



PRESS RELEASE

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

To ensure that differences in where people come from do not lead to social and economic inequalities, Germany needs to reshape its integration policy. In its 2021 Annual Report, the Expert Council on Integration and Migration (SVR) offers recommendations on strengthening political and labour market participation for migrants.

Berlin, 06 May 2021. The forthcoming federal elections in Germany in September have revived the question of how equality of opportunity and political participation can be better implemented in German society. Diversity has grown in Germany, partly as a consequence of migration. "We wanted to find out how different core areas of society deal with this diversity, and to understand the attitude that the population as a whole brings to the topic," says Professor Petra Bendel, Chairperson of the Expert Council on Integration and Migration (SVR), presenting the Annual Report 2021. "Although many different people contribute to the development of German society irrespective of their background, there is still room for improvement when it comes to how people exercise their rights and opportunities to participate in politics, culture and on the labour market, to name just some examples."

Strengthen political participation

The recommendation put forward by the Expert Council is clear. Policy-makers and politicians must ensure that differences in where people come from do not result in inequalities of participation. In this election year, the question of political participation is especially pertinent, as voting in a general election is conditional upon German citizenship, while only EU citizens have the right to vote at local level in Germany.

The ability of migrants to fully participate in the democratic process is therefore fundamentally dependent on whether they are able and willing to become German citizens. Compared to other immigration countries, however, in Germany only a small minority of foreigners takes this step. In 2019, for example, just 2.5% of those eligible were naturalised. While the law offers a number of different options and routes to naturalisation, the SVR believes that ways must be found of implementing these possibilities more frequently in practice. "Many federal states and local authorities are already leading the way on this, with targeted information campaigns and the introduction of events celebrating the act of becoming a citizen. This has helped to boost citizenship uptake rates, and at the same time, is a way of showing new citizens that they belong in Germany," explains SVR Deputy Chairperson Professor Daniel Thym.

The SVR also urges Germany's political parties to engage more closely with people with a migration background and to integrate them more closely in democratic processes, for example by encouraging them to stand as candidates in elections. Further, the question of whether third country nationals should be able to vote in local elections should be examined in terms of compatibility with German constitutional law. Data shows that political participation tends to increase down the generations. "While first-generation migrants have tended to hold back when it comes to participating in political processes, their children are already actively helping to shape German society," notes Professor Bendel.

Access must not be dependent on background

The proportion of people with a migration background on the labour market has increased in recent years. The coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated, if it was not clear already, that employees with a



migration background have become indispensable in certain key areas of German society – the health system being just one example. Currently, a quarter of all employees in Germany are either migrants themselves or come from families with a migration history. “Yet many of them are still disadvantaged, work in irregular forms of employment and generally have a lower income than non-migrants. Because of their educational background, or as a result of complicated recognition procedures, they often lack higher-level qualifications or are unable to prove that they have them. On top of this they may experience discrimination, and may also lack professional and social networks or the necessary language skills,” explains Petra Bendel.

Although some businesses – especially private-sector companies operating internationally – are making specific efforts to attract a more diverse workforce, the SVR has found that the public sector is still lagging behind. The SVR recommends offering opportunities such as work-shadowing placements and internships or launching campaigns and events specifically targeting people with a migration background. In addition, state-funded cultural and educational institutions should also be opened up to greater diversity, and more funding made available for other opportunities in culture and civil society. The SVR argues that this could make access less dependent on people’s background.

Use more in-depth research to drill down into the causes of racism

Longitudinal studies show that the idea of Germany as an immigration country is now generally accepted. “Migration is increasingly seen as something that enriches society, with growing opposition to differential treatment based on where people come from,” says member of the SVR Professor Claudia Diehl, summarising the findings of the SVR’s research. But discrimination still exists on the housing and labour markets, as has been shown by a number of studies. And while traditional racist attitudes, based on the idea that certain groups of people are naturally inferior, are now generally rejected, more subtle racist narratives based on cultural attributes still meet with a certain level of acceptance. The SVR has identified a clear need for more research and action in this area, and argues that the state should act as a role model; 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. The annual report can be downloaded from the Council’s website at: <https://www.svr-migration.de/en/annual-report/>

Contact for media enquiries

Meike Giordono-Scholz
Communications Manager SVR gGmbH
Tel: +49 (0)170 635 7164
Email: presse@svr-migration.de

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 Petra Bendel (Chairperson), Prof. Dr Daniel Thym (Deputy Chairperson), Prof. Dr Viola B. Georgi, Prof. Dr Marc Helbling, Prof. Dr Birgit Leyendecker, Prof. Dr Steffen Mau, Prof. Panu Poutvaara, Ph.D., Prof. Dr Sieglinde Rosenberger and Prof. Dr Hans Vorländer.

For more information, go to: www.svr-migration.de/en