to enlightenment principles, had resisted the demonization of the Jews." (Goldhagen, 1996, 81).

For instance, an author's quote which helps to reinforce that the *Judenfrage* was a very solid and unbreakable idea, is a quote from Franz Oppenheimer (a German economist and also Jew) who appealed that Jews could not do anything to change their own image for the "German cause", since it would be completely in vain: "(...) Franz Oppenheimer summarized the attitudes of Germans towards Jews, attitudes that Jews could not favorably alter no matter how fervently they might dedicate themselves to the German cause: "Don't fool yourselves, you are and will remain Germany's pariahs.'" (Goldhagen, 1996, 82).

In the case of Germany's historical international position, Goldhagen (1996) gives us some significant background about the similarities that the country had along with Western Europe, namely for its powerful economy. According to the author, the population during the Wilhelmine Era (considering the years between 1888 and 1918), already adopted at that time a racist and antisemitic behavior which was clearly engrained in the mentality's culture. Therefore, it is possible to admit that Antisemitism was a general belief in the entire Europe, where Jews were accused of bringing and providing wrong beliefs and negative values for society. In addition, during the Weimar Republic, Jews were negatively accused for delegitimize democracy during that period: "(...) Weimar's many enemies, as a matter of faith, identified it with the Jews, the purpose and effect of which was to help to delegitimize the democracy." (Goldhagen, 1996, 82). The relevant fact about this point is that this short time period of the Weimar Republic opened even more space for spreading negative and false beliefs.

Antisemitism felt in Germany had grown through a deep and gradual generational root, which gained a more solid political form in beginning of the 20th century. Initially, the formation of the party *NSDAP* came originally from the fusion of the German Nationalist workers along with other far-right ideologies which spread Antisemitism. The party came to power in 1933, and this event proved that ideological movements could gain a certain structure because of its

antisemitic fertile ground, which lasted for many years (Goldhagen, 1996). The political progression of the *NSDAP* showed that cultural ideologies can be embedded into political forms. As Elias (1996) noted, the generational transmission of certain attitudes and cultural stigmas can be factors which are clearly hard to resist in sociological terms.

Goldhagen (1996) seems to attribute a harsh cultural responsibility to Germany, where he notes that Antisemitism roots were not only related to the existence of Nazism but also related to a long-standing ideological tradition which was part of Germans minds. He appeals to the notion of consistent intentionality among Nazi forces, Hitler and ordinary Germans, who all together contributed to the creation of a functional system of mass murder: "The notion of "intentionality", the relationship of Hitler to his followers, and the manner of assessing the degree to which a set of actions are consistent- (...) have been, and are likely to continue to be, subjects of explicit and implicit dispute (...)." (Goldhagen, 1996, 132). He further seems to argue that Antisemitism became so embedded in the German culture, that by time, Nazism was no longer debated about its moral or ethical governance. At this point, we can presume that Antisemitism acts like an unquestioned cultural assumption which shaped social and political behavior: "(...) much *positive* evidence exists that antisemitism, albeit an antisemitism evolving in content with the changing times, continued to be an axiom of German culture (...) and that its regnant version in Germany during its Nazi period was but a more accentuated intensified, and elaborated form of an already accepted basic model." (Goldhagen, 1996, 32). This framing, however, can be problematic since it raises ethical questions about the generalization of collective guilt.

Subsequently, Goldhagen (1996) suggests an analogy between the American Democracy and German Antisemitism. He gives an example of how this interpretation of "naturality" can be relative to different countries. He mentions about Democracy in America and how this political form is neither contested nor challenged by the population, because it is engrained inside the American nation for many years. Likewise, in Germany, the common ideas of rejection and hate towards Jews were also ideas engrained inside the nation as mentioned previously. Both points revealed are neither contested, nor challenged by each nation, because they are conceived as part of "common sense", where there are no questions about the ideals engrained as Goldhagen reveals: "(...)Why? Precisely because the views are uncontested, because they are part of the "common sense" of the society." (1996, 32).

Apart from this, Goldhagen (1996) suggests how discrimination and cultural misunderstandings driven from the cultural axioms can be tremendously serious for a nation's

image as it is for Germany. Cultural axioms do unfortunately lead to false universal beliefs which may be accepted and trusted by almost everyone: "And it is precisely because the democratic creed is uncontested, just as (...) the antisemitic creed was essentially unchallenged in Germany, that far less "evidence" as to the existence and nature of each people's beliefs on the respective subjects rises to the surface." (Goldhagen, 1996, 33).

Having said that, from the author's main argument, Goldhagen (1996) does not suggest about a possible German cultural reform after the Holocaust as Elias (1996) reveals in his book about German sociology. However, it seems that the American author indicts Germans in a very simple way about their influenceable behavior before and during the Holocaust. In addition, he alerts to this natural hate and rejection that sustained a silent obedience, which can lead to similar historical events, and this issue can be related with the rise of the *AfD* in Germany nowadays. Small feelings which may be seen as buried for the nation, may reborn because in fact, those feelings seemed never disappeared entirely.

1.1.3 The common view of Elias and Goldhagen on Germany: Inherited violence and national identity

It is important to reflect on how the sociological perspective of Elias (1996) and the psychological analysis of Goldhagen (1996) do intersect, despite their distinct approaches and different study methods of reflection.

While Elias (1996) focuses more on the power of sociology and trusting on the natural process of development of civilizations, namely the German civilization after the Holocaust, Goldhagen (1996) focuses more on the psychological point of view, where mentalities influence for sure a whole political, social and cultural system. In addition, each author choses a different path to characterize the war events and its consequences for Germany. Elias (1996) relies more on positive facts and on a liberal reflection which may conclude that the Holocaust could have brought a change for German society, while on the other hand, for Goldhagen (1996), historical documents and reports are facts which cannot be avoided, and they help to construct his heavy argument on Germany's guilt on the Holocaust.

The common shared reflection by both authors is the recognition that Germany may have a certain nationalist-cultural intensity feeling which can lean toward hostilities, where Elias argues: " (...) generations saw themselves burdened not only with the stigma of defeat but over and above this (...) with the stigma of a nation which had a tendency towards barbaric acts of violence (...)" (1996, 230). In addition, Elias (1996) explains that German violence may be

hereditary, which is a relevant point for this project about the *AfD* federal field discourse. However, it seems that the German author takes a softer position of an indictment on Germany's incorrect behavior on the appearance of the Holocaust. He reveals discreetly about opportunities that Germany can follow on her own, assuming a devastating past, but still has the chance to show up internationally and that generations must work to build their image, although there is a high probability of cultural stigma.

As well as for the American Daniel Goldhagen, there is also an allegation and recognition of a degree of violence, although this accusation is way more serious, especially relating with the final guilt on the Holocaust. He relies on the idea that the violence adopted by ordinary Germans was naturally and blindly implemented before Nazism, and that gave rise to all those harsh consequences known today. Almost no citizen asked himself about the morality of hating Jews and possessing nationalist beliefs, which were instrumented at that time by society: "(...) the elimination not only of Jews from all spheres of social life in Germany but also of their putative capacity to harm Germany (...) (Goldhagen, 1996, 131). Having said that, not all the German violent actions can be classified as absolute attitudes of the nation, and it seems that the author approaches indirectly a kind of a delegitimization on an ethical point of view with the example of the Police Battalion 101.

In his book, the case of the Police Battalion 101, was a paramilitary Nazi group who was in charge to act in Poland according to Nazi ideologies expansion. The paramilitary group ended up killing a large Jewish group for "peaceful reasons" according to their superiors. Goldhagen (1996) specifies a situation about the German Sargent named Trapp, a man who showed concern and sadness about their own violent actions as a group towards innocent Polish Jews. The group had to obey because of the pressure put by the entire Nazi system and idealism: "In addition to having been assigned an important role in the extermination of Polish Jewry, the men of Police Battalion 101 were charged with "pacifying" their region. (...)" (Goldhagen, 1996, 239); "What was Trapp's attitude towards the killing of Poles? One of his men was struck by it: "I can still recall very vividly that our battalion commander was very shaken after his action. He even wept (...)" (Goldhagen 1996, 240). In this short example, there is a kind of short recognition that the actions demanded by the superiors had to be obeyed. However, even though there was a consistent and solid hate form, there was at the same time an emotional reflection by Germans, presuming it ethically and morally.

2. *Volksgemeinschaft* and Germany

2.1 Between inclusion and exclusion: The persistence of *Volksgemeinschaft* in Germany

It is necessary to introduce in this chapter the term *Volksgemeinschaft* due to its historical and controversial significance. The word was originally popularized by the Nazis in order to promote a sense of racial unity, while excluding those who do not fit in its ideological meaning. Even though the word was avoided and it's use even condemned after the Second World War, it persists to come up considerably in national debates, within the nationalist rhetoric of the *AfD* in the German political discourse field.

Volksgemeinschaft remains as a peculiar and sensible term in Germany's cultural context, as well as its historical past significance. As Wildt (2017, 15) explains, *Volksgemeinschaft* derives from the mother concept *Volk (*the people) and it brought many bloody wars because of its powerful meaning. The term Volk has several interpretations. When connected to the concept of *Volksherrschaft* (sovereignty or rule of the people), it can take on different political meanings, some which in certain historical contexts, became associated with ideas of anarchy or even terror.

Klikauer suggests that the word can be closely associated with Nazism: "(...) Since the rise of the *AfD*, both terms are often used to camouflage the Nazi reality of the *AfD* (...)" (2020, 97). After the Second World War, the word was rarely used, and now, the word appeared again in order to appeal for an exclusive racial reality, which the *AfD* is putting effort into. For this reason, Wildt (2017) mentions that it is important to consider in which cases the term *Volk* can be used, since the word cannot be simply used occasionally. *Volksgemeinschaft* does not mean *Pöbel* or "plebs" as people in general would consider according to Wildt (2017). For the author, it seems that the term *Volksgemeinschaft* does assume a higher position than the term *Pöbel*. In these terms, we can assume that both words have different meanings, because each word limits the nation's narrative differently. Belonging to the *Pöbel* and belonging to the *Volksgemeinschaft,* can mean very different belongings (Wildt, 2017, 60). Back in the 1920's, after the end of the first world war, Germany was facing a complex political polarization between left-wing and right-wing forces. As Wildt (2017, 59-60) reveals, this concrete polarization meant an internal fight between the two political spectrums, which as a consequence, led to the Hitler's *Putsch* in Munich, in 1923. From a right-wing perspective, it

can be considered that this *Putsch* was a failure inside the Weimar Republic. However, as the author reveals, the failure in Munich gave more strength for national beliefs and increased the power meaning of *Volksgemeinschaft* inside the Weimar Republic (Wildt, 2017, 60).

On the other hand and according to Wildt, during the Weimar Republic, socialists also embraced the term *Volksgemeinschaft* as an essential term for political rhetoric specifically, in the city of Hofgeismar, where socialist meetings were held, the term was used many times: "*Wolfgang Hartwig mach zu Echt darauf aufmerksam, dass zu Beginn der Weimarer Republik vor allem Demokraten den Begriff "Volksgemeinschaft" in ihrer politischen Rhetorik Verwandten"* ("Wolfgang Hartwig rightly points out that, at the beginning of the Weimar Republic, it was primarily democrats who used the term 'Volksgemeinschaft' in their political rhetoric") (2017, 59). The word's invocation was not associated with anything aggressive, although it was already being approached with a certain sentiment: "O*bwhol die Referate fern jedes agressiven Nationalismus waren, was "Volksgemeinschaft" doch ein Schlüsselbegriff für die Gefühle, die die Teilnehmer umtrieben*" ("Although the presentations were far removed from any aggressive nationalism, 'Volksgemeinschaft' was nevertheless a key concept for the feelings that preoccupied the participants") (Wildt, 2017, 59).

Due to the *Putsch* of 1923, socialists tried to bond all Germans into only one single *Volksgemeinschaft* in 1925, with the main intention to avoid all the possible internal divisions, as Wildt reveals: "Z*iel der Organisation sei, so hiess es in der Illustrierten Reichsbannerzeitung im Oktober 1925, 'über alles Trennende der Klasse und Parteipolitischen Weltanschauung hinweg ein eisernes Band deutscher Zusammengehörigkeit und Volksgemeinschaft zu schmieden'*" ("The goal of the organization, according to the *illustrated Reichsbannerzeitung* in October 1925, was "to forge an iron bond of German unity and *Volksgemeinschaft*, rising above all divisions of class and party-political worldview.") (2017, 60).

For Hitler, and for those who wanted to turn the Munich's *Putsch* into a new governmental system, *Volksgemeinschaft* was a significant and central term in their perspective. The term inside Hitler's party, the *NSDAP,* represented a meaning of continuity, union and progress, excluding indirectly those who according to the Nazis, would not bring anything useful for the nation (Wildt, 2017, 65).

As with Klikauer, the term would bring a meaning of an "organic union", where it seems that mutual cooperation stands for the word's meaning: "The *Volksgemeinschaft* imaged that landowner and peasant live in an organic harmony just as workers and factory owners work for the common good of the Reich." (2020, 99). In this aspect, *Volksgemeinschaft* is already

becoming an inclusive-exclusive term, because the word is determined by boundaries, principally for those who were excluded from the word, as the Jews (Wildt, 2017). Furthermore, Roche & Pine make a deep analyze about biopolitics and race in Germany during Nazi period, and both authors suggest as well that the *Volksgemeinschaft* meant a precise cost for the nation, mainly for those who would not be "necessary" for the nation: "The ultimate aim of many teachers was (...) facilitate the eugenic eradication of 'hereditary unfit' children from the population as a whole, and to convince those affected that their sterilization was an entirely necessary and appropriate sacrifice for the good of the *Volksgemeinschaft*." (2023, 418).

Klikauer (2020) points out about the importance of the term for the Nazis. Even after the end of the Second World War, the use of the word was very limited not only to respect Germany's past, but most importantly, to respect one of the most uncomprehensible events in human history, the Holocaust. For Uhlendhal et al., in the beginning of the Second World War, in 1939, the *NSDAP* conducted and approached the term *Volksgemeinschaft* as a base concept of a "clean" racial and "organized" nation through the work of eugenicists: "The objective of eugenicists was the genetic 'improvement' of their countries' population" (2023,1).

According to Uhlendhal et al., (2023), the *Volksgemeinschaft* had to be the reflection of the *Volkskörper* (imaginable idea of an improved national body). It can be presumed that both words mentioned previously, open subsequently space for what Hitler called later the *Lebensraum* (vital space). The *Lebensraum* had to provide a settled and solid space in order for the nation to grow "clean" as much as they could, according to Nazi utopia (Uhlendhal et al., 2023).

Volksgemeinschaft may represent much more than only a party ideology as Klikauer reveals: firstly, the word can mean "an imaginary order" in a confusing world; secondly, the term may approach "hope for a better culture"; on third place, it can stimulate "clear dividing lines" between different cultures. On fourth place, it creates a spirit of commitment of the "in-group", and finally, it encourages rejection "against intellectualism, democracy, debate (...)" (2020, 97). As it is possible to assume and presume, the term limits and conducts rejection ideology towards the "others" that are not welcome for this racial utopic nation.

2.2. *Volksgemeinschaft* resurrected: *AfD* in contemporary Germany

As mentioned in the previous point, the term is getting more attention nowadays than it probably had in the middle of the 20th century. The *AfD* has reintroduced terms like *Volksgemeinschaft* and *völkisch* into German political discourse, invoking past idealism, which were supposedly be eradicated for its racist significance. However, these concepts show as well how exclusion, anti-democratic sentiment and the rejection of pluralism are some aspects which are present in former East Germany.

According to Klikauer, for today's German Politics, with the *AfD* party on the *Bundestag*, in 2016, the term *völkisch* along with *Volksgemeinschaft* started to be used once again, however, in a more "disguised" way as the author reveals: "Since the emergence of the *AfD* in 2013 and even more so since Frauke petri in 2016 reintroduced the term *völkisch* into the canon of politics in Germany, the old Nazi idea of a *Volksgemeinschaft* has many new supporters." (2020, 98). Not only the former *AfD* leader Frauke Petri, but the *AfD* member Björn Höcke appealed as well for the "unified *Volks-will*" as a particular sentiment only related to Germany and only related to one single blood which is controversial for today's politics, since for Hitler's perspective, for a harmonized community could also be resumed by the relation between *Volk* and the *Führer:* "In Hitler's Volksgemeinschaft, "on blood belongs to one land" and land-owner and peasant lived in an organic harmony, just as the Volk and the Führer Adolf Hitler." (Klikauer, 2020, 99).

The concept use as it was previously analyzed, has been gaining undesirable results in the German political sphere as revealed previously. These undesirable results suggested by Klikauer (2020) are resumed by the fact that *AfD* supporters and voters may not only embrace emotionally the *AfD*, but they may embrace unconsciously the term *Volksgemeinschaft.* For German moderate parties, these ideological terms do not exist on their neutral political sphere position, since the words may cause controversy and polemic accusations according to Germany's past: "(...) *Friedrich Merz* said in 2018 interview that the *AfD* is *"openly a Nazi Party with antisemitic undertones""*(Klikauer, 2020, 98). For this reason, it is relevant to consider that citizens who vote for the *AfD*, may stick in one way or another to this word root, in order to connect themselves in a more nationalistic and emotional form with the party itself, where there is the recognition of an imagined world at the same time as Klikauer suggests: "Typically, this is an *imagine community* and more than ever before, this imagined community often conflicts with today's pluralist society." (2020, 98). However, it seems that there is not enough information on how exactly Germans feel and react when the *AfD* approaches and

reinforces these nationalist and controversial terms and this can be considered as a gap not only for academic researchers, but for the German citizens itself.

While for Klikauer (2020) the *AfD* embraces strategically the term *Volksgemeinschaft,* Donovan indicates other cultural terms related to the *AfD* such as "nativism" and "Populism", where they enter the political spectrum: "There is a tendency today to view populism and nativism as the same or similar political phenomena." (2020, 56). The *AfD* is a party dominated and supported by the process of "nativism" and brings up a narrative to be preserved. According to the author, the *AfD* is even considered to be the most populist and nativist party internationally, considering on European perspective (Donovan, 2020). One notable feature of the *AfD* is its enduring regional concentration, especially in East Germany, where its support is largely driven by anti-immigration attitudes and widespread discontent with the German democratic system (Hansen & Olsen, 2024). These characteristics can be pulled inside the term *Volksgemeinschaft* because it seems that the word brings out as well a hate sentiment, but most importantly, a rejection against democracy and against those who seem to be foreign or, do not fit as Klikauer mentions with a significant term which was appealed years ago with Nazism *Untermensch* (sub-human): "The idea of the nazi Volksgemeinschaft was based on a racially unified Volk- the Germans. It described a mystical-Germanic uniting all racially defined souls and excluding non-Aryans, the sub-human or *Untermensch* (...)" (2020, 98). It can be argued that the *AfD* has taken on a highly controversial role in contemporary German politics, as the party has revived concepts that were meant to remain embedded — but critically remembered — within Germany's moral and ethical consciousness. As Klikauer notes, "Today, the AfD regurgitates these ideas. The *Volksgemeinschaft's* exclusionary vision targets non-desirables (...)." (2020, 99).

3. Two Germanys, one nation: radicalization after the fall of Wall

The fall of the Berlin wall marked a turning point in European history, where there was an establishment of values which before 1989 were not respected, like freedom of speech, freedom of expression, democratic ideals and human rights. It meant also the end of Communism in East Germany. Even though it brought hope for a better future, it turned out as an event which caused social, economic and political tensions between East and West Germany. These tensions reflect the lasting problems and gaps and have influenced the action of the *AfD* in East Germany.

For some authors, the idea of the reunification of a country like Germany was something unthinkable to happen, as Sauter suggests: "(…) I heard an American theologian remark that he had his doubts about the second coming of Jesus Christ, but not anymore. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall, he considered all things to be possible. (…)" (2007, 349). On top of that, Rädel describes the reunification event as something which Germany and Germans were not ready to face at all: "(...) Therefore, German society, politics, and the social sciences were quite unprepared and generally surprised by the peaceful revolution when it occurred (...)" (2019, 31). This surprising feeling is positively interpreted because the revolution was mostly held by the force of the nation and took down the Communist system which repressed citizens for many years.

Entering this third chapter is possible to presume that the fall of the Wall was for global and German citizens an important mark to be achieved, not only for territorial unity reasons, but most importantly, for the reestablishment of freedom and human rights, which the Communist system did not respect as Loeb argues: "The fall of the Berlin Wall is generally seen as a symbolizing the end of the Cold War and of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe (...)" (2006, 67). Johnson reveals as well the importance of a peace revolution which brought freedom, as well as a new historical and political landmark for its citizens: "(...) The citizens of East Germany were now finally able to experience freedom (...) few East Germans probably imagined that the date would also mark the beginning of the end of their country itself (...)" (2009, 127). However, the technical consequences left by the positive and necessary peaceful revolution were and remain somehow harsh, principally for those who were more affected to this historical event like East Germans: "(...) And the reality of being joined can be painful to those who experience it. Though the physical Wall may have fallen years ago, mental ones remain. (...)" (Tweedie, 2013, 19). Langenbacher suggests as well about the reunification's aftermath impact: "(...) almost all measures of economic and social well-being are a

consequence of mistaken decisions made during and in the aftermath of reunification (...)" (2019, 2). Last, but not least, there is also an approach on how the political transition process showed some internal divisions along the years: "(...) the long-term social and cultural consequences of this rapid road from socialist planned to capitalist market society (...) are resurfacing again with supposed "gaps", differences (...) between East and West Germany coming under intense scrutiny." (Böick, 2020, 143).

Germany has gained invisible but noticeable social divisions between those who act with indifference or happiness by the effects of the fall of the Wall, and those who would try everything to return to the past due to the hard consequences left for their lives (Tweedie, 2013). Except for Jürgen Kaube (October 2, 2024, in *Deutschlandfunk*), as he explains that Germany may not have real exact divisions inside society, but there might be in fact clear differences and conflicts between different social groups. What the authors consider to be divisions is the way how the reunification was perceived on a mental level, as Figure *1* below shows:

Types of division:
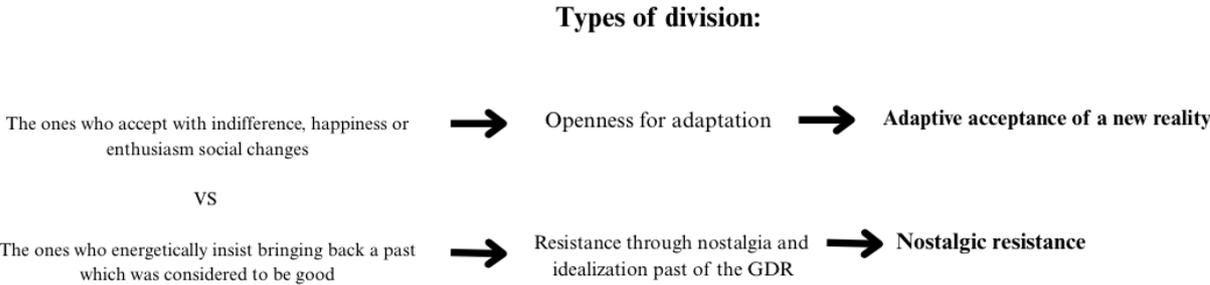
Figure 1- Argument table made by the student based on Jürgen Kaube (October 2, 2024, in Deutschlandfunk)

According to Jürgen Kaube (October 2, 2024, in *Deutschlandfunk*), the clear difference between those who tend to resist, and those who tend to accept a new reality, are key factors which contribute to social conflicts. The clear social division which co-exists in Germany until today, relies on the group which accepts either negatively or positively the new reality against the other group who desires strongly a return to their idealized past. This leaves the idea that East Germans do form certain groups between them due to their mental openness level on the consequences left by the reunification event, considering they belonged all to the same region until 1989. To emphasize more this idea, the author also uses an expression stating that in politics, all the sentiments are facts and there is nothing which can be done or controlled about it.

Tweedie (2013) explains that East Germans are still the ones who held back during the unification process and this helps to explain some of the issues of the *AfD*'s strength and success in the East. Rädel goes even further about the theme and mentions that the process brought in fact more votes which contributed to the growth of the *AfD*: "(...) the radical right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (...) provoked the electorate with slogans like "we are the people!" ("*Wir sind das Volk*") or ("*Friedliche Revolution mit dem Stimmzettel*") "peaceful revolution with the ballot" (...) """ (2019, 29).

According to Mushaben (2019), about two thirds of West Germans of the actual German population were born after the Second World War, while three-fourths of East Germans were born after the Second World War. For this reason, most of the population did not know its own country as one. This means that most people only knew one single history, one single identity, and one single currency, turning Germany into a specific case where there is a feeling and perception that there are two types of Germans inside the country: "Despite conservatives' assertions that "internal unity" had been achieved by 1995, 62 percent of Easterners, felt that the two peoples had grown farther apart following the euphoria of 1989." (Mushaben, 2019, 56).

This liberal reunification process, which was supposed to bring the old GDR and the old FRG into one political unity, was strongly supported by the then-Chanceler Helmut Kohl (Johnson, 2009). Helmut Kohl showed confidence and excitement on the reunification process, where he claimed that the political success of the reunification process should be mainly based on economic progress, as Sauter mentions: "(...) he worked for political unification, accepting that an economic unification, or, at least, the introduction of a common currency, would precede political change (...)" (2007, 351) . It is relevant to reflect about this citation when considering the main complex consequences left especially for East Germany, after 1989. In addition, the same author mentioned about the Willy Brandt's emotional discourse on 28th November 1989, when emphasizing the desire, hope and the inevitability of a union as he mentions a "togetherness" for all Germans: "A previous chancellor, Willy Brandt, a prominent Social Democratic politician and previous mayor of West Berlin, phrased the quasi-biological slogan "What belongs together must grow together!" *("Es muss zusammenwachsen was zusammengehört")* (Sauter, 2007, 351).

However, the deep consequences which appeared after the fall of the Berlin Wall left a new political outlook for Germany, which was the empowerment of right-wing parties in recent German federal elections (Rädel, 2019). It may seem controversial to see such a political

outcome for a country like Germany, who fought for a social and political reunification through the power of the people, while registering at the same time a high percentage votes for the right-wing party *AfD*.

According to Rädel (2019, 31), the end of the GDR and its integration within the Federal republic of Germany was supposed to guarantee a new change for Germany, as well as new opportunities which would appear for its nation. It was approached by the author a term called "catch-up revolution", or in German *Nachholende Revolution.* This relevant term incorporates the idea of a warm rejoin and modernized process, especially for East Germany, since this event had to provide some harmony for those whose lives changed considerably and had to rebuild a new life after 1989: "The FRG with its democratic political institutions and well-functioning economy - incidentally, highly respected worldwide - served as a role model for model that had to be established in the former GDR. Accordingly, the philosopher Jürgen Habermas declared the peaceful revolution to be a catch-up revolution." (Rädel, 2019, 31).

Nevertheless, reunification can be a real motive after all these years for new political beliefs, which can have radical characteristics. The reunification process is a relevant theme for social scientists where they can observe and analyze the real implications left for society and economy, while right-wing parties must be brought into national debate at the same time (Rädel, 2019).

While former East German government disappeared, the FRG remained practically the same, in political terms, meaning that technically, only the GDR suffered the hard consequences of being eradicated politically (Rädel, 2019). Therefore, the indirect and subsequent idea which remained for outsiders, was that Western liberal politics extended irrefutably and firmly to East Germany, as Rädel mentions: "Newly united Germany thus mostly represents a continuation of the FRG's specifically western history, accompanied by the assumption that the eastern German federal states (..) would align themselves to the standards of West Germany through a process of modernization and democratization" (2019, 32).

This can mean that the political extension can be interpreted or associated as an indirect annexation of East Germany by West Germany. Some authors like Foroutan (2019) do compare this process of rejoining two Germanys as a dominance event of West Germany over East Germany, opening more space for a certain ignorance feeling against East Germans, especially against the ones who migrated to West Germany for better life conditions. Some may also say that this reunification can be compared to a colonization process inside the country: "In the rush

toward unification, this "third way" was forgotten, leaving some believing that the country had simply been colonized by the West." (Johnson, 2009, 129)

This turns the process as an unfair political event with different interpretations, where East Germans become the "victims" and "second class citizens" on West Germans vision, where they were excluded from this kind of society elite that prevailed in West Germany (Kollmorgen, 2015).

3.1. The price of integration: The fall of the GDR economy

Introducing the impacts of the economic reunification between the two Germanys, it was aimed that East Germany could be at the same level as the West, however there were still many factors and challenges to face by East Germany during this harsh process. The promises made to East Germany were not respected, and the region faced high unemployment levels and economic disparities especially after the currency exchange from the *Ostmark* to the *D-Mark.* Disparities have shown that the poor integration in the Western system has lasted many years since the fall of the wall in 1989 and brought many consequences to the region. Even though the *Treuhand* commission as well as Solidarity-pacts tried to minimize the impact of the GDR's collapse, it remained hard for the region to survive economically.

The liberal conductive wire which was supposed to guide a successful economic unification between the two Germanys, assumed an opposite direction. Initially, the conductive wire's purpose was to guarantee a positive economic progress, whose intention was East Germany to succeed at the same economic level as West Germany as Rädel mentions: " (...) the former politically socialist-authoritarian and economically centrally planned East Germany had to reach West German standards (...)" (2019, 31). However, East Germany ended up losing almost everything, becoming somehow marginalized by the revolution when comparing to West Germany: "(...) In the case of Germany, the western Federal Republic of Germany (...) ended up as the political and economic winner from the Cold War, while the eastern GDR disappeared as a result of the 1989 upheaval (...)" (Rädel, 2019,31).

Although Germany was officially assumed as a reunified country on the 3rd October 1990, the real negative consequences only started to appear a few years later.

According to Figure *2,* the year of 1994 can be considered as particularly hard for East Germany, where unemployment level's percentage reached 14,8%, while in 1990 the number was lower, by approximately only 2,7% (Rokicka et al., 2020). Furthermore, for the GDP per head in absolute terms, East Germany starts to converge largely from the West since 1991.

Nevertheless, from 1995 until 2017, GDP per head in absolute terms, started to grow again progressively but registered a big disadvantage beyond West:

Table 6.4. Economic conditions in Germany in euro

Year	GDP per head			Unemployment in %		
	West-Germany	East Germany		Year	West-Germany	East-Germany
	absolute	absolute	as % of West	1990	7.2	2.7
1991	22,687	7,342	32	1994	8.1	14.8
1995	25,206	14,626	58	1998	9.2	17.8
2000	27,959	16,785	60	2000	7.6	17.1
2005	30,226	19,155	63	2005	9.9	18.7
2010	34,059	22,532	66	2010	6.6	12
2015	39,187	26,829	68	2015	5.7	9.2
2017	41,659	28,343	68	2018	4.8	6.9

Sources: Federal Statistical Office, February 2017; www.statistik.arbeitsagentur.de (accessed: 12.12.2018); Federal Ministry for Economy Affairs and Energy 2018.

Figure 2- Economic conditions in Germany in euro.

(source: Rokicka et al., 2020).

The unemployment percentage may be seen as something disturbing to interpretate when considering its old numbers in 1990. Until 1990, GDR had never lived such a mass unemployment, since the Socialist system was in charge on attributing a job for everyone since everyone had the duty of working while belonging to the Communist regime: "Until 1990, people in the GDR's grasp were at the mercy of arrangements for the distribution of work, so naturally, there was no such thing as unemployment." (Huang, 2023, 178).

Schweiger (2019) points out that the change currency of the *Ostmark* (Eastern currency) to the *D-Mark* (Western currency) was one of the main causes which opened a large discrepancy value between the two Germanys, where Helmut Kohl promised East Germans about the long-term advantages and necessity of a new common currency. However, simultaneously preserving his position to be elected as Federal Chancellor of Germany again: "The decision of Kohl government to exchange all wags in East Germany 1:1 into D Marks was hence predominantly (...) motivated and reflected a sense of urgency. It mainly originated from Kohl's desire to fulfill his election promise to East Germans to bring D Mark to them and his desire to bring a certain amount of stability to the faltering GDR." (Schweiger 2019, 20).

Such large economic disparities between East and West may have come also from the lack of economic inclusion, where East Germany was not able to integrate herself along with the Western German market economy (Schweiger, 2019). For this reason and according to

Schweiger, it was implemented the solution of *Treuhand* commission: "The precondition for including East Germany in the structures of the West German social market economy was the fundamental restructuring of the East German planned economy. Kohl pursued this by installing the *Treuhand* commission, which was delegated to assess the competitiveness of existing firms in East Germany and to assist them in restructuring themselves to be able to withstand free market competition." (2019, 20).

The *Treuhand* commission:

The *Treuhand* commission aimed to establish a softer transition from East German to a market economy, however it became controversial of its operational characteristics. The mass privatizations policies led to many structural problems like unemployment, poverty, collapse of local industries as well as to a symbolizing broken promises for many East Germans who hoped to have a greater economic future.

The *Treuhand* commission was created by East Germany and implemented in 1990. with all good intentions to sustain and minimize the economic impacts. However, with simultaneous operational influence from the Western federal government (Czada, 1994). This commission appears as an institution with a polemic background, which relies on the fact that it was controlled by Western government and not only by Eastern government: "Through its rigid and centrally organized privatization agenda, which failed to combine the restructuring of East German industry (...), the *Treuhand* contributed to the perception that the east is essentially governed by West Germans." (Schweiger, 2019, 22-23). Therefore, it is possible to admit that the East was not exactly integrated by West Germany but appropriated in these political and economic terms.

This commission served as an economic institution which oversaw restructuring a new economic plan for East Germany (Schweiger, 2019). According to Czada (1994), the institution possessed two main roles, where the first one relied on the municipality of investment distribution, while the second role relied on the mediation of political interests through this economic transformation. It is possible to reflect according to the discussion made by the author, that this process gave rise to internal misunderstandings between the Federal government and each state government.

Treuhand brought many issues to be answered, where investigators and economists started to wonder until what point does it represent a trustable economic institution inside this new united Federal Germany as Czada argues: "(...) *wirt die Frage auf, inwieweit sie einen*

Fremdkörper im Regierungssystem der Bundesrepublik darstelle (...) ("(...) it raises the question of to what extent it represents a foreign body in the government system of the Federal Republic(...)") (1994, 1). The implementation of the institution created as well some tension, since the whole process had to be strictly controlled by the federal government. Therefore, the *Treuhand* project had short maneuver space to interact with possible *Aufbau-Ost* (economic agents who would reconstruct East Germany's economy) (Czada, 1994).

Helmut Kohl hopped strongly for a fast and easy political transition process, encouraging the federal government's autonomy to solve the problem only by himself: "(...) Chancellor Kohl declared that all the costs could be paid by pocket money and soon East Germany would be a flourishing region in three to four years (...) (Rokicka et al., 2020, 111). Nevertheless, *Treuhaund* failed to accomplish the introduction of the eastern economy into the Western competitive European market (Schweiger, 2019). The accomplishment failure gave obviously rise to negative consequences such as poverty, unemployment, privatizations, and corruption cases (Rokicka et al., 2020). East Germany accounted as well not only for the loss of traditional industry, but also for local jobs, which caused a lack of investment on Eastern companies where they ended up declaring bankruptcy, since they were not competitive enough to run along with other companies: "In contrast to the initial assessment the Kohl government had received from economic experts, most eastern companies were unfit for liberal market competition." (Schweiger, 2019, 20-21).

Böick reveals a controversial and polemic aspect on the *Treuhand* as a bank, which is related as a bad memory for East Germans, especially for the generations who were older than forty years of age: " (...) the Treuhandanstalt seems to work like an emotional "bad bank" for many East Germans who are older than forty or so years of age." (2020, 144). In this sense, the *Treuhand* was not a discussable and known topic for younger German generations for obvious reasons. However, what is significant on these terms, is that the *Treuhand* belonged somehow as a symbol for lost hope and disappointment: "The notorious *Treuhand* serves as an important symbol for broken promises and disappointed hopes that many Easterners held dear in 1989-1990 (...)." (Böick, 2020, 144).

The *Solidarparkte*:

Germany's reunification caused severe economic challenges especially for the East. Since *Treuhand* commission did not guarantee a stable and hopeful future for East Germany, the

Federal government approved a stronger and solid economic plan which were the Solidarity pacts I and II. Both with different goals and rules, however with the same intention: to modernize and invest in East Germany. These economic pacts had short-term success, but many other long-term consequences remained.

It is relevant to understand that this economic plan was provided intentionally from West Germany to the East, in 1993. The plan called *Solidarpakt I* "Solidarity-Pact I", served as monetary fund support, whose role started in 1995 and finished in 2004 (Rokicka et al., 2020). The first pact incorporated about 94,5€ bn, whose intention was to guarantee infrastructures modernization, restore buildings and solve ecological problems. Even though the first economic plan was structurally well organized and politically promising, unemployment numbers remained very high as well as poverty indicators.

As a result, it was clear for the German government that a second "Solidarity-Pact" should be introduced to reinforce East Germany's economical essence and not letting her fall alone (Rokicka et al., 2020). The *Solidarpakt II* started in 2001, incorporating this time a higher monetary fund around 156,5 bn €. The second pacts investment would reduce the structural inequalities between East and West Germany and would be controlled as well by the *FAG* (Ragnitz, 2005).

It was estimated that the second pact's improvement would improve as well as infrastructures which do already exist such as railroads, railways and communication systems (Rokicka et al., 2020). In addition, this second pact's role was investing as well in a legal public administration system dominated by Western laws, which is a relevant and controversial aspect for the Eastern region beyond the reunification process. In total, it was estimated that Western monetary investment in the East could be presumed between 1.3€ trillion and 2.0€ trillion, a very high number and cost for one single country. According to Ragnitz (2005), the funds from this second pact were not used correctly, and most of them were used to pay other expenses. Therefore, the management of this second pact was a failure.

A relevant fact is that the region of Saxony is the only one where all the *SFG* funds were applied efficiently, while other former GDR states did not pursue all the guidelines as Ragnitz argues: "- *hat nach den Berechnungen des IWH wie in den Vorjahren nur der Freistaat Sachsen die Vorgaben des SFG erfüllen können (...)*" ("according to the accountability IWH through the years, only the free state of Saxony accomplished the SFG guidelines (...)") (2005, 288).

On top of that, the European Union used its strength between 2000 and 2006 by introducing subsidies and regional aid around 23€ bn. for Eastern states (Rokicka et al., 2020). Meanwhile,

in 2015, the fund increased to 43€ bn. The second pact ended late in 2019, and even though there was a continuation of financial aid from the West to the East, most politicians decided resolutely there should be no more financial aid. Germany crossed all the limits of public debt put by the Euro-Zone. Therefore, Germany started a new structure for a balanced budget in 2020, this means that there would be no more borrowing for the East, as well as any other financial aid program (Rokicka et al., 2020).

On the other hand, it seems that not everything about the second pact can be badly preconceived when it comes to its operational mistakes. For some authors as Haseloff et al., do in fact defend that even though the pact did not sustain and provide too many solutions to East Germany's hard necessities, the second pact's implementation and the help of external institutions, saved somehow Eastern degraded and collapsed economy: "*Es wird sicherlich niemand abstreiten, dass es ohne die Unterstützung der Länder, des Bundes sowie der Europäischen Union (...) nicht möglich gewesen wäre, eine im Wesentlichen marode und am Boden liegende Wirtschaft wieder aufzubauen*" ("Surely no one would deny that, without of the federal states, the federal government, and the European Union (...), it would not have been possible to rebuild an essentially ailing and collapsed economy") (2015, 3).

In addition, for these authors, East Germany's reindustrialization was a successful case, and unemployment was reduced which subsequently attracted more citizens to East Germany, promoting greater regional dynamism: "*Die Reindustrialisierung ist gelungen (...) die Arbeitslosigkeit hat sich in weiten Teilen Ostdeutschlands halbiert, und es ziehen mittlerweile wieder mehr Menschen nach Ostdeutschland als fortziehen.*" ("Reindustrialisation has been successful (...) unemployment has been halved in large parts of East Germany, and nowadays more people are moving to East Germany than leaving it") (2015, 1).

It may be particularly significant to reflect on these terms, since this is a positive approach on the economic management done on East Germany, however it may be relevant to understand also that there can be many regional and political interests since some of these authors Haseloff et al., (2015) are economists and workers on Eastern universities while others do perform in Western universities and do belong to some moderate parties like the *CDU.*

Figure *3* below shows how different states reached different numbers and different goals throughout the years and could have caused indeed particular issues between them:

Table 6.7. Risk of Poverty in % 2010 and 2017 (measured by federal median)

WEST	2010	2017	EAST	2010	2017
Baden-Wurttemberg	11.0	12.1	Brandenburg	16.3	15.0
Bavaria	10.8	12.1	Thuringia	17.6	16.3
Hamburg	13.3	14.7	Saxony	19.4	16.8
Hesse	12.1	15.4	Berlin	19.2	19.2
Schleswig-Holstein	13.8	14.8	Saxony-Anhalt	19.8	21.0
Rhineland-Palatinate	14.8	15.6	Mecklenburg-W.	22.4	19.4
Lower Saxony	15.3	16.7	**West Germany** East Germany	13.3 19.0	15.3 17.8
Saarland	14.3	16.8			
North Rhine-Westphalia	15.4	18.7			
Bremen	21.1	23.0			

Source: Federal Statistical Yearbook 2012: 179; 2019: 190.

Figure 3- Risk of Poverty in % 2010 and 2017.

(Source: Rokicka et al., 2020).

For East Germany, for instance, the poverty risk percentage between 2010 and 2017 is different in each state. For the capital city Berlin, poverty risk remained the same as in 2010, without any changes. However, for Saxony-Anhalt the poverty risk became higher, registering 21.0% in 2017, while in 2010 it registered 19,8%. On the other hand, Saxony registers a decrease from 19.4% to 16.8%, which is a considerable number. In addition, for Mecklenburg the risk of poverty also decreased at a very relevant scale from 22,4% to 19,4%. Even though the numbers in general for East Germany seem to impress, it is significant to consider the unemployment rate was still very high, depopulation levels and lack of workforces were aspects that remained in the region (Rokicka et al., 2020).

On the other hand, a curious and visible fact on the table provided by the authors is the increase of poverty risk in all Western states (Rokicka et al., 2020). States such as Hesse, Saarland and North Rhine-Westphalia are some of the regions where the risk increase reached considerable numbers. Having said that, it would be significant to mention as well, the city-state of Bremen which in 2010 was already registering one of the highest poverty risk percentages of 21.1%. Even though Bremen has a strategic location path when it comes to commercial ports and shipbuilding industry, the city's numbers fall apart when it comes to the increase percentage of 1,9%, almost 2%. It is a considerable number for a city-state which could benefit from its own powerful resource of access to the North-sea, especially for commercial trade. According to the authors, until today, Bremen faces challenges related to risk of poverty, mass unemployment, as well as a monetary deficit with naval industry (Rokicka et al., 2020). Even though East Germany is known through many arguments and academic researchers as a

region that struggled the most during and even after the reunification process, West Germany became the region where poverty risk is higher by registering an increase from 13.3% to 15,3%.

Nevertheless, for East Germany, the unemployment was still a big problem to solve, as well as the loss of a highly qualified workforce. It was estimated that between 1991 and 2010, about 3 million inhabitants of the total 17 million, left East Germany to search for better life conditions, as well as searching for higher salaries in the West (Rokicka et al., 2020). As a result, the internal exodus caused a principal worry of lack of qualified workforces for services like health care, and if we presume carefully, we can also claim that at the same time the lack of younger generations for certain job positions will affect certain society's sectors (Rokicka et al., 2020).

Even though poverty risk decreased in almost all Eastern states, the aftermath consequences turned out to be more serious than expected. According to the authors, most of the improvements only happened in the first 3 years of each economic pact's introduction (Rokicka et al., 2020). Moreover, Ragnitz (2005) mentioned that the monetary deficit could be extremely difficult to erase until 2019, for this reason, there is also some doubt about the efficiency of the pacts on concluding goals until a certain term.

The whole process of attempting an economic recovery can be considered a big structural failure coming from the mistaken decisions taken during the reunification process. Some authors do agree that these pacts had a short but in fact positive impact, while others do presume them as an unfinished project from the federal government.

Consequently, this leaves nothing more than a resentment feeling of being left outside alone and not trusting a democratic system anymore (Rokicka et al., 2020).

3.2 *Ostalgie* and resentment: The lasting effects of German reunification

The reunification was mostly challenging for many East Germans, who despite the state police *Stasi* repression, hoped for security and for some social benefits previously provided by the socialist regime. There is a nostalgic sentiment of the former East Germany, which Johnson (2009) reveals as O*stalgie.* The sentiment of missing a different social life pattern which belongs to the past may result in the rise of parties like the *AfD,* reflecting a lasting frustration towards the Western system.

It may be curious to think nowadays that some of the Eastern citizens would in fact prefer to live again under Socialism for many reasons, although they were fully controlled and repressed by the *Stasi* until every last second before the fall of the Berlin wall. Only after the

fall of the wall, *Stasi* actions became public for open discussion and for public knowledge according to Johnson: "East Germans had been fearful of the government's secret force and were aware they were spied on, but only after the GDR ceased to exist did the extent of the spying became public (...)." (2009, 130).

However, these actions were and will always be associated only as part of East Germany's history, causing indirectly a sense of humiliation and disruption for national cohesion. It seems that there is as a short consideration on East Germany's political communist background given the repressive years that the country lived in, where this communist regime was the only political form that East Germans knew almost their entire life (Johnson, 2009).

According to Johnson (2009), for a certain part of the nation to face a transition from old Socialism to a new democracy can be a hard process full of consequences. However, it may not be discussed enough about the fact that Socialism was the only political form known by the population in economic and social terms, mainly for employment and the promotion of social state programs: "They did not have luxuries but they had important things those in the West did not, and "the newfound East German *Ostalgie* toward a fallen world (was) based on socialist security and full employment, communal solidarity and progressive welfare programs." (Johnson, 2009, 131). For the old GDR, security and equality were aspects that were implicit not only on a daily basis perspective, but also on the GDR's ideals, and maybe, West Germany did not promise those same values so strongly.

A particularly relevant argument used in these terms is the term and characteristics of "homogeneity" that the GDR provided during her existence, where there was no mass immigration that east Germans had to face, while West Germany was having a culturally diversified society between the 1970's and the 1980's (Tim Brinkhof, November 14, 2024, in *New Lines Magazine*).

It is possible to consider that socialism somehow weighed heavily on East Germans hearts for many years, even though social repression was felt every day: "It was not long after this great change, known as *Wende,* and unification, then, that the people of the now defunct East Germany began to look back at their lost country with a sense of longing." (Johnson, 2009, 31). The word *Wende* will be extremely relevant to investigate the *AfD*'s electoral success through the revolution of 1989 in the fourth chapter of this thesis,

There was obviously no other option for East Germans than accepting a national reunification and fortunately, it was an option which gave them freedom and a new life. In addition, East Germany was the first East European country to join the European Economic

community after 1989 (Aron, 2023). However, the desire, which remained some time before the fall of the Berlin wall, was the desire for a hybrid capitalist and socialist system during the protests in Leipzig: "The protesters wanted more freedom but did not want to abandon socialism altogether. They had hoped for a democratic socialist society, a hybrid of capitalism and socialism" (Johnson, 2009, 129). In other words, the population desired a healthier and liberal Socialist system for their lives.

This desire for a hybrid socialist system is a peculiar theme which does not seem to be enough discussed in today's European society, because returning to a Communist-Socialist regime would never be an option again for East Germany, considering it all the ethical and liberal point of views, according to the European Union freedom values. However, it is relevant to reflect on how this new hybrid political form would eventually work, because in fact nowadays no one could have any clue about this issue. What we can presume is that for this new hybrid socialist system, the *Stasi* would be eradicated, while other daily state programs would remain for basis functionality.

The *AfD*'s rise and empowerment throughout these recent years in the East, may come as a response to this political crisis, and secretly, by this past desire. The high votes number may come as a protest towards the Western government, which are the perfect combination for the party's growth as Yoder describes: "The newspaper characterized the *AfD* vote as an expression of protest, frustration and disillusionment with the West German dominated system that undervalues eastern Germans and even neglects them." (2020, 35).

3.3 Colonized by their own: conflicts on managing two types of Germans on their common homeland

The perception of a "colonial-like" dominance by West Germany, combined with the lack of recognition for East German experiences and contributions, created tensions that still shape political and social dynamics today. Even Helmut Kohl tried to avoid a confederal association as a transitional model for German reunification model, reflecting the extent of separation between the two German regions.

Mushaben (2019) suggests that there is a large divergence between national history narrated in the East and the history narrated in the West, leaving an identitarian crisis. In addition, Harrison comes along with a relevant idea, even after rebuilding the country after the fall of the wall, there was a certain kind of an "insignificant past" sentiment from West Germans when it comes to the existence of a wall which separated one single nation: "Yet, most Germans,

including politicians, had little to no interest in the Wall, viewing it solely as something in the past". (2011, 79).

East Germans suffered particularly deep from the consequences left by the Berlin wall, since it represented decades of living under a repressive Communist Dictatorship that restricted their individual freedoms, and separated them from friends and family members who remained in West Germany. However, after the reunification, the history reflection was primarily focused only on the legacy of the Holocaust and the existence of Nazism, while the memory of the repression experienced in the East with the *Stasi,* has been kind of sidelined (Harrison, 2011).

According to Harrison, when West Germany was working on its own past, it was mainly related to the Nazi period and the Holocaust, forgetting shortly about the existence of the GDR after the territorial division of Germany in 1945: "For many people in western Germany, the main focus on working through the German past has been the Nazi period and the Holocaust. They thus reacted very defensively to the notion that attention and resources should be devoted to another difficult aspect of German history- that of the communist East German regime and its Berlin Wall." (2011, 81). Johnson suggests as well about West Germans effort on working only on their Nazi past: "West Germans, however, made a concentrated effort to deal with their Nazi past" (2009, 130). Therefore, this interferes with the country's unity and reunification spirit, given the peaceful revolution of 1989 (Harrison, 2011). On the other hand, for the history professor Alan McDougall, former East Germany perceived the existence of Nazism as an event which had to be treated as strictly independent from the Socialist regime, considering it as something "external": "Alan McDougall (...) tells *New Lines* that the East German regime always treated the country's shared fascist past as "something externalized and separate from the socialist state they had built." (Brinkhof, 2024). This argument leaves us with the intention that the two Germanys may present complexities and gaps, when it comes to managing their own common past as one single country. The West does not recognize entirely East Germany's past repressive regime, and East Germany does not perceive Nazism as a part of their common history.

Many years after the reunification, East Germans tend to compare their social identity to West Germans, as Vees-Gulani argues: "Even after 30 years later, Eastern German *AfD* voters define their social identity in comparison to Western Germans." (2021, 59). There might be as well a lack of attention on East Germans political concerns through the traditional party system of the Federal government. For this reason, the support on the *AfD* may be a comfort zone for the ones who feel marginalized by others who belong to the same nation: "Politically, they

judge the traditional party system in Germany as neglecting Eastern Germans concerns and see the newly founded *AfD*'s lack of political history as an advantage despite its Western German origins. East German AfD voters now consider it a "party of the East" (...)". (Vees-Gulani, 2021, 59). Celine Schmock (September 24, 2024, in *NDR*) reveals a relevant word *Gelassenheit* ("serenity") when it comes to accept that East Germany is indeed a very different region when we consider its citizens political and social behaviors on this new reunified Federal Germany. The region may be different in many aspects when it comes to federal elections and social issues: "*Manchmal denke ich, wir bräuchten auch ein bisschen mehr Gelassenheit, dass der Osten eben anders ist, kulturell, mentalitätsmässig* (...)" ("Sometimes I think we also need a bit more calmness and acceptance that the East is simply different — culturally and in terms of mentality") (Celine Schmock, September 24, in *NDR*).

What the author considers to be pertinent is to accept all differences by not trying to forcibly extend largely certain policies and values, although it was similarly implemented that way after the revolution of 1989. However, the argumentation of Celine Schmock (September 24, 2024, *NDR*) left some gaps when it comes to the basis of the reunification, mainly when considering if either there should be a large acceptance of social and cultural differences, or if the political and cultural extension after the reunification was in fact legitimate. Not only Celine Schmock (September 24, 2024, in *NDR*), but Tim Brinkhof (November 14, 2024, in *New Lines Magazine*) appealed as well that West Germans tend to look at their compatriots as different, especially when it comes to their radical political vote tendencies. Without realizing it, it is already creating some complex forms of superiority and inferiority between the two Germans which co-exist in Germany.

According to Langenbacher, East Germany is the biggest loser on a social level, where he suggests it as a problem of "inner unity" (2019,1). Social groups as children, Women and intellectuals, were the ones who suffered the most in social terms inside their own country after the reunification: "Initially, the big losers from reunification were eastern dissidents, intellectuals, and women." (Langenbacher, 2019, 2). These social groups mentioned previously are the ones who according to the author were doing poorly, especially Women who were fully employed on the GDR and had access to childcare and abortion. This leaves us with the idea that these social groups from the former East Germany who were having a reasonable life, do belong now as an insignificant group in society, whose role in society before the fall of wall was valuable.

Minkenberg already on that time suggested that a considerable large number of East Germans felt being somehow dominated by West Germans, claiming indirectly that there was a kind of a colonial expansion challenge inside Germany after 1989: "Large majorities in the East (between 60 and 90 percent) expressed resentment about the West Germans' "colonial conquest" behavior in the East (...)" (1993, 64). While Minkenberg (1993) reflects about a kind of a hidden political practice such as "internal colonialism", Schweiger (2019) argues about the possibility of Germany almost becoming a confederation association, where Helmut Kohl had some initial doubts about it and made a hard effort to avoid it at all costs. Any type of confederation in Germany could cause many social and economic problems inside the country: "Kohl had initially proceeded carefully and proposed a ten-point plan towards creating a confederal association between the West German Federal Republic and the GDR on 28 November 1989" (Schweiger, 2019, 20).

3.4 Reunification discontents: understanding the *AfD's* regional stronghold

Since Germany's reunification in 1990, the country's political landscape has been facing profound changes, especially in the East. Initially, moderate parties like the *CDU* dominated Eastern regions. However, gradually Eastern regions decided new political options, the *AfD*. This chapter reflects how frustrations and concerns specially in the state of Saxony as a key example, where economic uncertainty and cultural pride have contributed for the support of the party.

Federal elections 1990:

When the reunification process started in 1990, the main parties which had large preference from East Germans, were in fact moderate parties such as the *CDU* and *SPD* since Eastern political elites did not have developed enough in order to receive support from their Eastern population: "The deeply institutionalized parties of West Germany became the most successful in the East, and local political elites did not develop." (Aron, 2023, 108). Figure *4* suggests the political perspective on a federal level, where the *CDU* and *SPD* (grey and red color respectively) do domain East Germans preferences, considering that in this year the *AfD* party did not exist yet in the German political sphere:
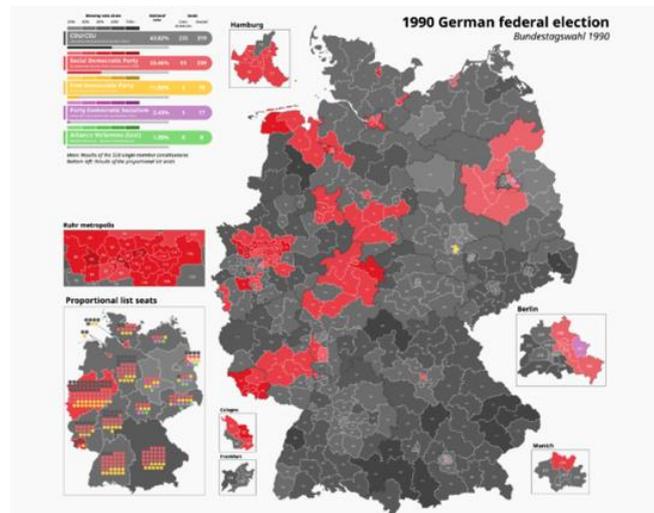
Figure 4- Results of German federal elections 1990.

(source: https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/1990_German_federal_election).

Federal elections 2017:

27 years later, in 2013, the situation gained a different political view. The *AfD* entered the German political spectrum, but only in the federal elections of 2017 the party started to gain recognition in the country. Representatives of the *CDU* and *SPD* have not been conceived as trustable political figures in East Germany, since they have been associated with negative perceptions such as the lack of political empathy and lack of efficiency (Celine Schmock, September 24, 2024, in *NDR*). Figure *5* shows how the political phenomenon of the *AfD* started to gain fertile ground:
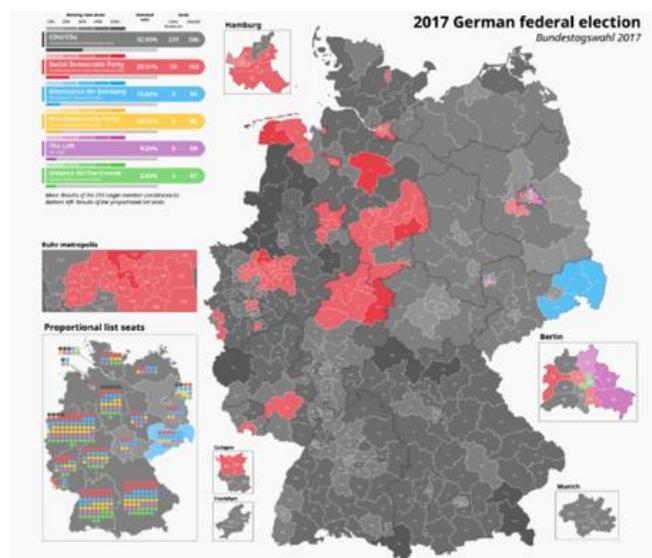

Figure 5- Results of German federal elections 2017.

The relevance of the area that the *AfD* reached in 2017 (blue color) might be the beginning of a gradual existing frustration, especially because the area marked with blue color refers to the state of Saxony, more precisely the region of Dresden. According to Vees-Gulani (2021), Dresden is a symbolic city for its successful case of post-reunification. The city revealed a low unemployment rate, a stable economy, mass tourism and flexible attraction for new tech companies. An important factor which is also revealed is that the state of Saxony has a very conservative middle-class population. This middle-class voted for the *CDU* for two long decades since 1990, but in 2004, the party started to lose Dresden's citizen's confidence. In 2019, the *AfD* registered 27,5 percent of votes in state elections, becoming the second strongest party in Saxony Parliament, behind the CDU. The author argues that this phenomenon is not unique to Germany, since it reflects this idea of the "political landscape of postindustrialism" (Vees-Gulani, 2021, 58).

However, the city's past may reveal some other aspects which seem to be hidden, like the fact that the city was one of the most destructed by war forces: "Since World War II, its reputation has come to include the city as an international memorial to the destructive forces of war." (Vees-Gulani, 2021, 56). The historical context of Dresden may help to explain some of the initial support for the *AfD* in the party's political action, since Dresden's history seems to be very "particular" as the author explains. This "particularity" seems to raise some identitarian fears when it comes to the essence on what it means to be a German in its own homeland, because Dresden's ground is fertile for the increase of populism and nativism: "In turn, gives Dresden's international reputation, it leads to increased regional, national and international attention for populist and nativist causes." (Vees-Gulani, 2021, 57). Not only for the cause of Nativism and Populism, but the city of Dresden resurges a very important aspect, which is regional pride, in this case, Saxony's pride. According to a survey done in 2016, (considering one year before the federal elections of 2017) 82,5 percent of participants mentioned being proud belonging to Saxony (Vees-Gulani, 2021).

It would be significant to investigate further the example of Saxony's social perception numbers in the same year of 2016. Therefore, is possible to present a formal report of social perceptions from *Sachsen-Monitor 2016* on Figure 6:

Nun lese ich Ihnen einige mögliche negative Aussagen über die Zukunft vor. Sagen Sie mir bitte jeweils, ob Sie sich deswegen sehr große, eher große, eher geringe oder keine Sorgen machen? Machen Sie sich Sorgen,...

Abbildung 4 – Zukunftssorgen

Figure 6-Zukunftssorgen ("Worries about the future").

(source: https://www.staatsregierung.sachsen.de/download/staatsregierung/Ergebnisbericht_Sachsen-Monitor_2016.pdf).

One of the many principal ideas that the social research tried to understand by the *Sachsen-Monitor 2016* is related to Germany's future perspective: "*Nun lese ich Ihnen einige mögliche negative Aussagen über die Zukunft vor. Sagen Sie mir bitte jeweils, ob Sie sich deswegen sehr grösse, eher grösse, eher geringe oder keine Sorgen machen? Machen Sie sich Sorgen,...*" ("Now I will read you some possible negative statements about the future. Please tell me, for each one, whether you are very concerned, rather concerned, slightly concerned, or not concerned at all,..."). Considering that dark blue and blue color stand for votes related to "having many concerns" and "having concerns" respectively, while grey and dark grey stand for "not having many concerns" and "not having any concerns".

The second subsequent idea marked in black circle: " *(...) dass der gesellschaftliche Zusammenhalt verloren geht."* ("(...) that social cohesion will be lost") was already largely voted in 2016, by the total of 72% (27%+45%) by higher concerns and having concerns respectively. On the other hand, less concerns and no concerns are voted on a smaller scale by the total of 26% (21%+5%) respectively. This has shown that citizens in general might have been already worried before the elections of 2017 about the essence of union and the idea of a "togetherness".

The fourth subsequent idea marked in black circle: (...) *dass die deutsche Kultur und Eigenart verloren geht.*" ("that German culture and identity will be lost") register very similar and closed numbers between the total of the ones who do have concerns by the total of 51% (20%+31%), and the ones who do not have in total 48% (30%+18%) respectively. Numbers

seem to be challenging and surprising, where the population is divided by different social aspects, where the idea of union seems to be more pertinent for citizens rather than the idea of individual identity which seems a curious fact.

Following another aspect which co-relates with the information provided previously, Figure 7 suggests:
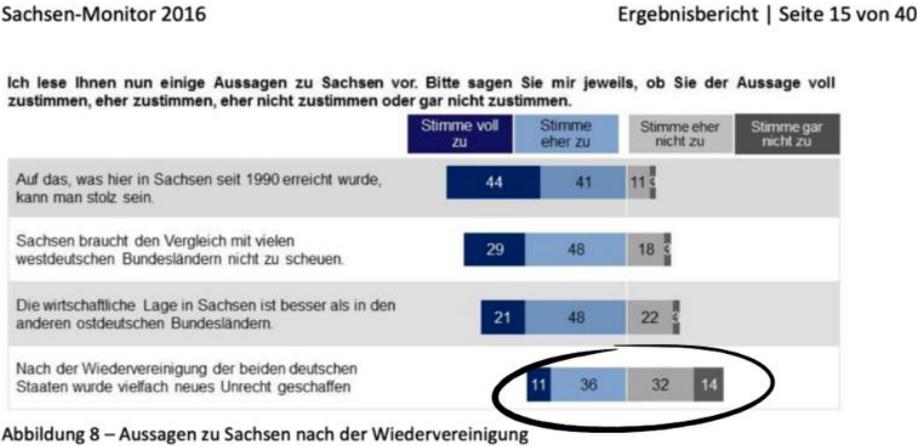

Figure 7- Aussagen zu Sachsen nach der Wiedervereinigung (“Opinions of Saxony on the reunification”).

(source: https://www.staatsregierung.sachsen.de/download/staatsregierung/Ergebnisbericht_Sachsen-Monitor_2016.pdf).

The fourth subsequent point of the table "*Nach der Wiedervereinigung der beiden deutschen Staaten wurde vielfach neues Unrecht geschafften*" ("After the reunification of the two German states, much new injustice was created") can be considered as critical on voting terms, where the numbers of those who tend to strongly agree and agree on that point (considering dark blue and blue color respectively) do reveal 47% in total (36%+11%), while others who tend to agree shortly and the ones who do not agree registers 46% (32%+14%). Numbers are extremely close to each other, where two opposite stable opinions domain some of this *Sachsen-Monitor 2016* research.

Federal elections 2025:

According to Gerhard Marchl (March 20, 2025, in *Karl-Renner-Institut*), German federal elections in February 2025, were without any doubt, the most polemic elections that Germany has ever experienced since the end of the Second World War. While in 2021, the votes in the East for the *AfD* relied on the 20%, in 2025, votes went higher up to almost 50%. It is clear in

every sense that East Germany has a strong tendency for radicalism and votes differently from their Western counterparts without any doubt (Jürgen Kaube, October 2, 2024, in *Deutschlandfunk*).

The *AfD* became this way the second strongest political force within the country as Figure *8* below suggests:
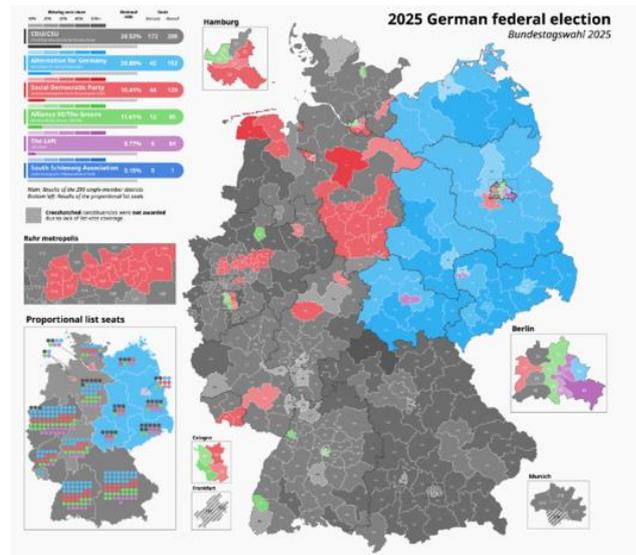

Figure 8- Results of German federal elections 2025.

(source:https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elei%C3%A7%C3%A3o_federal_na_Alemanha_em_2025).

According to Jürgen Kaube (October 2, 2024, Deutschlandfunk), Eastern states such as Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia are regions where the political vote has turned into a protest vote. Citizens want their convictions to be respected, regardless of what they may be. In these terms, East Germany is losing its essence when it comes to values related to democratic progression and liberalism. The author points out that, although the *AfD* is an anti-establishment party, it is free to be voted for in federal elections, as Germany is a democratic system.

According to Tim Brinkhof (November 14, 2024, New Lines Magazine), the historical background of certain Eastern regions provides fertile ground for the growth of certain parties. Moreover, the areas where the *AfD* has achieved its greatest success largely aligns with regions where most Eastern citizens migrated to West Germany. It is also worth noting that former East Germany, once portrayed as a strong and wealthy region within the former Soviet Union, has, become the poorest region of the today's Federal Republic of Germany.

To add more results about the *Sachsen-Monitor,* but this time, from 2023 (two years before the federal elections of 2025), it was researched and questioned pertinent subsequent ideas

similar to the report done in 2016. In 2016, concern numbers about the future in Saxony were very high by 72% (according to Figure *6*).

As Figure *9* suggests, one of the many principal ideas that the social research tried to understand through the *Sachsen-Monitor 2023* is related once again to Saxony's future perspective: *"Und wie ist das mit Sachsen: Sehen Sie der Zukunft Sachsens eher optimistisch oder eher pessimistisch entgegen?"* ("And what about Saxony: Do you view the future of Saxony more optimistically or more pessimistically?"). The ones who tend to be more pessimistic (regarding grey color) gained 8 percentage points than the report done in the two previous years, and the ones who are more optimistic with their future (regarding blue color) lost 8 percentage points than the previous year. The group ages which do show more optimism are the younger groups between 30-44 years and 45-59 years:

Figure 9- Zukunftserwartungen für Sachsen ("Future expectations for Saxony").

(source: https://www.staatsregierung.sachsen.de/download/dimap-Ergebnisbericht-Sachsen-Monitor-2023.pdf)

A pertinent consideration which is unavoidable to reflect is pessimism lived on East Germany. The lower emotional mental level is bringing citizens to vote as a protest their life conditions in Saxony. On the other hand, what seems to be even more curious and pertinent in this *Sachsen-Monitor 2023* research is by showing the age groups voting section, which is the younger age group between 18-29 years who voted less on optimistic terms for their future in Saxony. According to Celine Schmock (September 24, 2024, in *NDR*) younger East Germans are more connected to their cultural roots than their Western counterparts, and this lead as well a question if in fact the problem lies solely on how younger East Germans perceive their lives

in an isolated manner. In this sense, it would be relevant to remember what Elias (1996) suggested on the first chapter about sociological perspectives on how younger generations are so relevant for the implementation and resurgence of a new German culture which should be pleasurable.

As for Figure *10,* the other question done (similarly as in 2016): *"Und nu einige Fragen zu den Jahren nach der Friedlichen Revolution: Würden Sie sagen, dass in Deutschland genug über die Umbrüche und Erfahrungen in der Zeit nach der Wiedervereinigung gesprochen wird?"* ("And now some questions about the years following the Peaceful Revolution: Would you say that enough is being said in Germany about the changes and experiences in the period after reunification?"). The ones who support most the idea that the reunification it is not spoken about much (revealed in grey color), represent a high number of 54%, while the ones who think that reunification is spoken enough, registers 43%. The numbers do not diverge much from each other, however, a relevant factor is the age group who tends to support the most the idea that the reunification is not spoken much about, relies between the youngest age group (18-29 years) and the oldest age group (70 years and more).

Abbildung 7 – Gesprächsthema Friedliche Revolution

Figure 10- Gesprächsthema Friedliche Revolution ("talking theme on the peaceful revolution").

(source: https://www.staatsregierung.sachsen.de/download/dimap-Ergebnisbericht-Sachsen-Monitor-2023.pdf).

3.4.1 Democracy as an illusion: historical roots and false deliberative participation hope

German reunification political basis remains as an event which contributed for the democratic distrust felt by Eastern States. Despite the higher expectations of 1989, many Eastern states felt excluded from their political participation by the abandonment of the *Rund Tische* or "round-

tables" project which were an option for potential negotiations between East and West Germany for a fair political transition between the two Germanys (Ute Scheub, April 23, 2024, in *Taz*).

According to Aron, East Germany became a "idiosyncratic pre-communist history" case, where the region adopts easily habits of voting on right-wing parties in a very high scale since the fall of the Berlin wall: "Considering the unique process of its democratic transition even within the region, and its idiosyncratic pre-communist history (...)" (2023, 108). The author helps to explain how history creates fertile ground whenever there is a political transition to be faced. Vestiges from the old Communist Regime, along with the hard and transitional political process of diving into a democracy, are firm and solid combinations which give rise to polarizations, namely, right-wing, as explained on Figure *11:*

Old communist regime **+** Transitional political proccess ⟶ Gave rise to polarizations, namely populism
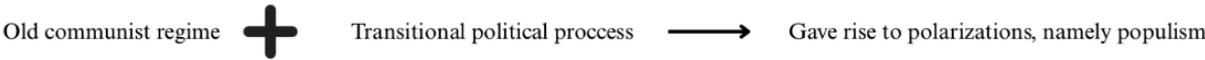
Figure 11- Argument table made by the student based on Aron (2023).

Ute Scheub (April 23, 2024, in *Taz*) reveals a pertinent factor which seems to be hidden from public speech which may have contributed to the expansion of the *AfD* in the East. In the beginning of the reunification process in Germany, East Germans delegates, and those who belonged to civic and democratic movements made part of the so-called *Runde Tische* or "round tables" of the GDR. They were highly involved on the idea that they could discuss and debate along with West Germans a new proposal for a new German constitution after the reunification.

This proposal had the main intention to create more flexibility and more political representation in this new country born after 1989, considering that the national constitution had to be somehow reformed. Nevertheless, the situation had a different result, where most of West Germans ignored the round table project, and Helmut Kohl proceeded with the plan on extending the previous German national constitution *Grundgesetz* as the only actual existing German constitution: *"Wäre das als neue gemeinsame Verfassung beider „Deutschländer" verabschiedet worden, dann hätten die Ostdeutschen in der Wendezeit eine stärkere Verhandlungsposition gehabt und wir heute wohl viele Probleme weniger. Doch der damalige Bundeskanzler Helmut Kohl und seine CDU waren nicht daran interessiert. Sie wollten die schnelle umfassende Machtübernahme."* ("If that had been adopted as the new joint constitution of both 'Germanies', then East Germans would have had a stronger negotiating

position during the time of reunification, and we would likely have far fewer problems today. But the then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl and his CDU were not interested. They wanted a quick and complete takeover of power.") (Ute Scheub, April 23, 2024, in *Taz*). The lack of a democratic participation, as well as the lack of direct consultancy forms in this new Germany, became strong reasons for East Germans to not trust on the democratic system anymore.

According to Nina Jeglinski (May 5, 2023, in *Das Parlament*), Steffen Bilger, a *CDU* politician, revealed a slogan: "*Unser Bürgerrat is der Wahlkreis"* ("Our citizens's council is the constituency"). Bilger's sentence was used on the German *Bundestag* in the beginning of May 2023, while debating for a new agriculture and food policy plan for the country. For Ute Scheub (April 23, 2024, in *Taz*), the slogan is unconsciously appealing for a complex and emotional interpretation by the ones who lived the repressive years of the GDR and are sensible to the actual German Democracy. The idea of *Wahlkreis* related to representative democracy (free direct elections), creates tension with deliberative Democracy *Bürgerräte* (where only a pre-defined citizens group is selected to discuss and decide on certain social and political themes). The pertinent issue about the slogan is that Bilger emphasizes more free direct elections, while he devalues deliberative Democracy.

Considering the lack of efficiency of the *Runde Tische* or "round tables" mentioned previously (regarded as a form of deliberative democracy) which had no significant effect after the national reunification, principles of dialogue and civic involvement were largely abandoned. As a result, many citizens in former East Germany began to distrust the effectiveness of German democratic institutions, feeling excluded from genuine political decision-making. Bilger's slogan only demonstrates that unconsciously, the *Wahlkreis* is what matters the most for German Democracy.

According to *Sachsen-Monitor 2023,* on Figure *12*, the question asked: *"Sind Sie mit der Art und Weise, wie die Demokratie in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in der Praxis funktioniert alles in allem sehr zufrieden, eher zufrieden, eher unzufrieden oder sehr unzufrieden?"* ("All in all, are you very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in practice in the Federal Republic of Germany?"). The dissatisfaction total number in the grey color registering 59% in total (45%+14%) (considering that it gained 16 percentage points than the year before) is the result of how Eastern citizens do not trust their own democratic political system. While the ones who show some affection to German Democracy by blue color (even though it lost 16 percentage points than the year before), relies by 41% in total (38%+3%). The age groups that show higher

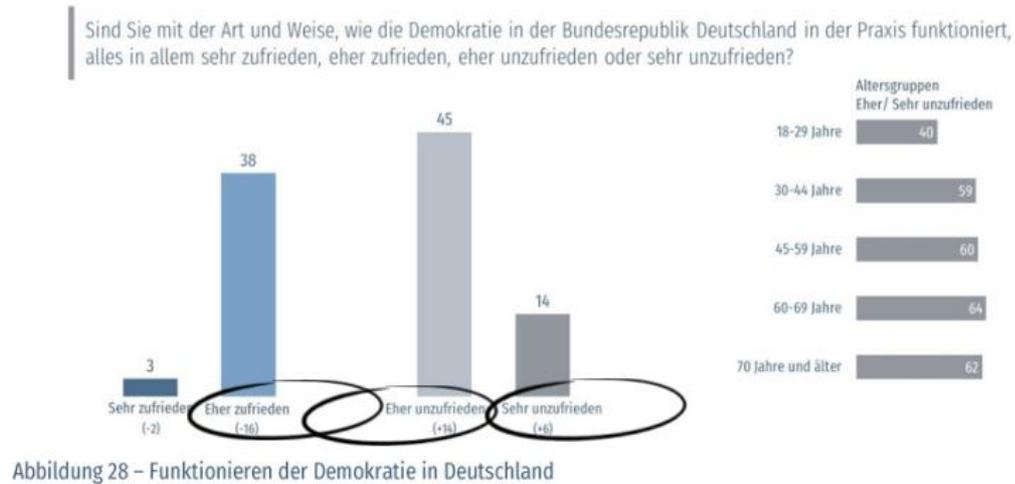dissatisfaction on Democracy can be seen by the older age groups between 60-69 years and 70 years and more:

Abbildung 28 – Funktionieren der Demokratie in Deutschland

Figure 12- Funktionieren der Demokratie in Deutschland ("Functioning of Democracy in Germany").

(source: https://www.staatsregierung.sachsen.de/download/dimap-Ergebnisbericht-Sachsen-Monitor-2023.pdf).

Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk suggests that East Germans had never been really reeducated about liberal values after 1989 and that might be a factor which contributes for the growth of Eastern radicalism (Jürgen Kaube, October 2, 2024, in *Deutschlandfunk*). Numbers do in fact demonstrate how citizens are dissatisfied with Democracy in their own country. Nevertheless, how is it possible to happen in a country where Eastern citizens tolerated so much and consequently fought so hard to take down a repressive regime which lasted so many years?

Subsequently to this controversial question, Tim Brinkhof (November 14, 2024, in *New Lines Magazine*) mentions Alex Holznienkemper's argument (working for the University of New Hamsphire). Holznienkemper's argument is that the GDR had a kind of a "fascinating aspect" inside their society for many years, which was the non-existence of grassroots organizations. The non-existence of these organizations meant the lack of space for discussion and implementation. Everything had to be approved by the *SED* to become available for public political knowledge. In this sense, it is possible to argue that societies who lived in this kind of repressive system for many years do develop involuntarily feelings of cynicism and disillusionment beyond politics. Of course, East Germany is not an exception to this factor, since it is not showing much affection to the German Democracy in recent years.

4. The *AfD* and the National reunification: What kind of discourse connects the two?

4.1 *AfD's i*ntroduction in the federal context and its voter profile

The rise of the *AfD* represents one of the most significant political transformations in contemporary Germany since the end of the Second World War. The party emerged in the early 2010's as an economic protest, however the party soon evolved into a broader challenge to the country's political establishment.

The *AfD* started its role in the German political sphere between 2012 and 2013 (Hansen & Olsen, 2022). The party's initial leadership was done by one of the founders, the deputy Bernd Lucke, whose Eurosceptic views were noticeable at the time, in 2013. Its creation served as a solid reason to assume a different position towards the moderate parties of the *Bundestag*, mainly because of economic reasons. However, recent years have been showing that the party has been gaining a larger relevance internationally for its rhetoric beyond social, cultural and political dimensions (Hambauer & Mays, 2018).

According to Nestler & Rohgalf (2014), *AfD* electorates were doubtful about the moderate party's strength, like the *CDU* and the *SPD* during the financial crisis of 2008. Heinze & Weisskircher (2021) reveal that the party was originated as a reaction to the euro policies which Angela Merkel revealed that she had no other option than adopting those policies. This gave more strength to the *AfD,* considering German citizens who were afraid of what kind of consequences would come after the European financial crisis, since the reunification was already an example of what a weak management by the Federal government can cause.

Years later, the party revealed itself as populist and radical where anti-immigrant and xenophobic themes dominated the party's agenda (Hansen & Olsen, 2022). In the aftermath of the refugee crisis in 2015 or the so-called "summer refugees", *AfD* resurged with a more radical discourse against Islam communities in Germany and immigration policies. Lewandowsky (2015) reveals that on a political definition level, the party seems to be not clearly defined. Nevertheless, only by the party's future development will be able to define himself. Arzheimer (2015) suggested that the *AfD* could not be even classified as a right-wing party, because there were no concrete sources that could conclude that, but there was already an acknowledgement that the party was assuming a right seat in the German political system.

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As shown previously, in Figure *5* from chapter 3.4, the party's presence started to be shortly noticeable in the federal elections of 2017 in the state of Saxony. Despite the common perception that the *AfD* is rooted in Eastern states, its political representation is largely attributed to West German deputies rather than by local ones (Jürgen Kaube, October 2, 2024, in *Deutschlandfunk*).

It is still hard to define in socio-demographic terms the *AfD*'s profile voter. However, it is presumed that the party might have been gaining more support especially from middle-aged men (Hansen & Olsen, 2022). Subsequently to this idea, East Germany has more men than women, which leaves the idea that the party is male dominated (Celine Schmock, September 24, 2024, in *NDR*).

For Huber & Yendell (2019) religious terms might help to define not all, but some aspects of the party's profile voter, although it may not be so concrete as it seems. Authors do refer the more religious citizens are, more they tend to vote for right-wing forces, especially Catholics. In addition, it has been clear that the *AfD* gets highly supported by an aged working population, especially in sparsely regions.

Art (2018) reveals how the *AfD* strategically plays a challenging role in Germany, regarding the of idea right-wing containment. This means that the party itself challenges Germany's ability to maintain political stability and to contain right-wing nationalist forces. According to Art, Germany's former Chancellor Angela Merkel may have contributed for the *AfD's* expansion beyond the limits of this containment, which Germany has been trying to preserve. Angela Merkel believed that Germany could manage herself to deal with economic and political challenges without the resurgence of nationalist movements: "Her bet- if one could call it that- was that Germany would rise to both challenges without producing a powerful and sustainable nativist movement in the process." (2018, 77).

Although it may seem that the *AfD* is a "regional party" inside federal Germany, there are no exact evidence which can confirm the regional detail, although the party is East Germany's most voted one (Hansen & Olsen, 2022). It is mentioned by both authors the idea of the political scientist Kai Arzheimer, where he claims that the party *Die Linke* would maybe full fill better East Germans needs rather than the *AfD*, when it comes to the O*stdeutschen Regionalvertretung* ("regional representation of East Germany") considering the Communist past of the region. However, it seems that *Die Linke* has not been the most desired party in the East even though they have left-wing roots.

4.2 Comparison between the two *AfD* electoral programs 2017 and 2025: victimization or domination discourse?

For this chapter, two different *AfD* electoral programs or *Wahlprogramm* were chosen. The first program is from 2017, and the second one, from 2025. Both electoral programs were chosen to sustain the argument illustrated by the voting map figures presented about the federal elections of 2017 and 2025 in chapter 3.4.

The 2017 federal elections marked the beginning of the *AfD*'s dominance in East Germany, while the 2025 elections demonstrated the party's significant expansion. It is relevant to mention as well that the contents structure of each electoral program is organized differently, which will be explained further. Different content's structure reflects a contemporary adaptation to maximize the impact of the electoral programs on citizen's minds, as well as the search for more possible votes.

It is relevant to mention that neither program offers a specific section related directly to the consequences of the national reunification, nor to any solutions that could have been derived from the peaceful event that legally reunited Germany in 1990. However, some ideas of the electoral programs might connect indirectly with some thoughts on reunification.

Pertinent similarities between the two electoral programs: Federal and social dimensions

Both electoral programs, as it is supposed to, approach many social areas like health, economy, immigration, and education. Similar points in both electoral programs of 2017 and 2025 are the mandatory military service and the indirect awareness of inequality in wage gains inside this Federal state. Both points seem to be indirectly very attractive for East Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland* 2017; *Alternative für Deutschland* 2025).

In 2017, there was already a certain will for more investment on civic and patriotic formation, which reveals already a certain sentiment of aggression, and in 2025 the party emphasized even more that sentiment. Beyond security concerns, military service may symbolize collective responsibility and shared national spirit, which is an aspect that has been gaining concerns in recent years (noting that in Figure *6* from chapter 3.4 from the *Sachsen-Monitor 2016,* numbers were already very high when it comes to the concerns of losing the sense of *Zusammenhalt* or "togetherness").

As for the inequal wage gains, the party does announce it implicitly through the *Polizei* or "police" reforms. According to Jürgen Kaube (October 2, 2024, in *Deutschlandfunk*) East Germans earn 15% less than West Germans, and this is an aspect which for obvious reasons is inconvenient for a country who is reunified for almost 40 yeas.

For this reason, the party appeals for a more secure and equal wage gains distributions in Germany. Subsequently, they suggest a new reestablishment of the *Polizei,* where the party claims that it should be a more unified leadership on a federal level. This might be a short but pertinent aspect which can attract East Germans to vote *AfD*, whose concerns about their future security and sense of community has been interfered with in recent years as *Sachsen-Monitor 2016* shows.

2017 electoral program

In structural terms, the 2017's electoral program is presented on a horizontal and on a linear structure reading, which provides an inviting impression for the reader. In formal presentation terms, this electoral program discourse intention seems to rely on terms such as "suggestion" and "requirement".

In 2017, Germany faced mainly challenges related to the consequences of opening national borders, refugee crisis and from the debate along with the European Union about decision-making power and the country's autonomy (*Alternative für Deutschland 2017*). This social agenda interferes with the electoral program as well as with the migration policies and the gradual loss of sovereignty.

While analyzing the program of 2017, some social aspects were considered. Approaching the section of sovereignty and democracy in point 1.1 (*Alternative für Deutschland 2017*) comes up a term which was already discussed in the beginning of this thesis with Klikauer (2020) and Wildt (2017) in chapter 2.1. The provocative term which comes up is *Volk*. There is as well a constant term reaffirmation *Heimat* "home" which is tied along with the aspect of national sovereignty and the idea of being "together" in their own country. Both concepts seem to connect with each other.

As for point 1.3 (*Alternative für Deutschland 2017,* 8) parties like *CDU* and *SPD* contributed for the creation of a small political elite, in which the *Volk* should not subject himself to. In this case, East Germany may see this kind of discourse as something which has been lost throughout the years, which is the sense of belonging to their own country (noting the

nostalgia of the old GDR) by always being somehow discriminated or rejected by another citizen from the same country.

Point 1.4 (*Alternative für Deutschland 2017,* 9) is a pertinent aspect as well, where the party defends the citizens courage in order to use the direct form of democracy (noting the aspect of the failed project of *Rund Tische* or "round tables") free direct elections, where citizens should have more space to debate from certain themes such as immigration, national crises or even energy.

Immigration along with education are key themes in 2017's electoral program, which serve as a possible argument basis for 2025. The party desires a "new Germany" in point 5.2 with a prosperous future which must be reflected through a conventional educational system, where traditions and cultural identities must be preserved (*Alternative für Deutschland 2017,* 29). It would be relevant to note as well about what was mentioned in chapter 3.2 where West Germany during the Cold War became culturally more diversified while East Germany remained more homogenous culturally. The lack of acceptance for new cultures is in this sense a complex issue for East Germans in which the reunification did not prepare them for.

2025 electoral program

In structural terms, the 2025 electoral program adopts a vertical format, with a more visually fragmented content. In formal presentation terms, this electoral program discourse intention seems to rely not only on "assertations" and on "obligations", but it reflects much more confidence than the program of 2017.

This year, 2025 has been a very challenging one principally for the free Federal elections in February, which marked one of the biggest victories of the *AfD i*n East Germany, considering the previous social events as the COVID-19 crisis, the energy crisis, Russia invasion in the Ukraine, economic struggles and the new reshape of public debate. Those social issues influence the electoral program regarding as well the migration management and national security (*Alternative für Deutschland 2025*).

While in 2017 the *AfD* claimed that there should be more sovereignty and autonomy for Germany, in 2025, there is a direct citation and confirmation revealed as "*Das Volk ist der souverän"* "the people are the sovereign" (*Alternative für Deutschland 2025,* 127). It is polemic to consider this citation as absolute and solid, since is not precisely legitimate to consider that way, however, the party said it. It seems that 2025 is a more provocative and critical year when it comes to go against the German federal government rather than in 2017. In the same section

again of sovereignty and democracy, but on the theme of Swiss model, there is a direct approach on the reunification process where they claim that the reunification is a historical example where the citizens thoughts should be highly considered through referendums or popular consultancy: "*Das ist die Lehre aus der Wiedervereinigung, aus der Ablehnung des 'EU-Verfassungsvertrags' durch das französische und das niederländische Volk und der Entscheidung der Bürger des Vereinigten Königreichs, aus der Europäischen Union auszutreten*" (""This is the lesson from the reunification, from the rejection of the 'EU Constitution' by the French and Dutch people, and from the decision of the citizens of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union.") (*Alternative für Deutschland 2025,* 130).

The other aspect which shows how aggressive and polemic the 2025 program is when compared to 2017, is the detailed and organized plan which the party made to expel all the immigrants from the country. Examples on detailed deportation plans, revocation of certain rights as well as the "plan of return" according to some legal terms of the National constitution are aspects which show controversy (*Alternative für Deutschland 2025,* 101). This is an aspect which Eastern citizens might as well embrace since the idea of being homogenous culturally remains even stronger than it was in 2017.

Vestiges of reunification are still being brought into debate, even though they are being done between the lines indirectly. It is possible to presume that possibly most citizens who would read these programs maybe would never vote for the *AfD* party, since the suggestions and ideas given in both programs do not have a sustainable argument to find concrete solutions for social issues. However, some of those ideas do align themselves with the reunification consequences which remained, as well as conforming with the idea of regional identities which gained a more solid form during Germany's division until 1989.

4.3 The *Friedliche Revolution: AfD*'s appropriation of a particular Nation conquest

The *AfD* has been strategically using the reunification legacy as a political tool to gain support, particularly in Thuringia and Saxony. Through campaign slogans like "*Wende_2.0*" and "*Vollende die Wende*" ("finish the reunification"), the party reinterprets the peaceful revolution of 1989 to appeal to voters who still feel neglected by the consequences of that same event. The appropriation of national memory has been considered as polemic and raises many questions on how manipulation and abuse of history is efficient for the party's political growth.

It has been noticeable that the *AfD* has been taking advantage of the negative consequences left by the reunification process to gain power through free federal elections. An example of that is *AfD*'s political chart of the regional campaign in Thuringia in 2019 "*Die Friedliche Revolution im Wahllokal*" ("the national reunification in the electoral section").

The chart shows how controversial the reunification event can be used for political propaganda. But what exactly is the *AfD* appealing to vote for in the *Wahllokal*? How is it possible to vote for a peaceful past event which is almost 40 years old?   Figure   *13*   represents   the controversial aspect of this political chart used in campaign:

Figure 13- AfD political chart campaign in the state of Thuringia 2019: "Die Friedliche Revolution im Wahllokal".

(source:https://afd-thueringen.de/landtagswahl-2019/wahlkampfmittel-zur-landtagswahl/).

According to Jürgen Kaube (October 2, 2024, in *Deutschlandfunk*), Thuringia is an example of an Eastern state where the so-called "protest vote" no longer exists. It seems that the vote for the *AfD* is taking a deeper path sociologically and culturally. The vote might not be used for political purposes as it is supposed to, but for emotional fulfillment. What seems to rise even more questions for outsiders and even for the Germans itself is the expression marked "*Wende_2.0*". As explained on chapter 3.2, *Wende* was the name given to the social and temporal transformation by the reunification event. But what does mean "*Wende_2.0*" for the *AfD?* How controversial can it be appropriating a significant historical event, considering that East Germans fought hard for it, that needs to be approached on a second version?

Gerhard Marchl (March 20, 2025, in *Karl-Renner-Institut*) considers that on a federal level, there was an inadequate revision about the GDR's functioning, and it left scares for East Germans. The inadequate revision about the Eastern political past may subsequently seem appealing to vote for the *AfD* considering Figure *13,* since citizens can choose again to vote for a revolution which did not satisfy them at all because of its consequences.

For Alex Urban (August 21, 2019, in *Volksverpetzer)*, it is meaningless to approach the term "*Wende_2.0*". He considers that the *AfD's* action is following a segmentation related to cultural memory rather than following social and economic consequences left by the reunification, and this leaves the question on how sustainable the party's discourse in this sense is.

Jona Källgren (August 30, 2019, in *Euro News*) comments that the *AfD* campaigns might have been instrumentalizing the German past for their own interest, distorting historical slogans which many years ago and even in present times, relate to identity and Nation. As for *Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut* (2025), there is the same reflection on the *AfD*'s historical past discourse. The *AfD* assumed a narrative which is not precisely their own, but they seem to assume beyond the public. In this case, the party demonstrates that unconsciously, it is in charge to finish the *Wende* process as Figure *14* reveals:

Figure 14- AfD political chart campaign in the state of Thuringia 2019: "Vollende die Wende".

(Source: https://www.mdr.de/geschichte/zeitgeschichte-gegenwart/politik-gesellschaft/montagsdemonstrationen-afd-pegida-ddr-buergerrechtsbewegung-100.html).

When observing the political chart, it arises indignation for those who know considerably their own country's history. On the other hand, it may also raise questions and doubts for citizens who do not pay much attention to National history, and it brings them to ask themselves what exactly the party means while mentioning that the reunification is going to be concluded when theoretically it happened so many years ago. According to *Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut (2025)*, the question relies precisely on the issue of what will the *AfD* demonstrate to its electoral public? Will they show that they are still able to satisfy Eastern citizens from a peaceful revolution which changed Europe and the world?

Finally, Figure *15* which is in fact the most controversial one, because of its specificity when it comes to regional party's approach on historical moments, is the chart from an old picture taken in Leipzig, from the social protests done during the transitional process of the end of the GDR:

Figure 15- AfD political chart 2019: "Kommunalwahl 2019- Wende für Leipzig".

(Source: https://www.l-iz.de/politik/leipzig/2019/05/Leipziger-AfD-versucht-mit-der-Erinnerung-an-die-Friedliche-Revolution-Wahlkampf-zu-machen-276395).

Ralf Julke & Michael Freitag (May 21, 2019, in *Leipziger Zeitung*) demonstrate their concerns on the abuse appropriation of the *AfD's* historical picture "*Wende für Leipzig*". Both authors tend to agree that the *AfD* is using history but distorting it at the same time, where they argue that the party is using a peaceful moment in history which does not belong to them, and it never will. It is even considered that the appropriation of the term *Wende* by the *AfD* is in fact a nationalistic *Wende* through the perception given by the political chart. It is related also with

the idea that the lack of affection to collective memory which is especially felt by East Germans is being brought up but through political charts. Even though the party tries to recreate and reconstruct the historical memory of the country, it is also in fact creating misinformation about the peaceful event of the past. According to both authors, Martin Neuhof (the grandson of the photographer of the Leipzig protests) told the *Leipziger Zeitung* that he reacted on Facebook subsequently to the use of the powerful image of his grandfather, which makes him very sad being used in a very distorted way: *"Die AfD Leipzig nutzt für ihren Wahlkampf ein Wende-Bild meines verstorbenen Opas. Würde mein Opa dies wissen, würde er sich dreimal im Grab umdrehen."* ("The *AfD* Leipzig is using a photo from the time of the reunification that shows my late grandfather for their election campaign. If my grandfather knew this, he would be turning over in his grave three times.").

Conclusions:

This study, which employs a comprehensive approach to various dimensions of German society, offers several noteworthy conclusions. Firstly, it will be presented smaller secondary conclusions which follow the chapters thesis logic. Secondly is discussed the main conclusion which answers the initial Research Question. Finally, there is a short approach on generic reflections of the theme which can be used for other possible future studies.

One of the first secondary conclusions of this study is the asymmetrical cultural memory valorization between West Germany and East Germany. Elias (1996) is one example of that idea, where he seems to appeal only on "West Germany" (or in other words more associated to the "West Federal Germany") and its history. However, there is no concrete approach on East Germany and their way on reflecting about their cultural memory. In this sense, it is already showing some mental imbalance coming from a sociological perspective. His speech in his book in how the civilizing process is ideal for a Nation's progress, but at the same time, is naturalizing and emphasizing more West Germany's framework when it comes to norms and values. Involuntarily, Elias (1996) interpretation is already creating a kind of cultural hierarchy, where East Germany seems to be somehow hidden and do not take part on collective cultural memory with West Germany. For this kind of cultural inequality, the *AfD* may try to convince some of its voters that in this sense they will be remembered if the others did not do it.

The second conclusion identified during this academic study relies in how exactly German public receives and interpretate the term *Volksgemeinschaft.* Klikauer (2020) and Wildt (2017) examined directly many aspects about the origin of the term and its meanings, however it seems there are no exact ideas on how society perceives the term when they listen or read it in contemporary times. According to Wildt (2017), the word strategy had an important role in the establishment of the *NDSP* but public reaction to its meaning in present German politics seems to be omitted. The word's meaning may oscillate between its ethical rejection and its limiting racial perspective.

The third conclusion is that somehow, reunification might have brought some rivalry and discrimination between East Germans and other East Germans, especially for those who accepted the reunification and fought for living a new life, while others resisted and still resist as much as they can, always exalting their past life security in the GDR.

The fourth conclusion which was mainly based on the *Sachsen-Monitor 2016*, which shows how citizens pay in fact much more attention to the idea of *Zuzammenhalt* or "togetherness", rather than individual cultural identities. The idea of community and being united seems to be more relevant than the individual factor. This helps somehow to explain the wave of nationalism in Germany post-reunification, since nationalism guides itself stronger when it is led by a group.

Answering the Research Question, is possible to claim that the *AfD's* discourse on the national reunification memory has contributed to shape political identities and electoral behavior in East Germany through the symbolic appropriation of the 1989 peaceful revolution. By reframing the revolution which originally was defined by being a non-violent, civic unity with democratic aspirations remains as an unfinished event by the federal government. Therefore, the *AfD* positions itself as kind of an heir to East Germans experience which are shown simultaneously by the political charts in chapter 4.3. The reinterpretation of past events to use for own benefit, allows the party to mobilize feelings of marginalization and resentment which transform the historical memory into a political resource. However, while this discourse resonates with certain segments of the electorate who perceive reunification as incomplete, it also represents a distortion of the revolution's original moral and cultural foundations. Therefore, the *AfD*'s impact lies less in reshaping the factuality of historical narratives as the peaceful terms of the revolution and reconfiguring more the emotional and identity-based dimensions of political belonging in East Germany since 1989.

Besides the objective conclusions from this study, it opened two extra generic reflections. The first reflection one relies on the issue of until what point can Federalism secure all their own regional identities. Germany is a considerable big country with 16 states, all of them full of small regional identities which might sometimes end in conflict with others when it comes to language dialect or other traditions. It remains a pertinent and relevant theme as well, which can also come across *AfD*'s regional campaigns throughout the country. The second reflection is related to a centra and provocative idea provided by Alex Urban (August, 21, 2019 in *Volksverpetzer)* in his article about the "*Wende_ 2.0*" which is the complexity of the *AfD* using that term because the author asks himself about what kind of dictatorship is exactly the *AfD* appealing to run away from since the reunification of 1990. He makes a deep analysis mentioning that the *AfD* might relate the devalue and ignorance sentiment of contemporary Democracy in Germany, by omitting the repressive years and the social consequences brough by the reunification.

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