

Multiculturalism in Germany: between integration and assimilation – voices of Syrian migrants

Manar M. Hafez Ahmed

Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University, Giza, Egypt

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Abstract

Purpose – This research examines the reality of multiculturalism in Europe through a case study of Germany, focusing on how migration, particularly from Syria, has shaped policies and societal integration. While multiculturalism is embedded in the German policy frameworks, its practical implementation and public acceptance remain contested.

Design/methodology/approach – The research combines an in-depth literature review with qualitative insights drawn from eight semi-structured interviews with Syrians in Germany, including migrants, refugees and naturalized citizens. One additional interview was conducted with a German key informant working in academic and social support services for the Syrian community.

Findings – The findings of this research indicate that, although multiculturalism has been formally adopted in Germany, practical challenges persist in fostering inclusion and equitable integration. Interviews with Syrian respondents revealed a persistent sense of detachment and a limited sense of belonging. Although some acknowledged personal- or community-level barriers to integration, systemic factors, such as discrimination, policy gaps and limited cultural recognition, also played a key role in shaping their experiences.

Originality/value – The research contributes to the growing literature on multiculturalism and integration in Germany by centering the voices of Syrian migrants and refugees. The findings provide considerable insights for policymakers and practitioners, seeking to enhance integration outcomes, foster a stronger sense of belonging among migrant communities and develop more inclusive societies that go beyond ceremonial multiculturalism.

Keywords Germany, Multiculturalism, Public policy, Migration studies, Syrians in Germany

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Europe has been a migration destination for decades. According to the European Commission (EC)'s statistics on migration to Europe, out of the 448.8 million inhabitants of Europe in 2023, 6% are non-EU citizens and 9% are foreign-born. There have been 7.03 million people who immigrated to the EU in 2022 (The EC, 2024). In 2023, the percentage of non-EU employees in the European labor market was 5.7% of the total workforce in the age brackets between 20 and 64 (The EC, 2024). According to the Migration and asylum in Europe report (Eurostat, 2024a), Germany alone, in 2022, received 31% of all immigrants who came to the EU from non-EU countries, equals to 1.6 million people. Migration, and its consequent impact of creating multicultural societies across Europe, is thus an undeniable reality that should be reflected in the EU policies and strategies and in those of its member states and the EU's associated policy formulation and strategy setting bodies. Nevertheless, since 2010, there might have been a decrease in the level of both official as well as public support to multiculturalism in Europe. An increased polarized and franker debate about the concept and its political, economic and social connotations has been rather dominant in the media and in political discussions and electoral campaigns. This change of perspective can be better highlighted through the below quotes from the political leaders of some of the most prominent Western European democracies.



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In October 2010, the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in a meeting with the younger members of her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party in Potsdam, said that the attempts to build a multicultural society in Germany have “failed” (Koopmans, 2013). She further stated that “The concept that we are now living side by side and are happy about it does not work” (Koopmans, 2013). According to Merkel, immigrants should integrate and endorse German culture and values (Koopmans, 2013). The same rhetoric exist in the German political arena years later. For example, Christian Linder, the Chair of the Free Democratic Party (FDP), announced in September 2024 that “People are fed up with a state that may have lost control of immigration and asylum in Germany.” The recent election of February 2025 in Germany witnessed the rise of the conservative CDU/CSU bloc, which has recently agreed to join forces with the AfD to pass an anti-immigration motion in the Parliament. This agreement followed the recent deadly attack by an Afghani asylum seeker who resulted in the death of two persons in January 2025 (Financial Times, 2025).

Germany presents a good case study in understanding the EU’s policies and overall political, social and societal perceptions of multiculturalism. Despite the listed sentiments from German different political figures with regard to multiculturalism, Germany is one of the most popular immigration destinations in the world, with around one million immigrants each year since 2013 (Statista, 2024). It was ranked fifth in the top 25 destinations of international immigrants in 2020 (Migration Policy Institute, 2020). Germany is the country with the largest number of refugees in the EU (Eurostat, 2024b).

The ongoing debate about immigration, integration and multiculturalism in contrast to mono-culturalism, homogeneity and nationalism has been shaping the EU societies in the last 15 years and determining their collective policies toward its southern neighbors over the banks of the Mediterranean Sea. It is considering this that this research focuses on examining multiculturalism and multicultural policies in the EU and Germany, thus gaining special significance.

The research offers a concise review of the development of multiculturalism in the EU, focusing on whether the policies and practices implemented have fostered assimilation or integration. The case of Germany, a leading destination for global immigration and the top recipient of immigrants within the EU, is examined to explore how multiculturalism is addressed within the context of German policies. The research also investigates how these policies have been perceived by the native German population through a revision of media reports and to what extent they have contributed to a sense of belonging and inclusion among immigrants whose views are captured through KIIs.

The research is thus divided into six parts, following the research methodology. The first part focuses on how multiculturalism has been defined and evolved as a concept. The second part discusses the case of Germany and how multiculturalism was first introduced, through different forms and shapes. The third part discusses the extent to which multiculturalism has been endorsed and accepted by the country’s political elite and examines native Germans’ perceptions of multiculturalism and migrations. Voices of Syrian migrants are then presented under the fourth part. The fifth part presents concluding remarks and policy recommendations on integration versus assimilation in the context of Germany. Conclusions are then finally shared.

2. Research problem and questions

This research questions the extent to which multicultural policies in Germany have contributed to the integration of immigrants, and their sense of belonging and how these policies have been perceived by both native citizens and immigrant communities. Other subquestions include:

- (1) How has the concept of multiculturalism evolved over the past decades?
- (2) What are the key elements and goals of Germany’s multicultural and integration policies, and how have they changed in response to political or social pressures?

- (3) How do native Germans perceive multiculturalism and immigration, and how have these perceptions been shaped by media and political narratives?
- (4) How do immigrants in Germany experience integration efforts, and to what extent do they feel a sense of belonging within German society?
- (5) What tensions exist between assimilation and integration models in the German context, and what are their implications for future German migration policies?

3. Methodology

The research uses a combination of literature review, case study and qualitative research through semi-structured interviews and key informant interviews with Syrian migrants, including refugees, in Germany. When possible, secondary data sources have been presented. The aim is to better understand how multiculturalism has in Germany. Toward that end, these research methodologies have complemented each other to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand. Literature review, as defined by [Grant and Booth \(2009\)](#), included examining, analyzing and synthesizing existing research, theories and data relevant to multiculturalism. This helped in identifying the key arguments with regard to multiculturalism. The literature review has further supported in providing a theoretical framework for the case study.

The case study, defined as “in-depth study of a single unit” allowed an in-depth investigation of multiculturalism in Germany ([Gerring, 2004](#)). This included practical insights into how multiculturalism has been debated, evolved and questioned, both at the political as well as the societal levels in the country.

In doing so, academic articles, policy documents, books, official reports, media reports and online databases have been reviewed and analyzed. Qualitative research is a method focused on exploring complex social phenomena through an in-depth understanding of human experiences, behaviors and perceptions ([Creswell and Poth, 2018](#)). Among commonly used qualitative tools are semi-structured interviews (SSI) and key informant interviews (KII), which involve gathering detailed insights from individuals with expert knowledge or lived experience relevant to the research topic ([Kumar, 1989](#)). The research was conducted on a total of nine, 8 SSI and 1 KII, with participants comprising six males and three females (eight of Syrian origin and one native German) aged 23 to 46 years. The interviewees with Syrians represented diverse legal statuses in Germany, including naturalized citizens, refugees awaiting residence or naturalization and skilled migrants admitted under the Blue Card scheme [1]. Participants were identified using a snowball sampling methodology, whereby each respondent was asked to refer other potential participants who met the inclusion criteria, namely being of Syrian background and residing in Germany under varying legal frameworks. One KII was conducted with a native German who has been actively engaged with the Syrian community to gain insight into how the Syrian experience in Germany is perceived from the perspective of the host society. For ethical consideration, all interviewees have been informed of the scope of the research and provided verbal informed consent. Below is a breakdown of the key demographic characteristics of the different interviewees, including their gender, age, education, legal status, marital status and geographical residence (see [Table 1](#)).

The various methodologies used have contributed to creating the theoretical framework, which was further grounded through the case study, drawing on both existing knowledge and real-life applications.

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, combining both deductive and inductive coding ([Bingham and Witkowsky, 2022](#)). The deductive framework drew from and multiculturalism literature, focusing on themes of perceived threats, belonging and identity. Inductive coding allowed new themes to emerge organically from the data. This dual approach enabled a rich, systematic understanding of how migrants navigate the complexities of integration amid societal tensions.

Table 1. Key demographic characteristics of interviewees

Sex		Age ^a		Education		Legal status ^b		Marital status ^b		Geographical residence ^c	
M	F	Below 35	Above 35	Higher education and above	Undergraduate	Naturalized	Not naturalized	Married	Single	West Germany	East Germany
6	3	7	3	8	1	7	1	4	4	5	4
Note(s): ^a Age bracket is based on what a number of development agencies consider as youth (15–35 years of age), ^b Excluding the German native, ^c Categorization is based on the historical division of Germany											
Source(s): Author											

Interviews were conducted online between April and May 2025 and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were mainly conducted in Arabic, except for the interview with a German native, which was conducted in English. Participants provided informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

This research mainly used qualitative research, which one of its main aims is to focus on the particular and to provide in-depth and rich data about a specific phenomenon. Generalization of findings and conclusions reached might be contested. Further, the research used snowballing sampling, which is characterized by using small sample sizes to reach data saturation. This can further contribute to the challenge of the possibility of generalization. The researcher deemed this as the most appropriate methodological approach, given the nature of the topic.

4. Multiculturalism – the concept and debates

Multiculturalism generally refers to how a society manages and embraces its cultural diversity within the boundaries of a nation-state. [Leininger \(2002\)](#) defines multiculturalism as the recognition of several different cultures coexisting within a society and the need to further recognize, value and understand differences and similarities of various cultures. To better understand multiculturalism, it is important to lay the boundaries of the notion of nation-based states ([Topçuoğlu, 2017](#)). In these states, the dominant nation or ideology was perceived as the owners of this country or state ([Topçuoğlu, 2017](#)). The language of the nation-based state was that of the dominant group ([Topçuoğlu, 2017](#)). In Europe, which has been the bedrock of the nation-state concept, history and culture were mainly celebrating and advocating for the dominant group ([Topçuoğlu, 2017](#)).

Yet, this approach did not pass without some objections from minority groups in a given nation-based state. In one sense, multiculturalism was perceived as a threat to the liberal nation-state ([Koopmans and Statham, 1999](#); [Topçuoğlu, 2017](#)). According to this argument, the nation-state notion is being endangered from within due to the increased pluralization of modern societies, driven by the growing trends of globalization and multiculturalism ([Koopmans and Statham, 1999](#)). It is challenged by the growing claims from specific groups who are emphasizing their cultural differences in comparison to those of the overall dominant society and asking for special group rights, or in some cases, the exemption of some duties considering these cultural differences ([Koopmans and Statham, 1999](#)).

Migration is a key driving force behind such trends ([Koopmans and Statham, 1999](#)). According to [Koopmans and Statham \(1999\)](#), “For Western European societies, the presence of growing numbers of racially and culturally different migrants is perhaps the most concrete, tangible, and for some most provocative, way in which globalization and pluralization have become manifest features of modern life.”

Multiculturalism has been perceived in the political and public spheres because of post-Second World War immigration and the associated aftermath challenges posed to the traditional liberal democratic governments ([Ashcroft and Bevir, 2019](#)). To address such challenges, many states started to grant immigrant groups exemptions from specific laws as well as the provision of complementary funds to programs that promote language rights, education reforms and funding for minority cultural activities and events ([Ashcroft and Bevir, 2019](#)). Yet, such efforts were always informed by an end goal of supporting these groups to integrate into a society that has a well-recognized dominant cultural majority ([Ashcroft and Bevir, 2019](#)).

According to [Kymlicka \(2006\)](#), there are three key characteristics of what can be defined as a multicultural state. These are (1) rejection of the idea that a nation-based state is seldomly owned by the dominant national group, (2) rejection of assimilation policies which entails total immersion and embracement of the dominant culture with no to limited recognition of other minority cultures and (3) acknowledgement of the injustice done to the minority groups in the nation-based state ([Topçuoğlu, 2017](#)). Multiculturalism policies usually revolve around three

main models of policy design and formulation. Multicultural policies are either directed toward (1) a full and complete cultural assimilation into the dominant/host culture, (2) a cultural amalgamation in which two cultures are mingled or mixed and (3) a cultural coexistence in which integration is at a minimal level but the two cultures can distinctively exist next to each other (Hanberger, 2010).

Through cultural assimilation, the minority culture is assimilated and gradually dissolved into the dominant culture of the majority (Hanberger, 2010). In some cases, while minorities are completely exposed to the majority culture, they are left with limited cultural leeway. This is, yet considered as, a form of assimilation policies. In cultural amalgamation, the culture of the dominant majority and these of the minorities are merged. Usually, further universal values and international human rights are enforced and applied to all as they are being viewed as applicable to all human beings, regardless of their cultural or ethnic orientations (Hanberger, 2010). In cultural coexistence, the minority culture is not encouraged to be integrated into the dominant culture of the majority, but it is allowed to grow stronger and to co-exist through what Hanberger (2010) called a possible form of social contract between the majority and minority groups.

However, multiculturalism, as a doctrine, did not go without considerable dispute. For example, multiculturalism is believed to prioritize the best interests of certain groups over the common good of the overall society (Eagan, 2021). According to this viewpoint, it can be harmful to national unity at large if groups of people start viewing themselves through their ethnic, racial or religious orientation rather than as members of a whole united society (Eagan, 2021).

Another objection to multiculturalism is the potential harm done to the notions of equal rights to individuals and equal treatment (Eagan, 2021). As multiculturalism calls for differentiated rights of specific individuals and groups, this might weaken the concept of political equality and equal rights for all (Eagan, 2021).

Other questions raised by opponents of multiculturalism include the question of which cultures. This argument is based on the potential that, in the call for multiculturalism, competition among different cultures might arise, leading to the question of which cultures of the competing groups should be considered (Eagan, 2021). Further, multiculturalism usually raises cross-cutting issues that impact how individuals relate to each other and the state. Integration should not be seen as a unitary process but rather as a progressive process that takes place across many spheres, both political and economic, individual and groups, public and private (Ashcroft and Bevir, 2019). Integration in the cultural sphere should not be prioritized over integration in other spheres. Similarly, integration in one sphere should not mistakenly mean a holistic integration across all spheres (Ashcroft and Bevir, 2019).

Other relevant critiques highlight the need to look beyond policies and surface-level cultural differences. For example, postcolonial and intersectional approaches attempt to explain how migrants experience life in new societies. These perspectives suggest that challenges around integration are not just about different traditions or values but are also connected to power imbalances, racial stereotypes and social inequalities. Scholars like Meer and Modood (2012) argue that many integration policies overlook Europe's colonial history and how people from non-European backgrounds are still treated unfairly. The idea of intersectionality, by Crenshaw (2013), adds to this by showing how people's experiences are shaped by more than one part of their identity, like race, gender, class and legal status, all at the same time. These combined factors can affect how migrants are treated and how easy or difficult it is for them to feel accepted and included.

These views can be rooted in the Social Identity Theory (SIT). The SIT, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979, explains how people form a sense of their identity and who they are based on their membership in social groups, such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender or class (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Tajfel and Turner (1979) defined identity as the personal and collective understanding of who one is, shaped by affiliations with social groups, such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender or social class. This theory is especially helpful

in analyzing why individuals may feel included or excluded in societies undergoing demographic and cultural change due to migration, creating or demolishing a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging, according to [Afonso et al. \(2023\)](#), can be defined as, “a highly subjective and dynamic feeling of acceptance, inclusion, and connectedness to a specific contextual entity. Perceiving belongingness to others is positively related to psychological well-being, happiness, or higher self-esteem.”

According to SIT, individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, known as *in-groups* (us) and *out-groups* (them). People then identify more closely with groups that provide them with a stronger sense of self-worth or social value. In doing so, they tend to view their own group more positively and may stereotype or discriminate against those outside their group. This leads to in-group favoritism and out-group bias, which can manifest in masked social exclusion or even open prejudice.

In the context of migration and integration, this theory helps explain how host societies may view migrants as “outsiders,” and how migrants themselves might struggle to establish their *new* identities, especially if they feel they are not fully accepted by the majority population. This theory offers valuable insight into why full integration may remain contested, especially if systemic barriers or social norms reinforce in-group vs out-group categorization. It also emphasizes the importance of addressing both structural and psychological dimensions of identity and belonging in multicultural societies.

In addition to these critical perspectives, researchers have also looked at how economic concerns and security fears influence the way societies respond to migration. Public debates often focus on whether migrants help or strain the economy, especially in terms of jobs and public services ([Dustmann et al., 2013](#)). These economic arguments can affect how migrants are welcomed, or not, depending on how useful they are perceived to be. At the same time, fears around security and crime, especially after major political or global events, can make people more cautious or even suspicious of migrants. Media coverage and political messaging play a big role in this, sometimes encouraging negative views or support for stricter immigration policies ([Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart, 2007](#)). This argument is also echoed in the Integrated Threat Theory (ITT), especially in terms of realistic and symbolic threats related to economic and safety considerations.

ITT, developed by [Stephan and Stephan \(2000\)](#), helps explain why people may feel uncomfortable or even hostile toward migrants. The theory speaks of four types of perceived threats that can lead to negative attitudes: realistic threats (such as fears about jobs or safety), symbolic threats (concerns that migrants may challenge local values or traditions), intergroup anxiety (discomfort during interactions with people from different groups) and negative stereotypes (beliefs that migrants are, for example, lazy or unwilling to integrate). These threats can create fear and rejection of migrants, especially when people see them as different or as a burden to society.

Research shows that how people see migrants is often shaped by their education, job status and where they live. For example, [Block \(2020\)](#) found that Germans with higher education and better jobs were more tolerant of migrants. In contrast, people who feel economically insecure are more likely to see migrants as a threat. Media and political messages can make this worse by focusing on crime or cultural conflict. [Stephan et al. \(2015\)](#) also highlight how fear and misunderstanding between groups can grow when these threats are not addressed. ITT helps in understanding why some communities are more welcoming than others and why successful integration depends not only on migrants but also on how they are seen by the wider society.

Finally, it is important to consider the historical and cultural background of each country when discussing multiculturalism. According to [Castles and Miller \(2009\)](#), every country’s approach to integration is shaped by its own past, whether it had colonial ties, past labor migration programs or recent experiences with refugees. These histories influence how people think about national identity and how they react to newcomers. A deeper understanding of this context helps explain why integration can be so complicated and why it means different things to different people.

In conclusion, multiculturalism is a complex and evolving concept shaped by historical, cultural, political and socioeconomic factors. While it aims to recognize and value cultural diversity within a nation-state, its implementation and outcomes vary widely depending on how integration is framed and practiced.

5. Multiculturalism in Germany: evolution and political shifts

Over the years, Germany has experienced waves of immigration due to significant political and economic shifts and crises. These include the migration of Jews, particularly from Eastern Europe, the return of Germans from former communist societies after the breakup of the Soviet Union, and more recently, the influx of refugees from the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s and the Syrian civil war in the 2000s. Additionally, large numbers of migrants, particularly from the Mediterranean, came to Germany as guestworkers, filling low-skilled jobs (Wasmer, 2013). 1955 marked the first recruitment agreement, as temporary laborers in Germany, with Italy, leading to a large wave of labor migration to Germany (Wasmer, 2013). Despite the labor recruitment stopped in 1973, the laborers already in Germany, continued with lower salaries and demanded family reunifications. A major shift was marked by the reform of the immigration law of 2005, which witnessed the state's commitment to allocating resources, for the first time in the country's history, to the integration of the newcomers and immigrants. This has also included liberating the labor market policies to allow access of skilled professionals while restricting it for unskilled labor (Wasmer, 2013). The policy reforms in 2009, 2012 and 2020 lead to a further increase in the number of immigrants and refugees coming to the Deutschland. Many of the "foreigners" lived in the previously known Western Germany, while a fewer number lived in Eastern Germany (Wasmer, 2013).

Yet, such waves of immigration should not lead to the conclusion that Germany is the land of multiculturalism. An intriguing study in understanding multiculturalism in the German context, conducted by Smolicz (1990), to explain the multiculturalism in the German context through the lens of what he called "mono-ethnic" Germany. Smolicz (1990) argued that the German citizen does not comprehend a German citizen who is not German by ethnic ancestry. To Germans living in a mono-ethnic Germany, such German ethnic ancestry is a key prerequisite for nationality and citizenship (Smolicz, 1990). This argument is confirmed by the fact that the German citizenship law admits citizenship to whoever is able to prove to be from a German descendant, while for non-German descendent, naturalization is a complex process, even following the recent relaxation in August 2024 of some naturalization requirements, including dual citizenships and shortened residence term prior to applying for citizenship.

Several scholars discussed the impact of these waves of immigrants. For example, Joppke (1996) conducted a cross-country comparison of multiculturalism between the USA, Germany and Great Britain. Joppke (1996) argues that multiculturalism in the German context is not about immigrants, but it is about the Germans. Fischer and Mohrman (2021) speak about the concept of *Leitkultur* or the "leading" or "guiding culture," which has predominated the past 2 decades within the German society. This concept "articulates the expectation that immigrants should embrace and adhere to dominant German values in order to integrate into society." With this approach, the country's attitude toward immigration was shaped. Further, *Leitkultur* as a concept, confirms and further promotes the "superiority" of German values.

For years, Germany has numerously denied implementing multicultural policies, whereas cities within the country have been providing services and programs that are similar to those provided by countries promoting multiculturalism (Jupp, 2015). A growing focusing on the acquisition of the German language is at the core of the country's integration policy. Limitation "on those unable to speak the majority language, even though they had previously been attracted as factory workers" has further hindered efforts toward effective multiculturalism (Jupp, 2015).

In contrast, Joppke (1996) discusses the internal argument of his time of the political German elite from the Greens party, who were among the proponents of multiculturalism. In

this argument, multiculturalism was declared not to be based on the concept of the nation-state. Supporters of this argument concluded that citizenship should not determine the rights of an individual. But it is rather where the individual lives should be the only acceptable determinant (Joppke, 1996).

Wasmer (2013), on the other hand, argues that Germany has never presented what she called “the prototype of a multicultural society.” To support her argument, Wasmer (2013) lists two key incidents. First, she reflects on German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s declaration in 2010 that “attempts to build a multicultural society had ‘utterly failed’”. She further highlights the bestselling book of 2010 of Thilo Sarrazin entitled “*Germany Does Away with Itself*” in which he blamed the Muslim population for “dragging Germany down” Wasmer (2013). In her work, she questioned whether “Germany turning away from multiculturalism before actually having reached it?” Wasmer (2013). To answer this question, she examined trends in areas such as policies, public debate and public opinion with the aim of confirming whether Germany is going backwards with regard to multiculturalism. While in her analysis she presented a review of public policies, laws and regulations relevant to multiculturalism, her focus was mainly on public opinion and their interactions with such policies and laws. Her justification for this focus assumed that in liberal democracies, policies are expected to reflect public opinions. To do this, she studies the attitude measurements from the German General Social Survey, known in Deutsch as ALLBUS.

Wasmer (2013) noted the lack of a comprehensive national multicultural policy in Germany, partially due to the federal nature of the country, which allows states to play a substantial role in the provision of education and cultural programs and services. She yet further indicated what she called “elements of a de facto multicultural policy.” For example, she refers to the Citizenship Law of 2000, which grants children born in Germany the German nationality if at least one of the parents has lived in Germany for at least eight years. She further noted that since then, no additional changes have accrued with regard to German citizenship, which meant that the naturalization rate in Germany is comparatively low if compared to its European neighbor states (Wasmer, 2013). 2007 and 2008 witnessed stricter regulations on German language proficiency and knowledge of the German legal and social system and cultural background for naturalization purposes, as well as tougher restrictions on family reunification processes (Wasmer, 2013). Integration courses were introduced through the Immigration Act of 2005, which were mandatory for people applying for a residence permit (Wasmer, 2013). On the other hand, exemptions are allowed for skilled immigrants, nationals of other European countries and of the privileged Western countries, which drew a concern with evident discriminatory practices in this regard (Wasmer, 2013).

With regard to education and integration in the labor market, Wasmer (2013) refers to the special training programs that have been introduced to improve the immigrants’ potentials in education and in the labor market. Yet, this has led to a complete focus on the acquisition of the German language as a cornerstone to enable such integration. In some cases, Wasmer (2013) noted what she called coercive measures that force students to only speak German at school, including during break and in between classes time. While 2011 witnessed the introduction of Islamic instruction in schools, one-half of the German states have banned the Islamic headscarf for teachers in 2011, an action justified on the principle of neutrality in the school environment (Wasmer, 2013). Wasmer (2013) thus concludes that elements such as supporting immigrants in maintaining and celebrating their distinct identities and cultural heritage are non-existent in the German integration policies. She concludes that many Germans during the time of her research prefer that immigrants conform to the German way of life, language and cultural and social values and attitudes. Yet, the extent to which such a call for assimilation is a public demand is unclear and requires further investigation.

Germany’s structured approach to migration and integration began in 1978 with the appointment of a Commissioner for Integration, evolving into a coherent policy trajectory. Notable milestones include the Immigration Act of 2005, which regulated entry and residency and subsequent plans such as the National Integration Plan (2007), National Action Plan on

Integration (2012), and the 2021 National Action Plan for Integration (NAP-I) launched under Chancellor Merkel, comprising over 100 measures extending beyond language and employment support. Legislative reforms continued with key acts: the 2008 Residence Act (amended in 2020) balancing humanitarian commitments and economic needs; the 2015 Asylum Act and associated benefits; the 2016 Integration Act linking social support to integration efforts; and the Skilled Immigration Act (2020), revised in 2023, which introduced the Opportunity Card to facilitate entry and qualification recognition for skilled third-country nationals.

However, strategies and policies to further promote integration were rather assimilative in nature with a key focus on ability to acquire the German language, manifest a profound understanding of the German values and life principles, proven records of ability to actively engage in promoting the country's economic growth and to provide for own livelihoods, with no recognition of the need to respect, promote and sustain linkage with mother culture, set of beliefs and values. Despite recent amendments in 2024 in the German Nationality Act, which allow German citizenship applicants to maintain their origin citizenship, they further enforce applicants to "acknowledges Germany's special historical responsibility for the National Socialist rule of injustice and its consequences, in particular for the protection of Jewish life" ([The German Nationality Act, 2000](#)).

Other relevant incidents, and in the aftermath of the New Year's event in Cologne in 2016, included the Act on Facilitated Deportation of Delinquent Foreigners of 2016 and the Act of Better Enforcement of the Obligation to Leave the Country of 2017 ([Koch et al., 2023](#)). Known as the Out of Here Act by its opponents, the Better Enforcement of the Obligation to Leave the Country included extending the detention time awaiting deportation and allowed for examining data on detainees' mobile phones ([Koch et al., 2023](#)), which is a severe violation of civil rights in a western democracy. The same Act has been further amended in 2019 to introduce the Dulgung category, which referred to asylum seekers who do not cooperate in revealing their identity to delay their deportation. The amendments introduce Dulgung light, which linked cooperation with the German authorities in deportation to access to basic social benefits, another violation of basic rights ([Koch et al., 2023](#)).

These reforms reflect a shift from humanitarian-driven migration policy to a labor-market-oriented model, aiming to attract skilled workers while regulating asylum flows. For example, the Skilled Immigration Act simplified access for vocationally trained and university-educated migrants and expanded the EU Blue Card scheme, though its impact was still emerging post-COVID. OECD findings from 2024 note that Germany has high immigrant employment rates (70% in 2022) and effective language integration, though challenges remain in education and for women and low-skilled migrants. According to this report, "The progress in the areas of employment integration and language support is encouraging, but there is still a lot to be done, particularly in the education system and in the integration of certain groups" ([OECD and European Commission, 2024](#)). These developments illustrate Germany's evolving integration framework, which is legally flexible and economically strategic, but the real test lies in evaluating their long-term effectiveness in fostering inclusive and sustainable social cohesion.

Legal frameworks like the General Equal Treatment Act prohibit discrimination and allow, but do not mandate, affirmative action programs to support vulnerable migrant groups. However, Germany's enforcement mechanisms have been criticized as ineffective. The 2020 MIPEX report rated Germany's anti-discrimination protections as only "slightly favorable" (70/100), noting weak enforcement even though legal coverage exists in employment, education and public life. OECD data (2023) indicate an immigrant discrimination rate of 10%, compared to 19% in the Netherlands.

Laws' applications have also differed for different nationalities. For example, the Asylum Procedure Acceleration Law of 2015 extended the mandatory period of staying in the reception center from 3 months to 6 months ([German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2015](#)). This same period was further extended under the Act for Better Enforcement of the Obligation to Leave to up to 2 years. Nevertheless, [Koch et al. \(2023\)](#) state that

Ukrainian refugees were to some extent free to decide where to stay, which was not the case for other nationalities. Unlike other refugees who had to adhere to a restriction in residence to the same state they applied their asylum-seeking application to for a maximum of three years, Ukrainian migrants enjoyed freedom of movement.

To summarize, while Germany had worked toward improved integration of asylum seekers and migrants, these efforts were mainly informed by the best interests of the country, especially with regards to the needs of the labor market. Restrictions on less skilled, more problematic and rather unwelcomed immigration have been reflected in several amendments to the country's legal schemes. Further, the country of origin plays a substantial role in determining the package that its citizens can access as they seek asylum or immigration to Germany. For example, Ukrainians were more welcomed and enjoyed a higher level of freedom of movement than other refugees. Those from safe countries of origin or those countries whose asylum applicants are usually rejected, were more subjected to restricted protection packages and more prone to deportation. Finally, while Germany called its policy integration, it was rather assimilation policies through which newcomers must acquire the language, abide by the German set of values and acknowledge responsibilities, which might contract to their own set of beliefs or value system. The above calls for a further consideration of how integration in the German society should not be at the expense of its new citizens' ability to express their genuine beliefs and practice their values in a safe and democratic manner.

6. Native German's perceptions of multiculturalism and migration

The next question is to what extent the current policies, laws, strategies and practices, including the public discourse and political communication, shape how native Germans perceive migrants and support in making efforts toward genuine integration a reality. Tolerance toward the foreign-born population in Germany from the native Germans is a key threat to the yet scattered efforts toward integration. Block (2020) studied the level of tolerance of native Germans with regard to migrants based on three sociodemographic variables. These are respondent's labor market position, respondent's education and regional dominance. Block (2020) concluded that the sociodemographic attributes of the native Germans play a substantive role in determining the level of tolerance toward the foreign-born population of the country. According to Block, "individuals who hold professional-level jobs, individuals who have obtained a college education, and individuals who live in cities demonstrate the highest level of tolerance towards immigrants." An OECD study of 2017 showed that despite improvement in education rates among Turkish immigrants and their descendants, who form the country's largest minority, they are still three times more likely to face trouble finding jobs or to access the state's welfare programs than Germans without Turkish roots. Interestingly, the German respondent noted that, "*Germans, in general, might not be seeing the contribution of migrants, including Syrians, to the country's economic growth.*"

The sense of intolerance toward Germany's migrants, despite their substantial importance for the country's growth, is further fueled by media reports and political stances of the far-right parties. For example, in 2018, a media report spoke of the city of Salzgitter's decision to ban more immigrants from residing in the city. The decision was supported by the right-wing party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), which has won 40% of the votes in the most recent elections of the year (ITV News, 2018). Earlier in the same year, media reported marches in southern Germany opposing the country's immigration policy, which, according to protestors, had led to a crime spike in the country. During these marches, protestors called for the protection of women and children from the "other" immigrants, following the murder of a 15-year-old girl by an Afghani refugee asylum in the city of Kanel (PBS News, 2018). The protests denounced Germany's multiculturalism policies and called for an end to the country's open border policy. The same media report mentioned studies conducted by Christian Pfeiffer, a criminologist, which highlighted that 92% of the increase in crime incidents are associated with young male migrants, largely from North Africa (PBS News, 2018). In a similar context, BBC News aired

a report in January 2016 questioning whether Germany's attitude to migrants changed, following the sexual assaults against German women by immigrants in the city of Cologne. The report highlights an increase in the selling of weapons to protect women against the *criminal behavior* of the immigrants.

DW news broadcasted a documentary entitled "Foreigners in their own country: Racial bias in German" in 2020 (DW News, 2020). Interviewees were young people who are German citizens of migrant origins, majority are German-born but have at least one of their parents as a foreigner. Yet, they have often felt unwelcome or not accepted. They spoke of how skin color, hair color, race and ethnicity play a substantial role in being accepted in Germany (DW News, 2020). One young lady, potentially from an Asian descent, spoke of how she "can dye her hair, but people here will never accept me as 100% German" (DW News, 2020). Another young lady spoke of how her experience in school was always to be asked where she was really from. Another veiled young lady spoke of how she was told that it is not very common for people like her to go to the swimming pool (DW News, 2020). Another dark-skinned young man reported an incident in which a man, walking down the street, "spat in my face." Interviewees also spoke of the "good" versus the "bad" migrants and how Western or European Union migrants are not migrants but labeled as "expats" (DW News, 2020). Other spoke of how Spanish and French migrants are welcomed, but if one is from Turkish or Arab origin or with dark hair, skin or is Muslim, then the person is a threat to "Germanness" (DW News, 2020).

In February 2020, the town of Hanau witnessed the deadliest racially motivated attack in which a German gunman shot nine people, who are either migrated to Germany or whose families had (DW News, 2021). Such hate and politically motivated crimes were not the first. Hate crime related to the neo-Nazi terrorist cell known as the National Socialist Underground (NSU) has also been reported as targeted immigrants in the country (DW News, 2018).

Holloway *et al.* (2022) published a report entitled "Public narrative and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Germany country profile," which examines the perceptions of immigrants among native Germans. The report showed that "38% of Germans felt that the integration of most immigrants was either very or fairly successful, which is below the EU average" (Holloway *et al.*, 2022). The German interviewee confirmed the above sentiment, explaining that, "*Current integration efforts mainly focus on migrants, including Syrians, learning the language, working, and paying taxes. Yet, incidents of racism persist. Some of my Syrian friends, who have lived in Germany for over ten years and have already obtained German citizenship, still face racism—for example, when trying to rent a home.*"

More importantly, several media reports link the rise in anti-immigration to the rise of the far-right party AfD, which is known for its anti-immigration beliefs and which is currently perceived as the main opposition party, since it entered the German parliament in 2017 (DW News, 2020; Block, 2020). It is thus not surprising that immigrants who report discrimination based on ethnicity, nationality or race in the period between 2012 and 2020 was 10% in Germany (OECD/European Commission, 2023). When asked whether she believed this recent development might negatively impact migrants, including Syrians, the German interviewee agreed, explaining: "*Especially since the general German public will probably not object. To many native Germans, these migrants are staying in the country, receiving stipends, but not working. Of course, they don't realize that the migrants aren't allowed to work until they reach a certain level of language proficiency; a level that is often difficult to attain due to the poor quality of the available language courses.*"

The conclusion thus is that while Germany has endorsed a number of what can be perceived as multicultural policies and practices post-World War II onwards, overall sentiments, including from the political elite as well as the public did not always align with the expected outcomes of these policies and practices. The above findings can be further explained in light of the economic and security overviews of multiculturalism and the relevant ITT.

From an economic viewpoint, concerns about jobs, housing and welfare are central to how communities perceive migrants. Research shows that people with lower job security or socioeconomic status are more likely to view migrants, like Germans viewing Syrians or

Turks, as competition for scarce resources. The OECD and Block (2020) data indicate ongoing disparities in employment access for Turkish immigrants and their descendants, which can increase concerns among native Germans about resource allocation, especially in regions with economic pressures. Moreover, comments from German respondents that “migrants . . . Might not be seen as contributing to economic growth” reflect this economic insecurity and support in building negative perceptions of migrants as burdens rather than contributors.

The security perspective involves fears about crime, cultural disintegration or societal safety. When migrants are portrayed in media or political narratives as criminals or cultural outsiders, these stories fuel symbolic threats, another core element of ITT. Events like crime spikes or terror fears are exaggerated, contributing to public anxiety about cultural cohesion and safety. Demonstrations against immigration and sensational reporting, such as in Salzgitter and Cologne, reinforce negative stereotypes and heighten intergroup anxiety, making integration more difficult. Media narratives, public discourse and the rise of far-right political parties (e.g., AfD) often emphasize cultural differences and portray immigrants, particularly Muslims and individuals of Arab descent, as threats to “Germanness.” The examples of discriminatory rhetoric against veiled women, people with dark skin or those with non-European roots reinforce symbolic fears that migrants disrupt cultural cohesion or shared values.

Finally, negative stereotypes, such as the perception of migrants as criminals or culturally backward, are repeatedly reinforced in media accounts, political rhetoric and anecdotal testimonies. Stereotyping young male migrants from North Africa as responsible for crime spikes, or portraying Syrians as welfare recipients who refuse to integrate, contributes to generalized fear and mistrust. These perceptions deepen societal divisions and hinder efforts toward meaningful integration.

7. Voices of Syrian migrants

As outlined earlier, the final part of this research involved conducting semi-structured interviews with eight Syrians, currently residing in Germany. The participants included individuals across different legal statuses: naturalized citizens, refugees awaiting residency or citizenship and skilled migrants under the EU Blue Card program. Interviewees were asked about their experiences living in Germany, with particular focus on their sense of integration and belonging within German society.

While most respondents expressed overall satisfaction with their life in Germany, they also conveyed an emotional and cultural connection to Syria. Social circles largely remained centered around other Syrians, not necessarily due to unwelcoming attitudes from Germans, but rather due to cultural familiarity and perceived warmth in Eastern versus Western social interactions. One respondent, who has lived in Germany for 15 years and obtained citizenship through the Blue Card program, stated that although she is “*as integrated as can be*,” she still identifies more as Syrian than German. However, she noted that her children, as second-generation migrants, identify more closely with German culture. She also pointed out that social interaction with Germans remains limited, primarily because of cultural norms that do not prioritize social engagement beyond work settings. According to her, “*I join all social gathering that are organized by the office, but these social ties never develop beyond the work premises. This is just how Germans are and I respect that and fine with it.*”

Another interviewee, a student and asylum seeker still awaiting legal resolution, reported that his social network primarily consists of fellow Syrians or other migrants. He attributed this to his educational environment, which includes many students working to align their qualifications with the German system. Nevertheless, he expressed a proactive attitude toward language learning, emphasizing his willingness to speak German despite language errors, viewing it as a necessary path to integration.

When asked about the recent rise in support for right-wing parties in Germany, most respondents did not foresee immediate changes but expressed concern about potential long-

term consequences. One participant spoke about the federal system in Germany, explaining that its coalition-based structure often prevents any single political ideology from dominating national policy across all states.

Regarding governmental efforts to support integration, many respondents did not expect further action from public authorities. Instead, they placed the responsibility of integration on the Syrian community itself. One respondent was particularly critical of fellow Syrians who do not engage in language learning or participate in the labor market, suggesting that such behaviors contribute to negative stereotypes of the Syrian community at large. She shared her own example of professional commitment, working even when ill, to demonstrate her dedication and noted that she is respected by her German colleagues as a result. Another interviewee highlighted the important role that Syrian expatriate communities and local Syrian NGOs could play in promoting integration through events, volunteering and social interaction.

A key finding from these interviews is that integration carries different meanings for different individuals. None of the respondents felt that maintaining their culture or language should be the responsibility of the federal or state governments. Instead, they viewed these efforts as part of their personal and communal responsibilities to preserve their heritage. To many of the participants, integration meant being able to live freely and contribute to society. As one respondent put it, *"I am integrated as much as I can and as much as needed."* Another stated, *"Syrians are integrated during the day, but once they return home, they listen to Arabic music, eat Syrian food, smoke argela (shisha), and spend time with their S. friends."* When asked whether the government should help teach their children Arabic, all interviewees agreed this was not a state obligation but rather a task for community-led initiatives, such as *Syrian community schools* or Syrian-led cultural events.

The interviews reveal that integration for many Syrians in Germany is a personal process, shaped by individual aspirations, legal status, cultural ties and social surroundings. Rather than seeking full integration, respondents expressed a desire for purposeful coexistence, where cultural identity is preserved at home while functional integration into German society is achieved through work, language acquisition and community involvement. These findings underscore the importance of recognizing the varied definitions of integration between migrants and native Germans and the role that they both play in shaping inclusive, multicultural societies.

The intersectionality approach to multiculturalism and SIT helps explain why many Syrians in Germany, even those who are working, speak German or have citizenship, still do not feel fully integrated or truly "belong." According to the SIT, people build part of their identity based on the social groups they belong to. This theory also highlights how people tend to see others as part of "us" (in-group) or "them" (out-group). These affiliations become particularly important in multicultural societies, where visible differences (such as religion, language or cultural norms) can emphasize perceived boundaries between groups, such as "Syrians" versus "Germans."

For Syrian migrants in Germany, many still feel emotionally connected to Syria and tend to socialize mostly with other Syrians. SIT explains this by showing how people stick to their in-group when they do not feel fully accepted by the out-group, in this case, mainstream German society. A Syrian-German woman shared, *"I am a hijabi and a trained English teacher, and my English is very good. When I tried to pursue a master's degree here in order to teach, the professor in my interview told me that my qualifications were not recognized. He said I would need to start with a bachelor's degree, and even then, my chances of finding a teaching job would be very limited due to community acceptance. He suggested I focus on translation work instead, as it would involve less public interaction."*

This account highlights the intersectionality at play, where religion, among other factors, significantly influences an individual's perceived acceptability and opportunities for integration.

Even when Syrians try hard to integrate, by learning the language, working or contributing to society, some still face discrimination or are not seen as "real" Germans. This is where SIT

talks about identity threat: when someone's sense of who they are feels challenged by how others see or treat them. Some interviewees mentioned being asked where they are "really" from or feeling excluded socially despite living there for many years. One respondent said, "*after the recent events in Syria, I was asked when will I go back? I am German, why should they ask me this?*". In this case, limited engagement with Germans, partly due to social norms around formality and privacy, reduces opportunities to form strong intergroup ties.

Overall, analyzing the above quotes from different Syrian respondents from the intersectionality and SIT lens shows that integration is not just about speaking the language or having a job. It is also about feeling accepted and valued as part of the national identity. When people feel like outsiders, they hold onto their original identity more strongly, and this limits deeper social integration.

8. Germany between integration and assimilation

The discussion above highlights that multiculturalism and integration are not one-size-fits-all processes but are shaped by individual identities, systemic structures, historical legacies and public perceptions. The findings explain how cultural and economic threats can create social divisions and hinder genuine integration. Moreover, intersectional analysis reveals how migrants' experiences are deeply affected by overlapping factors like race, gender, religion and legal status, which must be considered in both research and policymaking. Integration, therefore, cannot be achieved solely through individual adaptation; it must also involve structural changes in host societies, particularly in addressing discrimination, media framing and unequal access to rights and opportunities.

Germany's historical and legal approach to immigration reflects a complex tension between integration and assimilation. While post-WWII waves of migration and subsequent reforms, such as the Immigration Act of 2005 and the more recent 2024 Nationality Act amendments, aimed at managing increasing diversity, they often promoted assimilation over multiculturalism. Policies emphasized language acquisition, adherence to German values and economic contribution, while offering limited recognition for preserving immigrants' cultural identities. Concepts like *Leitkultur* reinforced the expectation that newcomers conform to dominant German norms, viewing integration largely through an ethnic-national lens.

Despite localized efforts and certain legal reforms, Germany has not embraced a formal multicultural policy at the national level. Discrepancies in treatment based on migrants' origins, such as more favorable treatment of Ukrainian refugees versus others, reveal inconsistencies and, in some cases, discriminatory practices. Public sentiment also reflects ambivalence: while some Germans view diversity positively, a significant portion feel alienated by it. Media narratives, political rhetoric, particularly from the far-right AfD, and selective application of laws have further complicated the integration landscape.

Ultimately, Germany's integration policies are often assimilative in nature, placing the responsibility on migrants to adapt, with little systemic support for cultural maintenance. This approach raises critical questions about inclusivity, belonging and the sustainability of integration efforts in a society that continues to diversify.

Based on the findings and theoretical insights discussed, it is clear that integration is a two-way process that involves both migrants and host societies. There is a need for a genuine address to key obstacles, including systematic barriers, social biases and cultural misunderstandings hindering integration, that move beyond language learning, employment and community engagement. To improve integration outcomes and foster a more cohesive society, the following policy recommendations are suggested:

(1) Promote Inclusion, Not Just Assimilation

Support policies that allow migrants to keep their culture while participating fully in society. Integration should work both ways, not just asking migrants to change but also encouraging society to be more open.

- (2) Fight Discrimination and Bias
Make sure anti-discrimination laws are followed in housing, work and schools. Public employees should be trained to treat all people fairly, regardless of their background.
- (3) Encourage Fair Media and Public Talk
Media and politicians should avoid spreading fear or false information about migrants. Instead, they should highlight the positive roles migrants play in society.
- (4) Offer Targeted Support Based on Needs
Understand that not all migrants are the same; refugees, skilled workers and children of migrants may need different kinds of support. Policies should be flexible and respond to these differences.
- (5) Create Shared Spaces for Interaction

Encourage programs in schools, workplaces and neighborhoods that bring migrants and local people together. Regular interaction helps reduce fear and build understanding.

9. Conclusion

This research examined the evolution of multiculturalism in Germany, focusing on how it has been perceived by different scholars, addressed by political elites and received by the public. The research concludes that while Germany has exerted welcomed efforts toward integration as a presumably preferred approach toward multiculturalism, these efforts were not sufficient nor effective and gradually shifted toward assimilation in response to challenging political dynamics. With the increasing number of migrants and foreign-born in Germany, there is an urgent need to foster genuinely multicultural societies that respond to the diverse needs and aspirations of their populations, to enhance social cohesion and inclusion. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to better understand how integration experiences and perceptions develop over time, especially in light of changing policies and social dynamics. Comparative studies across different migrant groups or regions within Germany are also encouraged, as they can provide valuable insights into whether integration challenges are community-specific or symptoms of broader structural issues.

Ethical statement

All participants have been informed of the scope of the research prior to their participation, including the protection of their anonymity. All participants provided verbal informed consent. Cairo University does not require ethics review board clearance, especially that all participants are adults and abled.

Note

1. Blue Card Scheme/Program that provides a work and residence permit to highly skilled non-European nationals who can address a gap in the labor force in a given country. Definition as per the European Commission (n.d.). *EU Blue Card*. Retrieved April 23, 2025, accessed through https://ec.europa.eu/immigration/blue-card_en

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Corresponding author

Manar M. Hafez Ahmed can be contacted at: manarsharouda@aucegypt.edu