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Analysis

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Election results show how the east and west of Germany are drifting ever further apart

After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the former West German chancellor Willy Brandt predicted that reunification would finally allow "what belongs together to grow together".

How optimistic that sounds 35 years on: last night's election results from Thuringia and Saxony paint a picture of a Germany whose eastern and western regions are, if anything, drifting further apart.

For years, the assumption in Germany has been that once the eastern states had "caught up" with the rest of the country economically, their political outlook would eventually align. The rise of the far-right, anti-immigration Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) was cast as a protest vote against continued disparities in income, employment and living standards.

Economics and demographics only go so far to explain the outcome of yesterday's votes. The population of the east is older than that in the west, but it is no longer "bleeding out". Every year since 2017, more people have annually migrated from the west to the east.

Unemployment is higher, but only by a fraction - the real contrast here is between northern and southern Germany. For the last two years, the economies of the eastern states have been growing faster than those in the west, as global players such as Tesla and Intel have set up factories. Levels of immigration in the eastern states that went to the polls last night are among the lowest in Germany.

A survey published by Olaf Scholz's government at the start of this year found about 19% of east Germans say they feel left behind. That is twice as many as in the west (8%), but would still suggest that 80% of the population of the five eastern states do not feel they are losing out. Yet a sizeable number cast votes for a party that, in its Thuringian branch, has been certified as rightwing extremist.

The eastern-born sociologist Steffen Mau has coined the term *ossifikation* for this trend. Far from still "catching up", Mau writes in his recent book *Ungleich Vereint* (Unequally Unified), east Germany is voting differently from the west precisely because it has already caught up and now claims the right to assert its own distinct identity.

In her book *Tausend Aufbrüche* (A Thousand Starts), the GDR-born historian Christina Morina says the AfD is winning in the east because it has managed to tap into a distinctive understanding of what democracy entails, shaped by 40 years under communist rule.

"East Germany too claimed for itself to have found a democratic response to national socialism," Morina said in a recent interview. "It's just that the communists' story of how democracy worked was a deeply populist one, which claimed to be truer and more representative of real people than democracy in the west, which they said was merely organising class hierarchies and representing the interests of capitalism."

The historic experience of that kind of pseudo-democracy, she said, was one explanation for why the AfD was managing to mobilise so many more previous non-voters in the east than other parties.

The AfD has not only held rallies but organised *spaziergänge*, "strolls" through town centres, which are designed to evoke the peaceful Monday protests that accompanied the unravelling of socialist East Germany. It is the only party in Germany that calls for the president to be directly elected by citizens rather than through a federal convention, and has advocated for a Swiss-style direct democracy of regular referendums.

"In its election campaigns the AfD very effectively tapped into an experience that is widely shared among east Germans," said Morina. "That you don't make yourself heard through voting, by engaging yourself in political parties, civic groups or unions, but by mobilising the masses for street protests."

There is every reason to distrust the AfD's claim to merely represent a different democratic tradition. Underlying its story of empowerment lies a racist strand of thinking which casts easterners as more pure Germans because they resisted multiculturalism and all the ideas that entered the West German discourse after the student revolutions of 1968.

Both Mau and Morina suggest winning back voters from the far right can only work by engaging them through unconventional and creative means. To halt and eventually reverse the drifting apart of east and west, the centre needs to think outside the box.



◀ Paramedics give first aid after about 12 Iskander-M ballistic missiles pummelled Ukraine's second city, Kharkiv

PHOTOGRAPH: GEORGE IVANCHENKO/AP

Ukrainian drones hit power plants deep in Russia

Luke Harding

Ukraine has carried out one of its biggest drone attacks on Russia yet, with videos showing a series of explosions and fires at power stations and refineries, including in Moscow.

Russia's defence ministry downplayed the overnight strikes. It said it had intercepted and destroyed 158 unmanned enemy aerial vehicles. These were shot down over 15 regions, it claimed.

The strikes came as Russia bombarded Ukraine's second city of Kharkiv and made further incremental gains in the eastern Donbas region. Its forces have been rolling forward in recent weeks and are closing in on the city of Pokrovsk.

Footage posted on Telegram channels suggested some of the long-range Ukrainian drones hit targets deep inside Russia, causing damage. At least one struck an oil refinery in the Kapotnya district in south-east Moscow.

More drones hit a thermal power station in the Tver region, north of Moscow. There was an explosion at the Konakovo station, one of the biggest in Russia, soon after dawn at about 5am. An orange fireball engulfed several transformers.

Another coal-fired power plant at Kashira in Moscow oblast was also reportedly hit. The extent of the damage was unclear. Three drones were allegedly used. Russian officials said others crossed into the Voronezh,

Tula, Kaluga, Bryansk, Belgorod, Lipetsk and Kursk regions.

Volodymyr Zelenskiy said Ukraine's attacks on critical infrastructure inside Russia were an answer to the Kremlin's repeated strikes on Ukrainian civilians and its own power infrastructure. "It is entirely justified for Ukrainians to respond to Russian terror by any means necessary to stop it," he said.

He condemned Russia's attack on Kharkiv yesterday, when about a dozen Iskander-M ballistic missiles pummelled the city. "Russia is once again terrorising Kharkiv," Zelenskiy tweeted, adding that a rescue operation was carried out with "all the necessary means".

The short-range rockets hit buildings including Kharkiv's giant Palace of Sport. Black smoke poured from a gaping hole in its roof. Ukraine's air defences were unable to shoot down the Iskanders, which fly at 6,000km/h (3,730mph), said the regional prosecutor, Oleksandr Filchakov.

According to Kharkiv's mayor, Ihor Terekhov, 44 people were injured in the latest strikes. Seven of the victims were children including a three-month-old baby boy.

Bombs hit Kharkiv's Kyiv district, near the hydropark, and landed next to a shopping centre and metro in Saltivka. In 2022 the Russians shelled this north-eastern area repeatedly. Local people who lived in its high-rise apartment blocks spent months sheltering in the underground station.

The newest salvo came after a Russian guided bomb smashed



▲ An attack on the Konakovo power station in Tver, north of Moscow

into a 12-storey residential building in Kharkiv on Friday. Several people died including Veronika Kozhushko, an 18-year-old artist, and a 14-year-old girl who was outside in a playground, sitting on a bench.

Zelenskiy said that over the past week the Kremlin had launched more than 160 missiles of various types, as well as 780 guided aerial bombs and 400 drones. "To fully protect and safeguard our cities from this aggression, we need greater support for Ukraine's rightful response," he said.

He has repeatedly called for the Biden administration to permit Ukraine to use US-supplied Atacms systems against military airfields on Russian territory. Visiting Washington last week, Ukraine's defence minister, Rustem Umerov, gave US officials a list of potential high-value targets.

So far, however, the White House has refused to amend its red lines. The UK and France, which have supplied Kyiv with Storm Shadow and Scalp cruise missiles respectively, have also not given permission. They appear reluctant to act independently from the US.

Ukraine argues that destroying Russian airbases will protect its cities and help it to stem Russian advances in the east. In recent weeks Russian troops have made rapid progress. They are 5 miles away from Pokrovsk, a key Ukrainian transport hub, and are approaching the neighbouring town of Myrnohrad.

Since 6 August, Ukraine's armed forces have occupied 100 settlements inside Russia's Kursk region, after a surprise incursion. In recent days this offensive has slowed down. Russia has sent in troops as reinforcements from other parts of the frontline while continuing its push for Pokrovsk.

On Sunday Russia's defence ministry said it had captured two more villages in Donetsk oblast, Ptyche and Vyimka. Thousands of civilians have left Pokrovsk after an order to evacuate. Shops, banks and businesses have closed in anticipation of an imminent Russian attack.