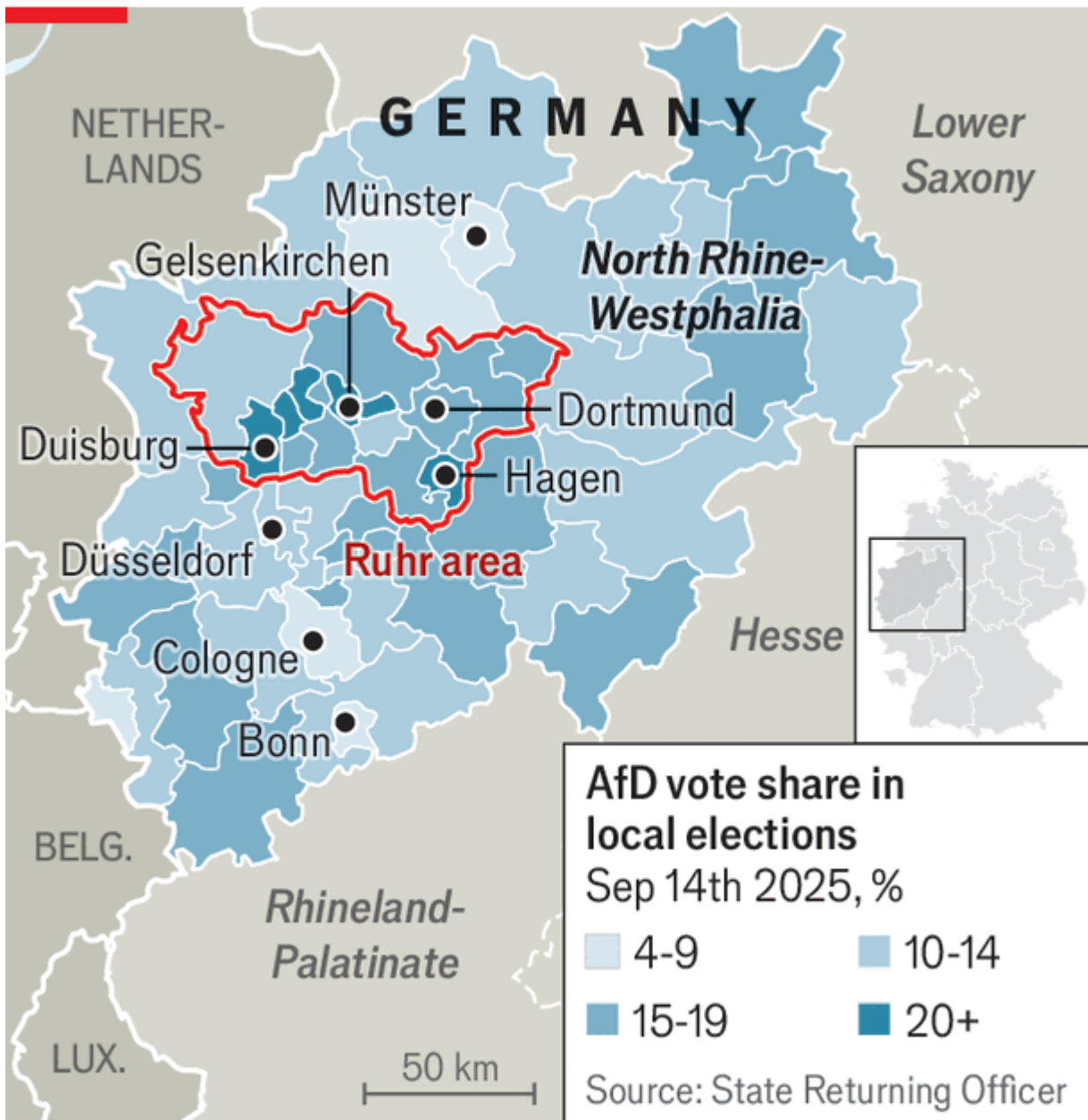


The AfD is not sweeping Germany. But it is dividing it

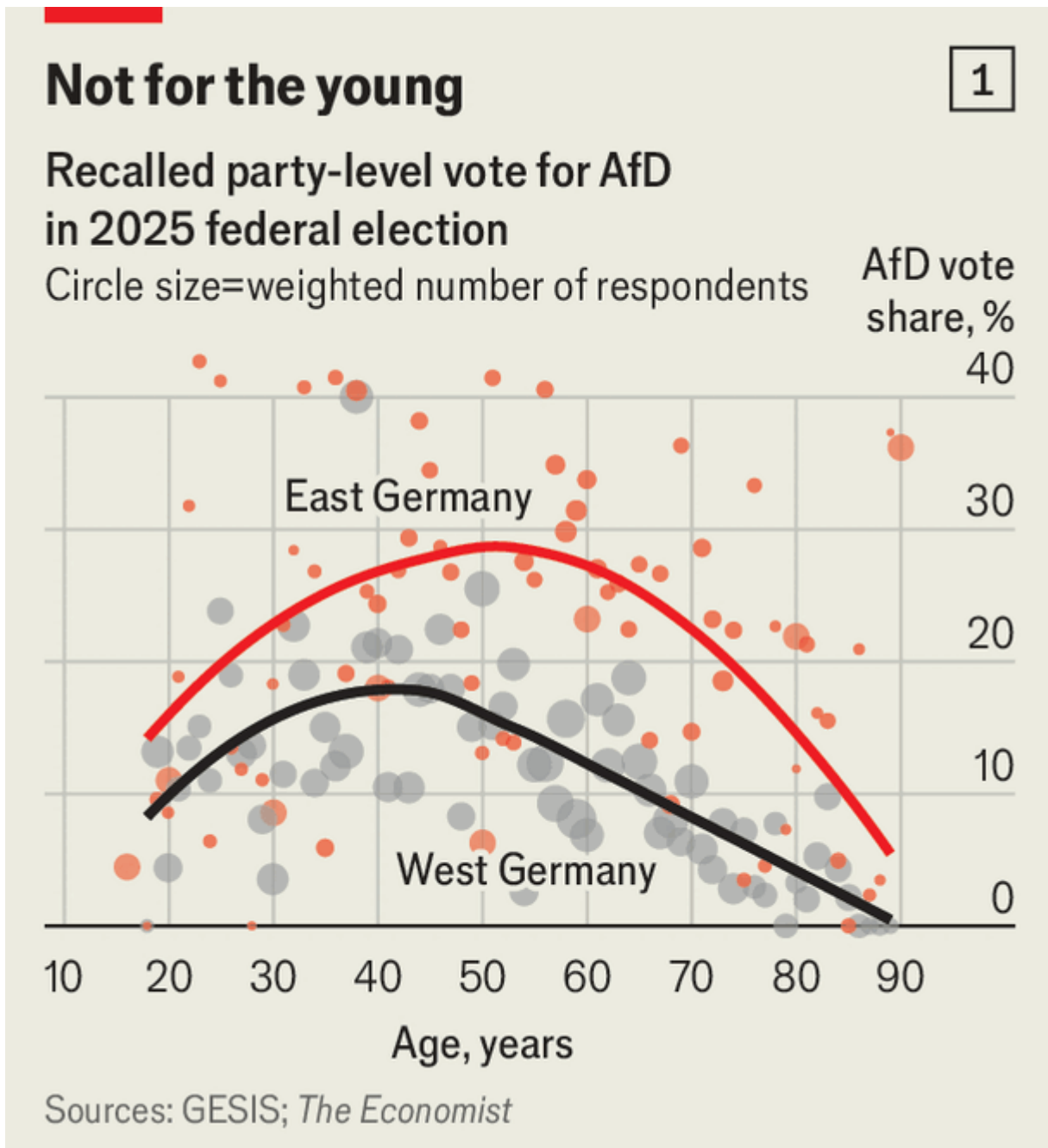
SAY THIS for Gelsenkirchen: no one is whitewashing its problems. It was once a mining and steel powerhouse that fuelled Germany's postwar recovery. Now, the best days of this city of 270,000 souls in the post-industrial Ruhr area are long gone. Gelsenkirchen is weighed down by debt and has long had Germany's highest unemployment rate. A walk down the Bahnhofstrasse, its once-thriving heart, reveals emptying shop fronts, an armada of mobility scooters and a babble of foreign languages. Further out are neighbourhoods blighted by *Schrottimmobilien*, the dilapidated housing often occupied by Romanians and Bulgarians who since the end of eu free-movement restrictions in 2014 have swollen the city's welfare rolls. Yet things were hardly better before then, says a local. "The city was already a shithole."

Little wonder the hard-right Alternative for Germany (afd), a party whose radicalism has seen it decreed right-wing extremist by domestic spooks, has found fertile ground here. In local elections on September 14th in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (nrw), the afd took 30% of votes for Gelsenkirchen's council, running the Social Democrats (spd), whose hegemony in the Ruhr faded long ago, a close second. Across nrw, where over one-fifth of Germans live, the afd tripled its vote share over the last elections in 2020, to 15%. The result sparked concern that the party is breaking out of its eastern strongholds. "We have arrived in the west," crows Kay Gottschalk, the afd's deputy nrw chair.



Yet as Martin Florack, a political scientist in the Ruhr city of Oberhausen, points out, nrw contains multitudes, from thriving cities like Düsseldorf to rural reservoirs of *Mittelstand* wealth and some troubled cities in the Ruhr. Germans often regard their biggest state as a *Bundesrepublik* in miniature, a bellwether for the country. They might be more correct than they realise. Some were shocked by the afd’s advances in nrw; others noted that it did not meet all its expectations. In fact it is the variation within the state that is most telling. As with Germany writ large, it is a story of a place that is growing apart rather than simply succumbing to an afd “blue wave”.

In February's general election Gelsenkirchen was one of only two cities outside the five states of the former communist East Germany in which the afd came first (the other was Kaiserslautern, an equally benighted spot in the Palatinate). Whereas the afd did slightly worse in nrw's local elections than in February, in Gelsenkirchen its score improved by five percentage points. A similar dynamic held elsewhere in the Ruhr, home to all three cities where afd candidates qualified for mayoral runoffs, to be held on September 28th.



But in richer, graduate-heavy cities like Cologne, Bonn and Münster the AfD underperformed its statewide swing, despite starting from a lower base. Outside the Ruhr it fell back almost everywhere on its February result; in some cities it barely improved on its 2020 score. It flopped among young voters (see chart 1). Conversely, the Greens, who did dismally overall, ran well in bigger cities. Statewide, the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) remain by a distance the biggest party, even as the decades-long trend of fragmentation continues.

A similar pattern has held for Germany as a whole. The AfD has long enjoyed greater success in the east, where party loyalties have a looser grip (though the west's larger population means it provides over two-thirds of the party's overall votes). But February's national election, in which the AfD scored a record result, saw the party growing faster in the east than in the west (see chart 2). That could continue. A recent poll put the AfD at an extraordinary 39% in Saxony-Anhalt. It now harbours hopes of winning an unusual absolute majority at next year's state election there. Meanwhile, the AfD's strength in western Germany, though growing, looks comparable to equivalent parties elsewhere in Europe.

Gaining ground

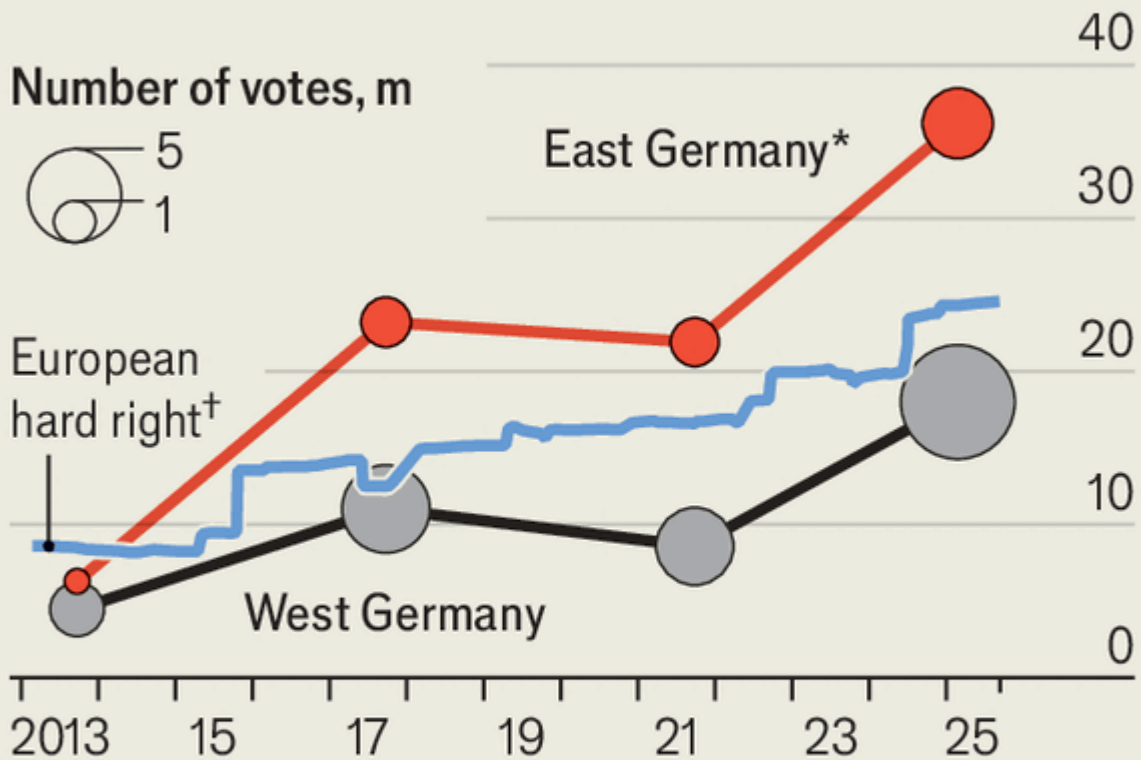
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AfD vote share in federal elections, %

Number of votes, m



European
hard right[†]



*Five states comprising the territory of the former GDR (excluding East Berlin) †Population-weighted average among democracies, excluding Germany

Sources: National elections; Our World in Data; ParlGov; The PopuList; University of Durham; *The Economist*

Since the anti-afd “firewall” maintained by other parties remains more or less intact, the afd is unlikely to win any mayoral runoffs in nrw. As in the east, strong afd performances produce strong counter-reactions. This should not inspire complacency. On the councils in which it has won hundreds of new seats, the afd is well placed to cause trouble. Officials in Gelsenkirchen, where it will hold nearly one-third of seats, already speak miserably of debates running late into the night on halal food in schools or Germany’s support for Ukraine. Anna-Lena Karl, an spd councillor,

says she fears the “normalisation” effect of citizens observing a radical party at work in city structures.

Others are troubled by the afd’s ability to attract support despite not appearing to take the elections especially seriously. The state party is riven by obscure internecine squabbles, and before the election dabbled in absurd conspiracy theories over the deaths of some of its candidates. Its desperate scramble for candidates means, as Professor Florack puts it, that some councils will be left with incompetents “unable to spell their own names”. Many had only vague links to the places in which they ran. If this appeared not to matter it may be because, as Martin Vincentz, the afd’s leader in nrw, says, “The elections were also a referendum on state and federal politics.” Over 40% of afd voters said they regarded state or national politics as the most important issue in the local elections, far more than for other parties.

The selective rise of the afd brings risks for other parties. In eastern Germany cdu politicians, confronting an afd that appeals to some voters’ pro-Russian sentiments, have adopted positions friendlier to the Kremlin than their party leaders in Berlin might like. In the Ruhr the local spd is far tougher on immigration than the national party is. “My party doesn’t speak the language of the people on the streets,” sighs Markus Töns, Gelsenkirchen’s spd mp. Sören Link, the plain-speaking spd mayor of Duisburg, promised a crackdown on welfare fraud among immigrants and was rewarded with a big win over his afd rival. Yet this is hardly a recipe for success in other areas, where the threat to the spd may come from the Greens or hard left.

As for the afd, it promises further advances elsewhere. “We are in the frontline of a national story,” says Jan-Hendrik Preuss, an outgoing AfD councillor in Gelsenkirchen. Is that true? Similar forces to those that walloped Gelsenkirchen decades ago threaten other parts of Germany, including places that depend on carmaking. In February the afd outperformed in industrialised parts of the country, appealing to workers who fear for the future of their jobs. Some may be tempted by its message that Germany’s climate goals are ripping out the country’s industrial heart. But other voters will mobilise strongly to stop the afd. So far, the rise of Germany’s far right looks less like a wave across the country than a wedge inside it.