Germany's Integration Politics

by Iris Hoßmann and Margret Karsch

Is Germany a country of immigration? Until a few years ago, the German government had responded with a “no.” Although the country experienced some waves of immigration and the size of the population with a foreign background continued to grow, the changing German government still maintained that the so-called guest workers would eventually return to their home countries. After decades of residency, they had established lives for themselves and their families, even though there had been no political action to try and integrate some 16 million migrants. These migrants were comprised of three different generations and nothing was done to try and make their arrival into their new home country any easier.

Since 2000, migration to Germany has stalled and this has led to the first net migration loss in more than 50 years in the history of the Federal Republic. Also in 2009, the number of emigrants was higher than the number of immigrants; however, to some extent, this can be attributed to a reassessment of the data. Indeed, more immigrants came to Germany until 2010, enabling Germany to record a positive migration balance, but in comparison to a wider time span, Germany is at a decreased level. This decline is definitely related to the Immigration Law of 2005, which began to limit immigration and focused more on attracting highly skilled workers to Germany. The family unification from the former guest worker recruitment countries came close to a near standstill because spouses were required to prove they had proficient German language skills. Additionally, the free movement of labor from the EU member states that joined in 2004 was constricted until May 1, 2011.

About 20% of the German Population has a Migration Background

Almost one in every five residents of Germany has immigrated from another country or has at least one parent that this applies to. The sample census taken by the Federal Statistics Office counted everyone after 1949 who is an immigrant in Germany, all foreigners who were born in Germany, and everyone who was born in Germany as a German citizen with at least one parent that is an immigrant or that qualifies as a “person with an immigration background.” The group considered “foreigners” is comprised of individuals who have foreign citizenship. This is a sub-category for people that have migration experience.

In total, about two-thirds of people with an immigration background are themselves immigrants (first generation), while nearly one third was born in Germany (second and third
generations). Turkish immigrants are the largest immigrant group in Germany at close to three millions. A group half this size is composed of immigrants from Poland, such as people from the former Soviet Union. Other countries of origin many immigrants come from include Italy, Spain and Greece.

Between 1955 and 1968, Germany had contracts with the national governments of Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal and Yugoslavia in order to bring a larger work force to the country. Germany did not see itself as a country of immigration. Since the foreign workers were not going to settle down in Germany, but return to their home country, no types of integration policies were created.

In the former federal territory, the number of foreigners was almost at one percent before the recruitment of workers in the mid-1950s. The percentage of foreigners grew to over seven percent by 1980 due to family migration. By ending the labor recruitment in 1973, the number of foreigners continued to grow. In the same year, seventeen percent of newborns in Germany were children of foreign parents. The then German government did not prevent family unification and continued to assume that the guest workers would eventually return to their home countries. Over sixty percent of the Turks and close to forty-five percent of Italians that were not born in Germany came to Germany through family unification.
The population with a migration background is younger and has more children than the whole German population on average. Every third child under five years old has a migration background. The picture’s different if you look at the German population as a whole: In the younger generations, the pyramid will become progressively thinner and the smaller amount of offspring will not be able to make up for the parent generation (Data source: German Federal Ministry of Statistics, Sample Census).

Another large wave of immigrants began in the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union as ethnic German repatriates, described as Russian-Germans, came to Germany. By the end of the 1990s, close to 200,000 people had immigrated each year to Germany, of which the majority had obtained German citizenship through the German Homecoming Act (Heimkehrgesetz). Since then, Germany has yet to experience another wave of immigration similar in size. The number of asylum seekers, which had risen dramatically since the mid-1970s, has since fallen just as much as it had risen from the 1990s until today.

In almost all of the neighboring countries, the main reason the population is growing is because of the large amount of immigrants. These countries seem better prepared to cope
High Qualified Foreigners do not have it easy in Germany

Germany’s methods to attract a younger, more qualified labor force have so far been widely unsuccessful. In 2000, the Green Card was introduced and should have worked to combat the increasing skills shortage in the Computer and Information Technology sector by permitting a maximum of 20,000 skilled foreign laborers with a university degree to immigrate and begin working in the IT-sector. In order to obtain a work permit and a temporary residence visa, these laborers had to prove they had a job with a yearly income around 80,000 Euros. Four years later, less than 18,000 work permits had been distributed. Not only did this not meet the expectations of the German government, but it also lead to the end of the Green Card program that only after a short period of time had created a minor solution to the skilled labor shortage.

The potential of immigrants in Germany that arrive with a high level of qualification is not exploited enough. Foreign graduates from German universities for many years had to leave Germany immediately following their graduation. At the same time they had the best qualifications: they had learned the German language, they were young, and they had been trained locally. Many of these graduates did not leave Germany after graduation to return to their home countries, but moved on to other countries in Europe. Only since 2005 have university graduates had the chance to find a job after their graduation with the establishment of a twelve month grace period by the German government. However, in addition to these graduates, approximately half a million immigrants live in Germany with a foreign education that is not recognized by the state. Their integration is therefore not furthered, but rather, hindered. In March 2011, the German government put forth draft legislation that would change this.

Disadvantaged from the Start

For the first generation of immigrants there was a lack of training and continuing education courses since there was no pre-existing integration policy. Also, for their children and grandchildren, the highly selective German education system hindered their climb up the social ladder. Already in the 1980s studies showed that children from families of migrants did worse in school than children of long time residents.

The first Pisa-findings showed Germany in international comparison to have a poor performance by students with a migration background in school achievements. Findings of neighboring countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark or Belgium showed the second generation of immigrants could achieve a higher level of education than their parents.

In the last ten years, children and youth with a migration background have increasingly reached a higher level of education, but the difference between the children without a migration background and those with a migration background remains almost unchanged. The proportion of German youth that graduate school by passing the Abitur has risen from twenty-six percent to thirty-two percent. Also, among foreign high school graduates, more students reach the level of Abitur: an increase from ten to twelve percent. As positive as this trend is,
the number of German high school graduates is still almost three times as high as the number of foreign high school graduates.

The number of university students has also risen in the last few years. The percentage of foreign university students that had completed their Abitur in Germany remains constant at just three percent of the overall number of university students. The Education Initiative attributes this to the more difficult social situation of foreign students. While almost every second student with a migration background comes from a poorly-educated or low income household, this remains true for only every one out of eight students without a migration background. Migrants will also to a lesser extent receive financial support from their families and to a higher degree rely heavily on student loans and their own personal earnings.

A study by the OECD in 2008 showed the low chances of promotion for immigrants in Germany. Only in a few of the 27 EU countries do foreign born people have a lower skill level than in Germany. Not even twenty percent have a university or a technical school degree, only in Austria and Italy is the percentage lower.

This trend is also reflected in job-related skills. Every third 25- to 34-year old immigrant has no vocational education. Of the second generation migrants, one of every four does not have any type of professional degree. The low skill level of migrants has far reaching impacts for their chances in the job market: Migrants often have jobs in cyclical sectors that require a low skill level and they often lose their jobs. They very seldom have a secure contract and often only have temporary positions.

A study by the OECD related to the offspring of migrants found that the second generation has worse prospects in the job market than those of non-migrants, even with the same level of education. In Belgium, Austria and Germany, it was observed that the children of Turkish immigrants especially have the highest employment deficit among migrants. Young people with a migration background are underrepresented in public administration in Germany. Only about three percent work in a public school as a teacher, are police officers or are employed in the registry office. In no other country were the proportions lower.

Not only do the lower skills of migrants in comparison to people without a migration background mean that many migrants move back, but also the scarce opportunities for the second generation to advance. As the networks within migrant groups become more important, it is possible for the discrimination to affect the trust in German society. Ethnic enclaves, however, obstruct the acquisition of language competence and other skills that are important for social, cultural and economic participation.
The most important prerequisite for integration is education attainment. A higher education increases the chances of finding an apprenticeship or completing further course work, and ultimately increasing one’s chances in the job market. Therefore, education in Germany is an essential factor for people with a migration background to achieve successful integration (Data source: German ministry for Migration and Refugees).

The parents of children with a migration background are important predecessors and their education level has an essential influence on the education chances of their children. Calculations by the Bertelsmann Foundation have yielded that for children with a migration background that attend daycare have a twenty-seven percent higher likelihood of attending high school. The influence of the educational attainment of parents weighs much more heavily than one’s migration background: children of parents who completed the Abitur have a greater chance of attending high school. Regardless of whether a child attended daycare, over sixty percent of these children will reach high school graduation and be accepted into college.

**Germany’s New Self-Perception: A Country of Immigration**

The demographic change and the view beyond the borders as in the international comparison like in the Pisa-Study increased the urge to act in the policy field. The study “Unutilized Potentials” by the Berlin-Institute in 2009 sparked a fierce debate about the failure of integration. In 2008, the German Advisory Council on Integration and Migration was launched and in 2010 they released a report to the public and spoke openly of Germany as a country of immigration. The German government admitted to the failures of their integration policies and acknowledged the future challenges. At the forefront, the Integration Commissioner of the German government had already signed a new approach to integration policy. Maria Böhmer took office in 2005 and in the thirty-year history of the department she achieved the level of minister of state in the chancellery.
Many political integration initiatives such as the German government’s Integration Plan with its three integration summits and the German Islam Conference are aimed at the general public. They have a symbolic character and signal that Germany is ready to take responsibility for its 16 million immigrants. Among migrants, these different integration initiatives are not well known, since they hardly affect their everyday life. In a poll by the expert advisory board, only six percent of those questioned with a migration background knew of the national Integration Plan and only eleven percent knew of the Islam Conference. In comparison, the integration courses and the citizenship test, which requires verification of one’s knowledge of the German language, are more commonly known by about twenty-one percent versus thirty-six percent. Almost every migrant knows that since 2007 immigrating spouses from abroad must prove they have basic German language skills.

The German government has placed greater importance on the acquisition of the German language in order to better integrate migrants. Then, only when they have mastered the German language, can they join the German education system and successfully complete a German education, receive an apprenticeship or study at a German university. Additionally, one will have better chances in the job market with a higher level of education. The current integration policies see language acquirement and the attainment of a higher education as the key to better integration. Therefore, the government’s integration plan lists the extensive educational integration measures from early education in childcare facilities to further education training for older migrants. The government appealed to parents to become more involved and to include the company in their consideration since they allocate training and job placement to migrants.

Whether or not such appeals suffice has yet to be seen, as well as the benefits of threatening to cut transfer payments if participants dropout of a German language course. The debate about integration in Germany has been going on for a few years and it is certainly a heated discussion. But it is necessary. Policies must finally address the situation and grant migrants the same chances as people without a migration background, instead of letting their abilities be wasted and risking a split in society.

**Literature / Links**


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