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**“Support for Democracy in Eastern and Western  
Germany: an Attempt to Explain the  
Differences”**

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## Introduction

The process of German reunification in 1989/90 was accompanied by high expectations from the East Germans. Many eastern Germans anticipated not only a considerable improvement in their living conditions, but also more political freedom, more democracy, and the guarantee of human and civil rights. Almost 15 years later, we may ask to what extent the eastern Germans now support the political system they were so keen to adopt in 1990. Without a doubt, the transfer of political, legal, and administrative institutions from West to East was successfully completed within a short period of time. But what about the attitudes and value orientations of the eastern Germans who have had to adapt to the Western institutional system? Have people who lived for decades under authoritarian conditions been able to develop a democratic culture? Or are their mind-sets and attitudes still influenced by the effects of GDR socialization with its socialist values and ideals?

The question whether eastern Germans support the political system in which they live is important, since, as political culture research assumes, a political system is stable to the extent that its political culture is congruent with its political structure. Political institutions need to be supported by the population or they will not function properly. And it takes time before democratic institutions become culturally ingrained. Thus the question arises: Are eastern Germans already adjusted to the democratic system, or do they still adhere to the socialist values of the past?

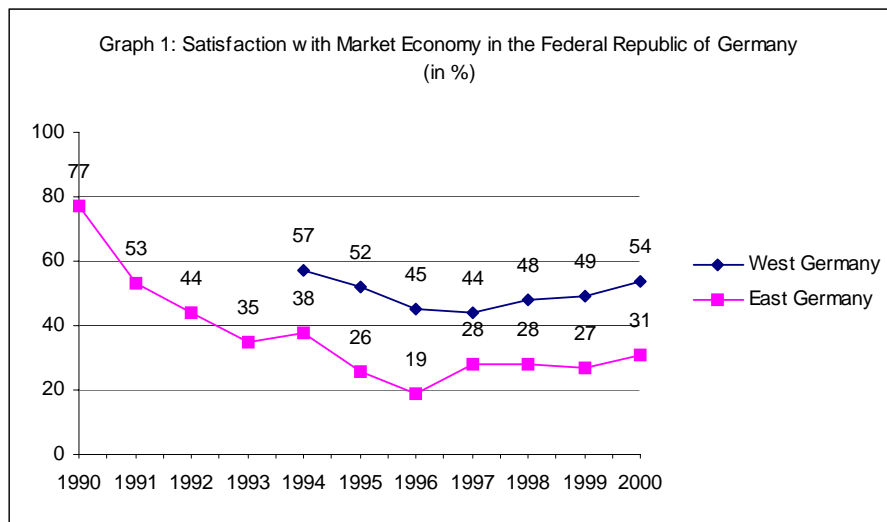
In fact, support for Western institutions among the eastern German population is very low. Trust in institutions lies below the Western level.<sup>1</sup> Many Easterners feel that they are neither protected by the legal system, nor treated very fairly by it.<sup>2</sup> Eastern Germans are more

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<sup>1</sup> Gert Pickel, *Jugend und Politikverdrossenheit: Zwei politische Kulturen im Deutschland nach der Vereinigung?* (Opladen 2002), 131.

<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, "Kein Schutz, keine Gleichheit, keine Gerechtigkeit," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 8 1995, 5.

dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy than western Germans,<sup>3</sup> and even the market economy is no longer appreciated very much. The market economy and democracy enjoyed the greatest support among eastern Germans immediately after the collapse of communism. In 1990, 77 per cent of the Easterners had a positive opinion of the FRG economic system; today that proportion has declined to 31 per cent (see graph 1).<sup>4</sup>



The same is true concerning the acceptance of democracy. In 1990, almost 60 per cent were satisfied with the functioning of democracy. In the meantime, this percentage has also declined (see graph 2).

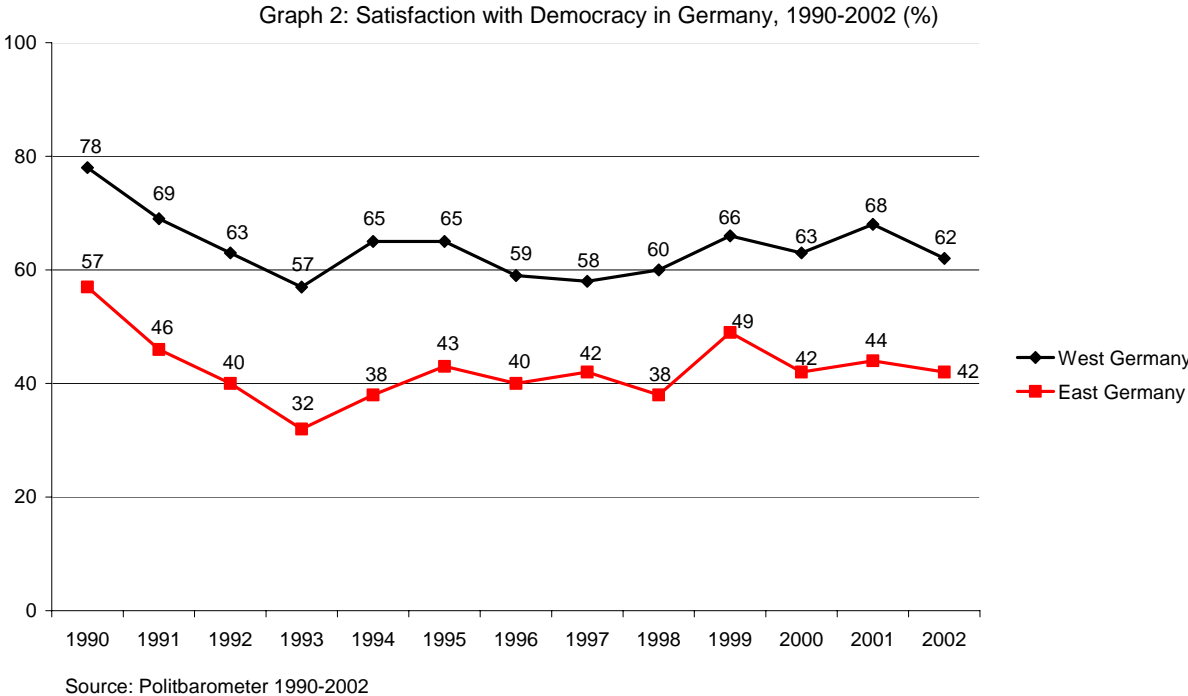
We should not overstate these figures, however. When asked if they prefer a planned or a market economy, eastern Germans vote in favor of the market economy.<sup>5</sup> We also have to be careful regarding their dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy. This dissatisfaction does not mean that eastern Germans reject democracy per se. On the contrary - democratic values like freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, the right to engage in demonstra-

<sup>3</sup> Statistisches Bundesamt (ed.), *Datenreport 2002: Zahlen und Fakten über die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Bonn 2002), 608; Dieter Fuchs, "Welche Demokratie wollen die Deutschen? Einstellungen zur Demokratie im vereinigten Deutschland," in O.W. Gabriel, ed., *Politische Orientierungen und Verhaltensweisen im vereinigten Deutschland* (Opladen 1997), esp. 109-110.

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and Renate Köcher, eds., *Allensbacher Jahrbuch der Demoskopie 1993-1997* (München, 1997), 670.

<sup>5</sup> Noelle-Neumann and Köcher (see note 4), 677.

tions, or party competition are valued as highly in the East as in the West (see table 1).<sup>6</sup> Eastern dissatisfaction focuses on the operationalization of democracy, not on democratic ideals and values as such.



Nevertheless, there is gap between the East and West in levels of acceptance of Western institutions. Here we will explain why eastern Germans are more dissatisfied with democracy than Westerners. Does this have to do with the socialist legacy in eastern Germany or with the divergent living conditions between East and West? The relatively high dissatisfaction with democracy in eastern Germany could also be attributed to the feeling of many eastern Germans that they are not recognized as Easterners. Is it possible that they transform the feeling of being despised into a rejection of that order which deprives them of recognition in the first place? Likewise, we could form the hypothesis that lower satisfaction with the func-

<sup>6</sup> Detlef Pollack, "Das geteilte Bewußtsein. Einstellungen zur sozialen Ungleichheit und zur Demokratie in Ost- und Westdeutschland 1990-1998," in R. Czada and H. Wollmann, eds., *Von der Bonner zur Berliner Republik. 10 Jahre deutsche Einheit* (Opladen 1999), 281-307, esp. 292-294.

tioning of democracy in the East correlates with social inequalities between East and West.

Perhaps it can be also explained by the Easterners' impression that the Western system is not efficient or productive. Each of these competing hypotheses will be explored in the sections that follow.

Table 1: Agreement with democratic principles (in %)

	West		East	
	1991	1995	1991	1995
Everybody should have the right to stand up for his or her own opinion even if the majority holds on to a different opinion.	97	90	97	96
Every citizen has the right to demonstrate for his or her convictions on the street.	94	90	96	94
A viable democracy cannot be conceived without political opposition.	95	91	96	96
Each democratic party should in principle have the chance to take over governmental responsibility.	92	84	94	90

Source: Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann/Renate Köcher, *Allensbacher Jahrbuch der Demoskopie 1993-1997* (München, 1993), pp. 546, 558; KSPW-Bus 1995.

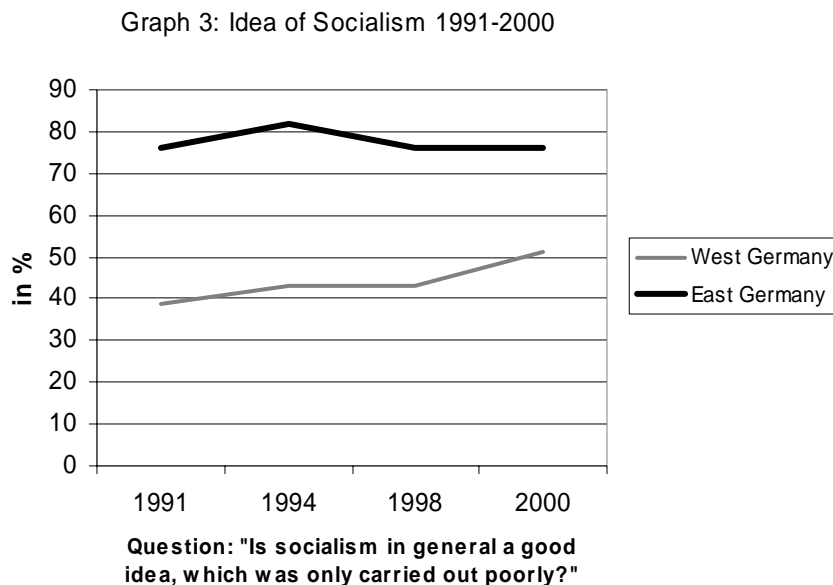
## 2. Different Factors to Explain the Differences

### 2.1. The Legacy of Socialism

The most common explanation for the lower degree of satisfaction with democracy in eastern Germany compared to the West is to attribute it to the effects of socialist socialization.<sup>7</sup> In order to evaluate the effects of GDR-socialization, we use one question frequently posed in representative opinion polls as an indicator of internalized socialist values: *Is socialism a good idea, in principle, which was only poorly put into practice?* Agreement with this statement has been consistently very high in eastern Germany over the last 15 years. During this time, agreement with this statement has stood 40 percentage points higher in the Eastern states than in their Western counterparts (see graph 3). We should not overemphasize this high level of agreement, however, since it expresses a defense of the GDR past that is cur-

<sup>7</sup> Ursula Feist, "Zur politischen Akkulturation der vereinten Deutschen: Eine Analyse aus Anlass der ersten gesamtdeutschen Bundestagswahl." *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, B 11-12/1991, 21-31; M. Rainer Lepsius, "Das Legat zweier Diktaturen für die demokratische Kultur im vereinigten Deutschland." Everhard

rently being discredited. Asked how satisfied they were with *the “realities” of socialism in the GDR*, only a little more than 40 per cent answered positively.<sup>8</sup> Only 22 per cent regard socialism as a good form of government, compared with 92 per cent who view democracy as such.<sup>9</sup>



## 2.2. The Personal Economic Situation

Personal economic circumstances can also have an important influence on citizens' satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. Individual living standards in eastern Germany have increased dramatically over the last fifteen years. Household property and assets have tripled in value during this period. Household incomes have also risen. But they are still lower than in western Germany. Whereas in eastern Germany, 27 per cent of households have more than 2,000 Euros at their disposal, 39 per cent of the Western households have reached

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Holtmann/Heinz Sahner, eds., *Aufhebung der Bipolarität: Veränderungen im Osten, Rückwirkungen im Westen*. (Opladen 1995), 25-39; Dieter Fuchs (see note 4).

<sup>8</sup> Statements are based on the *Political Culture in Europe* data set (PCE), a survey coordinated by the *Frankfurt Institute for Transformation Studies* and conducted in autumn 2000 in Eastern Germany and some other former Communist countries in Eastern Europe. The fieldwork was coordinated by INRA-Germany.

<sup>9</sup> See note 8.

that level of disposable income.<sup>10</sup> In 1990, the real incomes of eastern Germans only amounted to 55 per cent of incomes in the West; today their incomes have surpassed 80 per cent of the Western level.<sup>11</sup> Thus their personal financial circumstances have clearly improved, but still lag behind those of western Germans. Likewise, if we look at housing or household acquisition of durable consumer goods, like freezers, video cameras, phones or cars, we find significant improvements.<sup>12</sup>

It is no coincidence that these improvements are reflected in increased expressions of personal happiness. In 1990 the share of the population who felt their own living conditions were better than before was not much larger than the percentage who claimed their situation had worsened.<sup>13</sup> In 1998, by contrast, 59 per cent agreed that they enjoyed better living conditions, while only 16 per cent said they had deteriorated, and 25 per cent thought they were about the same.<sup>14</sup>

The greatest problem, without a doubt, rests with mass unemployment. Following the 1989 collapse of the GDR, almost 3 million people lost their jobs. In 1989, some 9.2 million eastern Germans held a job, today the number of employed persons in the region amounts to 6.5 million.<sup>15</sup> Women have been especially affected by unemployment. Every second Easterner has personally experienced some form of unemployment.<sup>16</sup> Today the official jobless rate for eastern Germans stands at 18 per cent, in western Germany it is only 8 per cent (see graph 4). If we include Easterners who retire early or are enrolled in job-requalification measures, the figure rises to almost 30 per cent.

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<sup>10</sup> Statistisches Bundesamt, ed., *Datenreport 2002. Zahlen und Fakten über die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Bonn 2002), 113.

<sup>11</sup> Hans-Werner Sinn, "Germany's economic unification: An assessment after ten years," *Review of International Economics*, 10, 2002, 113-128, 114.

<sup>12</sup> Statistisches Bundesamt (see note 10), 128-132.

<sup>13</sup> *Spiegel spezial* 1/1991, 22.

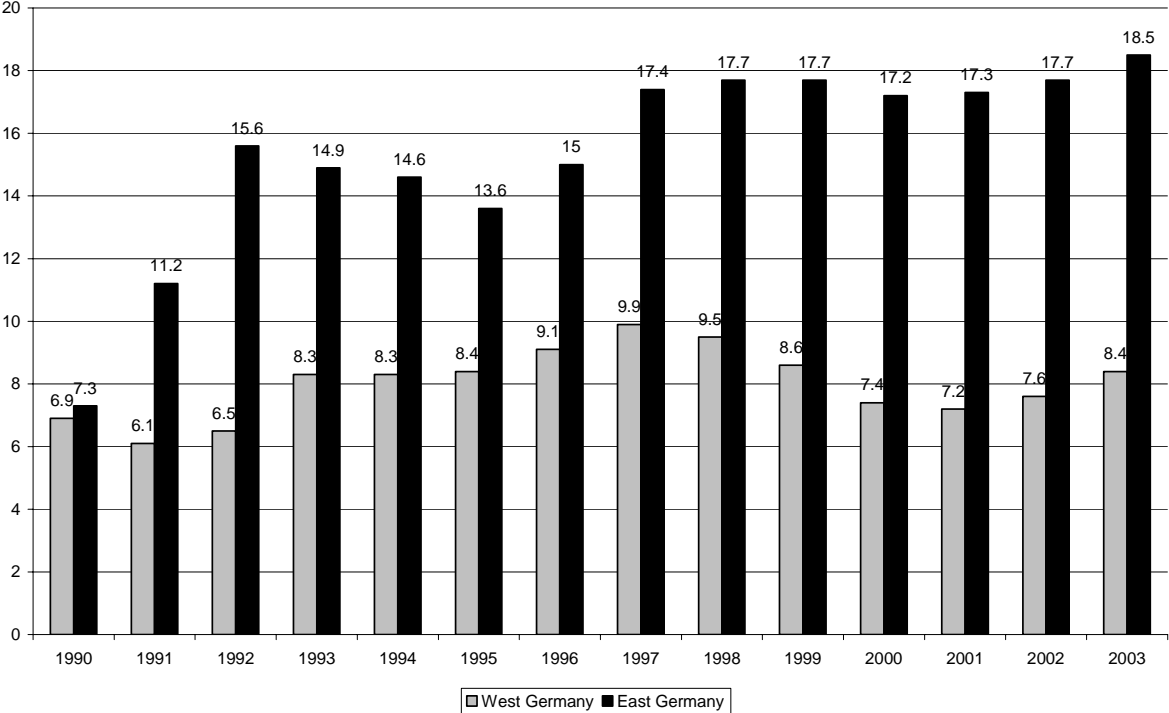
<sup>14</sup> Statistisches Bundesamt, ed., *Datenreport 1999. Zahlen und Fakten über die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Bonn 2000), 428.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Münter/Roland Sturm, "Economic consequences of German unification," *German Politics* 11, 2002, 179-195, 187.

<sup>16</sup> Gunnar Winkler, "Zur sozialen Situation und deren subjektiven Reflexionen in den neuen Bundesländern," in Sozialwissenschaftliches Forschungszentrum Berlin-Brandenburg, ed., *Sozialreport 1996, Sonderheft 1+2*, 24.

To summarize developments regarding personal living conditions, we have to state that quality of life has greatly improved in the East. But despite these positive changes, some differences remain compared with western Germany.

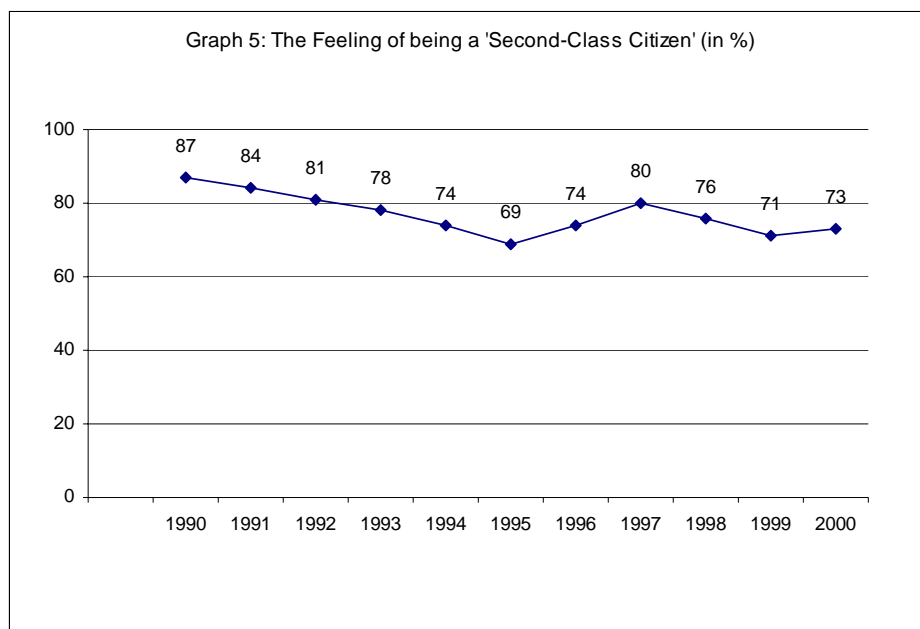
Graph 4: Unemployment Rate in Eastern and Western Germany 1990-2003



**2.3. Problems of Recognition of Eastern Germans**

It has been often said that eastern Germans perceive themselves to be *second-class citizens*. According to surveys conducted by emnid - an opinion research institute in Bielefeld - about 70 to 80 per cent of eastern Germans have tended to view themselves as second-class citizens over the last decade (see graph 5). When we take a closer look at the wording of the question, however, we see that the way the question is posed in many public surveys already presumes certain Eastern attitudes. The question reads: *Do you think that eastern Germans will remain second-class citizens in the longer run?* It is taken for granted that Easterners are second-class citizens. If you ask people directly - and I have done this in a representative poll

- if they *really feel like second-class citizens simply because they are eastern Germans*, only 42 per cent give a positive answer.<sup>17</sup> If you ask them whether they *personally feel like second-class citizens*, only 24 per cent answered affirmatively. The percentage of Easterners rises to 68 per cent, however, if they are asked whether they are treated as second class citizens.<sup>18</sup> The answers concerning the feeling of being a second class citizen depend to a large extent on the wording of the question. Three quarters of eastern Germans identify themselves as *having been recognized as Easterners*. Only one quarter does not. This is a considerable percentage, but a much smaller share than very often suggested in the public sphere. In the public debate we are confronted with the image of Easterners as underestimated, underprivileged, and otherwise despised. The feeling of social acceptance among eastern Germans, however, appears to be much more widespread than is seen publicly.



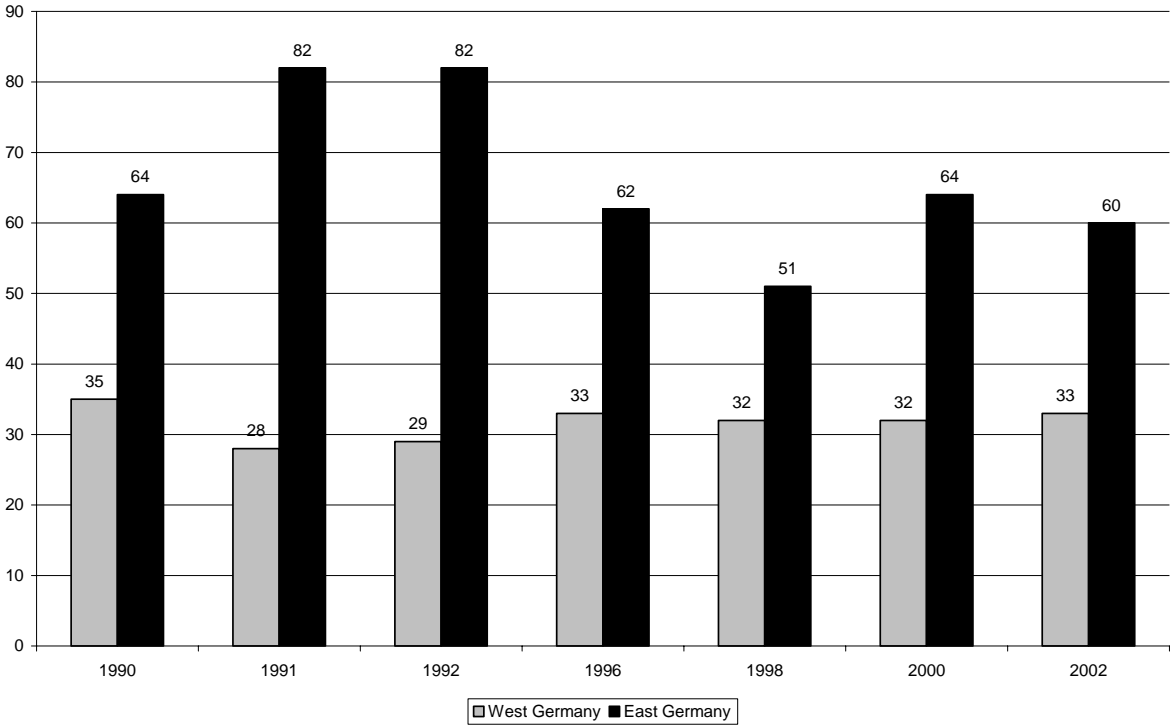
<sup>17</sup> Detlef Pollack and Gert Pickel, "Sozialer und kultureller Wandel in Ostdeutschland" - a survey carried through in 1998 by Emnid, Bielefeld on behalf of the chair of comparative sociology of culture at the European University Frankfurt (Oder).

<sup>18</sup> See footnote 8.

**2.4. The Assessment of Social Inequality**

The assessment of social inequalities in Germany is determined to a great deal by the perception of East/West-differences. Three quarters of eastern Germans think that *equality between eastern and western Germany* has not yet been achieved.<sup>19</sup> In order to measure the feeling of the individual with respect to social justice, different opinion polls have asked residents whether or not they think that, *compared with how others live in Germany, each gets the fair share he or she deserves*. In the first half of the 1990s, the difference between East and West totaled more than 50 percentage points (see graph 6). Presently the difference has dropped to 30 percentage points. Almost two thirds of eastern Germans still feel that they are treated unjustly. But the number of people that holds these feelings has clearly declined in the last years. Undoubtedly, this has a lot to do with the approximation of living conditions in eastern Germany relative to the standards seen in the West.

Graph 6: Just share on standard of living (less than just share in %)



<sup>19</sup> Pollack and Pickel (see note 17).

## 2.5. Changes in Assessments of the General Economic Situation

The assessment of the economic situation in Germany has, in general, changed dramatically over the last fifteen years. Whereas in 1991 a majority evaluated the performance of the German economy positively, in 1994 the majority offered a skeptical assessment of the general economic situation (see table 2), an assessment that has remained stable over the ensuing eight years.

Table 2: Assessment of the General Economic Situation in Germany

	1991	1994	1996	1998	2002
Western Germany	+64	-27	-24	-12	-15
Eastern Germany	+48	-18	-26	-23	-33

Source: Allbus 1991, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2002 (n= 1500 for West and 1000 for East per survey).

The figures listed above are the difference out of positive answers (very good and good) minus the negative answers (bad and very bad).

If we distinguish between eastern and western Germany, we can see that the situation in the West is assessed positively, but negatively in the East (see table 3). This means that the negative assessment of the economic situation in Germany as a whole depends upon the problems in the economic growth in eastern Germany.<sup>20</sup> The personal economic situation is, however, seen positively in both the West and the East.<sup>21</sup>

Table 3: Attitudes vis-à-vis the General Economic and the Individual Situation in Eastern and Western Germany

	Western Germany	Eastern Germany
Assessment of the economic situation in western Germany	+26,6	+44,1
Assessment of the economic situation in eastern Germany	-24,1	-47,5
Assessment of the personal economic situation	+58,8	+39,5

Source: Sozialer und kultureller Wandel in Ost- und Westdeutschland 1998. The figures listed above are the difference out of positive answers (very good and good) minus the negative answers (bad and very bad).

<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that Easterners not only assess the economic situation in the West more positively than Westerners, but also the economic situation in the East more negative than western Germans. Maybe they tend to overstate the differences between West and East in order to present themselves as underprivileged, whereas western Germans are prone to minimize the differences perhaps in order to avoid the image of being privileged.

<sup>21</sup> The difference in the assessment of the personal and the general economic situation is a well known fact in the polling research. Cf. Jürgen Maier and Hans Rattinger, "Economic Conditions and the 1994 and 1998 Federal Elections," *German Politics* 8 (1999), No. 2, 33-47.

### 3. Explaining Satisfaction with Democracy

In order to explain the level of satisfaction with democracy in eastern Germany we make use of regression analysis. This method is able to measure the influence of independent variables on dependant variables. Satisfaction with democracy is our dependent variable. All other indicators we have used serve as independent variables.

Table 4: Determinants of Satisfaction with Democracy in Eastern Germany

Variables	1998		2000	
	Standardized Coefficients Beta	Significance (p)	Standardized Coefficients Beta	Significance (p)
Idea of socialism is good	-.05	.322	-.01	.842
Was satisfied with the really existing socialism	-.03	.487	-.05	.646
Household income	.06	.189	.09	.012
Experience with unemployment	-.07	.095	-.01	.711
As eastern German citizen of a second class	-.07	.135	-.13	.002
As eastern German acknowledged	.16	.001	n.a.	n.a.
Receive just share	.11	.011	.20	.000
No equality between eastern and western Germany	-.09	.033	n.a.	n.a.
Economic situation West good	.18	.000	.13	.001
Economic situation East good	.19	.000	.17	.000
R <sup>2</sup>	.19		.21	

Source: Sozialer und kultureller Wandel in Ost- und Westdeutschland 1998. Political Culture in Central and Eastern Europe 2000. Significant are only values which are  $p < .050$ . (n.a. = question not asked)

As can be seen in table 4, the assessment of the idea of socialism and the satisfaction with socialism as it really existed in the GDR are not significant in determining one's satisfaction with democracy. The widespread thesis that socialization in the former GDR is responsible for the lower degree of satisfaction with democracy can be refuted. Also, the economic situation of households measured by household incomes and personal experiences with unemployment has an astonishingly weak influence on satisfaction with democracy. Only in 2000 did household income influence the assessment of how well democracy works in Germany, and only to a minor extent (Beta = .09). The lower degree of eastern German satisfac-

tion with democracy, therefore, can be attributed neither to the socialist past nor to the individual's economic situation.

More important are aspects of recognition in the process of re-unification. Whether eastern Germans enjoy a degree of recognition within united German society has a considerable impact on their overall satisfaction with democracy (1998: "As eastern German acknowledged," Beta = .16; 2000: "As East German citizen of second class," Beta = -.13). As regards social inequality, whether one believes he or she is getting a fair share of social 'goods' (1998: Beta = .11; 2000: Beta = .20) and whether one believes there is equality between eastern and western Germany are also significant explanatory factors (1998: Beta = -.09). Especially important for the degree of satisfaction with democracy, however, is the way one judges the economic situation in East and West in general (1998: Beta = .18 respectively .9; 2000: Beta = .13 respectively .17). The more negatively eastern Germans evaluate the economic situation, the more dissatisfied they tend to be with the functioning of democracy. Satisfaction with democracy depends to a great extent upon how people judge the outcome of the political and economic system.

If we compare these results with the positive assessments we detected at the personal level, we get a rather curious picture: Eastern Germans feel that personally they are doing well (see table 3), although the general economic situation in the East really does not provide any real basis for this - even in the judgment of the Easterners themselves (see assessment of the economic situation in East Germany in table 3). The improvement in personal living conditions is not merely the result of economic efforts undertaken by eastern Germans themselves but also owes a great deal to major financial transfers from West to East. The source of personal well-being appears to rest in particular on the continuing strength of the western German economy. The fact that they are doing well as individuals above all depends on the enormous economic support that the East has been receiving directly from the West, along with the transfer payments, Western development of infrastructure (rehabilitating the rail-

roads, improving the highways, restructuring of buildings, for example), new social policy measures, and the mass import of western consumer goods to the East. About 75 billion Euro have been transferred every year from the West to the East.<sup>22</sup> Consumption in the East is nearly 50 per cent higher than GDP for that region. This means that every third Euro spent in the East has been coming from the West.<sup>23</sup>

Germany is not a united nation. But the important point here is not the “Wall in people’s heads” about which so many pundits talk and write. The latter is only a reflection of the real economic conditions in East and West, which could not be any more disparate. On the one hand, we have a highly modern, extremely productive and potent economic system that is still rather efficient. On the other, we find an economic system highly dependent upon the West; the East is participating in a game of catch-up with a more potent partner, a race that it has already lost, and from here on in, the gap between the two parts of Germany is growing larger rather than smaller.

Immediately following the introduction of the *Deutschmark* in July 1990, three months before legal unification, eastern industrial production fell by 70 per cent.<sup>24</sup> Within two years GDP in the new states had decreased by more than one third (see graph 7). This is a singularity in the development of industrialized societies. In the other transformation states of Central and Eastern Europe, GDP declined by only 20 to 30 per cent.

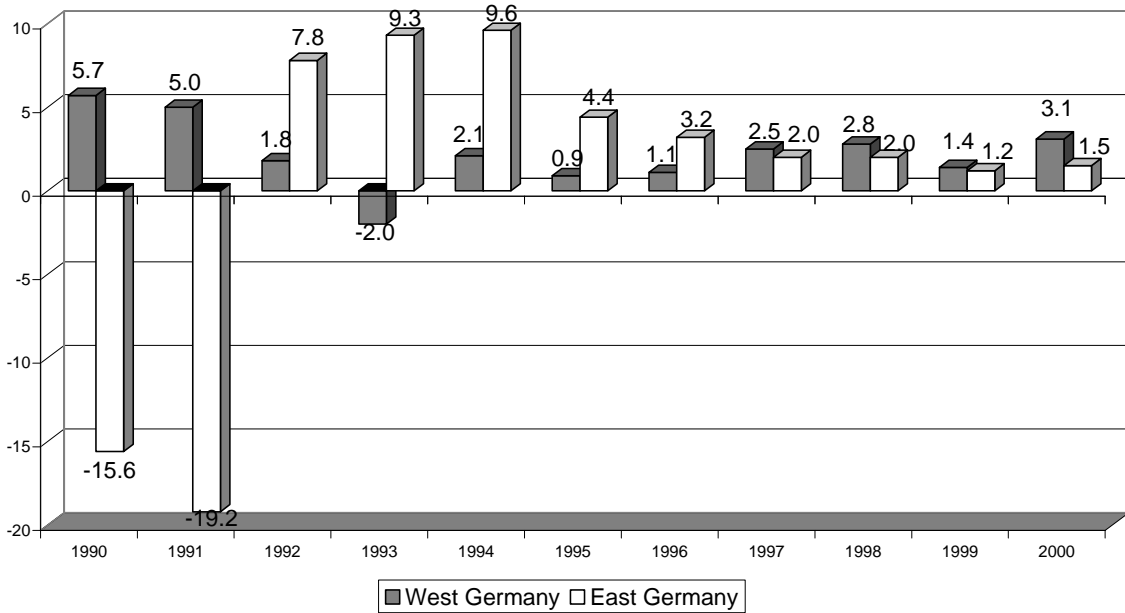
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<sup>22</sup> The bulk of that money was poured into social security payments. Only a small share, 17 per cent, went to investments (Ulrich Busch “Sieben fette Jahre? Kritische Bemerkungen zu Charakter und Umfang der Transfers,” *Berliner Debatte* INITIAL 9 (1998), No. 2/3, 89-103).

<sup>23</sup> Sinn (see note 11), 116.

<sup>24</sup> DIW, IfW, IWH, *Gesamtwirtschaftliche und unternehmerische Anpassungsfortschritte in Ostdeutschland*. 19. Bericht (Halle, 1999), 10-11.

Graph 7: Growth of Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (%)  
1990-2000



Between 1992 and 1994, the growth of GDP was high, though it slowed again after 1994 (see graph 7). Since 1997, the Eastern growth rate has been lower than that of western Germany; the same is true concerning growth in productivity.<sup>25</sup> This means that the distance between eastern and western German levels of economic development is not shrinking, but widening. Although many enterprises have invested in the Eastern economy, the new states have not yet experienced an upswing that is independent and self-sustaining.

Given this situation it is pretty clear to everyone why the Easterners would not be satisfied with the situation in Germany, despite the improvements in their personal circumstances since 1990. Eastern Germans have few reasons to be proud of their own accomplishments. Generally speaking, they are doing much better materially than their Central and East European neighbors. But in contrast to their neighbors, they also know that as far as the positive changes in their own country are concerned, the improvements did not come as a result of their own hard work but were just given to them like a gift.

<sup>25</sup> Frank Bönker and Hans-Jürgen Wagener "Ostdeutschland im mittelosteuropäischen Spiegel. Ein Vergleich gesamtwirtschaftlicher Transformationsergebnisse," *Berliner Debatte* INITIAL 10 (1999), no. 4/5, 98-110, esp. 105.

## Conclusions

Arguably, eastern Germans have accomplished a lot over the last several years. Regardless, though, it has not been enough to allow them to reach Western levels of development. Naturally, it is hard to blame themselves for this and it probably doesn't even make sense to ask who is to blame in the first place. But one thing is clear - it takes a special kind of self-deception to praise a system to whose competent functioning one has personally contributed so little. This is true especially among a people whose lives used to center around the concept of productive labor. So one real source of the limited eastern acceptance of the Federal Republic's institutions lies in the noteworthy lack of any proportionate Eastern contribution to the success of German unification. People, we must understand, can only identify with the successful completion of something they themselves have helped to build. In those economic places and political spaces where they are just not needed in order to reconstruct the whole, they will not be able to embrace the whole product as their own.

Dating back to the 1950s and the 1960s, western Germans have enjoyed the feeling that they created a success story all their own. They have been very proud of having pulled off an economic miracle after the destruction of World War II, and of once again having achieved an important standing on the world stage, even if as a rule they tend to overestimate their personal roles in bringing about this success. Eastern Germans, by contrast, are rather more inclined to attribute the circumstances in which they now find themselves to external forces and actors - and there are good reasons for this. Already during the communist era, eastern Germans were not allowed to make decisions about their own destinies. Eastern Germans did not even perceive unification as a process in which they could determine their own roles and contributions (although ironically, if it hadn't been for all of their self-mobilization in 1989 in bringing down the Wall, unification would not have happened).

In this regard, however, all of the good deeds of the West are turning back against it, producing a boomerang effect. As long as Easterners do not have an adequate list of their own

accomplishments to line up next to these Western good deeds, it would seem as though they are giving up on themselves, if they were to express gratitude for them. No, gratitude does not constitute a fitting reaction to these good Western deeds. As they perceive it, eastern Germans are entitled to the good things they are now receiving; indeed, they have been entitled to them for a long time - weren't they, after all, the ones who had to hang on for 40 years on the shadowy side of life, on the other side of the Wall? Are western Germans to blame for the reality that things have gone so well for them all these years? Of course not. The higher standards of living they have enjoyed since 1949 were the result of an accident of birth. Does that make it the eastern Germans' own fault that their lives were so much harder over a period of 40 years? Certainly not. Consequently they now think that they need a kind of redistributive justice to balance out past privileges and hardships. It is regrettable that Westerners cannot comprehend this. People have to complain; otherwise they would have to admit their own failings. The others are to blame, not themselves. Therefore one can also place demands on the others.

It is no coincidence that eastern Germans tend to revalue the old system they used to have and to devalue the Western system they have today; there is a psychological need to idealize aspects of GDR life and to look for bad features within the Federal Republic. Yes, even the tendency to consider themselves better with the passage of time and to morally discredit the competitive superiority of western Germans constitutes an obvious attempt at self-exoneration. This process is necessary in order for eastern Germans not to lose their self-respect. But it cannot cover up for the fact that the citizens of the eastern states just can't feel very happy about the progress that has been made in German – German unification. All of the unquestionable successes that this process has brought about are simply not the result of, and have too little to do with, their own accomplishments. Eastern Germans will grow more satisfied with the political, social and economic institutions of the Federal Republic when they finally have a reason to become proud of themselves.