Ostalgy in Flux? Transformations of the concept reflected in the case of (East) Germany[1]

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Abstract: *The contribution focuses on the origin, genesis and transformation of (n)ostalgy in the new German Bundesländer. It focuses on the political-ideological, life biography, societal and economic frame of ostalgy and presents this phaenomenon as a general East-Central European feature. Later, it specifically analyses the East German case presenting and analysing the uniqueness of this case. The intra-German discourse is used as the main shape for such analysis, and the bipolarisation of the discourse and the stereotypes used. In the last analytical part we present the transmission of ostalgic supporters of the successor Party of Democratic Socialism towards the new radical party Alternative for Germany, showing the overlap of ostalgy as the socio-economic and ideo-political background with the new forms of anti-liberal and nativist stances.*

Key Words: ***nostalgia; ostalgy; post-Communism; East Germany; counter-cosmopolitanism***

I. Introduction

When I started thinking about the (n)ostalgy phaenomenon, I began with the heuristic research at one of the e-portals offering books. Using the keywords 'nostalgy' and 'East Germany', I got a few hundred matches showing the significance of the issue. Furthermore, about forty of the first matches offered dozens of diaries rising from the nostalgic reflection of the former GDR. Among these 'Ossi Kalender' (Eastern diaries) we can find among others titles such as

1 This contribution was prepared within the internal grant project No. E75-91 *Phaenomenon of Ostalgy in the Post-Communist Area,* of the Internal Grant System of the Metropolitan University Prague.

'Stolzer Ossi' (proud East German) or 'Held der Arbeit' (Hero of the Labour), a majority of them study the milestones of East-German history, the national holidays, birthdays of the leading persons of the Communist regime, as well as other important anniversaries related to the existence of the communist East and international labour movement history.

Naturally, it would be possible to snub these diaries – as well as many other artefacts and relics related to the communist past of East Germany – referencing to the marketing and pop-art nature of such an 'article' which might be compared with the marketing use of Latin American revolutionist Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. On the other hand, we have to mention that in motion since 1990 in the post-communist states of East-Central Europe – and even more in the reunified Federal Republic of Germany – is a distinctive de-communisation related with processes such as lustration, digitalisation and declassification of the archives of the former secret police (Stasi) and *de iure* denial of the GDR as a sovereign state. For example, Helmut Fehr (2016: 56–58) stresses the terms 'Niemandsland' (nobodies land) or 'Unrechtsstaat' (lawlessness state) reflecting the recent perception of the GDR in the German official discourse.

In the German public and political debate, it is an unquestionable and proven fact that the political regime of the GDR was totalitarian and criminal, many critics compare the regime with the national-socialist totalitarianism between 1933 and 1945, labelling it as the 'Stasiland' (Funder 2011). Indeed, while the Nazi period is fully and completely considered repulsive and legally, politically and medially constantly condemned, in the case of the communist dictatorship and its perception the situation is distinctively different. At least by some societal groups the GDR-period is considered specifically 'retro' and related to the selected products, including the promo-campaigns (Lieder 2020). Often, the GDR-period is distinctively idealised and the alleged partially positive aspects of the East German regime and East German everyday reality are placed in the opposition against the alleged or real deficiencies of the Federal Republic. Thus, the reflection of the existence and history of the GDR became the specific form of nostalgy, rooted in the specific construction of the collective memory.

In this contribution, I focus on the recent development of the (n)ostalgic discourse in Germany as well as the broader East-Central European region, and the development regarding the scholarly discussion about the (n)ostalgy. I focus primarily on the transformation of ostalgy into the amalgamised form of doctrine and conviction combining the constructed myth about the pre-1989 past with other impulses related to both the older legacies (among others, nativism) as well as the recent forms of counter-globalism. Specifically, I assume that ostalgy as the phaenomenon related specifically to the generations that grew up before 1989 is continually turning to new forms of a radical or even an extremist form of political opposition against the liberal-democratic regimes (in my case specifically against the regime in Germany). Such analysis

is embedded in the general debate on the polarisation of Western societies in the last decade(s).

II. Ostalgy – genesis and scope of the concept

After more than four decades of non-democratic reality, the transition towards democracy and liberal market economy in the late 1980s and 1990s brought about a truly radical transformation. Such a reversal presented for many of the individuals and social groups not primarily new opportunities, but the loss of the up-to-then-achieved security and living standards, and it profoundly changed their existence. Alongside the economic fears, new phenomena such as unemployment, criminality and individualisation (as the opposite of the collectivism promoted by the former regime) were considered the aspects dismantling and undermining the relative – and stressed by communist and post-communist propaganda and its promoters – stability of the real-socialist regimes (Buden 2013: 37; Cox 1996; Kabele 2005: 63; Schneiderová 2023: 11).

After 1989, the newly free societies in East-Central Europe found itself without the censorship used by the communist regimes to keep the real problems secret. With censorship, the regimes created in the citizens a fake impression of a trouble-free life in different spheres such as economics, living standard, health, environment or international affairs. With the commencement of democracy and abolition of an information vacuum many people did not endure the reality and started to confirm the fiction that their lives under communism were better (Kabát 2011: 94–95; Schneiderová 2023: 28).

The phaenomenon of ostalgy reflects a specific type of nostalgy observed in the post-communist societies in East-Central Europe. 'The word Ostalgie is a noun combined of the German terms "Ost" that is translated as East, and "Nostalgie", which signify nostalgia. It was publicly introduced to the German language in 1993, when the first movements that attested that the significance of East Germany survived in the collective mind of German people were recorded' (Figus – Pisaniello – Mustica 2018: 50).

The content of the term 'ostalgy' is not fully fixed and it depends strongly on the context. It might involve the geographic component, the political label, as well as rejection or acceptance of concrete identity embedded in the 'other' Germany (Blum 2000; Schneiderová 2023: 30). Usually, ostalgy is presented as missing specific events and/or artefacts related with everyday life in former communist countries, while omitting the negative components of this past. Hloušková (2014: 43, cf. Schneiderová 2023: 12) considers ostalgy as grieving the lost idyll of one's own childhood and youth influenced by communism interconnected with the fascination by the socio-realist objects, products, lifestyle or free-time activities. 'Ostalgia can be defined as a romantic idea about what has passed, it is "memory", and it is understandable (maybe not in all justifiable). Let's always

remember that every man (generally) nostalgically remembers his past and the citizens of East Germany, have no other' (Figus – Pisaniello – Mustica 2018: 57).

Presenting also an important component of the political life and political expression of its proponents, ostalgy became a distinctive issue in social sciences. Historians often focus on everyday life during the Communist period searching for embedded reasons for the positive reflection of the regime which, by evidence, was anti-liberal and violent. In this sense the historical sociology specifically reflects the ideological influence the Communist regime associated with strengthening the interpersonal ties within the regime-controlled communities (recreation stays organised by the labour unions) and the specific focus on the education and upbringing of the children and youth (political organisations, summer camps), as well as backing leisure time activities (camping and other types of organised hobbies) (Franc 2008; Franc 2015: 27–28; Schneiderová 2023: 10; Rychlík 2015, 37–39).

Also considered highly influential was the dissemination of the official ideology through the culture. Specifically, movies and TV series were able to address the wide public – firstly with the historical themes reflected in the communist perspective and clear propagandist frame, and later with the hidden propaganda aimed at everyday life (Machek 2013: 65–73). Also Machonin and Tuček (1996: 337) agree that alongside politicians, marketing and media play an important role in the creation and capitalisation of ostalgy. As regards marketing, businessmen use so-called 'retro' editions and there is a return of 'traditional' products. Nevertheless, the most important share in maintaining the ostalgic frame of mind in society is produced by the media, should it be in the form of the never-ending repetition of TV series, movies and shows from the Communist period, or placing new movies into the setting of real socialism (Hloušková 2014: 46–47). The retro style develops in social networks, dance parties, design and fashion.[2] Symbols of the Communist regime and everyday life in socialism are also used in tourism, in merchandising or museum management (for example the so-called GDR museums in several East-German cities) (Schneiderová 2023: 12). 'The phenomenon of Ostalgie revolves around expression through cultural artefacts, such as TV shows, return of GDR products and objects of consumption; and Internet sites that sell memorabilia. Moreover, the years Sixty and Seventy are represented through material culture, counting furniture, wallpaper and outdated technology, and etc. etc' (Figus – Pisaniello – Mustica 2018: 53).

As mentioned, the phenomenon of ostalgy became an important issue in social sciences with growing importance. This growing interest is related to the visible electoral results of political actors promoting the alleged positive sides

2 As one of the first symbolic expressions, the East German traffic light figures for pedestrians (*Ampelmänchen*) might be mentioned, also the Trabi-clubs, parties with the East German fashion style, shops with the GDR-products, as well as the high popularity of former East German radio stations and music (Sierp 2009: 49).

of the pre-transitive period, as well as with the search for the correlation of the ostalgy 'wave' with the polycrisis after 2008 (economic, migration, pandemic, Russian war against Ukraine). Furthermore, along with the initial shape of ostalgy the research also focuses on the changes and transmutations generated by the new actors and new perspectives using and developing the ostalgic strategies. On one hand we are searching for the distinctive similarities of ostalgy in partial post-communist societies, on the other we can observe the 'national' paths. For example, in Czechia ostalgy has been linked to the persistence of a relatively strong and stable and only weakly-reformed Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Cabada 2015), but it is assumed that after the electoral failure of the party in 2021 (Popálený – Cabada 2022) the ostalgic frame will bring about an important cleavage in the society. Such a multi-faceted form corresponds with the general concepts of nostalgy examined as a political factor. For example, Ekman a Linde (2005: 356) differentiated four analytical frames of nostalgy – the political-ideological, life biography, societal and economic; some authors connect the latter two into one, socio-economic (Sierp 2009: 48).

Basically, there is agreement that the former GDR is a specific case in post-communist societies. While these societies underwent long – and in many ways still unfinished – transformation, the new *Bundesländer* were included into the Federal Republic of Germany less than one year after the beginning of the autumn revolt in 1989. In a much faster and much more intensive manner than any other post-communist nation, East Germans were swallowed by Western capitalism, goods, living values and norms. Indeed, after a few years the enthusiasm for re-unification cooled down. The East Germans continually got the feeling that their identity, history and national pride were being stolen. Compared with West Germany, they started to feel like second-rate citizens (Hloušková 2014: 44). The disillusion and frustration from the development after 1989 and the growing desire after the return to the former way of life brought about a new societal phaenomenon – the ostalgy – manifesting itself in a sentimental reflection on everyday life before the change and disregarding the awkward events and nature of the real-socialist regime (Buden 2013: 245; Schneiderová 2023: 11).

Similarly, we can observe the so-called Yugo-nostalgia (Boškovič 2013; Muranovic 2019), which is based in cultural, economic and political patterns. In culture it refers to the mutual music or film tradition, in economics to the relative Yugoslav prosperity compared with the recent economic problems of several post-Yugoslav nations, and in the political sphere above-all in the idolising admiration for the grounder of socialist Yugoslavia Josip Broz Tito (Dizdarević 2002). In a similar way we also have nostalgy for the Soviet Union (USSR), which after all became a significant part of the USSR's image created by the Russian president Vladimir Putin.

In the Russian/Soviet case (and others), we can at least partly interconnect ostalgy with the concept of *homo sovieticus*, developed in economy, sociology

and anthropology, and specifically portraying the passive individual depending on often weak, but general social services, promoting the paternalist state and adhering to conservative, anti-liberal and authoritarian values and politics. Nevertheless, ostalgy cannot be synonymised with *homo sovieticus*. Furthermore, some authors present a different opinion regarding the value system of these sociotypes. For example, Marody (2010: 80) notes that 'it is unclear what kind of values might be regarded as specific for *homo sovieticus*. One can even say that an important element of its definition is the lack of values rather than the presence of any specific moral standards' (Marody 2010: 80). The author further mentioned the sociological assumption that 'each system moulds people's characteristics, both on the level of cognition and on the level of behavioural dispositions. It does so by triggering processes of individual adjustment to the rationale of general structural qualities of systemic reality. In such a perspective *homo sovieticus* would be a kind of Weberian ideal type or just a shortening for those characteristics of people living under the communist regime' (Marody 2010: 80).

Tischner assumes that *homo sovieticus* is not primarily the product of the Communist regime, but the opposite – the customer searching for real or at least rhetorical profits offered by the Communist regime such as equality, financial egalitarianism, conformity or security (Marody 2010: 81–84). *Homo sovieticus* is 'a type of person who lived on communism and, owing everything to that system, became addicted to it. With the collapse of communism s/he became deprived of his/her "natural environment". Therefore, s/he has been unable to live under new democratic and liberal system, longed for the "old, good times" and attempted to "escape from freedom" by shifting the responsibility for his/her own life onto the authorities' (Tischner 2005, in Marody 2010: 84). In my opinion, such an examination of 'ostalgic' *homo sovieticus* is in full concordance with the de-mythicisation of the sort of 'USSR cult' offered up by the Belarussian winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature Svetlana Alexievich in her book *Second-hand Time* (2017). Similarly, another Nobel Prize winner, the German-Romanian writer Herta Müller considers the damaging nature of real-socialist regimes as producing value-less, unscrupulous and shallow individuals (for example) in *The Fox Was Ever the Hunter* (Müller 1994).

III. Specifics of ostalgy in the former GDR

As mentioned, the post-communist transformation in East-Germany was in many aspects different from other post-communist societies. As Pryce-Jones (1996: 222) notes, one of the important specifics was the practically continuous and damaging dictatorship from the beginning of the 1930s, i.e., the continuity between nazi and communist totalitarianism. Such a negative perception of the GDR belonged to the narrative developed in West Germany. It created

a fear in the West that the 'GDR could become an instantiation of German "authoritarian traditions" that threatened a return of dictatorial terror to Germany" (Boyer 2006: 369). After the re-unification, such a perception was linked to the reflection of the Nazi regime within the complex discourse of 'past burden' (*Vergangenheitsbelastung*).

The nations in the Eastern Block considered the West as the 'other', and those who did not accept the hypocrisy of real socialist regimes considered the West as their 'dream'. Specifically, for the East Germans such a positive view of the West was narrowed. As Ahbe (2018b) noted, when they still belonged to the *Second World* they acquired the comparison with the *First World* from Western TV. Some of them got the experience at Balaton Lake or on the beach by Varna that even an unemployed West German person or a student enjoys a better living standard than the typical GDR-citizen. Based on this perception, it is not surprising that West Germany became the symbol of paradise for an important part of East Germans. 'By the spring of 1990, a new slogan had taken hold: *Kommt die D-Mark, bleiben wir, kommt sie nicht, geh'n wir zu ihr*! (If we get the Deutsche Mark, we'll stay, if we don't, we'll come get it). The last part of the slogan referred on the threat of mass emigration from the GDR to escape economic misery. In the East German election campaigns of 1990, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) offered an obvious way forward: quick reunification and, *en route*, economic and monetary union with West Germany' (Ther 2020: 37).

The extremely positive view of West Germany and the re-unification idea was also reflected in public opinion surveys. Half a year before unification 61% of Eastern Germans felt more German than Eastern German. Nevertheless, only two years later, by 1992, these figures had reversed: only 35% identified themselves as German and 60% as Eastern German. Such decline for the preference of 'single-German' identity was continually sinking and in 1999 only one out of five inhabitants in the new *Bundesländer* said they felt like a citizen of the unified Germany (Sierp 2009: 50). A majority of the main reasons for such regression in the support for the 'single-German' identity are definitely related to the alienation of new citizens in the unified Germany.

Among these reasons, often the economic and developmental 'misery' in East Germany is mentioned in the first place, also related with the dramatic intra-German migration from the East to the West. 'By the mid-1990s, industrial production in eastern Germany had dropped to 27 per cent of its 1988 level. No other post-communist country, not even war-torn Bosnia and Herzegovina, saw a comparably dramatic decline. As a result, 1.4 million people from the new *Länder* left their homes by 1994. This number corresponded almost exactly to that on newly established business in Czechoslovakia… In Poland and Hungary, too, many people started their own businesses… In the GDR, the number of newly founded businesses was significantly lower' (Ther 2020: 41). High unemployment figures, an increasing social gap and difficulties in adapting to

a market economy, made people tend to not only look towards the future but also back to the past (Sierp 2009: 49; Schneiderová 2023: 63).

So far, this situation did not fundamentally change. The catching up and the levelling-up is still only partial, as the regularly reports and analyses show: 'The biggest remaining differences fell under the heading of lower gross domestic product per capita; few cities like Jena and Leipzig were able to match the economic power of West German regions… In terms of GDP per capita, East Germany is miles ahead of most of the transition regions in central and eastern Europe, and indeed many southern regions of the EU' (Leggewie 2020: 53; 56).

Compared with other post-communist nations, in the East German case we have to stress the weakening and even deconstruction of the social group often understood as the most important pillar of democratic society – the middle class. Alongside this group, also the (real or constructed) elite was destabilised. Only shortly after the fall of the Communist regime, the GDR was included in the political, societal, economic and value system of West Germany, and the old East-German elites, specialists and managers were removed and replaced by West Germans. Such discontinuity is unique and cannot be compared to any other post-communist society (Ahbe 2009; Hogwood 2001; Schneiderová 2023: 29). 'The professional group that suffered the least were civil servants… Through the monetary union, and the expansion of collective wage agreements… eastern German civil servants saw their salaries climb substantially' (Ther 2020: 41).

Regardless of the clear significance of the above-mentioned socio-economic upheaval, the most negative impulse to the birth and strengthening of ostalgy was the loss of one's own identity, associated with the construction of the new image of East Germany as *Niemandstaat*. As Figus, Pisaniello and Mustica (2018: 56) pointed out, demonisation of GDR history led to the mental confusion and shouting for roots and essence. Furthermore, the full denial of the East German history and identity produced a strong negative emotion of needlessness of East Germany which is also recently reflected more or less as the anomaly (Novotný 2019: 10).

It is understandable that the ostalgic response to such stimulus was much stronger in the new *Bundesländer* than in the majority of post-communist societies. The East Germans began to contend with the feeling of loss and dislocation. They found themselves in an unknown society with alien rules, values and hierarchies. They began to feel in unified Germany like 'immigrants who were expected to integrate into a society they did not know and that did not welcome them' (Blum 2000: 230). Continually, it became visible that the initial social differences and mentality among the West and East Germans are much bigger than originally expected (Stone 2017; Schneiderová 2023: 29). Such disparity produced the creation of new stereotypes (or strengthening of older ones). The West Germans considered the East Germans burdensome, mocking their disorderly consumption, lack of temperance or desire to catch up. East Germans

were often seen as the poor brothers and sisters, underdeveloped, hopelessly old-fashioned and uncivilised (Merkel 2006). To the major disappointment of East Germans, the expected change did not bring about the 'capitalist paradise', but an extremely competitive society they were not accustomed to, with high unemployment, low salaries and the feeling of being second-rate citizens. All this created a situation where an important part of East German society still believes that 'everything was better back when everything was worse' (Archer 2018, Figus – Pisanuello – Mustica 2018; Stone 2017).

Ostalgy became an important part of the recent societal debates in Germany, including cultural expression. Alongside the Wolfgang Becker movie *Good Bye, Lenin* (2003) several other films should be mentioned (Ziegengeist 2011). And a similar situation might be observed in other artistic branches. In literature, the name Thomas Brussig became a flagship (Brussig 2002, 2003, 2008). Specifically, we should mention the books produced by GRIN-Verlag, the publishing house with a rich production of books focusing on GDR history and the phaenomenon of ostalgy. All this is framed with the continually (re-)constructed label 'ostalgy' and the specific form of collective memory and identity, and imagined community (Anderson 1983; Cabada – Walsch et al 2019).

Ostalgy was also continually developed as an important strategy of social identification not only in new *Bundesländer*, but also in West Germany. The East Germans produced the Auto- and Stereotypes, but so did the (West)German politics, public discourse and media. As Boyer (2006: 371) commented, the 'West Germans need the figure of the cryptoauthoritarian, introverted *Jammerossi* (whiny Eastie) to legitimate their claims to a more cosmopolitan Germanness. East Germans likewise need the cryptoauthoritarian, extroverted *Besserwessi* (*arrogant Westie*) to legitimate their own sense of themselves as gentler, kinder Germans'. Proceeding from de-constructivist and post-colonial attitudes, Boyer proposes reversing the general logic and argument and thinking and talking in the German case rather about the *Westalgie*, i.e., the nostalgy after West Germany (without the problematic East Germans), alternatively about *Nostomania* as a specific form of obsession by the East German 'syndrome' that grows through German society and is questioned by the *Westalgie* (Boyer 2006: 379–380).

Based on such imagination, we do not share the somewhat astonished reflection expressed by Sierp (2009: 47–48), who observed that twenty years after the Berlin Wall fall we can notice a 'certain kind of nostalgia for the communist past expressing itself not only in opinion polls and political discourse but also in art and a renewed attachment to certain material objects'. As the author concludes, these objects we continually made stronger as the 'symbols of resistance to Western-style consumerism and a global competitive environment' (Sierp 2009: 51). Surely, such a positive self-perception, as well as the criticism against the 'West' might be seen also as a sign of frustration. In this sense we should not forget that the East German identity in the four decades

after World War II was designed as the *Trotzidentität*, i.e., the identity based on defiance (Sierp 2009: 50).

The impression of un-rootedness of the inhabitants living in the new *Bundesländer* is also strengthened by the matter of fact that Germany is still divided into the 'West German managers and their East German subordinates, the West German lessors and East German lodgers, the West German generals and high-rank officers and East German non-commissioned officers and soldiers…' (Ahbe 2018b: 19). Such negative emotion was not weakened by the matter of fact that politicians with East German origin occupied the most important positions in the executive – the long-term Chancellor Angela Merkel, as well as the Federal President Joachim Gauck. Paradoxically, these politicians were often presented as followers of the 'West German mainstream' that ignores the needs and appeals coming from the East.

Ahbe (2018b: 19) particularly stresses the role of German media, which the East German stances either do not display, or if they do only as problematic and unacceptable. This seems to be one of the important incentives for the deep mistrust of the inhabitants in the new *Länder* towards the 'untruthful public press' (*Lügenpresse*), as well as falling in with conspiracy theories. Specifically, the critics stress the clear disbalance where the West German perspective solely creates the stereotypes of both the West and the East.[3] In other words, mistrust towards the media and general public discourse stems from the matter of fact that the image of East Germany is produced and established only from the Western mainstream. As Boyer (2006: 374–376) pointed out, even the 'flagship' artistic representation of the transition towards democracy in the GDR and re-unification of Germany – the movie *Good Bye, Lenin* – is authored by artists without East German identity; the scriptwriter and director Wolfgang Becker originates from Westphalia, the co-scriptwriter from Cologne. And the nostalgic magazine *Super Illu* is produced by the Bavarian publisher Burda Verlag, punchlines Boyer.

As a result of such development (and also self-perception), 'the status quo is a widespread feeling of alienation, which has become all the more entrenched in recent years in spite of advances in material wellbeing and social cohesion; and this feeling will be difficult to address through social-political redistribution. While infrastructure in the East German states has improved greatly, a subjective feeling of second-class citizenship is rife, as some areas really have been left behind in terms of healthcare, entertainment facilities, digital connectivity and offline shopping opportunities' (Leggewie 2020: 56). The author calls this situation 'welfare-state-centred passivity'.

3 'The initiatives of the East German citizens' movement in democratic politics were largely ignored; the post-communist left struck anti-western postures and preached a socialist tradition which had never been practiced in the GDR… in the East of the country a national-neutral outlook persisted, as did a Russophilia unruffled by Vladimir Putin's aggressive policies' (Leggewie 2020: 51).

IV. From PDS and Die Linke to the AfD

The concluding sentence from the previous section brings us to the 'purely' political expression of ostalgy. Again, the development in (East) Germany might be understood as unique in the East-Central European region, maybe with the exception of the Czech Republic and the long-term presence and activities of an almost un-reformed Communist Party. In (East) Germany, the role of successor and (n)ostalgic party representing the electorate denying the fundamental changes after 1989 was assumed by the Party of Democratic Socialism (*Partei des demokratischen Sozialismus*, PDS) that continually developed from the former monolithic Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). When we look into the party manifestos, internal organisation, development of the membership base, etc., we can observe the visible focus on the rejection of the change in and after 1989. The PDS acted as the 'regionalist protest party' that advanced ostalgy in the socio-economic, ideological and biographical dimensions (Sierp 2009: 52), and next to the two catch-all parties implemented from the West (the Christian Democratic Union – CDU, and Social Democrats – SPD) she became the stable pillar of the party systems in the new *Bundesländer*. During the 2000s the party started to cooperate with the left-radical splitter party from SPD – The Left (*Die Linke*) and in 2007 both parties merged under the later name. Also *Die Linke* addressed the ostalgic voters and anti-Western attitudes, was egalitarian and counted the votes from dissatisfied voters (Novotný 2019: 205).

Nevertheless, the PDS/Left were continually losing support, and such a decline of support also correlated with the continuous ageing of their members. During the 2010s, the role of the leading protest party with an all-German scope of activity was taken by the new Eurosceptic and later anti-migrant party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD), established in 2013. As the results of the last parliamentary elections demonstrated, specifically in the new *Bundesländer* (Saxony, Thuringia, southern half of Saxony-Anhalt[4]) we can observe the spill-over effect. Furthermore, alongside the former voters of the PDS/Linke party (and an important share of first-time voters) AfD is also able to address the supporters of radical-right parties and movements.

Based on Iacob, Mark and Rupprecht (2020: 125), for the radical political actors from West Germany, the new *Länder* and the specific electorate became extremely attractive: 'In the reunited Germany of the 1990s, western right-wing groups and figures sought contact with like-minded fellow Germans in the former Democratic Republic. Björn Höcke, today (2020 – quoted by P.K.) a leading figure of the radical, *völkisch* wing of the AfD in Thuringia, had moved from West Germany to become a teacher and political activist in a part of the country he saw as

4 https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2021/ergebnisse/bund-99.html (8 February 2023).

less tainted by immigration, Americanization, and multiculturalism. Like Höcke in the former GDR, the rising western European populist- and far-right… encouraged eastern Europeans to see themselves as the last true defenders of Europe.'

As Klikauer (2020: 2) stressed in his analyses of AfD onset and internal transformation into the radical and at least partly extremist subject, 'the major socio-economic conflict does no longer appear to be *about* capitalism but *within* capitalism. It sets globalised-neoliberal capitalism against authoritarian--nationalistic capitalism'. Such a notion convenes to the earlier discussion on the new cleavages in (East-)European societies substantiated in the axiological axis about the fundamental principles of liberal democracy. As Rensmann (2012: 77) noted, the new cleavages are structured in three juxtapositions: 1) support of post-national political institutions (for example, EU) vs. opposition to post-national political institutions (for example, EU); 2) free (global) market allocation vs. economic redistribution or protectionism; 3) liberal-cosmopolitan values and recognition of cultural diversity (secularism) vs. authoritarian conformism, social cohesion and cultural homogeneity (including clericalism).

Klikauer (2020: 3–4) labels the opposition against the liberal-democratic principles the conservative reactionary politics and culture war; Tucker (2020) uses the term 'neo-illiberalism'; Norris and Inglehart (2019), analysing events such as Brexit, the electoral success and performance of Donald Trump and the rise of Orbán-like politicians, use the term 'cultural backlash'. As Leggewie (2020: 49) demonstrates, focusing specifically on the East German case, the 'people in countries of the former Eastern Bloc have become more estranged from the EU, and this sentiment exists in East Germany too, more strongly than in the west of the country. In the former GDR, too, name "Brussels" often inspires a post-colonial aversion, nostalgia for the Deutsche Mark, a yearning for greater representation, a nationalistic reserve'.

As with the Visegrad Group countries, the 'East German defensive reflex was similar to that seen in former Eastern Bloc states' regarding the migration issue in 2015 (Leggewie 2020: 56). Migration became a strong impulse for the appeal of AfD and like-minded actors in Europe to utilise the fear factor in politics: 'Feeling trapped between the fear of declining living standards and an uncertain future as neoliberalism takes hold' (Klikauer 2020: 51).

The following acts of the polycrisis also strengthened the counter--cosmopolitan and nativist nature of the transformed form of ostalgy. The inhabitants of East Germany came to the conviction that they 'suffer an untold loss of social security' and they do not have any chance to equalise their lives with the West German standard. 'There hardened a feeling of not having made it in the new Germany, of not being respected there. *Integriert doch erst mal uns!* (First off, integrate us!) was the title of a 2018 polemic published by a politician who grew up in the GDR, and which spoke to the heart of many "Ossis"' (Leggewie 2020: 53).

All this might explain why the AfD became so successful specifically in the new *Bundesländer*. 'Overall, the AfD has been highly successful in utilising East German resentment against West Germany. For a long time, West Germans have mistreated East Germans as second-class citizens in a *BMW-vs.-Trabbi* contest… The AfD has also been successful in attracting voters who live in rural areas with a low population density… The more rural and the lower the population density, the higher the AfD vote' (Klikauer 2020: 48; Pates – Leser 2021). As the analysis showed, the AfD voters evince important features combining the ostalgy with the general characteristics of anti-liberal and anti-modern social groups. Klikauer (2020: 147nn), discussing the 14 constitutive elements of fascism, observes here the important overwhelming of some of these elements with (n)ostalgy. Specifically, we have to stress the cult of tradition and the rejection of modernity producing the 'romantic-nostalgic hallucinations' (Klikauer 2020: 148).

As Klikauer notes, 'AfD voters are predominantly male and older. The typical East-German AfD voter in the state of Thuringia, for example, lives in a declining region, is male, has not voted before or voted for the NPD' (Klikauer 2020: 49). Such a situation also gets worse due to the continued (e)migration to West Germany, which is causing the even faster eldering of the populations, and paradoxically the abandonment of East Germany opens the door for external actors – migrants. Let us quote: 'The core problem is still the internal migration, above all, of young, well-qualified people from East to West Germany… the population, and especially the working population, is still falling in East German *Länder*, and the average age is rising faster than in the West of the Republic… East Germany is in the grip of a serious labour shortage that cannot be compensated by migrant labour force of latent or acute xenophobia' (Leggewie 2020: 54).

Such a matter of fact would support the sociological assumption that the remnants of the 'old mentality' might be explained by socio-demographic characteristics such as lower education, old age and lower social status. Nevertheless, the 'persistence of some elements of "old mentality"… appears to be a signal of current institutional shortcomings, rather than an indicator of the strength of individual habits' (Marody 2010: 84–85). As Leggewie (2020: 55) precisely summarised, 'the rallying of the *Wütburger* (angry, reactionary citizens) draws its power first and foremost from the passivity or indolence of the majority, and secondly from secret sympathy for the xenophobic movement in bourgeois circles'.

V. Conclusion

As presented, ostalgy is not disappearing in the East-European societies including the new German federal units. As I tried to argue, from the single-issue phaenomenon (ostalgy in East Germany) the concept was developed into the general issue related to the collective memory and identity in post-transitive

societies (Boyer 2006; Clarke – Wölfel, eds. 2011; Cooke 2005; De La Motte – Green 2015; Ekman – Linde 2005; Grieder 2012 ad.). Specifically, after 2008 and in the following set of crises – the polycrisis – the ostalgy-prone parts of the societies in the former East European region began to transform into the mixture of ostalgic and anti-modern values and attitudes. This change allowed the transmission of the fundamental characteristics of ostalgy as political phaenomenon also to younger generations, often born only after the collapse of the real socialist regimes in the Eastern Block.

This trans-generation transfer shows that ostalgy rooted in the psychologically rooted positive perception of the youth of recently elder people cannot be the only explanation of the visible axiological cleavage in post-communist societies, including that of East Germany. Here we have to stress the at least partial overlap of the concepts of ostalgy and *homo sovieticus*. As mentioned, the label *homo sovieticus* is often used 'as a tool of stigmatizing certain deplorable behaviour which resembles behavioural patterns from the Communist period. It has become an equivalent of adjectives such as "unadjusted", "unmodernized" and "conservative". It is applied both in the case of people who explicitly express their nostalgia for at least some features of the Communist system (security, lack of competitiveness), and also in the case of those who accept the new systemic reality, but whose actions and expectations seem rooted in bygone behavioural patterns' (Marody 2010: 89).

When we focus solely on East Germany, such development and transmission was clearly substantiated in the electoral successes of successor parties (PDS, Die Linke) and a shift of the electoral – and general support – to the new radical subjects – Pegida, and above all AfD. Let us stress that Saxony was the only federal unit where this subject won in the last parliamentary elections. As shown, AfD was able to interconnect the ostalgy with old-new nativist concepts and counter-globalism (Holzhauser 2018; Novotný 2019).

A specific feature characterising the East Germany (and East German ostalgy) is the fact that alongside the collapse of the Communist regime the change in and after 1989 was accompanied by the termination of the East German nation and state (Sierp 2009: 48). Maybe such a claim is excessively ultimative, when we consider the similar emotions observable by several collectivist actors with ethno-nationalist features from the vanished federations – the nostalgy after Titos Yugoslavia, the USSR and, in specific epistemic communities, Czechoslovakia (Kipke – Vodička 1993). On the other hand, it presents another dimension of the specific East German (n)ostalgy, the impression of civic and economic inferiority and colonial framing consisted in the transfer of the West German models. In other words, where the other post-communist nations 'painfully stumbled' in the transformation, in the East German case, very directly and unilaterally, 'Bonn' was deciding.

All this seems to be related to East Germany searching for it's own identity and the missing response to the question 'who are we?' As Bieber (2020) notes

in the post-communist societies we often miss the clear response regarding the present day and future. 'Central Europe is post-communist, the western Balkans are post-Yugoslav, post-war, post-socialist; but there is no word to describe what they currently *are*, as if the present remained permanently elusive. The defining feature of these central, eastern and south-eastern parts of Europe is that they are in a place where there is no name for the present' (Bieber 2020: 80–81). As he continues: The 'longing for the past reflects less about history and more about the present. Stark inequalities and poverty partly explain why nostalgia is so strong, but it is the uncertainties of never-ending transformation and crisis that are the driving forces of nostalgia and of disillusionment with the present. Continuous crisis and open-ended transition have created a permanent sense of anxiety which is profoundly destructive for liberal democratic politics' (Bieber 2020: 81–82).

Similarly, Ágh shows that the recent national populist actors in ECE 'champion the politics of past and historical memory, including the (re)construction of historical narratives. The nativists formulated the "traditionalization" narrative about the "glorious past that never was", remembering the "Golden Age" of national history' (Cabada 2021: 298). Ágh, Tismaneanu (1998) and other authors primarily reflect the traditionalisation forced by the actors glorifying the interwar or even older periods of national history. Indeed, in my opinion the assumptions presented are fully valid also for the nostalgy after the GDR--regime. As Figus, Pisaniello and Mustica (2018: 57) conclude: 'Ostalgie today is, to conclude, also in part, the system that binds two generations, that of grandparents, who built that system, that of grandchildren who strongly wanted change and freedom. The oldest are "ostalgic" by heart, the youngest are "ostalgic" by necessity, the latter, are generating intransigent and aggressive policies, which also frighten Europe (such as the Neo-Nazi movements), because of disappointed expectations, missed promises, generating a reaction typical of the sub-proletariat.' From all the presented reasons 'nostalgia remains a potent force even though the former socialist regimes offer little to be nostalgic about' (Bieber 2020: 81).

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