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REFRAMING GERMANY AS A COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: MOBILITY TRENDS AND THE GOVERNANCE OF GERMANS ABROAD

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Introduction

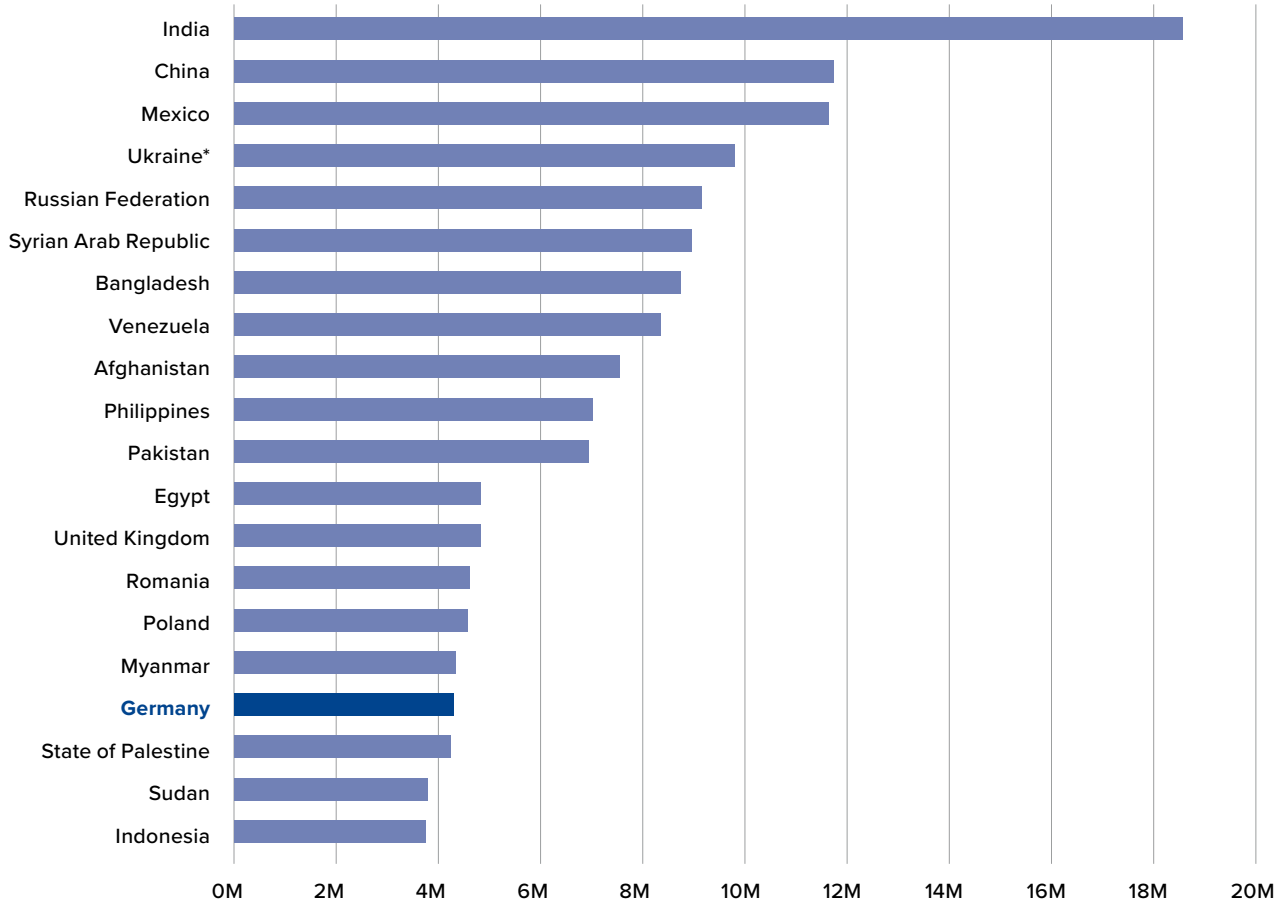
Migration debates on Germany almost invariably focus on the arrivals of forcibly displaced or labor migrants, while considerably less attention is paid to exits of citizens and former citizens, their lives abroad, and the policies surrounding them. This is not a bias unique to Germany: across the Global North, emigration and states' interactions with emigrants remain a significantly understudied phenomenon, in part because these countries have traditionally been framed as destinations rather than origins—a designation largely reserved for countries of the Global South. Yet, global population statistics reveal a more complex picture: countries of origin with large emigrant populations abroad span both the Global South and the Global North, including the United Kingdom, Poland, Germany, or the United States. Reframing and analyzing these as countries of origin opens up a broader analytical conversation about global migration dynamics, the governance of migration and mobility, and more critically, how states see, count, and draw the boundaries of membership, determining who among those beyond their borders belongs and who does not. Beyond the conventionally discussed areas of border management and migrant integration, this includes states' attempts—explicitly or implicitly—to regulate the movement of their own citizens: from policies designed to retain skilled workers and discourage emigration, to frameworks governing taxation, social protection, and the political participation of citizens living abroad. Germany represents a particularly instructive case in this regard. Its engagement with emigration and emigrants carries distinctive historical weight and raises questions on the contemporary politicization of this issue. This paper sets aside classical debates on Germany as a country of destination to ask a different question: what does Germany look like as a country of origin? It offers an exploratory overview of current emigration trends and the policy frameworks that surround them.

Governing Exits and Returns

While Germany is widely recognized as one of the top receiving countries for migrants, its position as a country of origin remains comparatively overlooked and has attracted very little systematic research. The existing literature has largely focused on the historical mobilities and conditions of ethnic Germans—a topic that has been widely studied in relation to mass movement to the Americas, expulsions in the twentieth century, and postwar resettlement—while contemporary emigration trends and policies have attracted very little systematic attention. Notable exceptions include the works of von Koppenfels,[1] collective work by Erlinghagen and colleagues,[2] and Pedroza.[3] Yet according to United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) International Migration Stock data, Germany has consistently ranked among the top 20 countries with the largest emigrant populations abroad over the past decades, with an estimate of around 4.3 million Germans living abroad in 2024.[4]

Germany's position as a country of origin has come under increasing scrutiny in the Bundestag in recent years, particularly in relation to the extra-territorial voting rights and electoral participation of Germans residing abroad. In response to a parliamentary inquiry by a member of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party, which requested data on the number of Germans living abroad, including those born in Germany, German citizens, and those eligible to vote in the 2025 federal elections, State Secretary Bernhard Kotsch responded in February

Figure 1: Estimates of International Migrant Stock at Mid-Year by Country or Area of Origin, Top 20 Countries in 2024

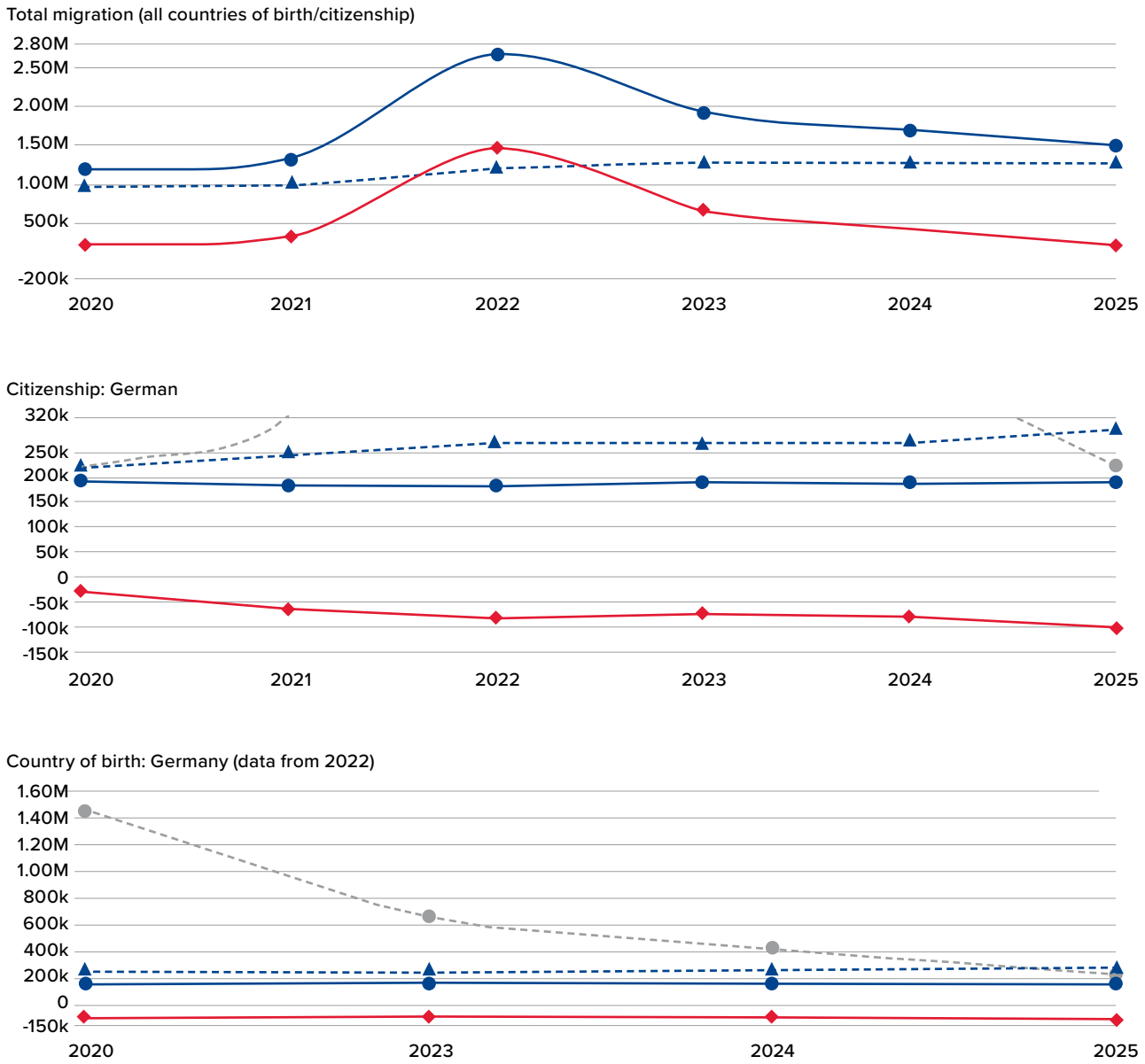


Source: United Nations Population Division, "International Migrant Stock 2024," https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock.

2026 that German nationals living abroad were not subject to a registration requirement under the Federal Registration Act, and that the total number of German nationals residing abroad was therefore unknown.[5] In a separate response to a similar parliamentary question in May 2025, a Federal Foreign Office estimate was provided an answer, quoting between 3 and 4 million German citizens living abroad as so-called "Germans abroad" (*Auslandsdeutsche*),[6] a term that carries some ambiguity.[7] Beyond these estimates, data provided by Federal Statistical Office (*Statistisches Bundesamt*) on cross-border migration flows paint a clearer picture of recent trends. As illustrated in Figure 2, since 2020, the net migration of both German citizens and those born in Germany has been consistently declining.[8]

Currently, the right to mobility in Germany is governed under Article 11 of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, which indicates that "(1) All Germans shall have the right to move

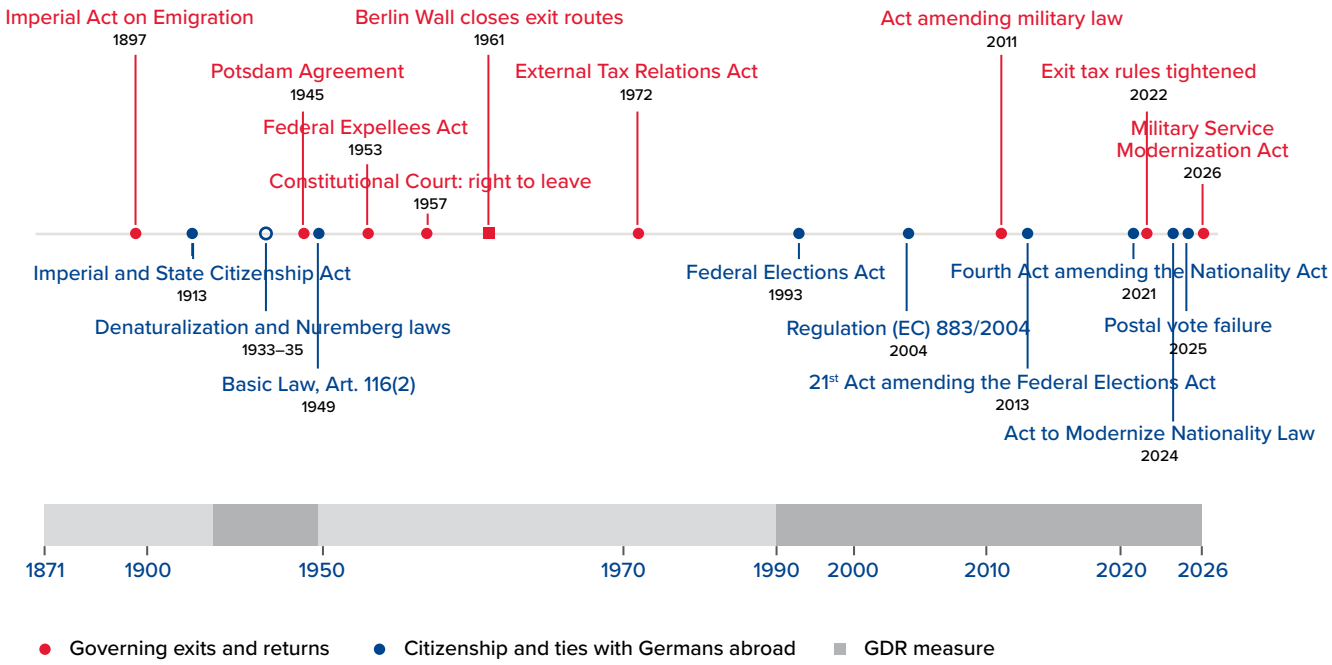
Figure 2: Migration Across Germany's Borders of German Nationals and Those Born in Germany (2020–2024)



Source: Destatis Statistisches Bundesamt, "Migration flows," https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Society-Environment/Population/Migration/Tables/migration-year-04.html; https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Society-Environment/Population/Migration/Tables/migration-year-02.html#fussnote-1-1129514.

freely throughout the federal territory." This right may be restricted under certain conditions that may be necessary to avert an imminent danger to the existence or the free democratic basic order, and to combat the danger of an epidemic, to respond to a grave accident or natural disaster, to protect young persons from serious neglect, or to prevent crime.[9] However, Article 11 does not relate to the freedom to leave the country, which is instead protected under the general freedom of action of Article 2(1) of the Basic Law, supporting that "Every person shall have the right to free development of his personality insofar as he does not violate the right of others or offend against the constitutional order or the moral law."[10] The regulation of movement abroad is further governed by the Passport Act (PassG), which sets the conditions on passport acquisition and exemption, as well as refusal or revocation of passports under certain conditions—including constituting a threat to the internal or external security or to other significant interests of the Federal Republic of Germany, intending to evade prosecution or sentencing, violating the provisions of the Narcotics Act, evading tax or legal support obligations, or leaving without necessary permission as someone subject to compulsory military service or recognized as a conscientious objector.[11]

Figure 3: German Policies on Emigration and Emigrants



Source: Selected milestones on Germany's governance of emigration and emigrants, from the Emigrant Policy Regimes (EMIGPOL) dataset. The time axis is compressed before 1950 and expanded after 2010. The interactive version is available at www.emigpol.com/timeline.

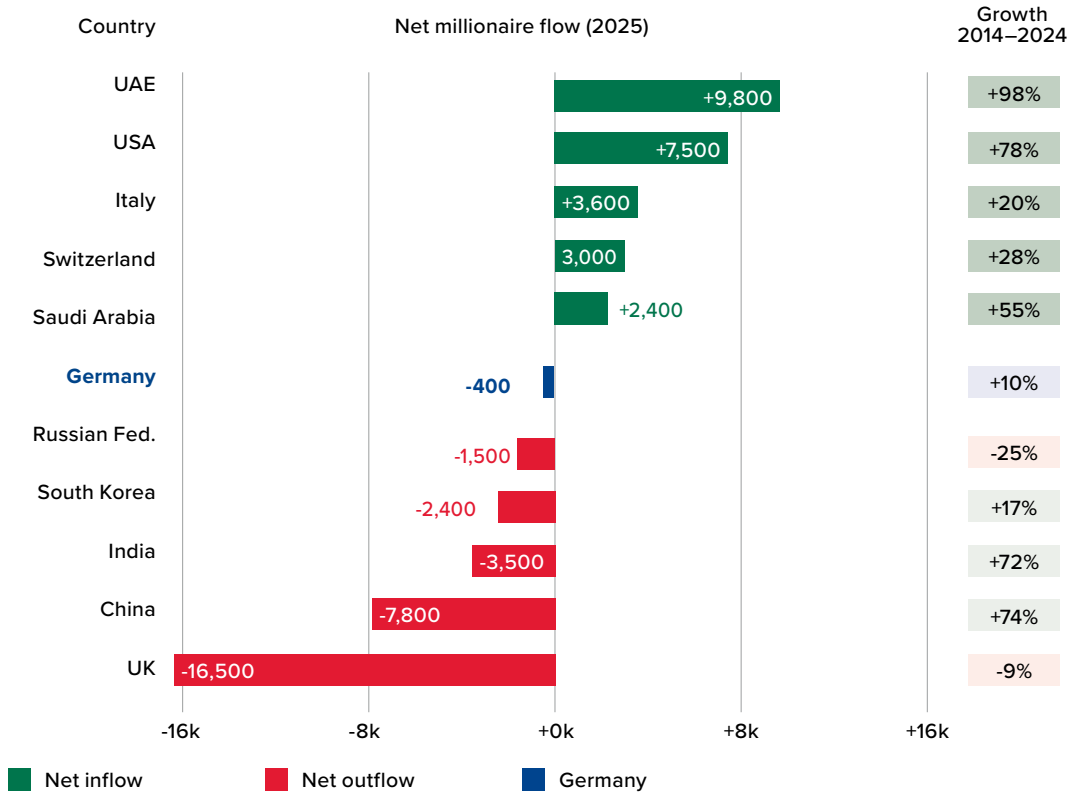
While passport issuance has not been restricted in practice, the very question of limiting exit carries particular historical sensitivity in the German context, given the memory of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), where state control over citizens' freedom to leave was a defining feature of the regime. Sensitivities on exit regulations were brought into renewed focus in late 2025, as Germany's move toward increasing the military budget and Chancellor Friedrich Merz's stated ambition of "creating the strongest conventional army in Europe" reopened questions of mobility rights. Among the changes passed to the military service law was the introduction of obligatory screening of all 18-year-old men for their suitability to serve, even as mandatory conscription had been suspended in 2011 under Angela Merkel's government.[12] Largely unnoticed for several months, however, was a clause indicating that men aged 17 to 45 would be required to apply for authorization to leave Germany for more than three months—not only during periods of conflict and emergencies but also in peacetime. Amid rising criticism, the Federal Ministry of Defense sought to clarify the scope of the new provision, stating that such a regulation had already existed in West Germany during the Cold War but had been of no practical relevance, that it would remain routine as long as conscription was not reinstated, and that further regulations would be issued to clarify the conditions.[13] The legal change, and the controversy surrounding it, raised broader questions about mobility rights, and their gendered dimensions in relation to citizenship obligations.

Beyond the debated exit controls, at least two further areas reveal state interest in the retention of specific groups. The first concerns the mobility of Germany's highly skilled. An OECD analysis from 2015 on "talent abroad" showed that while the number of highly educated among German emigrants grew from 2000s to the 2010s, almost 90% of all German emigrants resided in twelve OECD countries, particularly the United States, Switzerland, and Austria. The report also found that highly employable German emigrants were underrepresented among those who returned, describing the plight of researchers as "evidence of brain drain," although whether this was empirically substantiated was later questioned in parliamentary debates.[14] A panel study by the Expert Council's Research Unit, the Federal Institute for Population Research and the University of Duisburg-Essen conducted in 2014 suggested that the study found no evidence of a massive "drain" of highly qualified individuals, noted that most emigrants were not motivated solely by income, and highlighted that German emigrants with a migration background were disproportionately represented among those living abroad.[15] A further study by Ette and Erlinghagen, drawing on the German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS), found that professional reasons (of the individual or their partner) were the most important drivers of emigration, followed by personal lifestyle factors such as climate, new experiences, and financial considerations.[16] More recent research, including the Bundestag's "Youth in Germany 2026" survey, suggests that one in five young people between the ages of 14 and 29 were actively considering emigration, with 40% doing so in a longer-term perspective,[17] citing better research infrastructure abroad, higher institutional prestige in destination countries, and stronger career perspectives as key push factors.[18]

The emigration of Germany's highly skilled population gains attention in the context of economic slowdown, demographic decline, and growing demand particularly in IT and medical sectors. In its attempt to retain highly skilled nationals or attract international talent, the Federal Govern-

ment relies on long-standing programs including The German Academic Exchange Service's Postdoctoral Researchers International Mobility Experience (DAAD PRIME), German Academic International Network (GAIN), the Emmy Noether Programme, and Humboldt Professorships, which offer competitive funding and academic positions to researchers at German institutions. Parliamentary discussions have also pointed to the need for new targeted programs to attract particularly IT and STEM researchers, supported by measures for them and their families.[19] In a period of increasing public debate around the growth of artificial intelligence, Germany's efforts to retain highly skilled workers are further complicated by broader regulatory debates at the European level, particularly in relation to the EU Artificial Intelligence Act, which has generated uncertainty among German corporations.[20] Concerns over overlapping regulatory requirements prompted senior German officials to lobby for shifting AI oversight in industrial sectors from EU AI Act to sector-specific legislation.[21] Critics argue that such regulation could drive AI development, the companies, and skilled workers behind it to less regulated jurisdictions.

Figure 4. Estimates of Inflows and Outflows of High-Net-Worth Individuals (Top and Bottom Five Countries, 2025) and Millionaire Growth % (2014 to 2024)



Source: Henley and Partners, "Country Wealth Flows," https://www.henleyglobal.com/publications/henley-private-wealth-migration-report-2025/country-wealth-flows.

Another arena in which the governance of emigration becomes more ostensible, and in which the question of what citizens take with them matters as much as who leaves, concerns taxation. German citizens living abroad are generally not taxed on their foreign income. Germany has concluded double taxation agreements with nearly 100 countries to prevent individuals from being taxed twice on the same earnings.[22] An increasing concern relates to tax planning by wealthy individuals seeking more favorable fiscal environments abroad, particularly salient in relation to the emigration of high-net-worth individuals' (HNWI), referring to those with liquid investable wealth of USD 1 million or more. Much of the available data on this is produced by private firms with a commercial interest in the phenomenon, most notably Henley & Partners, a company whose core business is marketing residence and citizenship-by-investment programs globally, and which publishes the widely cited Passport Index and HNWI migration datasets. Their 2025 figures place Germany among the countries with a negative net millionaire flow, while noting overall millionaire wealth growth between 2014 and 2024.[23] One of the policy tools used to discourage the outflow of capital is exit taxation—a mechanism Germany first adopted in 1972 to "counteract tax plannings of individuals who decided to leave Germany in order to profit from a more beneficial tax regime abroad."[24] In recent years, exit rules have been progressively tightened. A significant change in 2022 abolished the longstanding provision allowing wealthy individuals relocating within the EU and European Economic Area (EEA) to defer their tax liability indefinitely and interest-free, replacing it with a more limited option to pay in installments over seven years.[25] These changes have faced legal challenges at both the European and national level, and two federal tax court rulings published in April 2026 further expanded the scope of exit taxation.[26]

Engaging with Germans Abroad

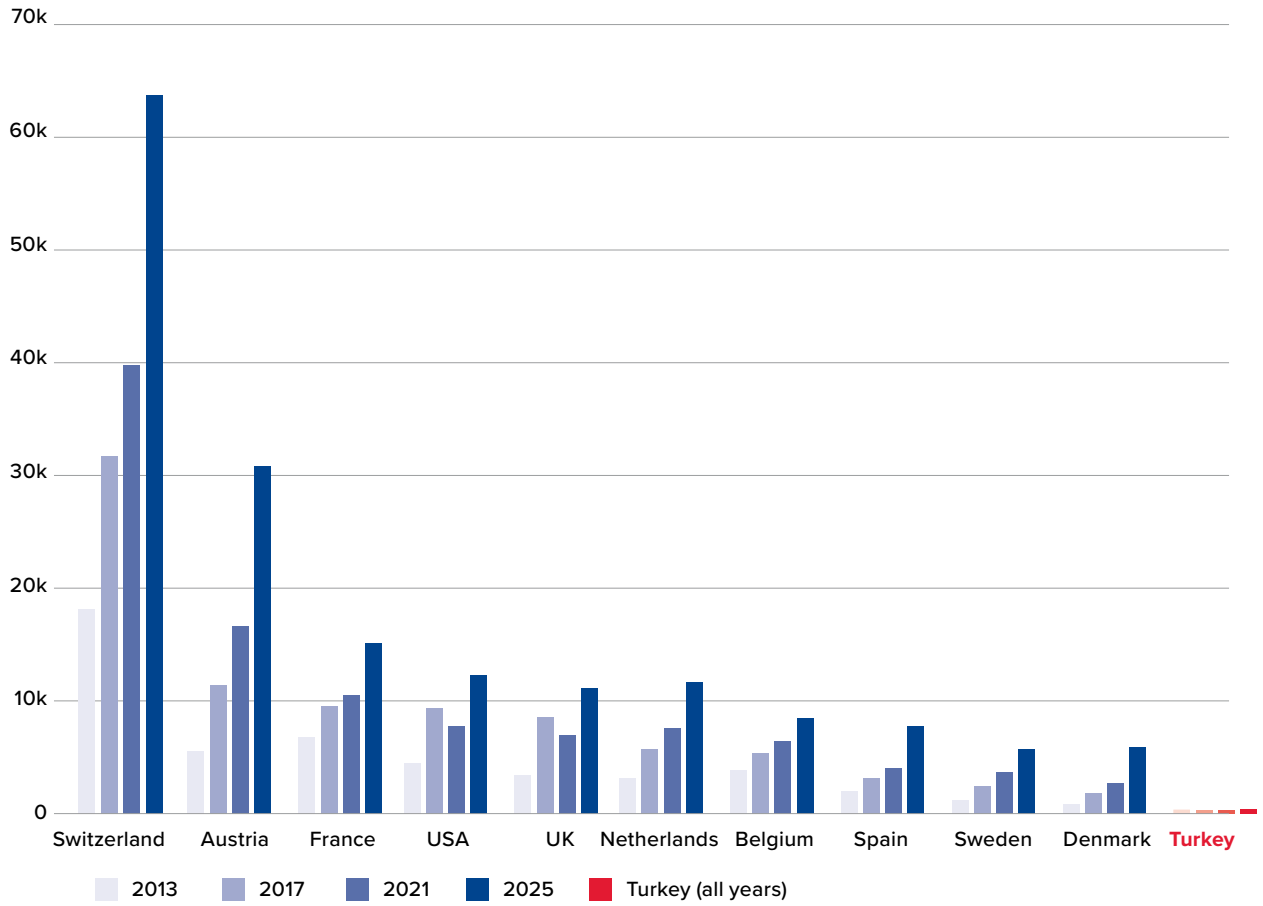
Germany's engagement with citizens living abroad remains limited, aside from several areas such as provision of consular services, access to pensions for years worked in Germany, and voting from abroad.[27] Germany maintains 225 missions abroad, comprising 154 embassies, 50 consulates-general, 7 consulates, 12 permanent missions, one representative office, and one German Institute. The core tasks of these missions in relation to citizens abroad are defined as helping German citizens in emergencies, carrying out crisis protection measures, and assisting Germans living abroad with regard to certificates and legal documents.[28] For those who emigrated, there is an Electronic Registration of Germans Abroad (ELEFAND), which is not mandatory but recommended, particularly in situations of crisis and disaster.[29] Most recently, German embassies in the Gulf provided travel and safety advice to nationals residing or traveling in the region, urging them to register or update their details in the context of U.S./Israel–Iran conflict.[30]

More substantive engagement comes through two specific areas, each with its own limits: social protection for those who worked in Germany and political rights for those who remain citizens. German citizens who had earned an income in Germany and live abroad retain the same eligibility for pensions as those residing in Germany.[31] In relation to social security rights, Germany is part of the European law through Regulation (EC) Number 883/2004 and Regulation (EC) Number 987/2009, which provide for the equal treatment of citizens of all member states, the aggregation of insurance periods to establish pension entitlement, and the exportability of payments across EU

member states, as well as EEA countries and Switzerland. Beyond the EU, Germany has signed bilateral social security agreements with 20 countries including Turkey (signed in 1965) and a so-called delegation agreement with China, regulating the acquisition of pension eligibility and the payment of pensions in these respective countries.[32]

These arrangements also shape the broader phenomenon of retirement migration—the movement of pensioners to other countries after leaving the workforce. As Finotelli[33] notes, retired migrants occupy an ambiguous position in migration debates: long considered a welcome, privileged group, they are increasingly subject to scrutiny as destination countries such as Spain grapple with the fiscal implications of their use of healthcare and social services. Yet retirement migration from Germany is not only a story of privileged sun-seekers. Schweppe's research on German retirees in Thailand reveals another face of retirement migration, one where many are low-income and in poor health, and fall through the net of social protection as Germany's social security system largely ends at the EU's borders.[34] According to Schweppe, this places a growing burden on destination countries and raises questions about the international reach of Germany's

Figure 5. Number of German Citizens Abroad Registered to Vote in Bundestag Elections—Top 10 Countries and Turkey



Source: Deutscher Bundestag, 21. Wahlperiode, Drucksache 21/373, May 30, 2025.

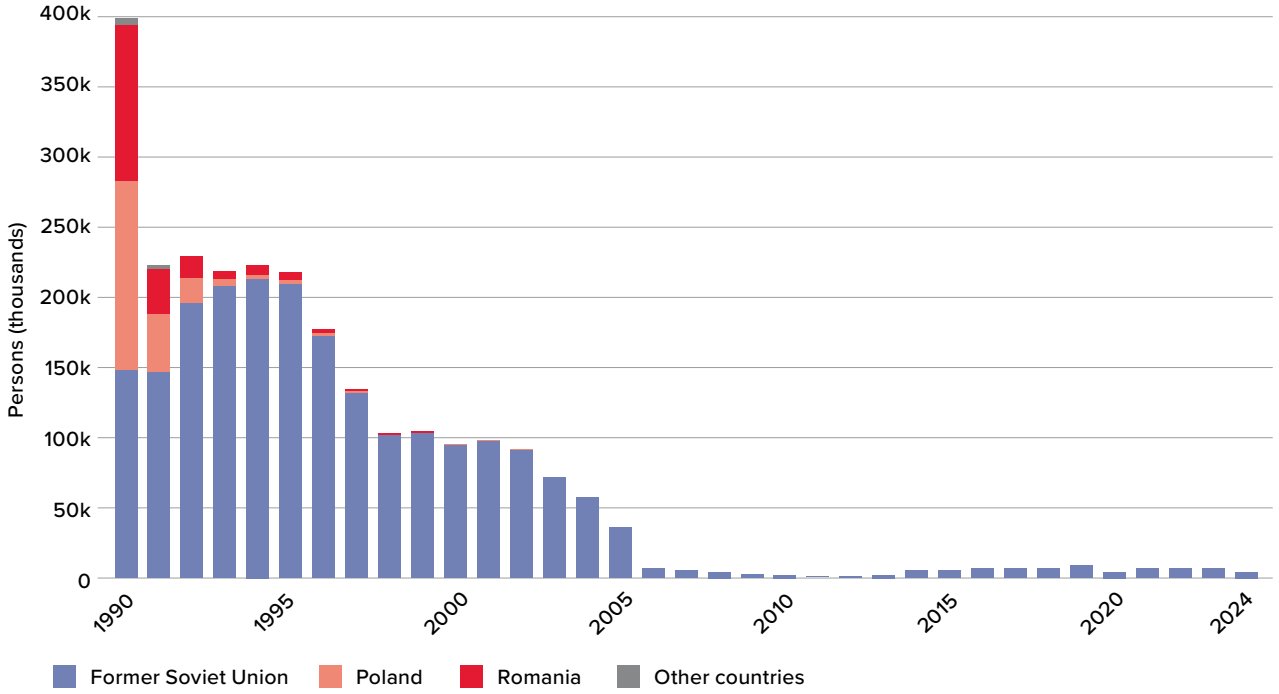
social security framework, one that is likely to widen as the country faces an increasingly ageing population.[35]

German citizens living abroad retain the right to vote and to stand as candidates in elections. Those who permanently reside abroad may vote only in federal and European Parliament elections but may stand for office at any level.[36] Permanent residents are eligible to vote if they lived in Germany for at least three months after the age of 14 and no more than 25 years ago, or if they can demonstrate personal and direct familiarity with German political conditions—in both cases, they must apply for entry into the electoral register before each election.[37] Only postal voting is available for those voting from abroad. Major political parties maintain various forms of offices and "friendship circles" abroad, through which they mobilize campaigns for elections.[38] Even though the numbers registered remain too small to have a significant impact on German electoral outcomes, the number of Germans registered to vote from abroad has grown considerably over recent years, from 67,057 in 2013 to 128,929 in 2021, and reaching 213,699 in 2025 (See Figure 5). However, the 2025 snap federal election, planned months ahead of schedule due to the collapse of the governing coalition, exposed structural problems in the postal voting system, as materials were dispatched too late to reach many voters abroad in time. This prompted widespread frustration among German citizens living abroad, those who were effectively unable to exercise their right to vote.[39]

The limited engagement with German citizens abroad identified by von Koppenfels sits alongside, and in contrast to, a considerably more active institutional relationship with ethno-national German minorities in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).[40] This contrast points to a deeper and more historically contested question about who the German state has recognized as belonging beyond its borders, and on what grounds—a question shaped by successive and often contradictory answers across different historical moments. The mass emigration of Germans to the Americas and elsewhere in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century prompted various governments to reconsider their relationship to former citizens, intensifying a long-standing debate between those who defined German membership through civic obligations and state loyalty, and those who argued for an expansive ethnic and cultural definition of the national community. This tension reached its most extreme articulation under National Socialism, when German-speaking minorities across the CEE were instrumentalized as part of expansionist ideology and the vision of a racially defined "national community."[41]

Throughout these moments, the boundaries of German membership were not only expanded but also actively redrawn through exclusion—most starkly through the 1935 Nuremberg Laws and subsequent measures that stripped Jews, political opponents, and others of their citizenship as well as revoked citizenship under conditions of prolonged residence abroad, military service obligations, or the acquisition of another nationality. The post-1945 settlement attempted to address some of these ruptures—restoring citizenship to those stripped of it on political, racial, or religious grounds, and creating legal frameworks for the millions of ethnic Germans expelled from the CEE—but did not resolve the underlying tensions. The question of membership, both in terms of who migrates and integrates, and in relation to who leaves, who left, and under what conditions ties to Germany are maintained or severed, remains a contested and underexplored dimension of German state and society.[42]

Figure 6. Late Ethnic German Resettlers (*Spätaussiedler*) by Country of Origin (1990–2024)



Source: Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung, "Spätaussiedler nach Herkunftsgebieten (1990–2024)," https://www.bib.bund.de/DE/Fakten/Fakt/M30-Spaetaussiedler-Herkunftslaender-ab-1990.html.

Today, one concrete expression of this historically contested framework is the status of repatriated ethnic Germans (*Spätaussiedler*) and their descendants, who constitute one of the largest migrant groups in Germany albeit one with a distinct legal status. The Federal Office of Administration has registered a total of around 4.6 million *Aussiedler* between 1950 and 2020, the majority arriving during the 1990–2006 period, as illustrated in Figure 6. Those born up to the end of 1992 may be recognized as ethnic German resettlers under the Federal Expellees Act (Bundesvertriebenengesetz, BVFG) and are immediately granted German citizenship upon recognition.[43] While the integration challenges and recent voting behavior of those who resettled in or were repatriated to Germany remain the subject of considerable controversy, the Federal Government maintains a dedicated institutional framework for this group through the Office of the Federal Government Commissioner for Matters Related to Ethnic German Resettlers and National Minorities, under the Federal Ministry of the Interior, which coordinates admission procedures, integration measures, and cultural support for German minorities in their regions of origin.[44]

Conclusion

This paper has sought to reframe Germany as a country of origin—a perspective largely absent from both academic research and public debate, where Germany is generally framed as a country

of destination. With around four million Germans living outside of Germany, consistently negative net migration, and a growing share of the population actively considering emigration, the question of who leaves, why, and under what conditions deserves closer examination. As this analysis shows, Germany does not have a comprehensive emigration and emigrant engagement policy but rather a fragmented governance structure, dispersed across various fields, such as passport law, military service regulations, taxation frameworks, pension agreements, and electoral rules. Several dimensions explored here warrant further research, including the governance of retirement migration and the evolving exit taxation landscape. The asymmetry between Germany's limited engagement with its emigrants and its more active institutional relationship with ethnic German minorities also raises deeper questions about membership and belonging that deserve further academic interest. More broadly, the German case illustrates why reframing Global North countries as countries of origin matters: it challenges the assumption that emigration is a phenomenon of the Global South and opens up comparative debates about migration and mobility in a period of demographic change and the politicization of migration.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

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The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

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