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**Project Outline: “Constitution and Development of Political Parties in Germany from 1989/90 to the Present”**

# **Overview**

The KGParl lead joint network: “Parties and Party System after 1990”[[3]](#footnote-3) examines the constitution and the transformation of a new German party landscape after the reunification of 1990. The first focus is on the establishment of party-political structures in the five new German states after system transformation in 1989 and unification in October 1990.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is to evaluate the different expectations in East and West Germany and the competing influence of the established West German parties, which extended their organizations into the territory of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), in building what soon was seen as an East German party system. Second, the effects and repercussions of these processes in eastern Germany on the all-German party system should also be examined: Did a co-transformation occur in western Germany? Did the reunification perhaps even accelerate the fragmentation of the traditional federal German party system which has been in place since 1983, when a new, young party, the Greens (Die Grünen), succeeded in entering the German Bundestag for the first time?

The process of democratization in the GDR, from illegal opposition to the 1990 Volkskammer (parliament of the GDR) elections and the election of the all-German Bundestag, is well researched. What remains controversial, however, is the question of what long-term consequences the transfer of West German party structures had for the emergence of a democratic culture in the territory of the former GDR, respectively Germany as a whole. In view of the recruitment of political leadership controlled by the party headquarters of the old Federal German Republic and the appointment of functionaries in the administration and judiciary who had been socialized in the West, was soon followed by discourse and allegations about colonization of the east.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The research project focuses on the period of the 1990s and early 2000s, but also seeks answers to present problems. The 90s and early 2000s was a period in which the internal structures of the nationally established parties reshaped. After the decision to make Berlin the capital of a unified Germany, party headquarters began to move organizations and structures from Bonn to Berlin. Even before the unification they had already begun founding East German state associations or appointing representatives for the east. This period of upheaval during the first years of unification was not easy or free from conflict. A common parliamentary practice between GDR politicians, who often had little experience in politics as a profession, and West German professional politicians had yet to be found. And even today one can still see great differences in mentality between East and West that has led to a different style of politics in the east.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This new, all-German party system was slightly different from the old Federal German Republic. This became significantly visible during the protests against the so-called Hartz IV reforms, which since 2002 (the second government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, a coalition of Social Democrats and the Green Party, 2002–2005) have been restructuring the former West German social welfare system which was extended to East Germany.[[7]](#footnote-7) The five new states became the focal point of vehement citizen protests against the reforms, which severely restricted social benefits. In the West, left-wing groups and trade union representatives split from the ruling Social Democrats and, together with former communist or socialist splinter groups, merged to form a new party, which positioned itself left of the Social Democrats and called itself an electoral alternative for labor and social justice WASG ( Wahlalternative Arbeit und Soziale Gerechtigkeit). Thanks to the protests, the former Socialist Unity Party of the east, now renamed the PDS Party of Democratic Socialism (Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus), which was mainly confined to eastern Germany and in sharp decline. For example, the PDS fell short of the 5-percent threshold in the 2002 elections for the Bundestag and was therefore no longer represented in the new Bundestag. But with growing protest against the labor market reforms the PDS, which rejected the reforms, managed to gain new supporters and establish itself as an all-German new left-wing party that merged with the WASG in 2007. In 2005, the PDS renamed itself The Left ( Die Linke)*,* returned to the Bundestag with a gain of almost five percentage points.

So, in short, the reference framework for the planned studies is, on the one hand, the change in the party landscape after the end of the Cold War in Europe as a whole and on the other hand, the specifically German manifestations of the system transformation.

# **The Historical Background**

The understanding of democracy and voter behavior in the new and old federal states differed from the outset, even though the parties represented in the state parliaments since 1990 consistently competed nationwide. Thus, the East German electorate and also the East German local party milieus were primarily shaped by the experience of the political system of the GDR. However, this experience was not universally negative: In surveys conducted as early as 1991, almost two-thirds of respondents thought that GDR socialism was a good idea, but that it had been poorly executed. Especially in view of social upheavals after reunification, deindustrialization and mass unemployment in East Germany, the GDR appeared ambivalent: Lack of freedom on the one hand, steady jobs and a stable social system on the other.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The lack of pluralism also characterized the GDR's party system. Although different parties existed in the GDR, the voter did not have a real choice. There was only a single list on the ballot: the so called National Front (Nationale Front), in which candidates from all approved eastern German parties and mass organizations like the trade unions were placed. The allocation of mandates was arranged by a fixed distribution key that guaranteed a majority for the SED Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands),. So, the self-proclaimed leading role of the GDR's Socialist Unity Party, effectively ruled out any claim to power by the bloc parties, which on paper formally had equal rights. But GDR-parties such as the CDU Christian Democrats (Christlich Demokratische Union), LDPD Liberal Democrats (Liberaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands), the NDPD National Democrats (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands or the DBD Democratic Farmers’ Party (Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands) had primarily a legitimizing and integrating function[[9]](#footnote-9); they allowed the illusion of plurality that did not exist in reality, they were able to render possible protests or dissatisfaction harmless. Critics of the SED's leadership role were able to become involved, without endangering the dominance of the Socialist Unity Party. So, the bloc parties were seen as a system-stabilizing factor.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In contrast, the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany (Grundgesetz) accorded constitutional status to all political parties that were loyal to the constitution in Article 21, paragraph 1: “The parties shall cooperate in the formation according to the political will of the people.” Political competition between different parties was fundamental to the political system of the Federal Republic and was an elementary factor for the electorate's understanding of democracy. Such party competition did not become established in the GDR until the very last period of the state’s existence: the phase in which the state party, the SED, slowly lost importance against the backdrop of growing protests among the population. Only towards the end of the GDR, did parties represented in the National Front bloc develop into potential power factors, but in the end missed their chance. This development began towards the end of the 9th Volkskammer, which in June 1986 was still elected on the basis of non-free elections with unified lists. The more the power of the SED eroded, the stronger the influence of the old bloc parties on the process of system transformation became at times. This was mainly due to the fact that the GDR's bloc parties were established and had material infrastructure – for example, members, a party organization, municipal officeholders or real estate holdings. Nevertheless, democratic change in the GDR did not come from the bloc parties; they only reacted and at no point did they succeed in gaining an initiative against the SED or in the reform process. Resistance to the system originated from outside the system. It formed itself in the mid-1980s against the SED's monopoly on power and the bloc parties that were integrated into the SED's system of rule.

However, the heterogeneous opposition, which initially developed primarily in the protective environment of the Protestant Church, for the most part did not see itself in the role of a competing party. It legitimized its existence primarily as a civil citizens' movement separate to political parties. It was not until the founding of the DDR/SDP Social Democratic Party of the GDR ( Sozialdemokratische Partei) ina Protestant parsonage in Schwante, a little Brandenburg village north of Berlin, on October 7, 1989, and other newly formed parties such as the DSU German Social Union(Deutsche Soziale Union), which was oriented towards the Bavarian Christian-Social Union,and the DA Democratic Awakening (Demokratischer Aufbruch), which was more or less the east German version of the western Christian Democratic Union, that the existing bloc party system of the National Front was expanded and transformed into a democratic, pluralistic alternative. Thus, the process of disintegration of the power-maintaining system of the bloc parties became apparent. And slowly their western counterparts became involved and took over these organizations.

# **State of Research**

The process of the political post-1990 transformation in eastern Germany is well researched. This also applies to the reorganizations or new foundations of individual parties in the territory of the GDR, which led to the integration of the citizens' movements or short-lived "east parties" by the "big sisters" in West Germany. For the unification of the Social Democrats, two well-founded studies by Daniel F. Sturm and Peter Gohle are available.[[11]](#footnote-11) The reorganization and transformation of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany into the Party of Democratic Socialism (Partei des demokratischen Sozialismus) and its later reconstitution as the Left Party, which in 2007 merged with the West German left-wing WASG toform a party that became active nationwide and not only in East Germany, has been extensively researched by Thorsten Holzhauser, at least until 2005.[[12]](#footnote-12) The merger of the East German civil rights party Alliance for the 90s (Bündnis 90) with the West German Green party is the subject of a current dissertation.[[13]](#footnote-13) Initial studies are available on the co-operation and later the attempted takeover of the German Social Union, a party founded in 1990, by the Bavarian CSU*,* which unsuccessfully attempted to acquire a nationwide party organization beyond its home state of Bavaria.[[14]](#footnote-14) In contrast, a summary study of the integration of the GDR parties, which were part of the national bloc – the eastern Christian Democratic Union, the Democratic Farmers' Party of Germany, the National Democratic Party of Germany, the Liberal Democratic Party of Germany and the German Women's League –, into their Western counterparts CDU and FDP is still pending*.* Moreover, the relevant holdings of the “Foundation Archives of Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR” which are kept in the German Federal Archives, primarily reflect decision-making at the central level. Research dealing with the regional or local decision-making level is still very rare, if only because of the difficulty in sourcing information.

Thus far, most research work focused on the phase of system transformation. Largely unexplored, on the other hand, is the long-term impact that the transfer of West German party structures had and still has on the emergence of democratic culture in the territory of the former GDR. That this transfer of West German standards and structures was viewed quite controversially is shown, for example, by talk of “colonization” of the lifeworld in the East – in view of the recruitment of political leadership controlled by the party headquarters of the old Federal Republic and the broad appointment of functionaries socialized in the West, to state functions such as administration and the judiciary, such an accusation could not be entirely dismissed.

# **Project Outline**

The research project carried out by KGParl and the parties' foundations starts with the confrontation of different political experiences and expectations in East and West with regard to the reconstitution of the parties:

Already in the first German democratic state level (Landtagswahlen), elections in the five new federal states, a significantly different East German variant of the previous West German party system was shaped, in which the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS)wasable to establish itself as a strong regional party., This provided a rallying point for all those who were not satisfied with the course of development in East Germany, while structural dominance of the mainstream parties Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, whichstill prevailed in the West (although already challenged by the successes of the Green Party), waned. Particular difficulties were experienced by the West German Liberal Partyand, to a lesser extent, the Greenswho were unable to establish a broad base in eastern parts of Germany up until the present day. Both parties were only able to gain regional political influence on government formation and opposition in the new states as small coalition partners.

In a second phase - beginning with the brief electoral success of the far-right DVU German People's Union(Deutsche Volksunion) in Saxony-Anhalt in 1998 and somewhat later in Brandenburg - the right-wing extremist protest potential also unfolded more dynamically in the party spectrum than in the West, further intensifying the fragmentation of the all-German party system and the East-West divide. In addition, special regional developments took place that made the East German states appear far from homogeneous in terms of party politics.

The time frame of the research project covers the phase of the constitution and consolidation of the parties after system transformation up to the reactions to the announcement of comprehensive, partly neoliberal social reforms under Agenda 2010[[15]](#footnote-15) by the government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Since 2003 the so-called Hartz-IV shock was felt particularly strongly in the eastern German states, where far larger percentages of the population were dependent on state support payments than in the west. It is therefore not surprising that since the end of 2003 opposition to the liberalization of the labor market and the increase in state pressure on social benefit recipients led to mass protests against the federal government, first in the east and later also in the west. After initial hesitation, the West German-dominated trade unions, which were organized under the umbrella organization of the German Trade Union Confederation, also joined the protests. However, protests in West Germany never reached the quality and quantity of East German protests. Here, the labor market reforms became the focal point for long-term alienation of citizens from the party system and, in part, from the welfare state, which for many presented itself primarily as an intrusion into private lives.

In East Germany, the PDS Socialist Party in particular was able to position itself as an opponent to the Hartz IV reforms and consolidate its position as the East German regional and protest party. For the Social Democrats, the protests also marked a turning point, as the partly neoliberal social policies of the Red-Green federal government led to the reestablishment of the WASG Electoral Alternative Party*,* which was subsequently able to mobilize parts of the left wing of the Social Democrats around their former party chairman Oskar Lafontaine, who left the Social Democrats in 2005, and left-wing trade unionists who were dissatisfied with the federal government's pro-employer policies. In 2006, the WASG merged with the PDS, which one year earlier had renamed itself The Left (Die Linke), and the two together formed a renewed nationwide leftwing party. As a nationwide left-wing party, they regularly succeeded in overcoming the five-percent threshold in state elections in the West as well and after 2005 became a left-wing opposition party.[[16]](#footnote-16) Nevertheless, even after unification with the WASG, the strong east-west division remained visible: In the West the party was never able to match the electoral successes it had in eastern parts of Germany, where today The Left holds the position of prime minister in Thuringia. The party's anchoring in society, for example party organization and membership figures, also remained significantly lower in West Germany than in East Germany.

Perhaps historian Philipp Ther is right when he points out that the importance of the Schröder-Fischer government's social reforms can hardly be underestimated in explaining the current and ongoing differences between East and West.[[17]](#footnote-17) The reactions to the Hartz-IV-reforms show the long-term consequences of massive social insecurity. The changes in the party system are an indication of the political price Germany is still paying for transformation to this day.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The following guiding perspectives, which target both the internal communication of the parties and the political practice in the parliamentary groups, have emerged as an initial focus for study:

* What is the relationship between the party headquarters and the East German state associations, how are their concerns represented programmatically and in terms of personnel in the party as a whole, and what conflicts of interest arise between the center and the periphery? What specific difficulties of organization and communication do the local constituencies encounter in recruiting members, in election campaigns, or in public consultations of members of parliament?
* How are election campaigns (at all levels) organized, how are candidates recruited, and what conclusions do the parties subsequently draw from sometimes surprising election results? What strategies do party headquarters develop with regard to the new, eastern German state associations, what knowledge do they have, how is information obtained and processed, how does this change the relationship with grassroots campaigns?
* How are local experiences perceived and reflected in party headquarters, and how does internal communication between members, the apparatus and the party leadership function?[[19]](#footnote-19) How important is external policy advice, for example, from opinion surveys and political science?
* Are there differences between West and East German members of the German Bundestag and the state parliaments in appearance and performance (for example, in plenary debates, parliamentary groups and committee meetings)? And if so, how can such performative differences be evaluated, for example, in the media or in sources (meeting minutes, audio or film recordings)? Attention should be paid to the perpetuation of different socialization experiences, insofar as these can be identified verbally and habitually[[20]](#footnote-20) – for example, in language, dialect, dress, presentation, professional understanding of roles, etc.
* Speech analyses: rhetorical and semantic using audio-visual sources – are there significant differences in interpretation of normative key concepts (the political turnaround 1989, in German often named “Wende”, the social market economy, state and nation, party, etc.) that indicate fundamental differences in the perception and practice of parliamentary democracy?
* How does the presence of East German elected officials and party politicians change the political culture in the parliament and parties of the united Federal Republic? How does media coverage of party politics develop? What role does the concentration of the press and broadcasting have on local politics and individual lifeworld?
* Another focus should be on the relationship of party elites and full-time functionaries to the local base and electorate: At least from today's perspective, the social connection and anchoring of party organizations in East German states and municipalities appears to have been far more difficult than in West German state associations and local constituencies. To this day, many parties – with the exception of The Left, which has long been able to draw on a reservoir of members dating back to GDR times –[[21]](#footnote-21) not only have difficulty recruiting sufficient members, but often fail to establish themselves in the party political arena.[[22]](#footnote-22) For example, even the Christian Democrats in Saxony, where the party has for many years provided the country’s prime minister and has won absolute majorities in several elections, has difficulty anchoring itself both at local and regional level. Beyond its thin pool of personnel in the municipalities and counties, the Christian Democrats relies mostly on a “phalanx of nonparty elected officials” in district or municipal councils, who frequentlyevade party discipline when they see fit.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The history of the parties after 1990 can therefore no longer be written hermetically from an institutional perspective. The fact that party politics and the political mobilization of social groups proceed asynchronously and increasingly even antagonistically, requires new parameters of analysis. Parties and the media tend to lose their function as agencies of political will formation, the more politics manifests in the self-mobilization of social groups. The private sphere has become political in a new and different way, in that the formation of political will in society is no longer oriented towards programmatic “offers” of parties or social elite discourses, but primarily follows personal experiences or perceptions of reality circulated by social media. In this sense, communication between voters, the local party base and full-time functionaries and elected officials should be the focus of the research project.

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3. The cooperation partners are the party-affiliated (but formally independant) foundations: the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, the Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, the Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit and the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung. There are several PhD-candidates working on the topics mentioned in this paper, see <https://kgparl.de/forschung/parteien-nach-1990/> (last visit: April, 11th, 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. At the time of reunification, the old Federal German Republic with its 11 federal states (in German: Bundesländer) had a four-party system: Christian Democrats (Christian Democratic Union ( Christlich Demokratische Union/CDU), including the Bavarian only Christian Social Union ( Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern/CSU, the Social democratic Party ( Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands/SPD), the liberal Party ( Freie Demokratische Partei/FDP and the Greens ( Die Grünen), which were focused on ecology and pacifism. In October 1990, the GDR joined the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany and the old GDR districts became 5 new federal states. The West German political structure, including the party system, was extended to East Germany. The former GDR state party Socialist Unity Party for Germany ( Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands/SED, a forced merger of the Social Democrats in the GDR and the communist party) renamed itself Party of the Democratic Socialism ( Partei des demokratischen Sozialismis/PDS) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See for example Dirk Oschmann, *Der Osten: eine westdeutsche Erfindung* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2023). Fritz

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6. See *Jahresbericht der Bundesregierung zum Stand der Deutschen Einheit 2021*, edited by the German Federal Government (Bundestag Drucksache 19/31840), 14, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the extension see Gerhard Albert Ritter, *Der Preis der deutschen Einheit: die Wiedervereinigung und die*

   *Krise des Sozialstaats*. 2., Erweiterte Auflage (München: C.H. Beck, 2008).. – One of the most

   controversial main parts of the so called Hartz-IV-reforms (the IV means, that it is part of a bigger reform

   package) merged the former long-term unemployment with welfare benefits, lowering them

   significantly and with strict conditions and monitoring through social security authorities. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The historian Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk pointed out that the GDR-ideology and self-perception, but also its citizens,

   defined itself in social reality as a state of working people and firmly secured jobs. The loss of this social security,

   as well as the West's disdain for these GDR biographies, had led to a long-term trauma that has not really been

   dealt with to this day. See Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, *Die Übernahme: wie Ostdeutschland Teil der Bundesrepublik*

   *wurde*. 2., Auflage Aufl. (München: C.H. Beck, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For example, the NDPD integrated former ordinary Members of the banned National Socialist Party. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. for example Ines Soldwisch, *„... etwas für das ganze Volk zu leisten und nicht nur den Zielen einer Partei*

    *dienen ...“: Geschichte der Liberal-Demokratischen Partei (LPD) in Mecklenburg von 1946-1952* (Rostocker

    Schriften zur Regionalgeschichte, Bd. 1) (Berlin Münster: Lit., 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For the SPD, the works areDaniel Friedrich Sturm, *Uneinig in die Einheit: die Sozialdemokratie und die*

    *Vereinigung Deutschlands 1989/90* (Willy-Brandt-Studien. Bonn: Dietz, 2006). Peter Gohle, *Von der SDP-*

    *Gründung zur gesamtdeutschen SPD: die Sozialdemokratie in der DDR und die Deutsche Einheit 1989/90* (Reihe

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12. Thorsten Holzhauser, *Die „Nachfolgepartei“: die Integration der PDS in das politische System der*

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    Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Florian Schikowski (Potsdam), among others: Takeover at eye level? The Merger of Bündnis 90 and The Greens. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jens Weinhold-Fumoleau, „Der Einheit wegen. Parteienkooperationen am Ende der DDR am Beispiel der CSU-

    DSU,“ in *Die Mauer ist weg! Mauerfall, Wendejahre und demokratischer Neubeginn*, herausgegeben von Renate

    Höpfinger (Bayerische Lebensbilder 5. Biographien, Erinnerungen, Zeugnisse) (München: Hanns Seidel

    Stiftung, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See also Footnote 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A position the Left is losing at the moment as the new populist party Alternative for Germany, a party that was initially founded as an anti-euro movement and now seen as a right-wing populist rallying movement, strongly rooted mostly in the eastern federal states, is taking the role of the aging Left in the eastern German states. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For Philipp Ther (Ther 2019), the labor market reforms of the SPD-Green government represent a catch-up co-transformation of the Federal Republic and alignment with the massive social transformation in Eastern Europe. Wages were depressed, incentive systems via pressure and reduction of labor costs for entrepreneurs were recipes of neoliberal reformers in Eastern Europe since 1990 within the framework of the Washington Consensus, competitiveness of the Eastern European economies was initially to be established primarily in the low-wage sector – the Federal Republic caught up with this adjustment from the beginning of the 2000s. Perhaps a thing to come for the western parts of Germany as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. More generally, on the costs of political and social transformation since 1990 seeIvan Krastev, and Stephen

    Holmes. *The Light that Failed: a Reckoning* (London: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Most of the contemporary research is by political scientists, see for example Manfred Krapf, *Die letzten*

    *Bastionen? die deutsche Sozialdemokratie in den Städten und Kreisen* (Baden-Baden: Tectum Verlag, in der

    NomosVerlagsgesellschaft, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For example the question: Is there a specific eastern identity? Are there different narratives which can be

    observed in eastern Germany that resulted from its different history? See cf. Thomas Ahbe, *Ostdeutschland und*

    *die Ostdeutschen als Erzählung: identitätsstiftende Narrative im Widerstreit* (Erfurt: Landeszentrale für politische

    Bildung Thüringen, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. However, by 2006, the Left’s membership had fallen from almost 300,000 in 1990 to just over 60,000 in 2006. Following the merger with the Electoral Alternative, WASG, membership rose again and grew slightly over the next few years due to new members, especially in the old, western states. As a result, the party's roots in eastern Germany have declined significantly since 2006, which is also due to the structural aging of its eastern German members, the majority of whom are over 60. According to media reports, The Left now has more members in western Germany than in the east. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Cf. Heiko Tammena, *Volkspartei ohne Parteivolk: Organisationsaufbau der SPD in Ostdeutschland 1990 –*

    *1994 und organisationspolitische Perspektiven* (Göttingen, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. „Auf tönernen Füßen“, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung,*“ September, 2nd, 2018, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)