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What Alternative?

The far right's election breakthrough in eastern Germany is about more than protest

Forty-four per cent for the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Sunday's state election in Saxony-Anhalt is more than another good result for Germany's far right. It is an electoral earthquake. More than three decades after reunification, a party of the radical right has become by far the dominant political force in an eastern German state of 2.1 million people.

The tempting explanations are already available. Eastern resentment. The legacy of reunification. Anger about immigration. Protest against Berlin. All are partly true. None quite explains the peculiar contradictions of Saxony-Anhalt.

Take a local train out of Magdeburg, the state capital, at the end of a shift. At one of the enormous logistics centres outside the city, the workers waiting on the platform are almost all migrants. It is difficult to look at them and maintain that immigration is something being imposed on a region that does not need it. Saxony-Anhalt is old, shrinking and short of workers. Migration is already helping to keep parts of its economy running.

But take enough trains through the state and another observation becomes difficult to ignore. There are passengers who shout, harass others or make everyone in the carriage uncomfortable. Quite often, they appear to have a migrant background.

People remember what they see, what frightens them and what happens in their neighbourhood.

Neither observation is a statistic. Both are part of everyday experience. While public debate in Germany is much more comfortable with the first observation than the second, in Magdeburg migration is tied to a much more traumatic memory.

In December 2024, a Saudi-born doctor drove a car into the city's crowded Christmas market, killing six people and injuring hundreds. The

attack was politically more complicated than the familiar story of Islamist terrorism: the suspect had expressed fiercely anti-Islamic views and sympathy for the AfD. Despite his extreme right beliefs, for people in Magdeburg, the abstract details of motive do not erase the concrete memory of a migrant driving into a Christmas market.

It is easy to insist – correctly – that one criminal says nothing about millions of immigrants. But politics is not conducted entirely through representative samples. People remember what they see, what frightens them and what happens in their neighbourhood.

The AfD has become extraordinarily successful at articulating such impressions. Its problem is what it does with them. A complicated reality becomes a simple story: immigration brings crime; elites refuse to admit it; therefore immigration is the problem. The simplification is powerful precisely because it begins with something people may genuinely have experienced.

The complications of history

And then, in Saxony-Anhalt, something darker repeatedly intrudes: a remarkably casual relationship with Germany's Nazi past. Sometimes it takes almost absurd forms. The party's state programme uses 'Räder müssen rollen' as a heading in its section on cycling – a phrase associated with German wartime mobilisation – apparently to make the perfectly ordinary argument that cycling should be promoted.

Such allusions to Nazi-era language are as provocative as they are unnecessary.

Few German states have more material from which to build a confident and positive relationship with German history. For a region now often treated as peripheral, Saxony-Anhalt has repeatedly found itself remarkably close to the centre of European history.

Magdeburg was a centre of Otto the Great's empire; Luther transformed Europe from Wittenberg; the future Catherine the Great grew up as a princess of Anhalt-Zerbst; Bismarck, Germany's legendary – and hardly uncontroversial – statesman, was born in Schönhausen; and Händel, born in Halle, composed Zadok the Priest, performed at every British coronation since 1727. In Dessau, the Bauhaus helped revolutionise modern architecture before the Nazis forced it to close.

Quedlinburg and Wernigerode, two of the many picturesque medieval

towns the state has to offer, have market squares that seem designed for postcards. This is not a region that needs to invent a glorious past, still less to borrow from the darkest chapter of the German one. Saxony-Anhalt has enough history to be proud of, and precisely for that reason, enough history to know where pride requires particular care.

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Yet eastern Germany has spent much of the past 35 years hearing about what it lacks. Jobs. Young people. Productivity. Investment. Cosmopolitanism. Democratic maturity. Much of this is not invented. But one needs to understand the whole picture: the GDR was a dictatorship, its economy needed radical transformation and its environmental legacy was disastrous. But diagnosis easily became a hierarchy: the West had the capital, the functioning institutions and the model to follow; the East was the part that had to catch up.

And the way that transformation happened created asymmetries that lasted much longer than the emergency that produced them. West Germans arrived with capital, networks and qualifications recognised by the new system. Eastern careers were devalued; ownership shifted; professors sometimes found themselves in entirely different professions.

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The problem with having no alternative

That history matters when eastern Germans are told today that another transformation is unavoidable. And Saxony-Anhalt really does need another transformation. It needs workers and investment. In the old chemical triangle around Leuna and Bitterfeld, once synonymous with the heavy and heavily polluting industry of the GDR, companies and researchers are working on green hydrogen, recycling and a more circular chemical economy. Around Magdeburg, meanwhile, the flat and windy Börde has become one of the centres of Germany's wind-power economy – a transformation the city embraced early, declaring itself a model city for renewable energy as far back as 2006.

An ageing state is therefore not simply being asked to endure Germany's next transformation. In some respects, it is already helping to build it. And to do so, it needs both new industries and people to work in them.

But ‘there is no alternative’ is a dangerous political message to people who have already lived through one transformation presented largely in those terms.

This is where the AfD’s name becomes almost more important than its programme.

It offers an Alternative.

That certainly does not mean it has one.

The question of investment illustrates the problem rather neatly. Intel’s planned multibillion-euro semiconductor complex near Magdeburg was supposed to become the great symbol of Saxony-Anhalt’s high-tech future. The investment never materialised.

In neighbouring Brandenburg, meanwhile, Elon Musk did build Tesla’s first European Gigafactory. Musk has also repeatedly endorsed the AfD on X.

So when the AfD’s lead candidate in Saxony-Anhalt, Ulrich Siegmund, suggests that he has better access to Musk than Germany's established politicians, the claim is not entirely absurd. In a state that has just lost one of Europe’s most prestigious industrial projects, being able to call a billionaire who actually builds factories in eastern Germany has an obvious appeal. But it also exposes the limits of the AfD’s alternative.

A state can reduce immigration. It cannot vote itself younger. And a government that toys with the language of Germany’s Nazi past may discover that attracting international capital and highly skilled foreign workers is harder than attracting endorsements on X.

The desire for an alternative is nevertheless real. So is the desire to be proud of a region too often described from outside through its failures. Neither belongs inherently to the far right.

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The AfD’s success lies partly in understanding those sentiments. Its weakness is in pretending that acknowledging them is already a solution.

state premier in the 77-year history of the Federal Republic.

The election may have produced an almost perfect final irony. The AfD has won around 44 per cent of the vote – more than twice the share of the Christian Democrats – but have fallen just short of an outright majority. That leaves a potentially decisive role to one of the strangest parties in German politics. The Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), founded by Sahra Wagenknecht after she broke with Die Linke, is hovering just above the 5 per cent threshold needed to enter parliament. Wagenknecht herself began her political career in East Germany's ruling communist party shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Before the election, Wagenknecht suggested that her party might abstain in a vote for state premier, potentially allowing the AfD's Ulrich Siegmund to take office without a formal coalition. If the numbers hold, she may now have precisely that power.

The historical irony would be difficult to invent: a politician whose roots lie in East Germany's communist and post-communist left could help install the first far-right state premier in the 77-year history of the Federal Republic.

That would certainly be an alternative to almost everything German politics has known until now. But after an election fought in the name of an Alternative, Saxony-Anhalt may end up with something rather more familiar: a government whose survival depends on an unlikely political bargain. Wanting an alternative, after all, does not mean that you have one.



David Fleschen
Wuppertal

David Fleschen is a journalist. He studied European Studies in Maastricht, Salamanca, Magdeburg, and St. Petersburg, and his work focuses on social change, the media, and Europe. For about twenty years,

he has been publishing journalistic articles in regional, national, and international media.