

Call for papers for a special issue on the topic

Persistent inequalities? Looking towards and beyond the continuing East-West divides in German society

in the journal

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Guest editors:

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Over the past ten years, the debate on persistent East-West inequalities in Germany has gained momentum again (cf. Vogel/Lorenz/Pates 2024; Mau 2024). The debate continues to play a prominent role in Germany's self-perception with regard to politically relevant socio-spatial inequalities. However, 35 years after reunification, there are increasing approaches in academia and politics that consider other socio-spatial differences to be more politically relevant. For example, research has identified a problematic urban-rural divide and major socio-spatial differences between northern and southern Germany (Fuest/Immel 2019; Westenberger 2025). These 'new' spatial inequalities may challenge the political relevance of the East-West distinction. For example, the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) points out that the eastern German states have continued to catch up in terms of financial and economic power, while the urban-rural divide is increasing everywhere (van Deuverden 2025). 'Left-behind regions' no longer exist only in eastern Germany, but increasingly also in old industrial or rural regions of western Germany, which are also facing major challenges in the current transformation processes (Royer/Leibert 2024).

However, this is not enough to completely relativise the socio-spatial East-West distinction. Eastern Germany is predominantly rural, which is why various marginalisation effects overlap there, leading to an exacerbation of socio-economic problems in individual regions. These problems in 'left-behind regions' (in eastern Germany and elsewhere) are often heavily covered in the media, creating the image of a 'different Germany'. At the same time, marginalised regions, both in eastern Germany and elsewhere, are often underrepresented in political arenas (Kollmorgen/Schaller 2024). The high election results for populist parties (AfD and BSW) also suggest a political differentiation between different regions, with the AfD in particular also showing rising results in the west.

Thirty-five years after reunification, this special issue therefore aims to analyse East-West differences and their causes, as well as other socio-spatial differences (e.g. urban-rural, North-South) and their inequalities, and to examine appropriate responses to them. The contributions should go beyond explanatory patterns in the sense of a 'revenge of the places that don't matter' (Rodríguez-Pose 2018) in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the differences and thus critically question spatial concepts of differentiation.

In order to develop a differentiated perspective on socio-spatial differences, we are particularly interested in research that focuses on the agency of local and regional actors, institutional contexts, narratives and historical approaches, as well as local structural conditions. We are also looking for contributions that examine cases of active engagement with socio-spatial differences. This includes resistant practices, protests and collective problem-solving, such as alternative economic approaches, social innovations or successful participatory projects that promote cohesion. Socio-spatial inequalities can serve as a starting point for mobilising economic, political or civil society actors, raising questions about power relations and asymmetries in spatial planning.

Accordingly, we invite contributions on the following topics (not exclusive) for this special issue:

- Socio-spatial (in)equalities and transformation:
 - o What trends for divergence and convergence exist and in which spatial configurations are they visible?
 - o How are (in)equalities and transformation processes represented in the media?
 - o How can we strengthen social and economic cohesion and address economic, social and political divisions?
- The legacy of the GDR and post-socialist transformation:
 - o What influence do and did socio-spatial restructurings in eastern Germany (e.g. the transformation of industries, demographic decline, peripheralisation) have on political perception and voting behaviour?
 - o How is 'the East' represented in German politics, economy and society as a whole?
 - o How can the GDR legacy be addressed in spatial planning, and to what extent do long-term political decisions in spatial planning still influence social and political development in the East today?
- Urban-rural differences:
 - o What differences can be identified between urban and rural areas in terms of demography, economic development, access to infrastructure, the labour market or education?
 - o What futures are imagined in rural and urban regions, and what alternative approaches are there to reducing inequalities?
- Geographies of discontent and protest:
 - o How are emotions such as anger, fear or discontent expressed spatially?
 - o What types of protest and counter-protest exist?
 - o Where is political protest strongest?
 - o What connections exist between these protests and material infrastructure, access to resources or regional spatial planning?
 - o How do political and civil society actors deal with discontent, anger and protest?

Contributions can be written in German or English and submitted in the categories 'Research Article' and 'Commentary'. Interested authors are requested to first submit an abstract (with the working title of the article, research question, methods and results) of no more than one page to the guest editors to ensure that the topic is relevant to the special issue. All interested

authors are also requested to note the journal's author guidelines (<https://rur.oekom.de>; section 'Submissions'). All manuscripts submitted will undergo the usual double-blind peer review process.

The following schedule is planned:

- Deadline for abstract submission: 31 January 2026
- Notification to authors as to whether a manuscript can be submitted on the basis of the abstract: 28 February 2026
- Deadline for submission of final manuscripts to the journal's editorial platform: 30 June 2026
- 'Online first' publication will take place approximately four weeks after the corresponding article has been accepted
- The print publication of the special issue is scheduled for April 2027

The guest editors are available to answer any questions with regard to contents: Franziska Görmär (f_goermar@leibniz-ifl.de) and Dr Jörn Knobloch (j_knobloch@leibniz-ifl.de).

For organisational questions, please contact the editor, Prof. Dr Andreas Klee (andreas.klee@arl-net.de).

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