

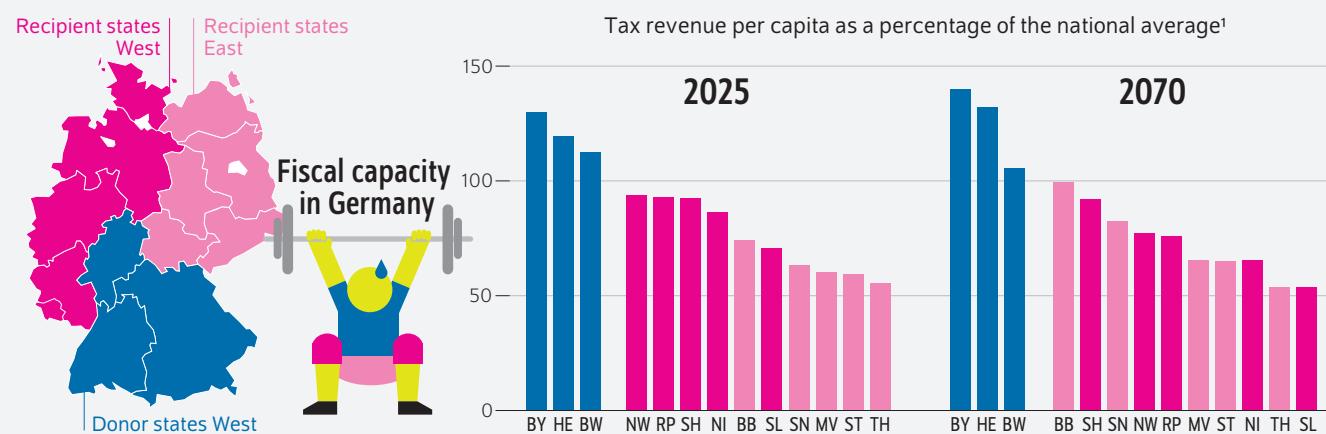
AT A GLANCE

Fiscal Capacity of German federal states: East-West gap narrows, but rich-poor divide grows

By Kristina van Deuverden

- Financial capacity and economic power of eastern German states still below average 35 years after unification
- But former East German states catching up with financially weak western German counterparts; gap between rich and poor widening nationwide
- In the long run, population declines—particularly in eastern Germany—amplify uneven development, increasing the need for equalization payments
- Scenario calculations show that, if trends over the last decade continue, disparities are likely to grow until 2070
- Financially strong states should assume more responsibility, while poorer states should be strengthened in the long term, irrespective of geographical location

The gap between the rich and poor states is widening more and more



1. City-states not included; scenario with medium immigration assuming tax trends over the last ten years will continue.

Source: Author's own calculations based on the middle variant of the Federal Statistical Office's 15th Coordinated Population Projection.

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FROM THE AUTHORS

"35 years since German unification, the former East German states are increasingly closing the gap on their financially weak western German counterparts. Today the divide is no longer between east and west but between rich and poor."

— Kristina van Deuverden —

MEDIA



Audio Interview with Kristina van Deuverden (in German)
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Fiscal Capacity of German federal states: East-West gap narrows, but rich-poor divide grows

By Kristina van Deuverden

ABSTRACT

Even now, 35 years after German unification, the economic power and fiscal capacity of the eastern German federal states remain below average. In Germany's system of fiscal federalism, this leads to substantial financial transfers, a fact that repeatedly triggers political debate. Thereby, the low tax revenue of the economically weak states is also a consequence of the tax system—and by no means a problem that is confined to the east. While East German states have closed much of the gap with weaker western states, jointly these represent a stark contrast with the wealthiest states. If current trends continue—particularly the regionally uneven demographic developments—this division is likely to harden, meaning that compensation payments from the more affluent states will keep rising. This may well prompt these states to push for another reduction in their equalization transfers, which, just as in the previous financial reform, would allow them to evade part of their responsibility. Such an outcome should be avoided, not least because it was primarily the financially strong states that benefitted from the population losses in the eastern German states after unification.

When the newly established eastern German states joined the Federal Republic of Germany on October 3, 1990, the differences were vast. Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the former eastern area states was barely a third of the western German level, the infrastructure was in a state of disrepair, and the capital stock severely depleted.¹ Financing needs—both private and public—were immense.

There was soon a consensus that unification was an intergenerational task, justifying partial financing through new debt. It was also agreed that this was a national responsibility; therefore both federal and state governments would have to contribute. Exactly how this financial burden should be divided up, however, was the subject of heated debate.

One of the main questions was whether the eastern German states should be integrated in the fiscal financial equalization system (*Finanzausgleich*) immediately. This is a complex process of distributing tax revenues among the states. Subsequently the federal government provides grants to financially weak states or those facing exceptional circumstances.²

Even before unification, large sums were redistributed between the western states and West Berlin via the fiscal equalization system. The goal of redistribution is to align the per-capita tax revenue across the states, in line with the constitutional mandate to create “equal living conditions” throughout Germany’s federal states.³

1 When it comes to the German federal fiscal equalization system, the city-states of Berlin, Bremen, and Hamburg are treated differently. Therefore, this Weekly Report concentrates on the regular states.

2 For the development of tax revenue in the eastern German states and its distribution—both among the states and between the federal government and the states—from 1995 to 2019, see Kristina van Deuverden et al., “Zeitlicher Rahmen für die weitere Rückführung des Solidaritätszuschlags 1995. Forschungsprojekt im Auftrag des Bundesministeriums der Finanzen (fe3/19),” *DIW Politikberatung kompakt*, no. 193 (in German; available online, accessed on September 17, 2025; this applies to all other online sources in this report unless stated otherwise). The distribution of the high-revenue taxes jointly allocated to the federal and state governments was changed several times during this period. For the tax distribution rules applicable from 1995, see Federal Ministry of Finance (2024): *Financial relations between the Federation and Länder* (2024) (available online).

3 Art. 72 of German Basic Law stipulates the establishment of equal living conditions throughout Germany. Until 1994, the federal government even held a constitutional mandate to ensure uniform living conditions.

Figure 1

Economic power by federal state

At current prices; as a percentage of the national average



Note: Economic power is generally measured using price-adjusted figures. For the development of tax revenue, however, the nominal values are more important.

Source: Regional Accounts Working Group (*Arbeitskreis VGR der Länder*), series 1, state-level results, vol. 1, August 2024/February 2025.

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Gross domestic product per capita in eastern Germany still lagging well behind the western German level.

When it came to economic power and financial strength, there were already substantial differences between the (western German) states prior to unification. When the eastern German states were integrated in 1994, these differences grew exponentially, resulting in a dramatic increase in compensatory payments between the states.

The federal level assumed a large part of the financing burden, significantly increasing its grants. Indeed, it was not until the expiry of the Solidarity Pact II that the eastern German states stopped receiving additional payments as compensation for the financial burden of division. Nevertheless, these states remain financially weak and continue to benefit from the redistribution of tax revenue among the states. They also receive general supplementary federal grants, which are intended to support states that still face a general financial weakness or special supplementary grants to compensate for special needs.

Since the integration of the former East German states in the fiscal equalization mechanism, a few donor states are supporting many recipient states.⁴ This imbalance has repeatedly

led to political demands for a reduction federal states' equalization payments or even to the threat to take legal action at the Federal Constitutional Court. Against this backdrop, the current *DIW Weekly Report* looks at how the fiscal capacity of (eastern German) states has changed in recent years and, more importantly, how it might develop in the future.

Possible developments are outlined below in two basic scenarios. Similar calculations were presented in the *DIW Wochbericht* marking the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, six years ago in 2019.⁵ However, subsequent events—both the economic upheaval caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the influx of refugees following the outbreak of the Ukraine war—could not have been predicted, thus necessitating a reappraisal of the situation.

Disparities in economic power and fiscal capacity have become more hardened

In comparative economic analyses, economic power is generally measured using (price-adjusted) gross value added per

4 The states of Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, and Hesse (with the exception of 2013) have been donor states throughout the period. The city-state of Hamburg was also part of this group for most years. From 2021 to 2023, Rhineland-Palatinate became a donor due to tax revenue from the high profits of a single company. Cf. Robert Fiesel, Kristof Kanzer, and Reinhold Weiß, "Biontechs Steuer-

booster und seine Nebenwirkungen auf das Finanzgefüge," *Wirtschaftsdienst*, no. 2 (2022): 114–122 (in German; available online). By now, it has returned to receiving compensation payments.

5 Kristina van Deuverden, "30 Jahre nach dem Mauerfall: Finanzschwäche der neuen Länder hält auch die nächsten drei Dekaden an," *DIW Wochbericht*, no. 43 (2019): 781–790 (in German available online).

employed person.⁶ The development of tax revenue, however, depends more on the (nominal) GDP per capita.

Compared to the German average, the differences in GDP per capita between the states are considerably larger than those in gross value added per employed person (Figure 1). Of all the federal area states, Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, and Hesse consistently perform above average. The city-state of Hamburg is also economically strong. The majority of states, however, are weak compared to the German average, with the eastern German states at the bottom of the rank.

When it comes to fiscal capacity, convergence is lagging behind that of economic power. This is mainly due to the progressive rates for wage and assessed income tax, which account for a significant proportion of a state's tax revenue. With this type of tax system, higher incomes are taxed more heavily, relatively speaking—and income levels in the eastern German states are often several times lower than in the west. With regard to corporate taxation, companies having headquarters in western German states also influences a state's tax revenue.⁷ In addition, the comparatively lower prices of products manufactured in eastern Germany could negatively impact the profits of the companies based there, which is, in turn, likely to reduce revenue.⁸ Moreover, withholding tax (*Abgeltungssteuer*) or non-assessed tax on earnings as well as inheritance tax are all significantly lower in eastern Germany, which has had 40 years less time to accumulate wealth.⁹

Scenarios for the projection of tax revenue

Outlined below are two scenarios intended to illustrate possible developments; they should not be understood as forecasts of likely outcomes. To provide estimates of projected tax revenue, two distinct assumptions are made (Box 1).

Scenario I is based on the assumption that taxes in all federal states will develop in the same way. The projection for each type of tax is based on 2024, using the medium-term changes predicted by the Working Party on Tax Revenue Estimates (*Arbeitskreis Steuerschätzungen*) in May 2025. In this scenario, changes in a federal state's fiscal capacity, measured relative to the national German average, result solely from differences in the historically grown structure of individual tax types in the states. In *Scenario II*, in contrast, tax revenue is projected based on historical changes from 2014

⁶ See also Martin Gornig (2025), *Produktivität: Ost-West-Muster durch Stadt-Land-Gefälle abgelöst*. DIW Wochenbericht Nr. 40, 635–642 (online verfügbar). At the federal state level, however, no price-adjusted data for gross value added are available.

⁷ This is because the tax payments of companies with operating facilities in multiple states are largely allocated based on the wages paid in this federal state, relative to the company's total wage expenditure.

⁸ Cf. Matthias Mertens and Steffen Müller, "The East-West German Gap in Revenue Productivity: Just a Tale of Output Prices?", *Journal of Comparative Economics*, no. 3 (2020): 815–831 (available online).

⁹ For a more in-depth discussion of the reasons for this, see Kristina van Deuverden, "Auch nach 20 Jahren: Steuereinnahmen in den Neuen Ländern schwach," *Wirtschaft im Wandel*, no. 2 (2010): 91–104, Leibniz-Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (in German; available online).

Box 1

Projection of tax revenue

For the purposes of our tax revenue projection, we developed two scenarios. *Scenario I* assumes the least likely case—that the rates of change for the individual tax types are the same across all federal states. The individual taxes are projected on the basis of 2024 using the medium-term official tax estimate for Germany as a whole, presented by the Working Party on Tax Revenue Estimates to the Federal Ministry of Finance in May 2025.¹ In this scenario, differences in the development of local tax revenue between the federal states arise solely from differences in the structure of the base year.

In *Scenario II*, tax revenue is projected based on state-specific developments from 2014 to 2024. Known one-off effects that are particularly significant for revenue and that can significantly distort longer-term averages at state-level are adjusted. For some types of taxes, the pandemic years are likewise omitted. This particularly applies to income taxes, which fell sharply in 2020 before surging the following year. This development was likely largely due to companies having reduced their advance tax payments on expected profits far too much, requiring them to retroactively adjust these prepayments.

For the projection, it is implicitly assumed that past trends in population development will continue to affect tax revenue. For the distribution of tax revenue, however, we explicitly use three variants of the Federal Statistical Office's population projection. All three are based on a birth rate of 1.55 per woman, an average life expectancy of 88.2 years for girls and 84.6 years for boys. Where the variants differ, however, is in their assumptions regarding net immigration. Variant A assumes a low level of immigration. Based on a starting value of 1.1 million people, net immigration will decline to 150,000 by 2033, thereafter remaining constant. Variant B, the middle variant, starts at 1.3 million. This will fall to 250,000 people by 2033, after which it will remain constant. In Variant C, which assumes high immigration, net immigration starts at 1.5 million, falling to 350,000 from 2033 onwards.

¹ This estimate draws on the government's economic development forecast, which is based on the same version of the national accounts data currently available to the federal state governments. Cf. Federal Ministry of Finance (in German; available online).

to 2024, which varied across states.¹⁰ This implies that the trends observed over the last ten years will continue. The current rules for the fiscal equalization system are then applied to the resulting tax revenue in the different federal states.

¹⁰ Larger one-off effects were adjusted for and, for certain taxes, the pandemic years were not taken into account (Box 1).

Table 1

Population increase/decrease in 2024 relative to 1991

In percent

Baden-Württemberg	13.5
Bavaria	14.6
Hesse	8.2
Lower Saxony	7.8
North Rhine-Westphalia	3.5
Rhineland-Palatinate	8.9
Saarland	-5.7
Schleswig-Holstein	12.2
Brandenburg	-0.2
Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	-17.4
Saxony	-14.2
Saxony-Anhalt	-24.9
Thuringia	-18.6
Berlin	6.9
Bremen	3.0
Hamburg	12.0
Germany	4.4

Source: Federal Statistical Office; author's own calculations.

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State's available tax revenue depends on the size of its population

A crucial factor in the distribution of tax revenue under the fiscal equalization system is the number of inhabitants. Throughout the 1990s and well into the first decade of the new millennium, the eastern German states faced significant population losses (Table 1). Young, well-educated East Germans—especially young women—moved to western German states in search of work. Indeed, this trend continues to influence average age and birth rates to this day and will also affect future generations. Although this out-migration halted in the 2010s, eastern German states are still expected to experience population declines in the future.¹¹ For decades, the eastern states already have had to adjust their budgets to declining tax shares year after year, while the western German states benefit from rising populations. This means they are permanently forced to continuously adapt their budgets to changing conditions.¹² Since 1991, they have lost a total of two million residents.

The two scenarios also rely on assumptions about future population development. For this purpose, we used the Federal Statistical Office's 15th Coordinated Population Projection for Germany (the most recent available at this time). The projection takes 2019 as its base year and draws on data from the

¹¹ The eastern German states only recorded population increases in the years of high refugee migration (2015/2016 and 2022/2023).

¹² Cf. Kristina van Deuverden, "Population decline creating constant pressure on eastern German states and municipalities on the expenditure side," *DIW Weekly Report*, no. 39/40 (2020): 414–419 (available online).

Box 2

Data and forward projection of population

Overall economic development is based on data provided by the Regional Accounts Working Group, as of August 2024/February 2025. The Federal Statistical Office's 15th Coordinated Population Projection, used to project population development, takes 2019 as its base year. As a first step, this will be updated using the migration statistics published since then.

Neither of these datasets take the results of the 2022 census¹ into account. However, the fiscal equalization calculation for 2024 was already based entirely on the census results.² The population figures used in the financial statistics thus serve as the basis for the scenario calculations; the projection is then based on the rates of change taken from the population statistics.

The taxes the federal states collect locally comprise wage, assessed income, withholding, corporate, and state taxes together (shown in the figures as before redistribution among the federal states). Only then are the states' shares of VAT revenue taken into account, as these were used under the system in effect before 2020 to equalize tax revenue in advance. In addition to this, there are extraction levies (tax revenue after redistribution among the federal states). Lastly, the equalization payments for the federal states are calculated according to applicable law. The resulting fiscal capacity of the different federal states then forms the basis for determining the general supplementary federal grants. The special supplementary federal grants are also taken into account; these are made to individual states to compensate for certain disadvantages (shown in the figures as tax revenue after supplementary federal grants).

¹ Cf. Zensus Datenbank (in German; available online).

² An interim solution was implemented in 2022 and 2023.

2011 census, meaning some adjustments were necessary to reflect current developments (Box 2).

The projections published by the Federal Statistical Office are presented in several different variants. For the scenario calculations, we selected three, each differing in terms of the levels of immigration assumed.¹³ In Variant A, which assumes the lowest level of immigration, the German population declines by 11.3 percent from 2024 to 2070, or by 7.4 percent over 1991 (Table 2). In Variant C (high immigration), the population increases by 5.5 percent compared to

¹³ The so-called "middle variant"—Variant B in the scenario calculations—is generally also used as the basis for the DIW Berlin Economic Forecast, the Joint Economic Forecast, and the government forecast, with the latter serving as the basis of the forecast provided by the Working Party on Tax Revenue Estimates and, consequently, the budget plans of the federal and state governments.

FISCAL CAPACITY

Figure 2

Scenario I: Development of fiscal capacity of the federal states before and after distribution in the coming years

Tax revenue per capita; as a percentage of the national average



Notes: Before redistribution: States' share of income and state taxes. After redistribution: States' share of income, sales, and state taxes.

Scenario I: Projection of tax revenue using identical rates based in reference to the result of the May 2025 tax revenue estimate for Germany.

Source: Author's own calculations.

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In Scenario I, redistribution significantly reduces disparities in federal states' financial capacity.

FISCAL CAPACITY

Figure 3

Scenario II: Development of fiscal capacity of federal states before and after distribution in the coming years

Tax revenue per capita; as a percentage of the national average



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If the trends in the federal states continue, ever larger shares of their revenue will have to be redistributed to reduce the disparities.

Table 2

Assumptions regarding population development: Population increase/decrease in 2070 relative to 1991 and 2024

In percent

	Variant A: low immigration, 2070 compared to ...		Variant B: medium immigration, 2070 compared to ...		Variant C: high immigration, 2070 compared to ...	
	... 1991	... 2024	... 1991	... 2024	... 1991	... 2024
Baden-Württemberg	4.1	-8.3	14.4	0.8	23.6	8.9
Bavaria	6.4	-7.2	17.6	2.6	27.5	11.2
Hesse	-2.4	-9.9	7.8	-0.4	16.9	8.0
Lower Saxony	-3.8	-10.8	7.1	-0.7	16.7	8.2
North Rhine-Westphalia	-9.2	-12.2	-1.4	-4.7	5.3	1.8
Rhineland-Palatinate	-4.2	-12.0	5.7	-2.9	14.4	5.1
Saarland	-25.5	-20.9	-18.0	-13.0	-11.4	-6.0
Schleswig-Holstein	-1.5	-12.3	7.4	-4.3	15.2	2.7
Brandenburg	-17.4	-17.3	-9.5	-9.4	-2.6	-2.4
Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	-37.4	-24.2	-31.3	-16.9	-26.0	-10.4
Saxony	-31.2	-19.7	-24.8	-12.3	-19.2	-5.8
Saxony-Anhalt	-46.9	-29.3	-41.8	-22.5	-37.3	-16.5
Thuringia	-41.2	-27.8	-34.9	-20.0	-29.3	-13.1
Berlin	9.5	2.5	24.7	16.6	38.0	29.1
Bremen	-3.2	-6.0	8.0	4.9	17.9	14.5
Hamburg	9.8	-1.9	20.4	7.5	29.6	15.8
Germany	-7.4	-11.3	1.9	-2.4	10.1	5.5

Notes: The assumptions are based on the Federal Statistical Office's 15th Coordinated Population Projection, adjusted for the developments observed since its release. This projection was still based on the 2011 census. The financial statistical calculations use the regionalized population figures published for 2024 based on the 2022 census. All variants are based on a birth rate per woman of 1.55 children and a life expectancy of 84.6 years for boys and 88.2 years for girls. Variant A is based on the assumption of medium-term immigration of 150,000 people (G2L2W1); Variant B assumes 250,000 people (G2L2W2); and Variant C assumes 350,000 people (G2L2W3).

Sources: Federal Statistical Office; 2022 census; author's own calculations.

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2024 or 10.1 percent relative to 1991. The impact of these population gains and losses differs markedly among the federal states, however. In the low immigration variant, Berlin is the only state to see population growth from 2024 to 2070. With high immigration, the majority of western German states will experience population growth, as do all the city-states. The populations of the former East German states, except Brandenburg, in contrast, will decline over this period. In this scenario, Saarland, which, like the eastern German states, has faced significant structural change, drops to third-to-last place. Rhineland-Palatinate is also projected to see a population decrease.

Differences in fiscal capacity before distribution likely to continue increasing sharply

In Scenario I, which assumes that individual taxes develop in the same way across all federal states, fiscal capacity is projected to converge slightly by 2070 (Figure 2). The financially weaker eastern German states see some gains, with Brandenburg's fiscal capacity improving particularly strongly. Many people have relocated to the rural areas of the Berlin-Brandenburg metropolitan region, causing Brandenburg's population to increase since 2014. Its fiscal capacity now already exceeds that of Saarland.

It also appears that the lower the assumed immigration for Germany as a whole is, the more the fiscal capacity of the federal states converges. The net immigration assumed in the projection (which corresponds to the average for 2018, 2019, and 2021)¹⁴ reflects the below-average in-migration to eastern German states.¹⁵ Given the assumption that tax revenue will develop in the same way across the federal states, the redistribution volume as a percentage of the states' tax revenue is projected to remain unchanged. In the eyes of the public, however, this sum is in the billions—and, due to inflation alone, is set to increase significantly.

Under Scenario II, however, where tax revenue is projected based on each state's development of individual taxes over the past ten years, the disparities in fiscal capacity before distribution rise markedly (Figure 3). The financially strong states—Bavaria, Hesse, and Hamburg—see a significant increase in local tax revenue. The financially weak eastern German states, in contrast, see their revenue decline relative

¹⁴ For more details on the assumptions and definitions, see also the Federal Statistical Office website.

¹⁵ In-migration was only high in the years with large refugee movements. Due to the formula-based distribution of refugees, the eastern German states benefited more than usual from in-migration while asylum claims were being processed.

to the national average. In Saarland, the continuation of tax trends will eventually result in significant losses.

If historical trends in the federal states continue, redistribution among the states will increase sharply. While five percent of the states' available revenue was redistributed in 2024, the corresponding figure in Scenario II is as much as 10 ¾ percent, with federal transfers increasing from three percent in 2024 to 5 ½ percent by 2070.

Conclusion: Hardened trends are difficult to reverse

The development of a federal state's fiscal capacity depends on many factors. Put simply, economic power roughly reflects the basis of local tax revenue. The economic power of eastern German federal states still lags behind that of the western states and, due to long-established structures, convergence is slow. This persistent gap becomes even more evident when we look at the states' tax revenue. This is the result not only of lower assets, but, more importantly, of the progressive tax system, according to which tax rates rise in line with the taxpayer's ability to pay. Under the existing fiscal equalization system, this is transferred to the federal states. The more affluent – as in having a greater ability to pay – federal states must make compensation payments, while the poorer states are the recipients of these transfers. With the fundamental goal of convergence, a high level of redistribution in German fiscal federalism is inevitable.

However, the analysis also reveals—in both scenarios and across all variants—that the east-west pattern no longer

holds. The eastern German states are increasingly resembling their financially weak western German counterparts. Brandenburg is already in a better financial position than Saarland, and the gap between the eastern German states and Lower Saxony is narrowing. Brandenburg, on the other hand, profits from its proximity to Berlin, not just in terms of population but also tax base. The fiscal capacity of Saxony is also growing markedly.

There are many indications that the federal states will become increasingly heterogeneous and that the volume of financial compensation payments between them will grow. It is not inconceivable that the financially strong states will soon demand a reduction in their equalization payments and once again threaten to take legal action in the Federal Constitutional Court. Historically, though, the financially strong states have certainly profited from the situation. For them, eastern Germany's shrinking population, along with similar demographic trends in other structurally weak states, has meant an influx of young, well-educated people. These migration flows have opposing effects on potential economic growth in the states. The eastern German states have also had to accept smaller shares of tax revenue every year, while the opposite has been the case for their financially stronger counterparts. Such developments narrow or expand the budgetary leeway that the federal states can use for effective regional development policy. Regardless, it is important to prevent financially strong states from shirking their responsibility, especially given that the last reform of the fiscal equalization system allowed them to shift part of their financial burden onto the federal government, which is currently facing a host of other challenges.

Kristina van Deuverden is a Research Associate of the Executive Board at
DIW Berlin | kvandeuverden@diw.de

JEL: H77

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DIW Berlin — Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung e.V.

Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße 58, 10117 Berlin

www.diw.de

Phone: +49 30 897 89–0 Fax: –200

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