



Migration as a “Trigger Point”?

In questions of migration, a sense of conditional inclusivity prevails in German mainstream society. Even though opinions on the issue are less black and white than often suggested, it remains riddled with conflict.

By Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser

Migration is seen by many as *the* most divisive issue of contemporary societies, pitting champions of a “culture of welcome”, who regard immigration not only as economically necessary but also as culturally enriching, against a sizable minority who argue in favour of a reduction or even a complete stop of arrivals.

Among the population at large, both camps are approximately of the same size. This is seen, for instance,

in a poll we conducted on the most polarised of all migration issues, the hotly debated question of an upper limit on refugee uptake, particularly of those coming from Arab and African countries: 23 percent of Germans support such a cap, while 20 percent are opposed. This represents a clear and comparatively polarized line of conflict which is mirrored in the oppositions of political and public discourses.

Yet these numbers also show us that a considerable part of the population – 57 percent – positions itself *in between* the two poles. What is it that citizens in this politically more muted middle ground want? And are there points of consensus regarding migration beside and beyond the well-rehearsed disagreements of proponents and sceptics? What does society owe asylum seekers and refugees to fulfil the humanitarian duties enshrined

Left: Newcomers to Germany in autumn 2019: temporary accommodation for refugee families in a hangar at the former Tempelhof Airport in Berlin.

in the German constitution and the Geneva Convention? How much labour migration should be allowed? Who should be allowed to come to Germany, with which conditionalities, and what can legitimately be expected from newcomers and settled migrants? Citizens’ answers to these questions draw on a wide repertoire of normative standards, economic, cultural and political considerations. In the following, we summarise some of the most central positions and arguments found among the wider public, drawing on a recent study for which we gathered extensive survey and focus group data.

First off, it should be noted that German migration attitudes have remained remarkably stable in the last three decades. This is surprising when you consider that society has changed significantly as a result of the increasing share of migrants, and that we saw heated – and at times violent – episodes of political contention over the issue in the early 1990s and in the aftermath of 2015’s “summer of migration”. Although newer data hint at a souring of the mood in recent months, on average German citizens have become neither significantly more sceptical nor more open to migration since the early 1990s.

What has changed is the salience and importance of migration as a political issue. Citizens’ views of migration today are much more decisive for their electoral choices than they used to be. And especially on the right, positions have hardened and radicalised since the anti-immigration party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) has entered the parliaments.

Overall, our representative survey of over 2,500 Germans shows a mixed picture, in which migration attitudes are characterised by an attitude of *conditional inclusivity*. There is a widespread realisation today that Germany has become a society marked by immigration, a self-understanding captured by the once contentious but now widely accepted term “*Einwanderungsland*”. Strict exclusionary measures in the service of ethnic homogeneity are seen by many as both impossible and normatively undesirable.

At the same time, the majority of citizens places conditions on migrants’ access to the territory and their membership in the national community. They distinguish between more or less deserving migrants, based on criteria such as the migrants’ humanitarian need of protection and aid, their cultural and social proximity and the degree to which arrivers conform to expectations of integration and hard work. The German “culture of welcome” is directed first and foremost at migrants whose perceived cultural foreignness remains limited (e.g. white Ukrainian Christians), those who are assumed to be in “genuine” need (such as mothers and children fleeing war) or those who are seen as compatible with the demands of the German labour market and its shortages of skilled labour.

Conversely, exclusionary impulses emerge with great predictability wherever Germans suspect an unwillingness of migrants to integrate or where immigrants are assumed to be motivated by “selfish” or “merely economic”, rather than humanitarian, reasons. These conditionalities and suspicions, which often draw on ethnic, cultural and gen-

Thematic Series

The current Science Year is dedicated to the subject of “Freedom”, focussing on milestones in the history of democracy in the Federal Republic of Germany and the fundamental values associated with it: the 75th anniversary of the Basic Law in May and the 35th anniversary of the Peaceful Revolution in November. Through its series “Freedom, democracy and ...”, *forschung* seeks to contribute to public dialogue and media debate. The aim is to show in a selection of examples and from issue to issue how freedom-related topics are the subject of very varied research projects funded by the DFG. The spectrum ranges from the question about “freedom and migration” (in this issue), notions of “democracy and freedom of research” or “urban development and democracy” through to the research concept of “denied freedom” in this year’s final issue.

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dered stereotypes, mark the limits of conditional inclusivity. The simultaneity of inclusionary and exclusionary tendencies is what characterises the attitudes of most citizens. Only minorities (albeit often politically articulate ones) want to close – or open – the borders altogether. Both sides of the debate introduce conditions, differentiations and exceptions that modified straightforward pro- or anti-migration positions. The argument overall rages less between “Yes” and “No” than between “Yes, but ...” and “No, but ...”.

To understand this pattern better, we analysed material from focus group discussions: Here, we asked people from different socio-struc-

tural characteristics (such as income and education) and widely diverging opinions to engage in moderated discussions about controversial issues. Discussions around migration here stuck out as particularly polarised and well-rehearsed. Many participants not only had a clear sense of their own stance on the issues, but were also familiar with the arguments put forward by the other side and already anticipated their response.

In addition, it was notable that controversies often arose within a defined corridor of opinions defined by implicit points of *consensus* that were shared across the different positions. Virtually, all proponents of migration as well as sceptics and those with less decided views agreed that immigration should be subject to farsighted control and steering. Practically everyone regarded the reception of refugees from warzones and regions hit by famine and natural disasters as a relevant ethical duty and agreed that immigration could in principle be beneficial to the German economy under the right conditions. Virtually all of them subscribed to the goal of migrant integration through

labour market participation and the linguistic assimilation. These – often unspoken – points of consensus are interesting in their own right. But they also structured conflicts: heated and contentious disputes often concerned the question of how exactly consensual goals, such as migration control and migrant integration, were to be achieved.

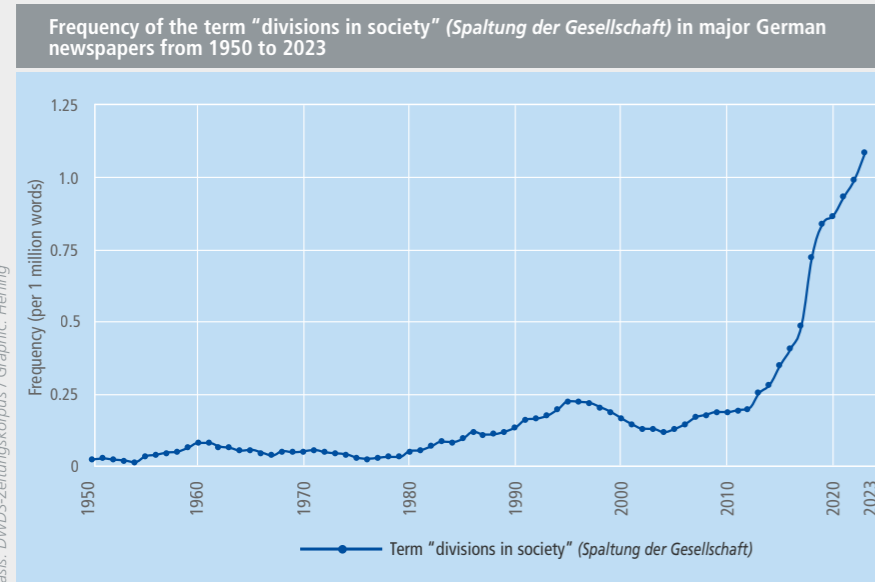
Our analysis distinguishes between two main areas of conflict in the arena of migration politics: one relating to the *external border* of the national territory, the other to the *internal border* of national membership and citizen status. External state borders are key for discussions about the controllability and legitimacy of immigration. Here, sceptical attitudes are mainly based on fears that result both from latent xenophobia and the sense that a greater permeability of the border will result in a sudden and quickly escalating influx of people, a loss of control and excessive demands on national infrastructures. This stands in contrast with the idea that immigration can be prudently controlled without

violent exclusion, or at least while keeping commitments to humanitarianism and decency, and that steady migration flows are a necessary and normal element of successful contemporary societies.

Disputes regarding the internal or membership border focus in particular on the economic and cultural effects that immigrants have on German society. The ideal of integration here acted as a moral hypergood that both sides subscribed to: yet while the pro-migration side emphasised examples of migrants' motivation to work and their willingness to integrate, the other side centred on experiences of foreignness and deviance, citing the Muslim headscarf of "criminal clans" as tropes of cultural distance and threat.

The main difference lays in whether the majority of migrants were categorised as willing to integrate, with a few bad apples as the exception, or whether, on the contrary, the few good examples were the exception to an overall pattern of anomie and deviance. These debates also concerned the question of who or what was responsible for *unsuccessful* integration: those who viewed the majority of migrants as motivated individuals tended to blame the host society's racism and/or the failure of the institutional architecture of inclusion and integration as hampering integration efforts. By contrast, those who were more distrustful of the migrants' motivations saw *them* as the main culprits who are not fulfilling their part of the contract even after the German host society had shown itself so generous to them.

Migration had been a major divisive issue already before 2015. In German newspapers, talk of "divisions in society" has become much more frequent over time.



Basis: DWDS-Zeitungskorpus / Graphic: Herling

and hostility towards migration. However, there is a significantly larger group in Germany that is not fundamentally opposed to migration and who wishes to continue fulfilling the country's legal obligation to protect asylum seekers and refugees. At the same time, this latter group expects policymakers to regulate immigration and facilitate successful integration. If this fails to happen in everyday life, while at the same time a dramatised image of migration is projected through public discourse, parts of the population are at risk of heeding the appeals of right-wing parties who have claimed ownership of the issue.

How far they will get with this is very much in the hands of those who bear political responsibility, as well as those who shape the way we talk publicly about refugees and immigration. Our analyses suggest that it is possible to counteract the radicalisation of migration-related conflicts. This would involve an empathetic focus on the human destinies behind migration numbers as well as clearly eschewing any racist differentiations between groups of migrants, even while organising the mechanisms of control necessary for a society of immigration.



Noisy protests and resentful messages ("Social stability in jeopardy: stop the multi-culti mania"): demonstration in Berlin in March 2023.

All in all, this leads to a mixed and partly contradictory image of migration conflicts in current German political opinion. Migration has become a crucial social issue and the obvious problems regarding finding lasting and effective solutions on the European level are contributing to the politicisation of the issue. When there is an increasingly widespread impres-

sion that neither the control of migration nor the integration of immigrants is successful, scepticism grows among the population. These impressions are stoked by right-wing populist and far right movements that capitalise on latent fears when they talk about "loss of control" or "foreign infiltration".

In our study, we certainly found entrenched attitudes of resentment



Illustration: Born / Stifterverband

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The authors co-wrote the book *Triggerpunkte. Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft* (Suhrkamp 2023).

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