



The full study is available  
only in German:

**30 Jahre deutsche Einheit.**

Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt  
im vereinten Deutschland.

English Summary  
**Thirty years of German unity**  
Social cohesion in a united Germany.

# Summary

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## Background

The third of October 2020 marked the 30th anniversary of German reunification. The debate over whether, and if so at what pace, a Germany that “belongs together is growing together” is just as old. Differences between the federal states of the former West Germany and the former East Germany persist even today. However, this study takes the occasion of this anniversary to look instead at the unifying elements within our society. Its goal is to explore what holds German society together in 2020, and how the people here look back on unification and the protracted process of growing together. In this regard, today’s Germany differs in many respects from the freshly reunified country of 1990. Among other changes, the diversity has become much greater, and is much more visible. Today’s Germany is slowly but steadily developing a new conception of itself as a country of immigration. The last 30 years have been shaped in many ways by this often contradictory and even painful process. Therefore, in this study, German unification is regarded not just as the process through which residents of the former East and West Germany have grown together, but also as one that has brought together Germans both with and without a migration background.

## Qualitative study with quantitative validation

The survey’s approach is primarily qualitative. This means that our study examines people’s different ideas, narratives and interpretations regarding reunification, their own understanding of Germanness and the experience of living together within society. To this end, the researchers conducted open interviews and discussions with people from eastern and western Germany, people with and without a migration background, older people who experienced Germany’s reunification as adults, and younger people familiar with the

country’s division only from stories. Finally, using the qualitative findings as a basis, the researchers carried out a quantitative validation of a number of key aspects using a representative online survey. They thus reviewed whether the findings that emerged from the interviews and discussion rounds also hold true for the overall population.

## German unity as an ongoing process

Friedrich Nietzsche penned the following aphorism: “It is characteristic of the Germans that the question: ‘What is German?’ never dies out among them.” In a similar sense, the present analysis too offers no conclusive judgement on what distinguishes our society, what connects people or how German unity may finally be achieved. Rather, the study sees itself a part of a process of societal self-reflection focused on how people in our society want to live together. For this to succeed, it is necessary to be familiar with the diversity of different perspectives; moreover, these perspectives must be taken seriously and should be developed further in an ongoing dialogue. We hope that the results of this study can contribute to the discussion about collective identity in a diverse, open and changing society, and ultimately advance this debate further.

## The eastern German perspective – Reunification as a personal turning point

Our study makes it clear that even 30 years after reunification of the two German states, there are two different narratives of this event. On the one hand, there is the eastern German perspective, which begins with the Peaceful Revolution, the Monday demonstrations and the resulting Wende (“turning point”, referring generally to the end of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the

reunification of the two Germanies). The core of this narrative is the achievement effected by the East Germans themselves, who through peaceful means initially brought about the fall of the Berlin Wall, and ultimately prompted the *Wende*. But this narrative also includes the experience of having received insufficient recognition for this achievement within the reunified Germany, and instead being subject to frequent rejection and contempt during the post-reunification period. In the standardized survey, 71 percent of eastern Germans, but only 48 percent of western Germans, were of the opinion that eastern Germans deserve more recognition for bringing about the peaceful *Wende*. At the same time, the eastern German interviewees indicated that they had had to bear a disproportionate share of the burdens associated with unification – for example in the form of higher unemployment rates and lower wage and pension levels. In this context, members of this population also cited the biographical disruptions of the post-reunification period that had reached deep into their personal relationships. For example, 83 percent of the eastern Germans in the standardized survey said that people in the East were often unfairly treated in the period following reunification. Only 50 percent of western Germans stated or confirmed this. In the eastern German narrative, there is often regret that much of what worked well under the GDR was not adopted following unification. A total of 84 percent of eastern Germans, but only 48 percent of western Germans, expressed this opinion in the quantitative survey.

### The western German perspective – Reunification as a historical event

These feelings contrast with a western German perspective that is also broadly shared by people with a migration background. In the western German narrative, the GDR collapsed as a consequence of its political and economic shortcomings. In this telling, the people of the former Federal Republic of Germany (FRG; the former West Germany) bore the financial burdens of reunification, and that with unification, the economically and political superior system of the West found its way into the East. This narrative includes the idea that people in the West deserve gratitude for their efforts – particularly in the financial sense – associated

with unification. A total of 55 percent of western Germans, but only 26 percent of eastern Germans, share this view.

### Different relevance to identity – Between *Wende* and reunification

The two narratives also differ linguistically: While the concept of the “*Wende*” – a term associated with transformation and a change in direction – predominates among eastern German respondents, western German respondents speak more often of reunification. Resonant in this latter term is the idea of a return to normality. This is also expressed in a further difference between the two narratives. For the eastern Germans, the *Wende* often represents a decisive personal turning point; from the perspective of the western Germans, it is also recognized as a significant event, but there is significantly less often a personal connection to it. Around 90 percent of people in both the East and West say that the influence of reunification was great or very great. However, 74 percent of people in the East, as compared to just 61 percent in the West, see it as having had a great or very great influence on their own lives. This is consistent with the fact that respondents from the West see differences between the various parts of the country as being less important than do their counterparts from the East. A total of 55 percent of western Germans say it makes no difference whether someone comes from western or eastern Germany. Only 32 percent of eastern Germans agree – a clear indication that for them, originating from the East plays a bigger part in their self-image than does the western German origin in the reverse case.

### The value of unity is not questioned

While these two narratives emerge from the interviews as clearly distinct perspectives, they are not altogether irreconcilable. In this regard, it is interesting that the significance attributed to the event and aftermath of reunification is waning among young people. The competition between the two narratives is thus diminishing over the course of time. In addition, the different perspectives described here are no longer

perceived as the dominant dividing line within society. This is partly because in both narratives, the unified Germany is endorsed as an unalterable and ultimately positive fact. There are certainly different interpretations, but unification in itself is not called into question.

### The migrant perspective – Struggles for recognition and identity

The migrant perspective on reunification, as noted above, is in many respects similar to the western German view, even among respondents living in the East. Reunification appears here as an important societal event, but for the most part, respondents do not have a personal connection with it. However, there are two notable exceptions. On the one hand, from the migrant perspective, there are often references to racist and xenophobic events in connection with eastern Germany. On the other, there is a parallel with the (younger) eastern Germans: In each of these two groups, experiences of devaluation and efforts to grapple with their own identities play a much greater role than is true of western Germans. This is partially reflected in the fact that around 60 percent of each of these two segments have the impression that members of their own group are treated as second-class citizens. Here too, the perception of others is revealing. Among the western Germans, 21 percent say that eastern Germans are treated as second-class citizens; among people with migration background, 36 percent agree with this statement. Conversely, about 50 percent of western and eastern Germans alike say that the same is true for people with a migration background.

### Requirements of “Germanness”

From the migrant perspective, another aspect – absent from either of the other two narratives in this form – also plays a role. In the interviews, people with a migration background describe three specific requirements that are repeatedly imposed upon them in order to prove that they belong in Germany, or to demonstrate their “Germanness,” beyond their formal citizenship. These three standards include mastering the language, adhering to the law and demonstrating a strong work ethic.

However, people in this group also say that even if they entirely fulfill these requirements, others continue to question whether they actually belong. When asked whether Germans with and without an immigrant background will differ even in subsequent generations, all three groups offer nearly identical answers. Among western Germans and people with a migration background, 68 percent agree that this will be the case; among eastern Germans, this share is 74 percent.

### There is not yet an inclusive collective self-image – but there are unifying elements

As a next step, based on these three different perspectives, the study sought to identify unifying elements seen as equally important by all three groups. In this regard, both the interviews and the focus groups demonstrated that people find it very difficult to define exactly what distinguishes German society, Germany or Germans as a people, with participants finding it difficult to compile a list of positive elements. Moreover, the challenging nature of this task was further confirmed in the standardized survey. More than half of all respondents in all three groups stated that it used to be easier to say what defined Germany, though it was primarily older respondents that felt this way. Nevertheless, four elements emerged in the qualitative phase that could serve as building blocks for a self-conception shared by eastern Germans, western Germans and Germans with a migration background alike.

### Language and common history as unifying elements

The first fundamental element is the German language, the mastery of which is viewed by all as the basis for social recognition. Thus, the capacity to understand one another in German is part of the shared image of our society. The second unifying element is the shared collective memory, or a common history as a point of reference. The interviews reveal a thoroughly ambivalent picture of history, however. On the one hand are the dark chapters, encompassing two world

wars, the holocaust and two dictatorships, which left a particular mark on the first half of the 20th century but also extended beyond this point. On the other hand, there is a specific sense of superiority that also derives from German history; in this case, references include the country's long line of poets and thinkers, its engineering skill, the economic miracle and Germany's status as the world's leading export power. For example, 76 percent of Germans with a migration background, 72 percent of western Germans and 63 percent of eastern Germans agree with the statement that "Germany does many things better than other countries." In this context, it is interesting that the eastern Germans expressing this sense of superiority in the qualitative interviews tended to draw on the western German perspective of economic miracles and "Made in Germany," while somewhat disregarding the history of the GDR.

### A focus on work and performance is part of the German self-image

The third element emerging from the discussions, and which is confirmed in the standardized survey, is a specific mentality centered around the personal work ethic. For the respondents, a willingness to work hard in order to succeed is a key to belonging. In much the same vein, practicing a profession learned through experience or schooling, as well as having a concrete job, appears as a key element of identity. In the standardized survey, all three groups regard industriousness, economic success and a strong work ethic as characteristics associated particularly strongly with Germany. Among western Germans and people with a migration background, freedom also plays an important role. Surprisingly, the eastern Germans cited this point somewhat less often. While people with a migration background place a strong emphasis on the security found in Germany, this is a somewhat less important feature for western Germans; for their part, eastern Germans attribute significantly less importance to this as a defining characteristic of Germany.

### Unity is found in a community of solidarity

The fourth element cited by all three groups is solidarity. German is seen as a country in which the social state offers its citizens a robust safety net, but also as a place where people support one another. The idea of society as a community of solidarity, in contrast to a more individualistic society in which everyone can depend only on themselves, emerges throughout the interviews. This said, the eastern Germans regard solidarity and the social state somewhat more critically; while 76 percent of western Germans see this as a defining element of Germany, this share in the East, at 63 percent, is considerably lower. However, no fundamental rejection of the social state is evident in the qualitative interviews or focus groups; rather, there is disappointment that the social state is too weak.

### The coronavirus crisis as external shock during the research phase

The qualitative interviews for this study were conducted in late 2019. The focus groups and the quantitative validation took place in 2020, thus slipping into the months marked by the coronavirus crisis. Accordingly, the focus-group discussions were already strongly influenced by participants' impressions of the crisis. For this reason, we also sought to examine how society was reacting to the shock of the pandemic. On the one hand, participants in the qualitative study indicated that they perceived society as pulling together in their immediate environments. People were helping one another, and supporting those in high-risk groups. At the same time, however, they expressed a growing concern that the crisis might lead to a long-term weakening in the sense of solidarity across society as a whole. Among the western Germans, the share saying they expected the crisis to produce long-term improvements in cohesion (29 percent) was roughly balanced with those that feared deterioration (26 percent). A similar split was evident among people with a migration background (34 percent vs. 33 percent). Among the eastern Germans, by contrast, skepticism prevailed: 32 percent said they feared long-term deterioration, while 22 percent expected improvement.

## Decreasing importance of the East-West difference over time

In bringing together the various results of this study, it becomes evident that even after 30 years, German unification is far from being complete, especially if unity is seen in a more inclusive sense that captures the realities of a country of immigration. At the same time, a comparison between the generations shows the effects of the passage of time – that is, people with less direct experience of national division and reunification attribute less personal significance to the East–West theme, and have thus learned to deal with it in a more relaxed and open manner. However, the country still lacks a shared narrative that recognizes the services rendered by all involved, and which also takes into account eastern Germans' experiences and achievements in life. In a similar sense, the country lacks a narrative of Germany that includes residents with a migration background – as well as those who do not formally belong in this group, but due to their skin or hair color, surname, or religion are forced into a perpetual struggle to belong.

## The path is the goal: Unity is realized in an ongoing process

Questioning someone's identity can push them to fight for it. This is rarely something our western German respondents without an immigrant migration background have experienced. For the respondents with a migration background, however, this is a part of daily reality. Similarly, most of the eastern Germans interviewed felt themselves to be eastern Germans first, and Germans only secondarily. Especially in times of crisis, there is a risk that these unclear identities and corresponding identity conflicts will become the front lines of societal confrontations. It is thus all the more important to have a productive overall societal discussion on how we want to live together in this society, and on what it means for us today (and might mean in the future) to be German. Both with regard to German unification and immigration, the demand for adaptation has to date always been given a top priority. However, the results of this study make it clear that these processes have also entailed problems of recognition. It is likely – as

demonstrated by other successful countries of immigration – that the process of adaptation would be usefully advanced by adding an additional ambition, to reshape and further develop the community together, guided by a future-oriented vision to which everyone could contribute, and which valued the experiences and biographies of every segment of the population. At the same time, however, this study shows that we may never be able to answer the question of German unity, about what the common ground in our society genuinely is, with any finality. Rather, the results suggest that we are engaged in a kind of continuing societal dialogue. We hope this study can make a contribution to this ongoing discussion.

## Methodology

The study is divided into three methodological steps. It began with 50 in-depth ethnographic interviews carried out on the basis of a common set of interview guidelines. In November 2019, 10 of these interviews were conducted in the general environs of each of five cities in eastern and western Germany, including Rostock, Berlin, Leipzig, Essen and Nuremberg. Half of the participants in these interviews were around 60 years old, and had thus experienced German reunification as adults. The other half were about 30 years old, thus growing up only after the point of reunification. People with a migration background were also interviewed at each of the locations.

In a second step taking place in April 2020, 42 of the interviewees, separated on the basis of the five locations, participated in discussions in online communities and in two online focus groups. Finally, a third online focus group was held with representatives from all five locations, in order to bring the discussions together.

The third step entailed a quantitative and representative online survey of 1,581 people at least 18 years old, including 779 individuals from western Germany and 802 from eastern Germany. This overall group included 170 people with a migration background. The survey was conducted between 5 and 10 June 2020, and lasted an average of 10 minutes.

## The Living Values program

In the Living Values program, we examine social cohesion and especially the role played by religion and values for living together in diverse societies. We regularly research and publish new studies on these topics in the Religion Monitor and the Social Cohesion Radar. In addition, we actively seek to strengthen values through practical projects and methodologies, and work to build networks between civil society actors engaged in our field.



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