Country study

Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

Germany country profile – second edition

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Key messages

Germany is one of the most important countries of immigration in Europe. In 2020 there were 11.4 million refugees and other migrants, accounting for 13.7% of the German population, of whom 1.4 million were refugees.

There is a strong tradition of refugee protection in Germany. A large majority of Germans believe that countries including their own have an obligation to accept refugees. Yet there is also growing concern about the cultural impact migration could have in the long term.

Most Germans do not have strong positive or negative views about refugees and other migrants, with 59% concerned about the negative externalities of immigration but also open to its potential economic benefits and supportive of the moral obligation to protect refugees.

Immigration was a key issue in 2015, but it has swiftly declined in importance. Whereas once more than 50% of poll respondents believed it was one of the top two issues facing Germany, this number has consistently declined and was only around 12% in spring 2021.

The private sector is actively engaged in supporting the integration of refugees and other migrants into German society and the economy. Often working in partnership, they have spearheaded initiatives offering practical support and employment opportunities for refugees and other migrants.

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1 History of immigration in Germany

Germany has been one of the most significant immigration destinations in Europe for decades (see Figures 1 and 2; Green, 2013). Following the Second World War, 12 million Germans expelled from former German territories returned, with another 4 million returning after 1950 (ibid.). The division of the country between East and West Germany also generated considerable internal movement.

Recent decades have seen a drastic shift in how migration is viewed and approached in Germany. Migrants were traditionally seen as filling temporary labour shortages or seeking temporary refuge. From 1955 to 1973 a 'Guestworker' scheme attracted several million unskilled workers from Turkey, Italy, Spain and Greece. Three million of these 'guestworkers' stayed in Germany, joined by their families, after the scheme ended (Prevezanos, 2011). Little attention was paid to integration; learning German was seen as optional, as it was felt that migrants retaining their language and culture would encourage them eventually to return home (Rietig and Müller, 2016). There were also few legal channels for labour migration from beyond the European Economic Area (EEA).

More recently there has been a shift in policy to allow labour migrants from outside the EU to enter Germany (Oberstadion and Stuttgart, 2019). Immigration law was overhauled in 2000, alongside efforts to encourage the integration of migrants, including courses in the German language, law and culture (Rietig and Müller, 2016). Integration policy was tightened in July 2016, following the mass movement of refugees into the country the previous year, with benefits and the right to settle linked to participation in integration courses and outcomes such as fluency in German (Agence France-Presse, 2016).

Figure 1 Timeline of immigration to Germany
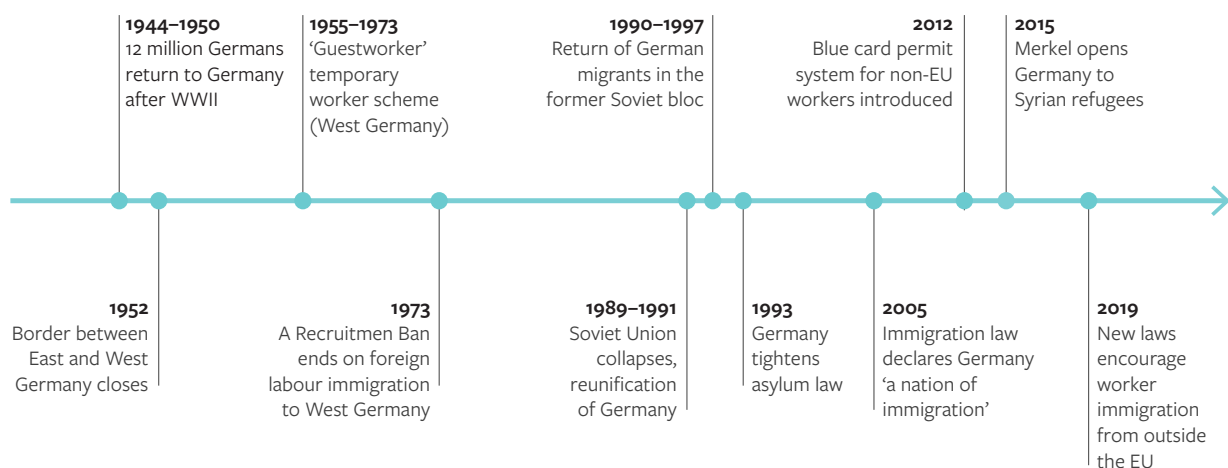
Figure 2 Long-term migration trends in Germany
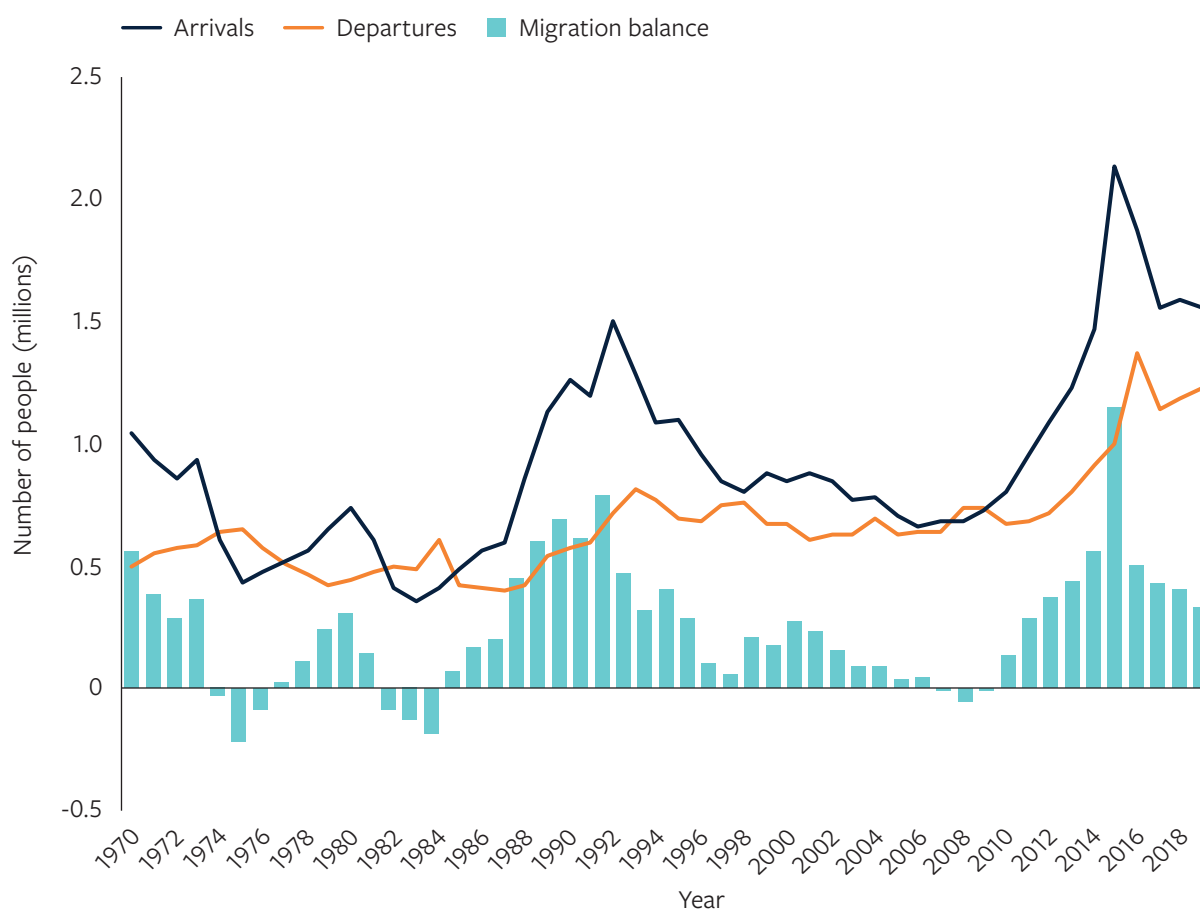
Note: Migration figures for 1970–1990 are for West Germany. From 1991, figures refer to Germany.
Source: BAMF, 2020b.

Germany has been and remains one of the major destinations for asylum-seekers in Europe (see Figure 3). Former Chancellor Angela Merkel's response to the refugee influx to Europe in 2015 famously stated 'We can do it!', opening Germany to half a million Syrian refugees and reinforcing the country's position as a major sanctuary destination in Europe. In 2020, there were 11.4 million refugees and other migrants in Germany, accounting for 13.7% of the population (DESTATIS, 2021b). Of this number almost 1.4 million were refugees (around 1.7% of the overall population) (ibid.).

Figure 3 Applications for asylum in Germany, 1951–2016
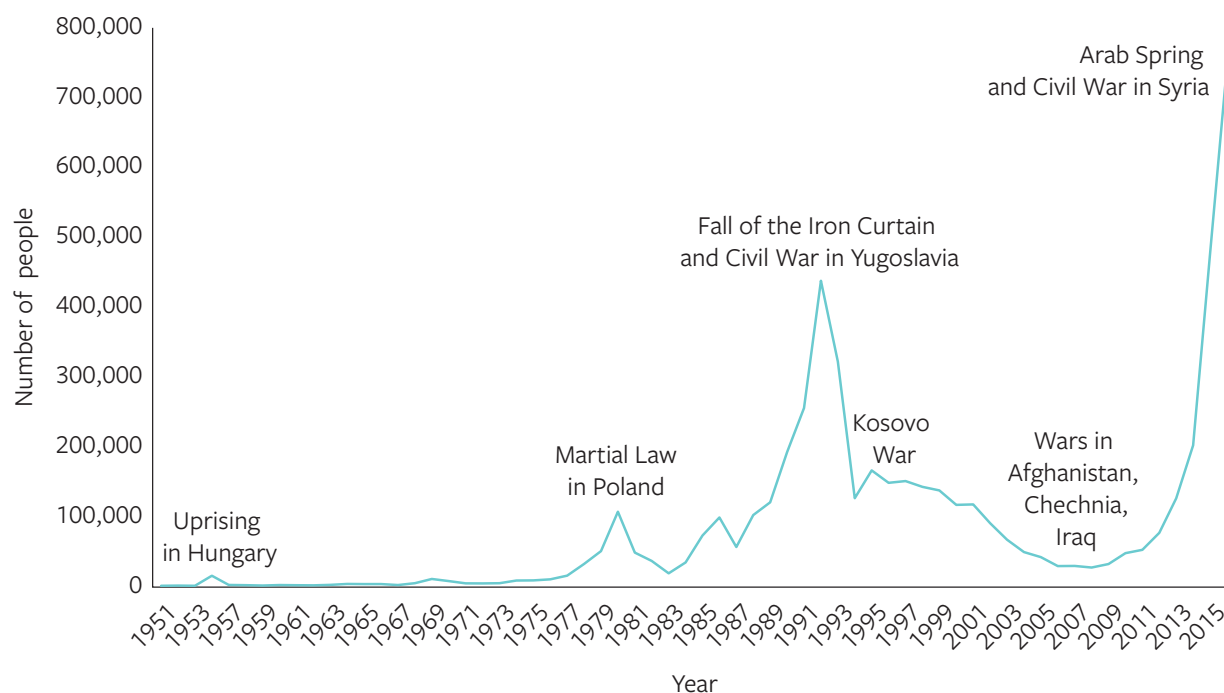
Source: Mansour-Ille et al. (2019), based on data from Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, key figures 2016

Despite the leadership shown by Merkel in opening Germany's doors to refugees, the country's response to the 'refugee crisis' of 2015 failed to set the tone for the rest of the Europe. The majority of European countries took and continue to take a far more restrictive stance to welcoming and integrating refugees, driven by politics and perceived public hostility to refugees and other migrants and fuelled by polarised media coverage.

Due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, Germany's Federal Statistics Office DESTATIS (2021a) projects that Germany's population did not grow in 2020. Lower net migration, higher mortality and lower birth rates culminated in a decline in population for the first time since 2011, though previous years' growth consistently depended on net migration due to Germany's ageing population.

2 Current German immigration system and approach

European Union (EU) citizens are free to live and work in Germany without a visa and have similar access to benefits as German citizens. Non-EU migrants require a visa to stay in Germany long-term for the purposes of work, study, family or medical treatment. Visa applicants are required to prove that their livelihood is ensured and have a valid passport (BAMF, 2020a; see Box 1). In 2012 Germany adopted the EU blue card, facilitating the labour migration of skilled non-EU citizens with a university degree and an annual salary of €56,800, reduced to €44,304 for a 'shortage occupation', including doctors (BAMF, 2021).

Increasing public unease about the numbers of asylum-seekers led to a tightening of asylum policy in 2015–2016, which saw asylum- seekers' benefits limited and a pause on family reunification for those who had been granted subsidiary protection[1] (Rietig and Müller, 2016). There was also a controversial deal between the EU and Turkey led by Merkel. Under the deal, irregular arrivals (including refugees) to Greece will be returned to Turkey. In exchange, for each person returned the EU commits to taking in one Syrian refugee from Turkey (Rankin, 2016). As of July 2020, almost 10,000 migrants had been accepted by Germany under this deal (Wallis, 2020).

In 2019, Germany passed more changes to asylum and immigration policies to help facilitate deportations of failed asylum-seekers and expand the power of the police and immigration authorities. These changes have made it easier to deport failed asylum-seekers to 'safe' countries, but also include legislation to expand access to the labour market for skilled workers (Mischke, 2019).

The German labour market sees a net loss of 300,000 employees per year (Schulz, 2019), with the country lacking low- and medium-skilled labour to meet the needs of an ongoing period of very high employment (Oberstadion and Stuttgart, 2019). In 2018 the German labour office noted there were 1.2 million unfilled vacancies in the country (Germany Visa, n.d.). A 2019 study by the Bertelsmann Foundation estimated that Germany needs around 260,000 migrant workers per year to plug the gap created by its ageing population, 146,000 of them from outside the EU (Kaiser, 2019). Policy-makers have suggested that a key way to meet the challenge of an ageing population and resulting labour shortages is through migration (see Box 2).

With labour shortages in many low- and medium-skilled sectors in Germany, migration has been proposed as a key way of helping employers meet their labour needs. The Skilled Workers Immigration Act has extended the rules covering the employment of foreign graduates and

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1   Subsidiary protection currently means permission to stay for a year initially, with the possibility of repeated extensions of two years.

trained workers from 2020 – meaning employers can employ non-EU workers to fill shortages so long as their German is good and they are trained to German standards (Oberstadion and Stuttgart, 2019). Between 1 March 2020 when the Act came into effect and June 2021, Germany had issued more than 50,000 visas this way (Germany Visa, 2021). Concerns remain about the ability of these new regulations to attract the volume of foreign labour Germany needs, with the quality of training given to German nationals making it very difficult for non-EU nationals to prove an equal or greater competency with German standards (Oberstadion and Stuttgart, 2019).

Germany has sought to integrate Syrian refugee arrivals to the country into the labour market to address labour needs. Of the 890,000 asylum-seekers who came to Germany in 2015, more than 307,000 were employed by 2018 (Ferguson, 2019). The majority of this group are under 35 and over two-thirds are paying social security contributions (ibid.).

One example of the harnessing of skills of refugees and other migrants to fill labour gaps was the introduction of the Act on the Acceleration of Asylum Procedures (2015), which allowed immigrant doctors who had requested qualification recognition to work alongside certified doctors in refugee centres until they were recognised (Buchan et al., 2019).

Box 1 Overview of German immigration and asylum policies

Citizenship policy. German citizenship was historically defined by ethnic heritage (*jus sanguinis*), rather than place of birth (*jus soli*) or length of stay. This meant that an individual had to have a German parent or grandparent in order to be considered German, rather than acquiring citizenship by virtue of being born or having resided in Germany for a specific number of years. Since the 2000s, *jus soli* elements have been introduced. For instance, children born to immigrant parents, who have been legal residents in Germany for eight years, now automatically receive German citizenship. A first-generation migrant who has been in Germany for eight years may become a citizen if they pass a naturalisation test and have adequate German-language skills, no criminal record and enough income to meet living expenses, and if they give up their nationality (exceptions are EU and Swiss citizens, who may have dual nationality) (DOMID, n.d.).

Asylum policy. Asylum in Germany is a two-step process. Following initial registration, the applicant is allocated to a reception centre according to a quota system, from which they formally apply. Applicants originating from designated 'safe' countries enjoy fewer rights while seeking asylum than applicants deemed to have a better chance of remaining, including being prohibited from working. The types of protection granted are refugee status, subsidiary protection or bans on deportation. In 2019, 56.6% of asylum applications were accepted (Kalkmann and Hesari, 2020).

Box 2 In focus – Germany's ageing population

Germany's ageing population presents a major challenge – by 2060 it is estimated that one in three Germans will be over 65 (Ferguson, 2019). Alongside this ageing trend the demand for older persons' care is expected to grow rapidly. In 2018 just under 3 million people required nursing care, a number that is expected to double by 2050 (Ziegler, 2018). While Germany has been relatively successful in increasing the size of its care workforce compared to other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, it is still struggling to keep pace with the growth of its ageing population (OECD, 2020). Shortages of care workers have been widely reported (Ziegler, 2018; The Local, 2019). As Germany's elder care system has a large 'cash-for-care' component, a critical element of delivery of care services are the allowances provided to individuals to purchase care. As a result, it is common for individual households to privately employ care workers and the system has come to rely heavily on low-wage migrant workers to deliver home-based elder care (Cangiano, 2014; ILO, 2018). Migrant workers often come from the EU, particularly EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe, often supplied through agencies and working under temporary contracts (ILO, 2018; Van Hooren, 2020). More than 250 recruiting agencies offer this service (Gutenberg, 2019).

3 Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

The saliency of immigration as a key issue of concern in Germany spiked in parallel with Merkel's opening up of Germany to Syrian refugees in 2015, though it has since declined (see Figure 4). Indeed, immigration as a key issue only reached more than 50% in 2015. Since then, it has been steadily declining in importance. It is likely that the significant decrease in the winter 2020–2021 survey was due to the subsequent large jump in responses for 'health' resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic (Eurobarometer, n.d.).

Figure 4 Salience of immigration as a key issue in Germany
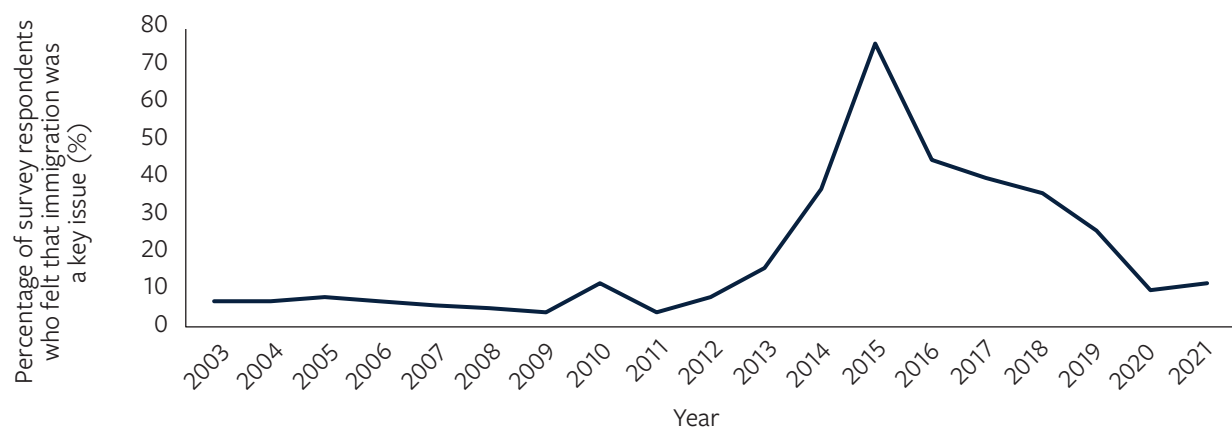
Note: This graphic shows the percentage of people answering 'immigration' to the question 'What do you think are the two most important issues facing Germany today?' Data is taken mainly from autumn surveys, though the Eurobarometer surveys were delayed due to Covid-19, with the autumn 2020 survey shifting to winter 2020–2021. Data shown here for 2021 is taken from the latest survey (spring 2021).
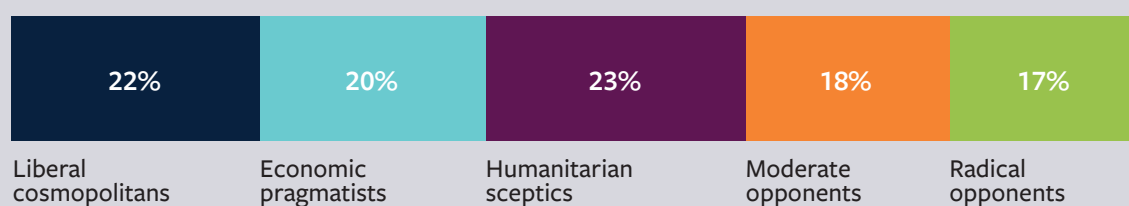Source: Eurobarometer, n.d.

There has also consistently been strong support for refugee protection, with a large majority of Germans believing in the obligation of countries to accept refugees. A 2016 poll found that 69% of respondents believed that people should be able to seek refuge in other countries, including Germany, to escape war and persecution, and only 8% rejected this view (Helbling et al., 2017). This is reflected in '*willkommenskultur*' ('welcome culture'; see Chapter 4), used to describe many people's willingness to help and engage in the large-scale civic activism that followed the arrival of refugees at train stations and elsewhere in Germany in the autumn of 2015. While the extent of this welcome culture may have been exaggerated in the German media (Haller, 2017), opinion surveys in 2016, 2017 and 2018 suggest that attitudes towards refugees and migrants have not substantially shifted since 2015 (Gerhards et al., 2016; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2017; Helbling et al., 2017; SVR, 2018). A 2021 poll found the percentage of respondents who believed people should be able to seek refuge in other countries, including Germany, to escape war and persecution had risen to 71% (Ipsos MORI, 2021).

Even so, the rise of the far-right, anti-immigrant party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)) would seem to indicate growing anti-refugee sentiment, fed by public anxiety and by incidents such as a fatal attack by a refused asylum-seeker on a Christmas market in 2016. In a 2018–2019 survey by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), 53% of respondents expressed negative opinions about asylum-seekers, higher than the 44% of people who thought this in 2014, prior to the considerable increase in refugee arrivals (FES, 2019). In the 2021 German elections, however, AfD won only 10.3% of the vote, down from 12.6% in the 2017 election (Schultheis, 2021), paralleling the waning salience of immigration as a key issue as depicted in Figure 4.

Ultimately, public opinion towards refugees and other migrants in Germany is driven by an economic pragmatism, evident in attitudinal segmentation research by More in Common that roughly divides the German population into five groups based on their attitudes towards immigration and globalisation (see Box 3).

Box 3 Segmentation or 'tribes' of the German population by attitude towards refugees and other migrants

22%	20%	23%	18%	17%
Liberal cosmopolitans	Economic pragmatists	Humanitarian sceptics	Moderate opponents	Radical opponents

Source: Helbling et al. (2017)

Liberal cosmopolitans: people who perceive immigration as beneficial economically and culturally and support the idea that refugees ought to be able to live in Germany permanently; they are highly educated and live in larger cities; many come from families with a recent history of migration.

Economic pragmatists: people who take pride in German identity and are generally positive about the future; believe immigration makes Germany more open to ideas and cultures but are concerned about the compatibility of Islam and German culture; do not believe that refugees should be allowed to live permanently in Germany; have medium to high incomes and medium education levels.

Humanitarian sceptics: people who see accepting refugees as an obligation and a matter of principle, perhaps due to Germany's history and European countries' responsibility for conflict and its consequences in the Middle East; have doubts that refugees will integrate successfully into society and are less likely to believe that refugees should be permitted to live permanently in Germany; are the oldest segment, are highly educated but many have low incomes.

Moderate opponents: people who have deep reservations about Germany's refugee intake, with security concerns and doubts that arrivals are bona fide refugees; they worry that immigrants disproportionately benefit from public services; hold negative views towards Islam; think refugees should not be able to live in Germany permanently and many support closing Germany's borders; most have low incomes and an intermediate level of education.

Radical opponents: people who are the most opposed to migration and refugees; they believe that admitting refugees is a security risk and that refugees are actually economically motivated migrants; believe immigrants are a burden on public services; feel left behind by globalisation and are concerned that Germany's identity is disappearing; demand the closure of Germany's borders; tend to be older with lower education and income levels; and are most likely to live in small communities in former East Germany, Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate.

According to this analysis, the majority of Germans (59%) are located in a 'conflicted middle' (i.e. Economic pragmatists, Humanitarian sceptics and Moderate opponents). The rest of the population are 'outliers': Liberal cosmopolitans and Radical opponents who are most strongly in favour of and most opposed to immigration. These segments parallel the findings of the European Social Survey, where Germany has consistently had similar percentages of respondents answering positively (6–10), negatively (0–4) and indecisively (5) to the statement 'On a scale of 0 to 10, immigrants make Germany a worse or better place to live' (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 Attitudes towards immigration: do immigrants make Germany a worse or a better place to live?
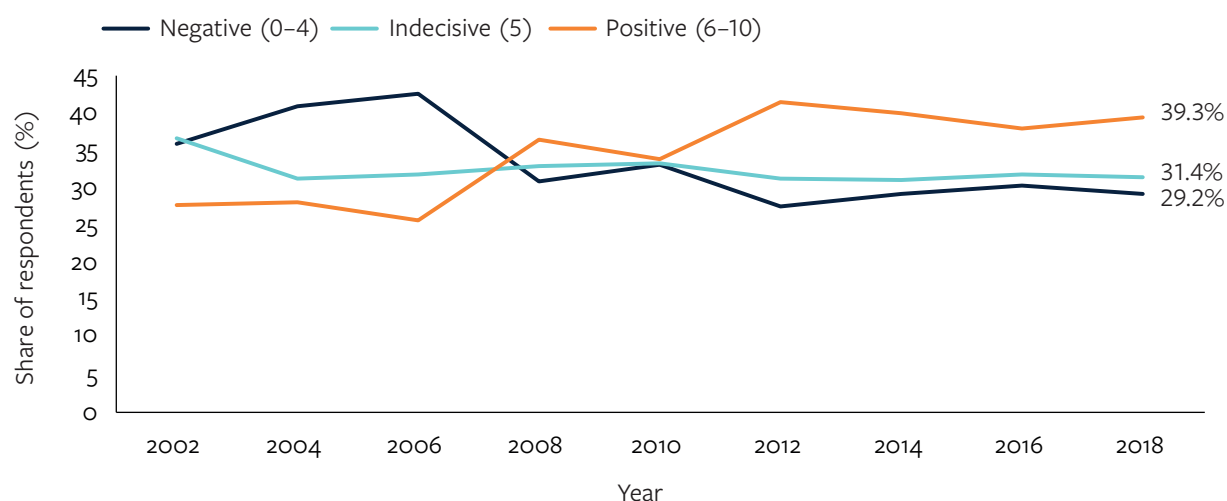
Note: This data has been extracted from each wave of the European Social Survey. The survey scores respondents from 0–10. We have classified survey respondents who scored 0–4 in their answers to the question 'Do immigrants make Germany a worse or better place to live?' as holding 'negative' views, those scoring 5 as being 'indecisive' and those scoring 6–10 as holding 'positive' views.
Source: European Social Survey (n.d.)

4   Public narratives: '*willkommenskultur*' and '*Wir schaffen das*'

When Germany decided to admit more than one million refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan in 2015–2016, there was an outpouring of support from civil society activists and volunteers known as *willkommenskultur*, or welcome culture. Trauner and Turton (2017: 34) argue that 'welcome culture as a concept gained such a relevance in the public debate as it allowed different societal, media and political actors to promote a certain perception of migrants'. It became a narrative that could be used by human rights organisations and refugee advocates as well as entrepreneurs and the German media (ibid.). This welcome culture was supported by former Chancellor Angela Merkel, who often asserted '*Wir schaffen das*', or 'We can do it' when advancing her open-door policy for refugees in 2015 (Delcker, 2016).

The terrorist attacks in late 2015 and 2016 that gave rise to support for AfD also amplified its contrasting negative narrative on immigration, which gained enough traction and backing to prompt the government to introduce more restrictive immigration policies (Trauner and Turton, 2017). Both '*willkommenskultur*' and '*Wir schaffen das*' were co-opted by the AfD to push its domestic agendas. For example, they used the idea of welcome culture to support their pro-life agenda, since in their view, if Germans were more welcoming towards unborn and newborn children, it would reduce the need for migration because the German population would grow (ibid.). They also turned 'we can do this' on its head by saying 'We don't want to do this at all' when it came to welcoming refugees (Delcker, 2016).

Yet the outcome of the 2017 election, when immigration was high on the political agenda, was a victory for Merkel's party, winning the largest proportion of the vote at 32.9%, with AfD receiving only 12.6% (Clarke, 2017). This, coupled with the public opinion polls discussed in the previous section, suggest that positive narratives outweighed negative ones.

Immigration was not a key topic of concern in the 2021 elections, even for AfD. Following the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, and with 80% of survey respondents believing that a new wave of refugees from the Middle East would be heading to Europe, 62% believed Germany would be able to cope with the situation (ZDF, 2021) – echoing Merkel's words from six years ago: '*Wir schaffen das*'.

The segmentation data outlined above provides some insight into how public narratives could positively shape attitudes towards immigration in Germany. In particular, people in the 'conflicted middle' present opportunities for tailored messaging. These groups are more likely to be influenced by carefully advanced arguments on the benefits of immigration for Germany, as well as the costs associated with effective integration in German society and the economy, and are less emotionally driven than the two groups on the extreme ends of the spectrum. Key messages and priorities for engagement could include:

- **Control of migration**. People in the 'conflicted middle' need reassurance that the government is in control of immigration and is effectively working to integrate refugees (Helbling et al., 2017).
- **Global identity**. Communication about refugee policy should be sensitive to differing interpretations of Germany's global role and the role of migration within it. As a rule, those who feel positive about Germany's integration within Europe and its interaction with the global economy support assisting refugees, while those who are less positive about globalisation are more sceptical. Persuading the 'conflicted middle' to be more positive about refugees and other migrants may require communication around Germany's global outlook and identity (ibid.).
- **Contact with refugees and other migrants**. A key determinant of successful integration is interaction with people from other cultures. The more contact people have with refugees the more positive their view of integration. There was a significant discrepancy in attitudes to refugees and other migrants between the former East and West Germany, again largely determined by the degree of contact people had with refugees and migrants (ibid.). Engaging the 'conflicted middle' should employ contact theory and examples of lived experience to make a positive argument for refugees and other migrants in Germany.

5   Implications for public and private investors

The current climate in Germany is favourable to the integration of refugees and other migrants into the economy and society (Fleischer, 2019). Recent policy reforms have sought to deliver more tailored integration support to different groups of refugees and asylum-seekers, including intensive language training, courses on aspects such as the legal system and German culture, as well as specialist literacy programmes (Brücker et al., 2019). Following the 2015–2016 influx of refugees, a simulation comparing the costs to the government of taking in refugees (e.g. care, accommodation, integration and social welfare) with the benefits (including wider consumer demand and economic performance) suggested that, in the long run, refugees contribute more than they cost. The study found that, even with sluggish labour market integration, refugees would 'still have a positive impact on the Germany economy after five to ten years' (Fratzscher and Junker, 2015: 612). One report by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees found that 50% of refugees in Germany surveyed were working in skilled jobs, despite the fact that only 20% of the refugee population have the required qualifications. The survey highlighted that many refugees have acquired skills informally or in their home countries, and then taken up jobs unfilled by German workers (Dowling, 2019). There is also evidence that refugees who arrived in 2015 have integrated into the labour market slightly faster than previous refugee cohorts (Brücker et al., 2019). Yet the challenges for refugees and other migrants seeking work in Germany remain significant, from language barriers to ensuring recognition of existing skills, with the bar often set unrealistically high for acquiring German qualifications.

Many businesses and investors in Germany have demonstrated how the private sector can support the integration of refugees and other migrants alongside government and civil society efforts. Programmes range from individual companies with large-scale initiatives to collective platforms developed to share experiences of integration, galvanise support and open up opportunities for refugees and other migrants among businesses. The aim of these initiatives is primarily to facilitate employment and sustain integration into Germany's economy and society. Good business practice can also have an impact on broader public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants by demonstrating how internships, job opportunities and skills development can enhance integration.

Box 4 provides examples of good practice by businesses engaging with refugees and other migrants in Germany. Businesses and investors can play a vital role in providing support for refugees and other migrants' economic and social integration, and in doing so help demonstrate to the 'conflicted middle' how this can be achieved in practice. The following are priorities for effective engagement:

1. **Framing that makes the most of Germany's 'economic pragmatism' and the need to fill labour shortages**. Targeted messaging from businesses and investors should take into account key anxieties about refugees and other migrants, particularly around long-term integration and the perceived threat of immigration to German culture, values and security.
2. **Businesses and investors should harness the economic opportunities presented by refugees and other migrants** to fill labour shortages and skills gaps, recognising, investing in and building the skills of often highly qualified refugee and migrant employees and job applicants.
3. **Build innovative partnerships among like-minded businesses and investors in Germany and beyond**. Drawing on existing initiatives and coalitions such as the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration, German businesses have knowledge and expertise on the integration of refugees and other migrants that could be useful to businesses in other countries, particularly in Europe.

Box 4 Examples of good business practice in engaging with refugees

The **Network of Businesses Integrating Refugees** includes hundreds of companies of all sizes supporting refugee integration in the labour market. It aims to provide a platform for exchanging information and practical knowledge around refugee integration (NETZWERK Unternehmen integrieren Flüchtlinge, 2019).

Bertelsmann Stiftung and seven other foundations fund the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration. Supported by a research unit, the council develops reports, policy briefings and policy recommendations to promote Germany as a country of immigration and integration (Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration, 2019).

Under an initiative dubbed **We-together**, 36 German companies have joined forces to showcase how German businesses can promote the integration of refugees and support a more tolerant and open public climate. These companies' wide-ranging initiatives spread far beyond employment and work towards an integrated, welcoming Germany (Wir Zusammen, 2019).

Deutsche Post has established 1,000 new internship places for refugees, and more than 10,000 staff members engage in voluntary work with refugees. The company also supports projects to teach refugees German and employs 100 coordinators to support the company's integration work (Dams et al., 2016).

Henkel, a washing powder and cosmetics company, provides essential hygiene items to new refugee arrivals, as well as long-term integration initiatives supporting language and music training for refugee children. The company's employees receive eight days' paid leave per year to engage in voluntary work in support of refugee integration (ibid.).

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