

Strengthening European
integration through the
analysis of conflict discourses
Revisiting the Past, Anticipating the Future

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1 Introduction

The RePAST project builds on the idea that the collective memory of a country's troubled past impacts on European integration processes. In simple terms, a country's mode of dealing with a conflict-ridden or traumatic past, the values and norms associated with public memory practices, serve as an indicator of a country's overall commitment to promoting mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence, both of which are equally deemed core values of European integration. In this policy recommendations report, we take the balance of 30 years of German unification as a starting point, by focusing not only on how the phase of transition after unification is publicly remembered and evaluated but also—and more importantly—on how the German population judges this historical legacy and its public reappraisal. The question at stake is how memory politics can promote integration processes and, thus, ultimately ensure social cohesion and peace: What forms of remembrance do we need to reach as many people as possible and overcome social division? This question is asked against the background that today—30 years after unification—we have yet to find an all-German discourse of remembrance about German unity—with the East German narrative, in particular, being still far from having found its way into the all-German memory discourse.

Already on the twentieth anniversary of unification, the East German social scientist Rolf Reiig (2011) called for a public exchange on what is meant by the concept of *Einheit* (unity). Although the term is undeniably valid concerning the geographical unity of the two German entities, social and economic unity has still not been achieved today, nor has been established what can be termed the *inner unity* of Germany. Even though the East is catching up economically with Western regions, the majority of so-called structurally weak regions is still located in the Eastern part of the Federal Republic. East Germans, particularly in rural areas, have a lower life expectancy than their compatriots in the West (Rau & Schmertmann, 2020). They have, on average, not even half as much wealth as West Germans, they earn less, are unemployed more often, and they are significantly less likely to hold management and leadership positions in business, science and media (Kollmorgen, 2020).

Even though almost 70% of Germans believe that the Federal Republic benefited from the fall of the Wall and unification, three quarters of East Germans and almost as many West Germans today also state that the differences between East and West Germany are still considerable.¹ The landslide victory of the right-wing party *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) in the last federal state elections in East Germany at the latest has put the question of inner unity on the political agenda. Since then, the question of the reasons for the AfD's march through the East has been driving science and research, filling many a bookshelf in the anniversary year of the fall of the Wall and unification (see, e.g., Kowalczyk, 2019; Mau, 2019). The AfD has made a difference in the country: The party's victory has not only brought the interests of the East into focus, but its presence has also brought civil society initiatives to the fore, such as *Wir sind der Osten* (We are the East) or *Dritte Generation Ostdeutschland* (Third Generation East Germany), which are actively resisting clichés about the East. It is now generally acknowledged that resentment and discontent of people in the East have a lot to do with the experiences of the period after 1990. Petra Kopping (2018), currently Minister of State for Social Affairs and Social Cohesion in Saxony, speaks of 'humiliations, insults and injustices' (p. 9) that East Germans experienced 'quasi collectively' (p. 71) after the fall of the Wall—including the large-scale privatisation of former state-

¹ Figures from *Der Spiegel* special edition '30 Jahre Mauerfall', October/November 2019: pp. 25, 67.

owned companies by the *Treuhand*, the devaluation of diplomas and qualifications or the loss of jobs leading to an unprecedented mass unemployment in the East—therefore claiming the post-unification period to be subjected to a political reappraisal. According to the East German sociologist Steffen Mau, who combines the socio-political conditions of the pre- and post-unification period into a scientific synthesis, the East German society has experienced numerous *fractures*: ‘These are neither solely attributable to the collapse of the GDR nor to the pitfalls of the unification process, but arise from both together’ (Mau, 2019: 14; see also Kohlstruck, 2018).

The RePAST project is concerned with the question of how the period of transition after 1989, as well as public memory of this past, continue to affect social divisions, the public image of East Germany and, ultimately, political developments there. Besides the aforementioned socio-economic rift between East and West, we also identify today’s public construction of *East Germanism* emanating from this past as a reason for the persistence of an East-West polarization in Germany. In contrast to West Germans, people from East Germany are often held responsible as a collective group, combined with negative attributions (Ahbe et al., 2010). Following social scientist Daniel Kubiak (2019), the German public is regularly confronted with ‘discussions about East Germans and East German-ness concerning whether this social group reacts differently to cultural developments and providing explanations as to why East Germans are still less democratic and less integrated into normal German society’ (pp. 151–152). Departing from the assumption that communication both produces and mirrors social practices (Foucault, 2002), the public construction of East German-ness can be interpreted both as a *cause* and a *consequence* of the continuing social division between East and West. Put differently, public discourse makes East Germans into East Germans just as much as it reflects social tendencies of an ongoing East-West distinction.

Against this background, the present policy recommendations report contains evidence-based arguments for strengthening dialogue and mutual understanding. First, the methodological approach is explained, which forms the basis of the reasoning in the remainder of the document: The policy recommendations form a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative results of the RePAST project as well as five expert interviews conducted with relevant stakeholders. This part is followed by a section on the role of the European Union concerning unification, the period after unification and the historical reappraisal, with Germany being rather exceptional compared to the other RePAST countries under study. Recommendations are then formulated along the four RePAST work packages *History, Media, Politics* and *Culture*, by drawing on a ‘currency’ that is still largely absent from the public discourse about the East: *recognition*.

2 Methodology

The RePAST project is based on both quantitative and qualitative analyses, the results of which are incorporated into the present policy recommendations. We conducted 36 guided group discussions with 193 participants and 78 semi-structured interviews; hence, a total of 271 people participated in our studies. In addition, a representative telephone survey was carried out in the framework of the project using a standardized questionnaire among the population (N=1,005). We interviewed 16 journalists from leading German media houses and 32 experts working at the interface of history, memory and culture, and we conducted qualitative content analyses of six print and online newspapers. The fieldwork began in December

2018 and was largely completed in spring 2020, before the lockdown in Europe due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing this policy recommendation, by far not all data had been evaluated. Still, during the course of data collection and its initial evaluation, specific ideas of the current memory discourse have emerged. This policy recommendation should, therefore, be seen as a *working paper*, as the results will be analysed further over the coming months.

The recommendations have been refined by means of qualitative expert interviews. We have spoken with the following persons:

- *Mathias Weilandt* (*1982 in Dresden), jurist and politician, since December 2019 State Secretary in the Saxon State Ministry of Justice, for Democracy, Europe and Equality;
- *Tobias Bütow* (*1978 in Magdeburg), historian and political scientist, since March 2019 German Secretary-General of the Franco-German Youth Office;
- *Mandy Tröger* (*1980 in Berlin (East)), historian and communication scholar, since 2018 assistant professor at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, focus on post-socialist and German-German media history;
- *Katrin Rohnstock* (*1960 in Jena), literary and linguistic researcher, publicist, author and founder of the company *Rohnstock Biographies*, initiator of East-West storytelling salons;
- *Anonymous leading official* (*1977 in West Germany), social scientist, since 2020 responsible for EU affairs in an East German Ministry.

The recruitment of respondents was largely unproblematic, although some inquiries remained unanswered. Due to the celebrations marking the 30th anniversary of German unification, there may have been an increased demand for experts in science and media. All conversations were conducted by telephone or online between August and November 2020, recorded and then transcribed. Because the West German perspective dominates the public discourse of remembrance, the goal in selecting interview partners was to capture primarily the East German perspective. In addition, substantial importance was given to attracting experts from all areas of society relevant to the RePAST project: from the fields of history, politics, media, and culture as well as civil society. Three interview partners work in European/EU-related working contexts. In addition to questions on their personal background, the interviewees were asked to provide their assessment of the current remembrance policy concerning German unification and the political transition period; recommendations for action were discussed, as was the role of the European Union in the context of German-German remembrance.

3 The EU's approach to the German divide and unification

Germany is a founding member of the European Economic Community and, therefore, in contrast to the seven other RePAST countries, has not gone through an admission procedure. This also applies to the German Democratic Republic. Even if the term *reunification* is still predominantly used today, the GDR formally *acceded* to the Federal Republic of Germany on 3 October 1990 through Article 23 of the Basic Law. At the same time and in contrast to the other Central and Eastern European states of the then Warsaw Treaty, which

underwent a 14-year accession process, the GDR joined the EU (or the then European Economic Community) without an accession process.

The countries of Southern Europe (i.e., Spain, Portugal and Greece), whose troubled past did not end with the Second World War, also had to go through such a political, economic and legitimacy-building accession process. The fulfilment of accession criteria, referred to since 1993 as the *Copenhagen criteria* (free-market economy, stable democracy, rule of law), generally requires a preceding, far-reaching transformation process, which the EU supports financially and provides administrative guidance. There was no such process in the five new federal states, Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Brandenburg. The title of this subchapter—so named for reasons of comparability with the other RePAST countries under study—might, therefore, be somewhat misleading: there is no EU approach to Germany's troubled past in that sense.

The economic and political adjustment process in Eastern Germany took place literally overnight. All Community law was also applied in the accession territory (Unification Treaty, Art. 10). The EC laid down numerous transitional arrangements for the transformation. The democratic legitimization of the GDR's accession to the European Community was given by the GDR's accession to the FRG, following the election to the *Volkskammer* (People's Chamber) on 18 March 1990, the decision of the *Volkskammer* to join the FRG on 23 August 1990 and the Unification Treaty of 31 August 1990 between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. An interesting note on the transitional periods established in 1990 between the united Germany and the EC: according to Hans-Dieter Kuschel, former Head of the Unit for the Accession of Third Countries to the EC at the Federal Ministry of Economics and Head of the German negotiating delegation for the integration of the former GDR into the EC, the larger EC countries, in particular, were afraid that a 'new Hong Kong' would be created in the Eastern German accession area through 'generous exemptions from EC competition and state aid law, from the requirements of the internal market rules on health, safety and consumer protection and from plant- and product-related environmental law' (Kuschel, 1991: 81). The temporary derogations were, therefore, only to be achieved in accordance with the promise that the products manufactured in the accession area of East Germany would be consumed and processed in this area only and not be transferred to the rest of the EC territory (*ibid.*; see also König, 2010).

Whereas the EU, by means of the common market, above all creates a level playing field for companies and, thus, enables Europe-wide economic growth, the distribution of wealth is largely the responsibility of the member states themselves. To a comparatively limited extent, however, the EU also acts in a balancing way with the aim of promoting the EU's 'economic, social and territorial cohesion' (Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union). Against this backdrop, the EU's range of action in East Germany is modest, but it comes out, above all, in the significant use of cohesion funds. Although cohesion policy is not an EU specificity for East Germany, it is an EU policy that, in the case of Germany, applies almost exclusively to East Germany. With the current EU budget and the supplementary COVID-19 reconstruction funds, considerable funds once again flow into Eastern Germany, above all into the lignite regions, which receive special support through the EU's *Just Transition Fund* with the aim of achieving CO2 neutrality by 2050, in order to make the transition in these regions as equitable as possible.

Despite these financial instruments, the East German population's attachment to and identification with Europe has rapidly declined over the years (Krämer, 2002: 37). Ten years after unification already, the two economists Kathleen Toepel and Christian Weise (2000) described the weak support for European integration by the population in East Germany as a 'serious failure,' which was 'all the more difficult to understand in view of the positive assessment of the way in which East Germany's integration into the EC had been shaped' (p.

190). In their view, the advantages of EU membership was ‘less obvious for the East Germans’ than for other Eastern European populations, where the EU was perceived as an ‘anchor of modernization.’ In the case of East Germany, according to the two authors, ‘this reference point was not the EC but the ‘old’ Federal Republic.’ East Germans were not sufficiently aware ‘that the success of the Federal Republic’s economic order can hardly be separated from its membership in the EU’ (p. 191). This highly functionalist view contrasts with the fact that the West has never quite succeeded in emotionally binding the citizens of the former GDR to the European project. ‘The Euro-enthusiasm noted in the earlier *Eurobarometer* surveys in the former GDR,’ summarized a special report for the European Community in 1993, ‘has now subsided, and the new EC citizens are now in the group of Euro-sceptics’ (Kommission der europäischen Gemeinschaften, 1993: i). In 2016, 80% of West Germans felt that they were EU citizens, compared to under two thirds of East Germans. Whereas more than half of the West Germans supported the idea that more decisions should be taken at the EU level, only a third of the East Germans felt the same way (Europäische Kommission, 2016: 5, 8). If one believes the historian Heinrich August Winkler, the East Germans had ‘no chance of developing a post-national self-confidence; despite the state doctrine of socialist internationalism, they remained German in a conventional way’ (Winkler, 2018: 147)—a thesis that would first have to be empirically substantiated, however.

To complete the picture, it should be noted that since the EU’s eastward enlargement, the communist past of Eastern European states has increasingly been on the political agenda at European and EU level (see, e.g., Mälksoo, 2014). In 2008, for example, the European Parliament established the *European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism* (Black Ribbon Day)—and there have also been a number of other initiatives on the part of Eastern European states to anchor the communist past of the continent more firmly in the collective memory of Europeans, analogous to the commemoration of National Socialism (see, e.g., Ghodsee, 2014). These initiatives were largely supported by the German Federal Government, as they are very much in line with the public remembrance practice established in Germany since the 1990s, according to which the GDR past is to be remembered primarily through the prism of totalitarianism and dictatorship.

4 Proposing strategies for mitigating the challenges arising from the troubled past: policy recommendations

If one follows Helmut König, then the politics of memory express ‘the ideal of citizenship.’ This citizenship, writes the political scientist and memory researcher, ‘governs itself in such a way that it believes can be accepted by others for good reasons and gains additional plausibility through past experiences’ (König, 2010: 116). In other words: Inherent to social peace is a broad social consensus among the population, which forms the basis for political legitimacy; this consensus also touches on the question of how to remember controversial and conflict-prone events of the past. With the rise of the *Alternative for Germany* party, which is shaking the democratic foundations of the Federal Republic of Germany to its core and is also bringing about a paradigm shift in the politics of memory, the history of unification and of the post-unification period, erroneously believed to have been written, is once again at stake. In democratic, pluralistic societies, the question of political memory must be ‘debated publicly and fairly and with reasons given’; any answer is ‘always only of a provisional nature’ (ibid.). In the following, we will take König’s statement as a starting point to enter into a debate on how the public memory of unification and political transition could be shaped to

promote dialogue and maintain social cohesion. The following policy recommendations, which are formulated below along the four work packages of the RePAST project, are based on two overarching entwined objectives, which are first presented and discussed here and then translated into concrete recommendations for action.

The short-/medium term objective is to create an *awareness of the problem among the general public for the period of unification and post-unification as an all-German conflictual context in its own right*. The results of our qualitative research have shown that the period of German (post-)unification is still understood by many (West) Germans primarily as genuine East German history and not as a shared past of Germans as a whole. 'To this day, this period of total dismantling has not become part of an all-German narrative,' writes journalist Jana Hensel, 'as a regional but nevertheless profound historical event, it has not become part of a more recent German historical narrative' (Engler & Hensel, 2018: 69). Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, one must ask: What really happened? Reconciliation begins where both sides look critically at past developments by acknowledging that mistakes have been made and naming them more openly. Our representative survey demonstrated that a majority of 43% of Germans consider reconciliation necessary with regard to the post-unification period (37% do not consider it necessary; 20% had no opinion about it); unsurprisingly, this wish was higher among those respondents who experienced this time personally and/or were close to the East. Interestingly, Germans are divided about what reconciliation means with respect to the post-unification period: Whereas those closer to a West German position think reconciliation means 'forgetting,' those who sympathize with East Germans consider it to mean 'dialogue'. However, political developments in recent years have shown that forgetting does not have the desired effect of closing the societal rift. Identifying mistakes and critically reflecting on past developments would enable a more differentiated view of the causes of social imbalances between East and West. 'One problem is that a lot of the current problems are traced back to the time of the GDR,' said Mandy Tröger, 'and not so much to the time of unification or the time after unification and the experiences that people there had.'

The fact that in April 2019 the German government set up the Commission *30 Jahre Friedliche Revolution und Deutsche Einheit* (30 Years of Peaceful Revolution and German Unity), which operates under the motto, 'German Unity is a process that is not yet complete', shows that awareness increases at the political level. In December 2020, at the time of the completion of this report, the Commission presented a final report including recommendations for action (Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, 2020). The present report takes up the main points of this final report without, however, being able to provide a complete analysis of it. The following observation is particularly relevant for our policy recommendations: It is striking how little the Commission's report deals with the events of the post-reunification period. While it emphasises the importance of intra-German dialogue and makes a number of proposals to support dialogue formats, it lacks a call for a critical analysis and reappraisal of the period after the fall of communism.

Dialogue and sensitization, both of which are our short-/medium term objectives, are conducive to what we shall refer to as a *discursive change in public memory of German-German history*, which is the long-term objective. Through a pluralization of perspectives, encrusted narratives can be broken up that bear witness to the dominance of the West, such as viewing the GDR primarily under the framework of dictatorship (Meyen, 2013) or framing unification as a unique success story (cf. Kollmorgen et al., 2011). A central concern must be the recognition of different experiences, not their delegitimization. If one takes the book market as a yardstick, then there seems to be no doubt that the public pressure to reassess the history of the German transition period falls on fertile ground: Titles on the role of the *Treuhand* in the liquidation of former GDR businesses (e.g., Jacobs, 2020; Böick, 2018; Tröger, 2019) are today lined up alongside stories of East German identity negotiation (e.g., Schönian, 2020; Foroutan & Hensel, 2020). That said, the transitional phase was also a time

of extreme right-wing extremism. ‘These baseball bat years,’ said Tobias Bütow with reference to the journalist Christian Bangel (2020), ‘are a topic that we also have to remember more.’

A discursive change is not only a matter of allowing the various East German perspectives to enter the leading media, politics and culture, but the wheel must be turned further. *East Germans as legitimate speakers*, this means: What skills, knowledge and expertise do East Germans bring with them that can be of use to this society? Journalist Christian Bangel played this out using the example of ‘post-capitalism’: Ecological, social and economic challenges will bring about the end of the capitalist age of profit maximization, commercialization and waste of resources. Thinking a society anew and differently, according to Bangel, is exactly the point where the East German perspective is needed, in the middle of which ‘the fixation on market economy and profit characteristic of the West is missing’ (Bangel, 2020). With this line of argument, we go further than the Commission Report, which focuses exclusively on the skills of people in East Germany acquired through the transformation experience as an important asset for today’s society—e.g. with regard to ‘technological and societal challenges’, including ‘major trends such as digitalisation, globalisation, sustainability, climate protection and energy transition’ (Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, 2020: 19). However, we believe that it is possible to draw on achievements from both the GDR and the (post-)unification period—without automatically relativising the injustices committed during the communist era.

Such a change of perspective could be seen by the Germans as an opportunity to get out of the continuing East-West imbalance, possibly even helping to overcome the East-West dichotomy, in favour of strengthening regional and not least European identity. After all, it was not Germany alone but the European continent that was divided and reunited. The social division that emanates from this past, which can be observed in Germany today, is also taking place in other neighbouring European countries. Sociologist Steffen Mau (2019) writes that the ‘narrative of progress and modernity of the Western model society seems scratched’ (p. 16); East Germany is not a marginal note, ‘but possibly a condensation area for distortions that can also be observed elsewhere...East Germany may even play a pioneering role in the populist revolt of the dissatisfied and frustrated’ (p. 17). Thus, it is important in German remembrance to think beyond the national borders.

The idea proposed in the report of the Commission to establish a *Zukunftszentrum für Europäische Transformation und Deutsche Einheit* (Future Centre for European Transformation and German Unity), intended to be a scientific institute, meeting place and cultural centre all in one, aims precisely in this direction, to free transformation and research about it from its national embrace. In addition to the aforementioned demand for greater utilisation of the East German transformation experiences, the Commission’s recommendations also include strengthening structurally weak regions and expanding national symbols. The policy recommendations presented in this report are intended to complement, but also counter, the recommendations of the Commission, which are referred to selectively, by paying special attention to aspects of the culture of remembrance.

4.1 History

Expanding the topic in the school curriculum: The results of the numerous interviews and focus group discussions that we conducted in the context of the RePAST project show that many Germans feel that the period of (post-)unification is underrepresented in the public discourse of remembrance, which is limited to a chronology of a few significant events of that time. The younger generations in particular, whose knowledge

is based solely on transmitted family memories and history lessons at school, often feel insufficiently informed about this part of German history, albeit that there are regional differences between East and West, with East German (post-)adolescents benefitting more often from transmitted (grand-)parental memories. The findings from the qualitative research are supported by the representative survey conducted among the population (N=1,005). Only approximately one quarter of those surveyed between the ages of 18 and 34 years felt well informed about the post-unification period, half of the survey participants in this age group had at least a vague idea and another quarter stated that they knew basically nothing about this period. These findings are countered by the interviewees' desire to know more about the topic. Nearly 70% of the interviewees from the age group of 18- to 34-year-olds stated that they find it important to talk today about the time of (post-)unification. If one adds the other age groups, the approval of the relevance of the topic is even 80% of all respondents. We, therefore, recommend a general expansion of the subject matter in the curricula—i.e., topics and issues relating to the history of both German states should be given a higher priority in (history) school lessons than is currently the case. Hence, increased emphasis should be placed on the transition period and be anchored in schoolbooks, including the restructuring of the East German economy (keywords: *Treuhand*, market economy, privatisation, etc.), the political upheaval (from the civil rights movement to the founding of a party landscape in the East) and the social implications of the turnaround (from gaining new rights to mass unemployment). To make the post-unification period an all-German narrative, it must also be placed in the broader European context.

Organization of theme-based pupils/student exchanges: Even today, 30 years after unification, there are still people in Germany who have never travelled to the former other part of the country. This is particularly true for people from West Germany; some of them—as our study has also confirmed—exhibited a highly prejudiced view of the East. Establishing an exchange can be conducive to the idea of providing young people with an understanding of the realities of life on the other side, breaking down stereotyped images and fostering inner-German dialogue. We would deliberately frame such a dialogue as a 'theme-based' exchange. In 2018, then President of the Conference of Education Ministers and Minister of Education in Thuringia, Helmut Holter (*Die Linke*), spoke out in favour of integrating exchange programmes between East and West in school curricula—and failed with this proposal. One of the criticisms was that such an exchange was no longer up to date because many young people no longer think in East/West terms, which is substantiated by our focus group discussion results. In principle, it seems correct that an exchange under the East/West banner could cement the *Otherness* rather than dissolving opposites. A remedy to this problem could be to choose other categories—such as an exchange between pupils/students from Hanseatic cities, trade fair cities, etc., which exist in both East and West. The 'by-product' of such an exchange would be the understanding of commonalities. The advantage of this approach is that there is an interest in exchange, as the focus group discussions have illustrated: There is the desire among East and West Germans to get to know the 'other' side better.

The history of transformation as European history: The same is true for pupils exchanges on a European level. According to Tobias Bütow, 'more than exchanges between East and West, we need Europe. Every pupil should have experienced a European or international pupils exchange at some point during his/her school career,' he said. In a similar vein, Mathias Weilandt advocated for 'building relationships, for example between border regions': 'When we talk about the European level, the concern must be to move away from the national idea.' If there is a close exchange at European level, he said, then 'the question of belonging to a former GDR and all other related issues will also be resolved.' While exchange programmes already exist at EU level, more support should be given in particular to the mobility of young people between 'troubled past countries.' Furthermore,

historical components could be added to already existing exchange structures in order to make history tangible beyond national borders, e.g. by integrating storytelling salons into existing exchange structures—making storytelling between European citizens a central part of the understanding of (European) history.

Opening of the archives: To prevent the formation of myths and legends—which still exist among the population as our qualitative interviews have shown, for example, with regard to the role of the *Treuhand*, but also in terms of the interference of politics, secret services and the economy in the dissolution of the GDR—the archives must be opened. Although the archival heritage of the GDR was made accessible to the scientific community on a large scale after unification, many files from the times of unification are still under lock and key on the part of the Federal Government. ‘The consequences of this imbalance for historical research are serious and well-known among archivists and historians in Germany,’ writes Mandy Tröger (2020): ‘They relate to a broader political agenda to the writing and construction of German-German history. They also partly explain the often one-sided and GDR-centric approaches in current German-German history writing.’ For instance, not all questions concerning the history of the *Treuhand* have been clarified, at present, partly because the *Treuhand*’s approximately 45 km of files were not opened until 2019 and have since been gradually released by the Federal Archives.

4.2 Media

Varying perspectives on the period of German division, unification and the post-unification period: In reporting on the GDR past, media coverage concentrated for a long time primarily on the totalitarian aspects of the communist regime—such as the Stasi, doping, human rights violations, the Wall and barbed wire (Meyen, 2013), whereas media coverage of East German society today often implies ‘a subalternization of East Germans and East Germany within the framework of West German society’ (Kollmorgen et al., 2011: 15, see Ahbe et al., 2010): ‘“Ossi-Bashing” is one of the compulsory exercises of the most important opinion leaders’ (Engler & Hensel, 2018: 31). This one-sided bias can only be addressed by pluralizing perspectives. More important at this point is the observation that the right-wing media, in particular, know how to use this situation to their own advantage: Our discourse analysis of articles with reference to the GDR and East Germany published in right-wing media shows that these media aim to compensate for the ‘omission’ of the leading German media (i.e., to promote an all-German discourse) by upgrading and revaluing the East Germans and their history. These media stylize the East as the place where the ‘better’, ‘genuine’, ‘autochthone’ Germans live, in the sense of a patriotic and nationalistic society. Thus, to counterbalance this glorification of the past, mainstream media, politicians etc. need to address their own biases and broaden perspectives. Public broadcasting in particular should fulfil its public mandate here and devote more attention to East German topics.

Topic- and problem-based dissolution of East/West dichotomies: Today, approximately one quarter of West Germans, but more than half of East Germans, still regard the fact of provenance from East or West Germany as one of the most important dividing lines in society (Köcher, 2019). In particular, the strong support the AfD party enjoys today in the East—in all five East German states, it is now the second strongest force in the state parliaments—has given new fuel to the idea of an East German *Other*, appearing ‘as a deviation from an unmarked West German norm’ (Heft, 2018: 358). Our qualitative interviews have also shown that many study participants, in particular from West Germany, still think in terms of black and white, having a strong

stereotyped image of the East. Especially among those who have never or only very rarely set foot in East Germany, the image of a right-wing extremist, violent, xenophobic East typically comes from the media (keyword: *dark Germany*). The linguist Elisabeth Wehling (2016) has called the (un)conscious, cognitive-neuronal networking of concepts *political framing*: ‘mental frames of interpretation’ (p. 17), which always have an ‘ideologically selective character’ (p. 191), are activated by specific terms in our brain: ‘Whenever we hear or read a word, we not only simulate the individual concept represented in each case—but also a whole range of other concepts’ (p. 27). It is, therefore, mandatory to circumvent the mass-mediated discursive nexus of East Germany/right-wing extremism. According to Michael Kohlstruck (2018), who has compared statistics on right-wing violence in West and East Germany, the ‘thematization of the figures of right-wing violence always offers the possibility of being used for political East-bashing; unintentionally, this increases the asymmetry between the old and the new federal states.’ In his opinion, ‘It could, therefore, make sense for political reasons to let this comparative perspective lie idle for quite some time and to compare other units: urban areas and rural areas or northern German regions and southern German regions. For the current practical examination of the micro-milieus of right-wing violence, few practical conclusions can be drawn from historical explanations anyway.’ Empirically, it is interesting to note that East and West German regions with similar socio-economic structures do not differ much in their voter behaviour (Vehrkamp, 2019); rather, the distribution of the different types of regions over East and West Germany is uneven. Thus, as with voting behaviour, other topic-based inter-regional comparison could break away from East/West dichotomies.

Creating an East/West and gender balance in leading positions in the German media: ‘If East Germans were phenotypically recognizable, there would have been a quota long ago,’ writes sociologist Steffen Mau (2019: 185). Journalists in leading positions of East German origin are still underrepresented in Germany’s media houses (Kollmorgen, 2020). This imbalance is also due to the fact that in the period of transition, most of East German media were bought up by West German publishers so that the emergence of an East German media market was stopped in its tracks before it could even gain momentum (Tröger, 2019). As a result, chief editorial offices were filled with West Germans. In the RePAST project, we conducted interviews with journalists from both leading private and public as well as counterpublic left-/right-wing German media. Not every German media outlet can afford its own history editor, but where this is the case—and where we were able to conduct an interview—the editor generally was male and West German (e.g., *Die Welt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, *Deutschlandfunk*) with a background in history or politics. The West German dominance in the editorial offices provides an important explanation for why the *Othering* of East Germans in public discourse persists. Therefore, we recommend creating increased awareness of the fact that both East German voices are still underrepresented in the mass media (e.g. by means of seminars for journalists/in journalism schools). This imbalance also applies to the gender gap in journalism and the underrepresentation of female journalists in the history sections of newsrooms, from whose point of view the unification and the post-unification periods could be told in a completely different way—for example, as a story in which women in particular lost their jobs and were pushed back into traditional role models.

4.3 Politics

Reduction of administrative barriers: The European Union is perceived by many people as an abstract entity. Bureaucracy, over-regulation, lack of transparency—to name just a few of the terms that arose in our discussions. Still, more than 60% of the sample of the quantitative survey assess it positively that Germany is

a member of the EU. Among the sub-groups that are less favourable to this integration are those siding with East Germany, despite which 48% of them still value the EU positively. Interestingly, the proportion of those in favour is higher among those having experienced (personally or as family members) the period of (post-)unification. Furthermore, those who have had personal experience believe, to a greater extent, that the EU should play a role in supporting those affected by past injustices of that time, as do those in the sample who are sympathetic to the East German side. This finding is remarkable because it shows that there is potential to reach rather Eurosceptic strata. The EU must become more visible and tangible to what it does in terms of programmes and policies to reduce inequalities—while speaking the language of the people. ‘The commitment is there in East Germany,’ said Mandy Tröger in the interview, but ‘most of the people do not have the resources to work their way through the entire administrative machinery of how to apply for EU funds.’ In the end, ‘The money stays with big initiatives.’ In a similar vein, Tobias Bütow commented that ‘Applications must be less administrative, especially in the field of youth exchange work because you cannot expect someone who speaks the language of young people to speak the language of administration.’ The example of the Franco-German Youth Office, which financially promotes and supports youth encounters, illustrates particularly well how unequally resources are distributed. In 2018, less than 4% of the participants in Franco-German youth encounters in 2018 were from East Germany, noted the Secretary-General of the Franco-German Youth Office. This low figure is, of course, also due to the fact that there is no French tradition in the East of the Federal Republic as there is in the West. But the figures nevertheless make it clear that more substantial efforts are required in the disadvantaged regions to draw attention to funding opportunities in a low-threshold form, e.g. by means of regional offices or specific seminars targeting local people.

Further promotion and recognition of civil society engagement and voluntary commitment: Civil society and voluntary involvement must find improved social recognition and be brought into the focus of public awareness, by means of awards, media attention and special financial resources. Public recognition can not only act as a catalyst for civil society engagement and local initiatives but also help to dispel the prejudice of a ‘lost East.’ In its report, the Commission made far-reaching proposals in this regard (see, e.g., Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, 2020: 21–23), which will not be discussed in detail here. It should be pointed out, however, that commitment must be rewarded that earns its merits by addressing controversial events of the past that continue to have an impact into the present, not only with regard to the communist era, but also with regard to the period of (post-)unification.

4.4 Arts and Culture

Promotion of East German pre-unification arts and culture: It is ‘time for a change of perspective’, says East German author Marko Martin (2020: 33), writing against the forgetting of GDR culture. Literature, film, songs or paintings from the East are ‘unexpectedly relevant again today’—they exist ‘not because of the party regime or against it, but despite its strangulating effect’ (p. 13). If one follows Martin, then renitence is the magic word: GDR literature, for example, tells ‘how subordination has always worked in Germany’ (p. 30). He writes of DEFA films that never survived censorship or eventually disappeared into the archives, of novellas with subversive messages and of songs whose lyrics no one remembers today (Martin, 2020). It is time to raise these treasures of the past, to make them even more visible in public discourse—for example in school lessons, in exhibitions, in museums, in the media—and to acknowledge more emphatically that the art and culture of the GDR belong to the cultural heritage of the Germans.

Promotion of East German post-unification arts and culture: The same is true for contemporary East German arts and culture. It seems strange when not a single East German band plays on German Unity Day, as was the case in 2018 at the central unity celebrations in Berlin. A possible imbalance in the public presence, reception and promotion of East German art should also be debated publicly and critically. One idea could be, for example, to revisit the events of the 1990s and discuss them in the current situation through artistic exchange (East/West), film productions or public programmes of museums or galleries.

Conclusion

In the introduction it was emphasized that this report should be primarily about a currency that is often absent from the public discourse on East Germany: recognition. Charles Taylor (1994) has distinguished between two meanings of the *politics of recognition*: the *politics of equal dignity* and the *politics of difference*. The first refers to the equal treatment of people regardless of their origin, gender, ethnicity or religion. The second focuses on what might be called 'identity at risk'. Along these two distinctions of recognition, policy recommendations have been formulated in this report which, on the one hand, aim to build a society in Germany in which people from East and West meet on equal terms, are given equal opportunities and are equally listened to in public discourse (*politics of equal dignity*).

On the other hand, these recommendations for action expressed the goal of remembering, preserving and perpetuating what has been lost in particularistic interests of the East (*politics of difference*), not only with regard to material traditions (such as arts and culture), but also in terms of intangible assets and property (such as knowledge and skills from a different socio-political system and a political transformation), for 'what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of [a] group, their distinctness from everyone else. The idea is that it is precisely this distinctness that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity' (Taylor, 1992: 38).

If one follows Michael Kohlstruck, memory politics can be distinguished between 'decisions in material policy fields' and the 'space of symbolic action and "mere" communication' (Kohlstruck, 2004: 178). Even if a politics of remembrance in its own right will probably never be established with regard to the post-unification period, as shown not least by the report of the Commission *30 Jahre Friedliche Revolution und Deutsche Einheit*, which leaves a blank space with regard to the controversies surrounding the post-reunification period, at least the space of symbolic action seems to have opened up. Many questions about reassessing and coming to terms with the post-unification period are still open and controversial, but the fact that these questions have now, more than 30 years after German unification, come into the public sphere and are being discussed seems to be a first step towards German unity.

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