



Refugees as new citizens – the potential in the coming years

Summary

Over the past 10 years several hundred thousand people from war and conflict zones have sought refuge and protection in Germany. The war in Syria in particular gave rise to large refugee movements, leading to a marked increase in the number of asylum applications filed in Germany in 2015 and 2016. There are now more than 1.8 million people living in Germany on humanitarian grounds. Half of them hail from just three countries of origin (Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria), with Syrian nationals alone accounting for one third of those seeking protection. Since they still have no realistic chance of being able to return home and have already taken first important steps towards integrating into German society, public attention increasingly turns toward questions around settlement, long-term participation and naturalisation.

Progress is being made on integrating these refugees, as evidenced by their success on the labour market and when it comes to learning German and building social networks. **Their willingness to integrate goes hand in hand with an increase in the number of people applying for naturalisation. In 2020, for instance, 6,700 Syrian nationals were naturalised throughout Germany, that is a year-on-year rise of 73.6 per cent.** However, since the majority of Syrian refugees will fulfil the minimum requirement for naturalisation of six to eight years' legal residency in Germany between 2021 and 2024, the number of applications for citizenship will continue to rise.

This trend prompted the scientific staff of the Expert Council on Integration and Migration (SVR) to make informed estimates regarding the future number of applications for naturalisation. Three scenarios were developed: The assumption made under the first model was that there will continue to be a large number of Syrians applying for naturalisation in Germany at the same rate as previous cohorts (Scenario I). Under the second model, the assumption made was that the quota of Syrians being naturalised will align with the naturalisation rate of those coming to Germany from other countries of origin as a result of forced migration (Scenario II). Under the third model, the average naturalisation rate of all foreigners was applied as the lower threshold for the number of Syrians naturalising in the future (Scenario III). **All three scenarios suggest there will be a considerable uptick in the number of naturalisations.** Significant rates of increase are in particular expected in the period up until 2024. Depending on which scenario is applied, there could be a total of 39,000, 101,000 or 157,000 naturalised Syrians respectively in the period between 2022 and 2024 – provided the authorities are able to process a correspondingly large number of applications without massive delays. Even the more defensive Scenario III, which is based on the assumption that there will be a considerable drop in the current large proportion of Syrian nationals wishing to become German citizens, at least 22,000 Syrians are likely to naturalise each year from 2024 onwards. That number would be in addition to the “regular” around 110,000 naturalisations registered each year over the past decade. If the number of applications rises markedly compared to previous years, the naturalisation authorities will face a huge challenge, given that most are already understaffed. **To avoid both a “naturalisation backlog” and leaving potential new citizens disappointed, the federal states (*Länder*) and municipal authorities should take appropriate steps to prepare as quickly as possible.** First, they need to recruit new

staff. Second, the digital transformation also has the potential to meet the mounting interest in naturalisation. Both the previous and the current Federal Government pledged to launch a naturalisation drive to actively seek to attract new citizens and make it easier to apply for German citizenship. **The huge naturalisation potential among refugees should be seen as an opportunity to prepare for an upcoming “decade of naturalisation”.**