

A matter of trust: Why the German Armed Forces need more people with a migrant background

Summary

With the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the security situation in Europe has changed fundamentally. A few days later, then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared a “turning point” and announced a special fund to strengthen the German Armed Forces (Bundeswehr). However, it quickly became clear that the reorientation of the armed forces would require not only financial resources but also additional personnel. In view of demographic change, the shortage of skilled workers, and the suspension of compulsory military service in 2011, the Bundeswehr now faces increased competition for suitable applicants.

At the same time, the proportion of people with a migration background in Germany has grown steadily—a recruitment potential that has not yet been sufficiently exploited, even though it should be noted that currently only German citizens are allowed to serve in the Bundeswehr. Greater involvement of this population group can be justified both functionally in terms of personnel requirements and in terms of democratic theory and integration policy. Studies show, for example, that contact with soldiers with a migrant background can help to break down prejudices within the armed forces.

A key prerequisite for social support and successful recruitment is trust in the armed forces. The SVR Integration Barometer 2024, which measures this trust for the first time, shows that around eight out of ten respondents with a migrant background say they trust the Bundeswehr “completely” or “somewhat” (77%). This means that their trust is significantly higher than that of people without a migrant background (68%).

This confidence gap is mainly due to the approval of immigrants themselves, almost eight out of ten of whom say they trust the Bundeswehr (78%). In contrast, the descendants of immigrants born in Germany hardly differ from respondents without a migrant background



(67% versus 68%); their attitudes have converged. The differences between the four major groups of origin – (late) repatriates, people of Turkish origin, people with a migration background in the EU, and those from the “rest of the world” (68, 69, 74, and 84 per cent respectively) – can also be attributed mainly to the different proportions of new immigrants in these groups.

Overall, it appears that the level of trust among German citizens with and without a migration background is virtually identical. Recruitment measures should therefore address both groups equally. At the same time, efforts must be made to specifically reduce the underrepresentation of Germans with a migration background in the Bundeswehr, including in higher ranks.

Against this background, this SVR Policy Brief examines the challenges facing the Bundeswehr in recruiting this group, the functional, democratic, and integration policy reasons for their greater involvement, and the extent to which the armed forces enjoy support within this population group. Finally, strategies are discussed with which the Bundeswehr can recruit immigrants and their descendants born in Germany in a more targeted manner.