



## **Refugee country as a new home: Naturalisation of refugees after the reform of German citizenship law**

### **Summary**

A growing share of refugees living in Germany now meet the main requirements for naturalisation, such as a minimum period of residence, sufficient German language skills and a secure income. This is particularly true for refugees who arrived between 2015 and 2016. Refugees also show a comparatively high level of interest in obtaining German citizenship. In recent years, the number of naturalisations has risen steadily. Refugees, especially from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, account for a high proportion of this increase: In 2023, almost 38 percent of naturalised citizens came from Syria alone. Against the backdrop of this 'naturalisation boom', the SVR's scientific staff is conducting a multi-year research project on the naturalisation of refugees.

Naturalisation is considered as an important means of ending refugee status permanently. According to a ruling by the Federal Administrative Court (BVerwG), Germany is obliged under international law to naturalise refugees quickly and affordably. By becoming German citizens, people not only gain additional rights (and obligations), but also an official recognition that they belong – in short, a new home. This is particularly important for the more than three million refugees currently living in Germany, since many of them are denied political participation and state protection in their countries of origin, as is currently the case in Syria and Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, naturalisation – including that of refugees – are now part of the integration policies of the federal, state and local governments. For a long time, the prevailing view had been that refugees were only staying in Germany temporarily. However, this proved incorrect: as the situations in their countries of origin remain dangerous, the majority of refugees require long-term protection. Over the past decade, the German authorities thus adopted an integrative approach that aims to provide rapid access to the labour market as well as language and integration courses. This investment in integration has made it easier for recent refugees to meet the requirements for naturalisation.

Although naturalisation is a well-researched topic, there is little empirical evidence on the experiences of refugees in the German naturalisation system. Studies show that refugees are more likely to seek naturalisation than other immigrant groups. There is also evidence that naturalisation tends to have a positive impact on the socio-economic and political integration of immigrants in the country of residence. In contrast, there is still limited evidence on the specific motivations of refugees to seek naturalisation in Germany and the obstacles they face in the naturalisation process. There are also open questions about how the acquisition of German citizenship affects the integration process of refugees.

Processing naturalisation applications has been a major challenge for the competent authorities for years. Among other things, they are struggling with the digitalisation of their processes and staffing problems. The current 'naturalisation boom' and the Act on the Modernisation of Citizenship Law (StARModG), which came into force in June 2024, are exacerbating this situation. Nevertheless, many federal states and local authorities have developed strategies to address these challenges. To date, however, there is a lack of empirical research including the perspectives of street-level bureaucrats in naturalisation processes at the state and local levels. Key public data that would allow for understanding and optimizing naturalisation processes are also missing.

In the research project "Naturalisation as 'integration booster' for refugees", researchers from the SVR's scientific staff are investigating the naturalisation of refugees in Germany. The aim is to gain more knowledge about refugees' naturalisation process and the impact of naturalisation on their integration in order to develop evidence-based policy recommendations. This policy brief first summarises relevant research findings, with a particular focus on what is already known about the naturalisation of refugees. Second, it identifies how the 2024 citizenship law reform is likely to affect refugees, and, third, it derives from this overview the research desiderata that the project shall pursue.