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# IASS DISCUSSION PAPER

Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS)  
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## Dead end: Right-wing populism

**Time to acknowledge diversity and immigration  
culture in Lusatia**

Tobias Haas; Johannes Staemmler



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# Summary

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The German government has resolved to phase out coal-fired power plants at the latest by 2038. The coal exit will inevitably mean the end of lignite mining in Lusatia, a central economic sector that has played a major role in shaping the region's identity. However, against the backdrop of the worsening climate crisis, lignite is a hotly contested political issue. Although there are many people in Lusatia who reject the coal exit by 2038, lignite is not uncontroversial here either. (see Bischoff et. al. 2021). At the same time, in recent years the right-wing populist and to some extent radical right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD) has gained mass appeal among some of the Lusatian population. With their right-wing populist orientation and simplistic friend-foe argumentation, the AfD is driving social polarisation. The party rails against the coal exit, sheds doubt on man-made climate change and, more recently, has sought proximity to pandemic deniers. But why exactly is right-wing populism so popular in Lusatia? Why does this success pose a threat to structural change in the region? And how might we remove the breeding ground for right-wing populism and counteract social polarisation? This Discussion Paper addresses these questions and develops three approaches for countering social polarisation so that the coming structural change in Lusatia can be successful.

## **Acknowledge diversity**

Lusatia is often presented as a homogeneous area with a homogeneous population. This in no way reflects the social reality on the ground. The population in Upper and Lower Lusatia is very heterogeneous in terms of their origins, political views, and religious beliefs. This diversity must be acknowledged and viewed as a resource for the region.

## **Establish a culture of immigration**

Since 2000 alone, the population in Lusatia has declined by about 20 per cent, from 1.4 million to 1.1 million, and the average age has increased significantly (WRL 2019, 27). For the future, it is imperative to establish a culture of immigration to make the region attractive both for people who left as young adults and for people from other parts of Germany and abroad.

## **Take fears about the future seriously, but do not exacerbate them**

The massive economic and social changes of the 1990s have stirred fear of change in the region. For this reason, it is important to establish spaces where dialogue can take place on what the future might look like without strengthening vague fears stemming from past experiences.

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# 1. Lusatia in transition

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Lusatia has seen a great deal of change over the years. This is true both of the demographics and spatial characteristics of Lusatia, as well as its sense of belonging. While Upper Lusatia experienced a period of prosperity at the time of the Lusatian League, the area was later divided between the kingdoms of Saxony and Prussia in 1815. With this division, Upper and Lower Lusatia became peripheries of their respective dominions already more than 200 years ago. Lusatia was industrialised early on; already in 1789, lignite was found for the first time in Lauchhammer. With the establishment of the Oder-Neisse border after the Second World War, Lusatia was divided among Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic. As part of the GDR, lignite mining was then massively expanded to provide almost all of the country's electricity. Today, the German parts of Lusatia are divided into six districts (Dahme-Spreewald, Elbe-Elster, Oberspreewald-Lausitz and Spree-Neiße in Brandenburg and the districts of Bautzen and Görlitz in Saxony), as well as the independent city of Cottbus.

The region has also experienced many demographic changes. The Sorbs and Wends settled in Lusatia as early as the seventh century. This Slavic population group with its own language and other cultural practices (traditional costumes, Easter processions, etc.) is one of four recognised minorities in Germany. After the end of the Second World War and in the course of the extensive expansion of the coal mining industry and further industrialisation of Lusatia, many expellees from the areas east of the Neisse River settled here, resulting in the marginalisation of Sorbian culture. In addition to the arrival of tens of thousands of expellees, many contract workers from Vietnam or Mozambique, among others, were also settled in Lusatia, though after German reunification, the majority of these workers were forced to leave. At this time, Lusatia suffered from heavy deindustrialisation, high unemployment and the exodus of mainly young people, a disproportionately large number of them women (see Gabler et. al. 2016 to 2020).

Against the backdrop of the structural upheavals of the 1990s and new peripheralisation of Lusatia, a certain fatigue has set in with regard to change. The AfD, for its part, positions itself as the representative of the common people and denounces immigration (especially from Muslim societies) as well as the coal exit, and casts doubt on whether humans are causing climate change. Along with these issues, climate science is viewed by the party as a project advanced by "left-green elites" and is consequently against the interests of "ordinary" people. By driving fears of a blackout, the AfD picks up on narratives that have long been stoked in Lusatia by groups such as the association Pro Lusatian Lignite (Pro Lausitzer Braunkohle) (see Haas 2020). These arguments, linked to conspiracy narratives, have long limited the chances of initiating a constructive regional dialogue on what a sustainable climate policy and structural change in Lusatia could look like. Furthermore, the election results for the AfD work to deter much potential immigration and could lead to a vicious circle for the reputation and quality of life in Lusatia. Lusatia needs open-mindedness, immigration and the courage to face the challenges of the future. Backward-looking populist agitation will be nothing but destructive.

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## 2. Acknowledge diversity

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Lusatia's population is diverse in many respects. The region's various historical migratory movements are the reason people with very different migration histories live together in Lusatia today. Among other things, the region is characterised by the fact that it is home to one of the four minorities recognised in Germany, the Sorbs and Wends, who represent a unique cultural feature here. The Sorbian Institute in Bautzen and Cottbus are important reference points for the development of Sorbian culture. In addition, numerous people from other parts of Germany as well as from other European and non-European countries have found a home in Lusatia, though social coexistence is not always easy.

And it is not only the population's origin that is diverse. Lusatia is also home to people with different sexual identities (see Land Brandenburg 2018), world views and belief systems (Staemmler 2021). This diversity also holds true for opinions on coal mining, which, like other industries, has played a role in integrating many people into society. Some worry that jobs will be lost with coal, young people will move away, and the region will lose its attractiveness. Others are afraid of the further destruction of villages by open-cast lignite mining, the degradation of the water supply, and an escalating climate crisis which is being fuelled by coal mining and increasingly affecting Lusatia. However, in general, many Lusatians are aware of both the advantages and the problems associated with the coal exit (see Bischoff et. al. 2021).

This brief sketch shows that the population of both Upper and Lower Lusatia is more diverse than the image populists like to portray. Lusatia is not a homogeneous region threatened from the outside. It is important to acknowledge the diversity of its population in terms of social coexistence and in the political representation of Lusatia while at the same time not sweeping problems, conflicts and differences of opinion under the rug. The latter need to be dealt with in a productive manner, as is being done by the Brandenburg Institute for Community Consultation and many other initiatives (Krüger 2021). Active acknowledgement of diversity and the negotiation of different views and opinions is essential for shaping structural change in Lusatia successfully and democratically. Lusatia must continue to develop its identity, remain open to fresh ideas and at the same time also become a region that welcomes immigration.

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## 3. Establish a culture of immigration

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The demographic structure of Lusatia has changed considerably since 1990. As a result of the structural upheavals caused by deindustrialisation, many young people with above-average qualifications have left the region, most of them young women (see Gabler et al., 2016). The population has decreased significantly and the average age has risen. Yet not only the population structure has changed: the Lusatian labour market has undergone major transformations. While mass unemployment prevailed in large parts of Lusatia in the 1990s despite emigration, unemployment has now fallen significantly, so much so that many companies complain of an increasing shortage of skilled workers in the region.

These changes in demographics and the labour market are important points of reference for the future prospects of Lusatia. Even though the end of coal mining will bring with it the loss of several thousand jobs – which are covered by collective agreements and pay well-above-average wages – there is no threat of new mass unemployment (see Zundel et al. 2021). According to estimates, many more employees in Lusatia will retire in the coming years than young people will enter the labour market (see Hermann et. al. 2018) The Institute for Labour Market and Employment even forecasts a 35 per cent decline in the potential labour force compared to 2012 (IAB 2018, 16). Furthermore, the funds from the Structural Strengthening Act which have been pledged as part of the coal exit will be used to establish numerous authorities here, make infrastructure investments, expand the healthcare system and invest in education and research (BMWi 2021). Private-sector investments, for example in the Schwarze Pumpe industrial park, are also increasing. In light of this, the shortage of well-trained personnel will presumably be greater than the loss of jobs. Against this backdrop, it is essential that Lusatia becomes a more attractive region, especially for young people, to settle in and to use their skills to further develop the region (see Luh et. al. 2020).

This issue is already being addressed in numerous municipalities, for example through the creation of the “returner hotline”, informal meetings, and trial accommodation. These initiatives are important, but the returnees are not enough. (Young) people from outside of Lusatia must also be encouraged to move here. Establishing a culture of immigration in Lusatia is essential so that people, no matter their origin, skin colour, religion or sexual identity, feel welcome in the region. To do so, it is necessary to emphasise the attractiveness of Lusatia – for example, the availability of affordable housing – as well as to create contact points for newcomers. Village development processes led by “workshops for the future”, such as those carried out in Nebelschütz, in which expertise was partially obtained from outside the region, are example of initiatives that promote opening Lusatia and dialogue about the future. Fortunately, some indicators suggest that, at least in most cities in the region, the trend in population development has already been reversed, and even slight growth has been recorded in recent years (see Zundel et. al., 2021).

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## 4. Take fears about the future seriously, but do not exacerbate them

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The experience of upheavals and devaluation since the 1990s have left deep marks in the Eastern German states. In addition to the loss of jobs and the exodus of predominantly young people, the public infrastructure was also dismantled, in some cases on a massive scale. In view of this, openness for new change in Lusatia is not very high. For many people in Lusatia, it is especially painful that an anchor of stability for the region will be lost with coal. Although this sector also saw massive job losses in the 1990s (from around 80,000 to 10,000), at least several thousand jobs with above-average pay have been preserved to date. Furthermore, coal plays a significant role in defining the political identity of the region (see Pfeffer-Hoffmann et. al. 2011). Therefore, it is understandable that some people in Lusatia are sceptical or even opposed to the end of coal mining (see Bischoff et. al. 2021). However, structural change looks different now than it did in the 1990s.

In addition to the changes in population structure and the labour market outlined above, structural change offers numerous opportunities for Lusatia. While in the 1990s little decision-making power was left in the hands of the people (e.g. due to the Treuhandanstalt), there are now several opportunities for the people of Lusatia to help shape the coming transformation. This can already be seen in the participation processes in Spremberg or Boxberg, the development strategy Lusatia 2050 and in the differentiated, albeit somewhat financially weak Lusatian civil society (Staemmler et al. 2020). In any case, it is important for Lusatia to be open to external support but at the same time to draw on its own local resources. Moreover, funds offered by the structural change package could be used to improve the transport infrastructure, educational institutions, and health care and leisure facilities in Lusatia.

The understandable concerns and fears of the people of Lusatia need to be taken seriously, but they must not be exacerbated. Instead, work should be done to ensure that structural change is perceived as an opportunity for the renewal of Lusatia – a transformation in which Lusatia, in all its diversity, can to a certain extent reinvent itself, but in doing so draw on Lusatian traditions in all their heterogeneity. Initiatives already taking place, such as Diversity Days, should be further developed for this purpose (see ZukunftLausitz 2021), and a culture of dialogue and participation should be established. Inspiration can be found in this initiative, as well as the youth participation in Lauchhammer or the Free Alternative School in Weißwasser.



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## 5. The perspectives of the Lusatian transformation

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Despite its many transformations and internal heterogeneity, Lusatia is often portrayed (not only by the AfD) as a homogeneous region that is threatened from the outside. An excerpt from a press release of the association Pro Lusatian Lignite from 2016 reads: "Green ideologues want to abolish Lusatia! The political wrangling over the coal exit in Lusatia shows more and more clearly how much green ideologues with no prospects for the future are influencing the media and public opinion in our country" (quoted from Häfner et al. 2016, 239-240). This narrative of "Lusatia is threatened from the outside" is compatible with the right-wing populist narratives of the AfD as well as conspiracy theories, which in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic appeal to some of the region's inhabitants (see Roose 2020).

In this respect, the end of coal mining presents challenges and risks for the region in economic, political and cultural terms, but it also creates enormous opportunities. After all, coal offers no future prospects in view of worsening climate change and rising prices for carbon dioxide. The extensive support provided under the Structural Strengthening Act opens up new chances for Lusatia's development that need to be identified and followed, especially locally. Large investments are being made in Lusatia, and the situation on the labour market has improved significantly compared to the 1990s.

What is urgently needed now is for Lusatia to open up more to change and new developments in cultural and economic terms. Diversity should be viewed as an asset, a culture of immigration should be established, and while people's fears should be taken seriously, opportunities for the region's renewal should also be discussed and communicated honestly. This is a major challenge in view of the AfD's successes in the region, as the party's backward-looking and not infrequently inflammatory remarks are diametrically opposed to the change Lusatia needs. Against this backdrop, decision-makers should consistently advocate a culture of dialogue, learning and diversity, and refrain from portraying Lusatia as an inherently homogeneous region.

Lusatia will partially reinvent itself in the coming decades. In the process, its social and spatial diversity should see much more recognition and be geared towards following heterogeneous development pathways. Lusatia was never just a coal and industrial region, and there is much to be gained in an orientation towards health, tourism and sustainability.

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## 7. About the authors

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### **Tobias Haas**

Tobias Haas has worked in the research group "Social Change and Responsive Policy Advice in Lusatia" since 2018. In the context of this work, he focuses on the connection between structural change, democracy and right-wing populism. He studied economics and political science at the FU Berlin and received his PhD from the Eberhard Karls University in Tübingen in 2017 with a dissertation on the Political Economy of the Energy Transition.

### **Johannes Staemmler**

Johannes Staemmler has led the research group "Social Change and Responsive Policy Advice in Lusatia" since 2018. The goal of the group is to develop and apply democratic means to the social and economic transformation that is being accelerated by the end of coal mining. He studied International Relations at the University of Technology Dresden and Public Policy at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin, where he received his PhD in 2014.



## Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies e.V. (IASS)

The Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) conducts research with the goal of identifying, advancing, and guiding transformation processes towards sustainable societies in Germany and abroad. Its research practice is transdisciplinary, transformative, and co-creative. The institute cooperates with partners in academia, political institutions, administrations, civil society, and the business community to understand sustainability challenges and generate potential solutions. A strong network of national and international partners supports the work of the institute. Among its central research topics are the energy transition, emerging technologies, climate change, air quality, systemic risks, governance and participation, and cultures of transformation. The IASS is funded by the research ministries of the Federal Government of Germany and the State of Brandenburg.

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**Contact:**

[tobias.haas@iass-potsdam.de](mailto:tobias.haas@iass-potsdam.de)

[johannes.staemmler@iass-potsdam.de](mailto:johannes.staemmler@iass-potsdam.de)

**Address:**

Berliner Straße 130

14467 Potsdam

Phone: +49 (0) 331-28822-340

Fax: +49 (0) 331-28822-310

Email: [media@iass-potsdam.de](mailto:media@iass-potsdam.de)

[www.iass-potsdam.de](http://www.iass-potsdam.de)

Authorised to represent the institute

Prof. Dr Mark G. Lawrence,

Managing Scientific Director

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