



PRESS RELEASE

Between openness and restriction: Integration and migration policy in the last five years

Migration and integration policy has been highly dynamic in recent years. On the one hand, increasing demand for foreign labour has led to a further opening of Germany as a country of immigration; the possibilities of so-called "lane changes" for rejected asylum seekers were also extended. Following the increased influx of refugees since 2022, more restrictive measures have been taken in the area of asylum policy in Germany and the European Union (EU). In its annual report, the Expert Council on Integration and Migration (SVR) analyses developments and identifies areas where further action is needed.

Berlin, 14 May 2024. "Taking stock of migration and integration policy over the last five years, we can see a mixture of continuity and change. Various adjustments have been made in the process: We see a substantial opening in some areas, while in others there are attempts to impose greater control through restrictions," explains Professor Hans Vorländer, Chairperson of the SVR. The challenges were huge: Movement was initially severely restricted due to the coronavirus pandemic. This has changed again since 2022. In particular, the number of arrivals seeking protection has increased. The Russian attack on Ukraine has triggered the largest movement of refugees within Europe since the Second World War. Over four million Ukrainian refugees have since been granted protection in the EU, more than a quarter of them in Germany.

European refugee and asylum policy: Implementation is the key

"The EU has reacted swiftly and prudently by accepting Ukrainian war refugees who have been granted collective protection status and has demonstrated its capacity for action in a difficult situation. But coordination at European level is also crucial for the sustainable management of refugee migration in the area of individual asylum," says Professor Vorländer. The SVR therefore welcomes in principle the agreement on a reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The continuing high influx of refugees into Europe, the increase in human rights violations such as illegal pushbacks at the EU's external border, but also the lack of solidarity and responsibility-sharing in previous CEAS made a reform urgently necessary. The new solidarity mechanism is therefore a step forward - provided that the member states participate as agreed. "Ensuring that human rights and refugee law standards are upheld during implementation is crucial to the success of the reform. This applies in particular to the newly agreed accelerated border procedures for certain groups: People seeking protection must continue to have access to independent legal advice and be accommodated with respect for their human dignity. The EU member states share responsibility for this," warns the SVR Chairperson.

Forced displacement to Germany: Balance between return and integration

With the rising number of people seeking protection and the increasing strain this puts on local authorities in particular, the public debate has become more heated and the political pressure to act has grown - including in Germany. Against this background, benefits for asylum seekers were reorganised and measures were taken to facilitate returns. "We shouldn't expect this to significantly reduce refugee migration - and we shouldn't raise such expectations. At the same time, a sustainable migration strategy always includes an enforceable return policy. However, deportations should be the last resort. More important are effective migration agreements that also take into account the interests of countries of origin, as repatriations often fail due to a lack of cooperation. Take-back obligations would then go hand in hand with facilitations for work visas, for example," explains Professor Vorländer.

Fundamental infrastructure problems have also contributed to the frequent bottlenecks in the reception and integration of refugees. "We see this in many areas - in the housing market, in the education sector, in access to administrative services: Immigration does not usually cause structural problems, but it does make them visible," indicates Professor Birgit Leyendecker, Deputy Chairperson of the SVR. General public systems must therefore be strengthened and overall framework conditions adapted so that new immigrants can also integrate at an early stage. "Residence restrictions have tended to be an obstacle to integration. Rather than restricting people's freedom to reside where they choose, it would make more sense to take greater account of the skills and needs of those seeking protection and of host communities when distributing refugees," says Professor Leyendecker: "In the field of education, the main focus of attention must be on children and young people who are recent immigrants. Their educational performance is a cause for concern."

Germany as a country of immigration: Labour market opened up further, naturalisation made easier

Germany's dependence on immigration is clearly reflected in labour market developments. The Act on the Further Development of Skilled Worker Immigration and the related ordinance mark a departure by the German government from the principle that qualifications acquired abroad must be equivalent to German training standards. There are now more opportunities to come to Germany for workers without formal qualifications. "This opening is important in the context of demographic change. However, the new rules must not come at the expense of worker protection, especially in the low-wage sector. The new rules are also very complex. Public authorities are already struggling to cope and this could make it more difficult to attract foreign skilled workers," argues SVR Chairperson Vorländer.

The reform of the Citizenship Act adopted in 2024 will make naturalisation much easier: "Accepting multiple nationalities in principle removes a major hurdle to naturalisation - the reform therefore has the potential to sustainably increase the number of naturalisations. But this will only be the case if the authorities are able to keep pace with the implementation of the new law," says Professor Vorländer. As many of the competent public bodies are already overloaded, the SVR recommends that the federal states adequately staff naturalisation authorities, consider greater centralisation and digitalise administrative processes. "In the SVR's view, the failure to find a solution for stateless persons is a missed opportunity. We also recommend that further consideration be given to how the disadvantages of an unrestricted transfer of German citizenship across generations can be avoided," the SVR Chairperson explains.

Practical implementation: Cutting red tape, making laws easier to understand

Migration and integration has been one of the most dynamic policy areas over the past five years. Many changes have been initiated. "However, we do see problems with the implementation of laws. Over the years, too little has been invested in administration. The technology is outdated, work processes are over-regulated, there is a lack of personnel and there is little co-operation between authorities. This is an overarching problem that affects everyone," comments Professor Vorländer.

Moreover, the legal situation is increasingly unclear. "German migration law is now so complicated that very few people understand it. This is a competitive disadvantage when it comes to recruiting labour and skilled workers, for example. If Germany wants to manage migration effectively and organise integration in a sustainable way, it needs to have more courage to simplify things," the SVR Chairperson concludes.



More topics in the SVR Annual Report 2024

- Labour market and educational integration: Facilitating access, enabling opportunities
- Attitudes towards immigration: Population fundamentally open to immigration despite situational scepticism
- Empirical facts and figures: Crime against and by migrants

The SVR Annual Report Summary 2024, Core Messages and the Press Release can be downloaded here.
<https://www.svr-migration.de/en/publication/annual-report-2024/>

For the German publications related to the SVR Annual Report 2024 please refer to this link.
<https://www.svr-migration.de/publikationen/jahresgutachten/2024/>

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About the Expert Council

The Expert Council on Integration and Migration is an independent and interdisciplinary body providing research-based policy advice. Its reports aim to assist those bodies responsible for integration and migration policy, as well as the general public, in their opinion-forming processes. The interdisciplinary Expert Council comprises a total of nine Researchers: Prof. Dr Hans Vorländer (Chairperson), Prof. Dr Birgit Leyendecker (Deputy Chairperson), Prof. Dr Havva Engin, Prof. Dr Birgit Glorius, Prof. Dr Marc Helbling, Prof. Dr Winfried Kluth, Prof. Dr Matthias Koenig, Prof. Sandra Lavenex, Ph.D., Prof. Panu Poutvaara, Ph.D.

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