

Diversity as the new normal? How Germany deals with difference as an immigration country

Eight Core Messages

The 2021 Annual Report of the Expert Council on Integration and Migration (SVR) is based on the premise that diversity is increasing in society. Migration is one factor – although by no means the only one – that contributes to this diversity and awareness of diversity. In accordance with the SVR's mandate, its Annual Report this year focuses on Germany as an immigration society. How does this society respond to diversity in the core areas of politics, culture and the labour market, and what attitudes to diversity can be found in the population as a whole? The findings of the report are summarised below, together with recommendations based on the outcomes of the SVR's research.

1 Increasing diversity must not lead to increasing inequality

For more than 60 years now, nearly every year more people have immigrated to Germany than have left the country in the same period. Currently, around every sixth resident of Germany was born abroad; that is, around 13.7 million people. This is not to say, of course, that people with a migration background form a homogenous group. They are no less diverse and varied than the non-migrant population. The many differences in German society – which have come about in part due to migration – bring economic and cultural benefits. Consequently, concepts like diversity and plurality have become established within the German language, and have come to have positive connotations. But diversity also brings risks and challenges. This can be seen in contexts where diversity has increased alongside inequality, or in areas where parallel societies have emerged. As a result, future migration and integration policies will need to focus, as a core task, on making sure that differences in where people come from do not result in unequal participation. How could such policies be successfully developed, and who should be involved? The SVR Integration Barometer has repeatedly shown that on one point, people with and without a migration background are in agreement. If migrants are to be integrated into core areas of society, they themselves must actively contribute – for example, by learning German. But those sections of the population who do not have a migration background must also play their part (SVR 2016: 45-46), to ensure that the efforts made by migrants are not in vain. This is something on which, again, a majority of every population group agrees.

For more information, see Chapter A.1.



2 Promote the uptake of German citizenship through targeted initiatives

Political participation takes many forms, from participating in public discourse to the right to vote in elections. Voting is an important act of political participation. Most countries, however, restrict the right to vote to their own citizens. In Germany, this means that comprehensive political participation can only be achieved if migrants are able to acquire German citizenship. The reform of the Nationality Act in 1999-2000 laid the groundwork for this to happen by introducing the principle of birthright citizenship (*jus soli*) into German legislation. This means that children born to foreign parents in Germany are automatically deemed to be German nationals, provided that at least one parent has been legally resident in Germany for a certain period of time. The first children to acquire automatic German citizenship under the reform are now adults and can vote in German federal elections this year for the first time. There are also options for acquiring German citizenship later for those who did not acquire it at birth. This process, also known as “naturalisation”, has become considerably easier in the last decades. Yet the number of naturalisations in Germany has been stagnating for years. In 2019, for example, only 2.5% of all those meeting the eligibility criteria actually became German citizens. There are many reasons why foreign people living in Germany do not apply for German citizenship, despite being eligible to do so. EU citizens, for example, often see no added value in acquiring citizenship, as their legal status is equal to that of German citizens in most contexts. Non-EU citizens, on the other, often cannot hold dual nationality and must give up their previous citizenship when they become German citizens. Many refuse to do this, feeling a sense of belonging to both (or several) countries. The idea of allowing foreigners to keep their original nationality on acquiring German citizenship, however, is contested in Germany. Additionally, it seems that some people are not aware that they are even eligible for German citizenship. To increase the rate of uptake for German citizenship, therefore, the SVR urges following the example set by some federal states. Under this model, all federal states and local authorities should explicitly promote German citizenship and inform eligible persons about their options and the advantages of citizenship. Acquiring citizenship, too, should not be limited to the administrative procedure, but should be given a more personal character. Ceremonies celebrating the act of becoming a citizen show that the new citizens are welcome and wanted in Germany. Some local authorities already hold this kind of event and organise information campaigns. Initiatives like these would increase the citizenship uptake rate, while also sending an important message to people who have always been German nationals. In this way, they could help to promote social cohesion. As a response to the controversy that surrounds the idea of dual citizenship, in 2014 the SVR proposed a model suggesting the introduction of a “dual passport with generational cut-off”. This would offer a compromise between the stark alternatives of rejecting or accepting the concept of dual citizenship outright. Under this model, multiple citizenship would be accepted for one or two transitional generations. However, there would be a generational cut-off to prevent people from a certain generation onwards from automatically acquiring the original nationality held by the person who first migrated to Germany.

For more information and recommendations, see Chapter A.2.

3 Encourage voting, and consider opening up local election voting to third-country nationals

The electorate increasingly includes Germans with a migration background. People in this group, however, are less likely to vote, according to current findings. They are also under-represented as members of German state and federal parliaments. Political parties in Germany are therefore urged to engage more closely with the immigrant population as voters, party members and potential political representatives. Germany also offers numerous informal opportunities for political participation which are open to everyone regardless of nationality. These include, for example, taking part in demonstrations or getting involved in clubs, associations or citizen initiatives. Non-Germans are also entitled to become members of political parties in Germany. But first-generation migrants are generally less likely to participate in any form of political activity than people without a migration background. The main, although not the only reason, for this, is that migrants on average have lower levels of educational achievement than non-migrants. Second-generation migrants are much more likely to participate in political activities. Local authority councils tasked with integration, along with migrants' organisations, could take on an important supporting role when it comes to increasing participation in democratic processes. Another opportunity could be participating in workplace representative bodies, for example staff councils. However, these cannot replace more conventional forms of political participation, especially when it comes to exercising the right to vote in elections. With the uptake rate for citizenship stagnating, numerous people who have lived in Germany for years or even decades are currently excluded from the electoral processes of democratic decision-making. The SVR therefore believes that from the point of view of integration policy, there are weighty arguments for considering granting the right to vote in local elections to third-country nationals. But there are also significant legal barriers that would make it difficult to introduce this kind of right, as past judgments issued by the Federal Constitutional Court and by the constitutional courts of certain federal states (*Länder*) have shown.

For more information and recommendations, see Chapter A.2.

4 Continue to promote diversity on the labour market and work to prevent discrimination, including in the public sector

Social diversity is mirrored on the labour market. Labour market participation among people with a migration background has risen in the last decades. However, they continue to be disadvantaged at work in a number of important ways. On average, people with a migration background work in areas where fewer qualifications are needed and wages are lower. They more frequently have irregular forms of employment and are less likely to work in the public sector. These differences can be explained mainly by the fact that people with a migration



background tend to have lower-level formal qualifications. Various studies have shown, however, that other factors also play a part. These include discrimination, a lack of relevant networks, poor knowledge of German or concerns on the part of potential employers. People with a migration background are under-represented in the public sector, especially at the higher levels of employment, even though numbers have increased slightly in the last few years. Even if they have the formal qualifications and experience that would fit them for these roles, they often lack the role models and networking opportunities that would help them to find employment in these areas or even to be aware that such positions exist. Yet it is in the state's own interest to consider persons with a migration background more carefully in the context of its recruitment and employment strategies. There are many indications that a diverse workforce is better able to adapt and respond to the needs of a diverse population. Diversity in the workplace also actively demonstrates and embodies equality of opportunity and participation, so that the state could function here as a role model for society as a whole. Last but not least, in view of the fact that many employees in the public sector are about to reach retirement age, there is a good demographic reason for paying more attention to potential candidates with a migration background. The SVR therefore recommends implementing and strengthening measures to open up the public sector to a more diverse range of potential employees. This could include offering work-shadowing placements and internships or launching information and recruitment campaigns targeting people with a migration background. Public sector organisations could also more directly engage with people with a migration background, for example at career fairs or through their career services. In the private sector, migrants, including second- and third-generation migrants, are quantitatively better represented than in the public sector. At least at larger companies, employers are keen to flag up their commitment to diversity management. Nonetheless, various studies show that people with a migration background can still experience discrimination during recruitment procedures. It is therefore difficult to say to what extent diversity is genuinely valued by employers. Qualitatively, too, studies indicate a number of imbalances on the labour market. People with a migration background are over-represented, for example, in the low-wage sector. Education, work and social policies, as well as "traditional" integration policies, must do more to address this segmentation on the labour market.

For more information and recommendations, see Chapter A.3.

5 The cultural sector is already diverse and international; make it easier to participate in established cultural institutions

Cultural institutions tend to differ from other areas of society when it comes to participation. In the cultural sphere, diversity has been the norm for a long time, perhaps from its very beginnings. One reason for this is the universality of cultural and artistic expression as such, that is, that all societies and cultures have forms of artistic expression. At the local level, too, intercultural practices are an established aspect of social and cultural life. It is precisely this

kind of cultural interaction, offering few barriers to participation, that needs to be more highly valued and better supported. But even in the cultural sector, people with a migration background are less likely to participate in or attend more established institutions (theatres or opera houses, for example). There is not much data available on this point, but studies that do exist show that this is most often due to socio-economic and educational factors. The SVR therefore believes that it is essential to address socio-economic status as one of the key elements, if not *the* key element, influencing participation in the sector. The SVR recommends that young people in particular should be able to visit certain state-owned cultural institutions free of charge (at least once a week). It also recommends further targeted measures to open up such state-owned institutions to greater diversity, to strengthen forms of civil, artistic and cultural engagement, and to expand cultural education in state-owned educational establishments. This ought to have the effect of opening up access to all, regardless of ethnic background or nationality.

For more information and recommendations, see Chapter A.4.

6 Migration can help to maintain the welfare state, but it can also decrease support for redistribution

When discussing how society responds to migration, difference and diversity, it is also important to identify potential conflicts of interest. The social and economic sciences have always been interested in the question of how migration and the welfare state hang together, although much work still needs to be done in addressing the many facets of this complex issue. However, a number of factors point to an ambivalence in the relationship between migration and welfare. On the one hand, migration can be an essential factor in maintaining the welfare state. In an ageing population, migration can have a greater influence in terms of demographics and the politics of employment than any labour market-related measures; for example, it may have a greater impact than pushing back the retirement age or introducing further measures making it easier to combine paid employment with family life. If it wasn't clear before, the coronavirus pandemic has clearly shown that the German health system would have reached its existential limits much sooner without doctors, nurses and other employees with a migration background. On the other hand, migration and the welfare state can also be at odds. If social insurance payments – and therefore taxation and other salary deductions – are very high, this may discourage highly qualified persons, for example, from migrating to Germany. Yet it is precisely this group of people that would be in a position to contribute directly to the financing of the welfare state through their employee contributions. Migration could also, for example, encourage a selective solidarity that only includes certain groups, or reduce a general acceptance of the idea of wealth distribution among the population.

For more information and recommendations, see Part B.

7 Differential treatment based on ethnicity or nationality is increasingly opposed

Findings from longitudinal studies show that acceptance of diversity in Germany has grown. Immigration is increasingly seen as something that enriches society, and migrants are generally perceived as having a right to participate. At the same time, differentiating between people according to ascriptive, non-behaviour-related characteristics (such as ethnic background and/or a possible migration background) is increasingly opposed. Among the general population in Germany, it is now commonly accepted that migrants are part of German society. This can be seen, for example, in the importance assigned to various criteria for acquiring German citizenship. Criteria that depend on a person's behaviour, such as their knowledge of German, a lack of a criminal record and the ability to support themselves financially, have become increasingly important in the last years and decades. Other criteria, such as a Christian faith, one's place of birth or being of German descent, have become much less important and now play only a subordinate role in citizenship decisions. In addition, attitudes among the German population towards diversity are increasingly based on the principle of equality. A good example of this is how religion is taught in schools. In the last 25 years, surveys asking whether religious instruction classes in schools should include Islam as well as Christianity have seen a continual rise in the number of respondents who agree. In 2016, this number for the first time overtook the number of those who said that faith instruction should only be offered in the Christian religion. The proportion of those who believe that religious instruction should no longer be a mandatory subject in state schools at all is also growing. This attitude, too, implies a belief in the principle of equality. This opening-up of society and the widespread endorsement of equal treatment may be due to the fact that diversity is increasingly an everyday experience. Contact between people with and without a migration background has increased significantly in the last few decades. More and more people have regular contact with people with a different background to themselves, whether at work, in the neighbourhood or within their friendship groups and family circle. These experiences can help to break down anxieties and prejudices and to establish a perception of diversity as the norm.

For more information and recommendations, see Chapters C.1. and C.2.

8 Use more in-depth research to drill down into the causes of racist prejudice and discrimination

Following the far-right murderous attacks in Hanau and Halle, the question of racism in German society has taken on a new urgency. How deeply rooted are racist attitudes in the general population, despite the greater openness in society discussed above? Astonishingly, there is little useful data on this subject. The few studies that do exist show that traditional racism –

the belief that certain groups of people are naturally inferior to others – is widely rejected in society. Nine out of ten respondents, for example, disagree with the statement that certain ethnic groups are naturally less intelligent than others. Almost 93 per cent of respondents reject the idea that the colour of a person's skin should be an important factor when it comes to deciding who should be allowed to come to Germany and settle here. But this does not mean that racial prejudice and racial discrimination do not exist. More subtle racist attitudes, referencing the allegedly “natural” inferiority or superiority of different groups, are still prevalent. Their narratives, however, usually tend to legitimise exclusion based on cultural attributes rather than biological differences. This means that they are often more complex and cannot be interpreted as straightforwardly as narratives based on biology. They are problematic if and when they see cultural attributes as “naturally” determined and thus unchangeable in the same way as biological differences. Additionally, numerous studies have shown that people experience discrimination in specific sectors based on their background. Such experiences are especially well documented on the housing and labour markets. People are especially likely to report discrimination if they perceive themselves as not looking “typically German” – that is, where they are characterised as “foreign” based on their appearance. However, there is still an urgent need for more research in this area. The SVR therefore demands that the terminology and narratives typically used in this context should be reviewed and better differentiated, with more time and resources devoted to understanding the different ways in which racism is expressed. The state has an obligation to set a good example in this regard. The SVR therefore recommends that public sector organisations should be encouraged to become more aware of and more sensitive to racism and discrimination, for example through anti-discrimination training for employees.

For more information and recommendations, see Chapter C.3.