Article

American Behavioral Scientist
1–22


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DOI: 10.1177/00027642231182886
journals.sagepub.com/home/abs


Migration as Crisis? German Migration Discourse at Critical Points of Nation-Building

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Abstract

This article enquires how the Federal Republic of Germany has governed migration at critical junctures of German nation-building within a growing European Union. Drawing on the documents on "Einwanderung" (immigration) from the archive of the German Bundestag from 1949 until 2022, and on secondary literature and media representations of (forced) migration, migrants, and refugees, this article traces different depictions of migration in German political discourse at critical moments of German nation-building to answer the question: Which role does the narrative of "migration as crisis" play for the German nation-building project? I argue that to answer this question, it is necessary to understand whether an incoming migrant group is considered beneficial or dangerous ("critical") for the hegemonic articulations of an imagined German national identity.

Keywords

Germany, migration crisis, political discourse, nation-building, German history

Introduction

"Crisis narratives" have long dominated European migration[1] discourses, the German discourse being no exception. With the number of people moving toward Europe being perceived as steadily increasing, the EU and its member states have declared a war on "criminal gangs" of smugglers and traffickers (Hintjens, 2019, p.1), and "migration as crisis" has become the dominant narrative (Allen et al., 2018; Carastathis et al., 2018;

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Dines et al., 2018; Lucassen, 2018; Niemann & Zaun, 2018; Sigona, 2018). Such crisis narratives are built around deviations from a perceived "normality": A crisis is commonly portrayed as an extraordinary event leading to instability and danger and affecting a preexisting reality which is perceived as "normal" (Cantat et al., this issue).

Despite migration having been the norm in human history, European discourses have long considered sedentariness as normal. This is in part linked to the Westphalian state model, which is dominant on the continent and takes the form of nation-building projects that rely on the differentiation of an in-group from an out-group, of citizens from noncitizens. I understand a nation as a historically developed community of people who share a distinctive language and culture (Bendix, 1980) who collectively construct a national identity (Anderson, 1991); in modern day Europe, such a community is commonly organized in nation-states, which are continuously engaged in processes of nation-building. I follow Keating (1996) in defining the nation-state as "the concentration of authority within territorial boundaries and the claim to sovereignty," and the nation as "that community which may claim the right to self-government" and the state (Keating, 1996, p. 23). I understand nation-building as a process through which the boundaries of the nation-state and those of the national community come as close to matching as possible. It is logical, therefore, that controlling the mobility of people has a performative aspect in nation-states as it tries to demonstrate the capacity to exercise force and take hold of a population (Fröhlich & Müller-Funk, 2023). Research has established that state actors actively construct authority, including over mobility, and utilize it to achieve different political goals in processes of nation-building (Lams, 2021). Looking at Europe after 1945 as a "post-wartime order," mobility control can thus be understood as a tool to shift and reshape a society in a way which includes some citizens while excluding others (Sosnowski, 2020, p. 273f). In such a view, "the migrant" can be seen as a potential threat to processes of nation-building, as they are "moving targets" (Elsheikh & Ayazi, 2017) and marginal figures with unclear potential (Baldwin, 2013), making them hard to read and control (Rothe et al., 2021). With the number of displaced people worldwide having risen steadily over the past decades, it seems only logical that this would be echoed in a view of "migration as crisis": The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) considered 89.3 million people worldwide as forcibly displaced at the end of 2021 "as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order."[2] This is almost twice the number of 10 years earlier, when the UN characterized 43.7 million forcibly displaced as "the highest number in 15 years."[3]

In Germany, as in other European states, not all migration is considered equally "critical," however. Such perceptions depend on whether migrants are considered assets or risks (Müller-Funk & Natter, 2023) to a nation-building project. The political dimension of this is evident in the hierarchy of suffering created by states, clearly differentiating between those who deserve protection and those who do not (Carastathis et al., 2018, p. 30). Those fulfilling the conditions outlined in the Geneva Convention of 1951 (i.e., refugees) are commonly considered deserving of protection, while labor migrants are seen as not needing protection as they remain their home states' responsibility through consulates and embassies. Whether the arrival of refugees and labor

migrants is seen as critical or not depends on the size and timing of such immigration movements, the self-image of and economic conditions in the host state, on the level of education of incoming migrants, and on cultural proximity (Müller-Funk et al., 2023). In the German case, for instance, the arrival of ethnic German *Flüchtlinge* (refugees), *Vertriebene* (expellees), and *Aussiedler* (resettlers) was treated differently than the arrival of *Ausländer* (foreigners) as refugees or migrants, with the underlying differentiation between ethnic Germans and "foreigners" captured in the often-repeated (but contested) statement "*Deutschland ist kein Einwanderungsland* (Germany is no immigration state, see analysis below). In any case, those who seek better lives in Europe due to hardships other than political violence (effects of climate change, natural disaster, poverty, no rule of law, etc.), are commonly seen as "illegal" or "irregular" and as not deserving of protection in dominant European discourses, including the German one; their immigration is considered "critical" in every respect. Thus, while refugees and labor migrants are provided with certain rights and privileges, the label of irregularity has a pronounced negative and exclusionary impact on the lives of those categorized as such (Triandafyllidou, 2010; Vollmer, 2011; Zetter, 1991). Relatedly, different groups of migrants experience different degrees of openness and "welcome culture" in host societies like Germany.

In the following, I first present my theoretical framework. In the article's main body, I draw on archival data to show how German discourse on migration has evolved over time, and how the narrative of "migration as crisis" figures in it, with a focus on three key features: the framing of immigrants at moments of national identity formation; the delicate balance between seeing immigrants as economic assets or threats; and interactions between a growing European integration and domestic interests. The conclusion summarizes the findings and identifies avenues for future research.

Theoretical Framework

Whether immigrants are a valued part of or a threat to German society has been fought over for decades, if not centuries, within the different entities that have considered themselves German over the years. In this article, my goal is to understand the role of depictions of (im)migration as crisis in processes of nation-building in Germany. I do this by identifying discursive shifts and critical junctures in German migration discourse from the foundation of the Federal Republic 1949 until today, and relating them to shifts in migration policy and governance. I understand changes in discourse as indicators of real-world power shifts (Foucault, 2017), and therefore interested in the "specific rules and conventions that structure the production of meanings" in such instances (Lams, 2021, p. 61). Because national identity is a key element of nation-building, I aim to uncover how national identity has been discursively constructed by differentiating between "us" and "them" in German migration discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). To structure my analysis, I focus on seven critical moments of nation-building, namely the foundation of the Federal Republic (1949); the economic boom of the 1950s; a period of détente toward the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from the mid-1960s onward, especially

the Eastern Agreements (*Ostverträge*) of 1972; German reunification and European freedom of movement (1990); the EU's eastward enlargement (2004, 2007); the collapse of the Dublin System (2015/2016); and the Ukraine war (2022). It is in such situations, in which political power and the established order are challenged, that discursive (power) shifts become possible.

The discursive construction of national identity becomes evident in hegemonic articulations of social relations which aim for political dominance, meaning that discourse as a social practice is also a political activity. In addition, discursive representations of national identity can also contain elements of totalization, meaning that a national identity is presented as homogenous, for example, by combining a set of disparate, subjective identities into one (illusionary) notion of "Germanness" that only exists through rejecting other identities and is otherwise an empty signifier (Laclau, 2005, p. 70f). The notion of "Germanness" alone does not carry meaning, but symbolizes diverging interests depending on who is speaking, as my analysis will show.

I draw on a corpus of both secondary and primary data, including academic publications and media reports as well as 8000+ documents from the archive of the German Bundestag (1949–2022) connected to the search term *Einwanderung* (immigration). This includes laws (draft to enacted), interactions between the executive and legislative branches of the state (debates, inquiries, proposals, and petitions), communications between the German *Bundestag* (Federal Parliament) and *Bundesrat* (Federal Council), and between EC/EU bodies and German administration.

Contextualization: A German History of Migration Governance

The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was founded in May 1949 after its predecessor had committed genocide of 6 million Jews and devastated large parts of the world with an aggressive, violent war based on fascist, racist, and antisemitic ideas. Millions of people had become refugees throughout the war; from the end of 1944 onward, Russian advances and the total defeat of Nazi Germany also drove millions of ethnic German *Vertriebene* (expellees) from Eastern Prussia, Silesia, and Pomerania to what is today the FRG. In fact, the *Flüchtlingsfrage* (refugee question) became Germany's "Problem Nr. 1" (Das Parlament, 12.03.1952) after the war, but with the term refugee mostly referring to 12.5 million *Reichsbürger* (citizens of the German Reich) and ethnic German minorities from Eastern Europe as well as to German refugees from the Soviet occupied zone. The heterogeneity of this group is mirrored in the different terms used to describe its members: *Ostflüchtlinge, Flüchtlinge, Kriegsvertriebene, Ausgewiesene, Neubürger, Heimatvertriebene*, and so on (refugees from the East, refugees, war expellees, deportees, new citizens, homeland expellees; Beer, 2016). The presence of so many terms also indicates the lack of a collective national identity; it was unclear and contested at this point in time what "Germanness" meant and who belonged to this group (see below).

With regard to refugees (*Flüchtlinge*), Germany's initial governance approach was enshrined in Art. 16(2) of its constitutional law (*Grundgesetz*, GG) of 1949 (Streich, 1989). After the experience of the totalitarian Nazi regime, the Parliamentary Council formulated a strikingly liberal right to asylum explicitly to prevent German governments from ever denying protection to politically persecuted people ever again (Bosswick, 2000; Kauffmann, 2008): "*Politisch Verfolgte genießen Asylrecht*" ("Persons persecuted for political reasons enjoy the right to asylum"). The interpretation of that very inclusive sentence (on its history, see Bosswick, 2000), however, has changed over time and in essence swayed between humanitarian calls for protection of asylum seekers on the one hand and efforts to protect German national identity from increasing immigration on the other, with the latter position dating back to before the second World War (Kauffmann, 2008).[4] *Vertriebene* (expelled ethnic Germans) as well as ethnic German refugees from the Soviet occupied zone (*Sowjetzonenflüchtlinge*) were governed by the *Bundesvertriebenengesetz*[5] (Expellees and Refugees Act, BVFG) of 1953, which defined who belongs to this group and which rights and privileges accompanied the respective categories. The law is still in force but has since been amended to include so-called *Spätaussiedler* (late resettlers): ethnic Germans who migrate to Germany from the territories of the Soviet Union/Eastern Bloc up until today.

The economic boom (*Wirtschaftswunder*) of the 1950s also had implications for German migration governance, as a period of very high unemployment rates immediately after the war was superseded by an economic upswing that uncovered a severe lack of manpower especially in the fields of agriculture, mining, and construction. In consequence, the FRG started to work on bilateral agreements with European (Greece, Portugal, and Spain) and non-European states (Turkey, Tunisia, and Morocco). These *Anwerbeabkommen* (recruitment agreements) allowed German companies to legally recruit and employ foreign workers. The first was negotiated with Italy in 1955, the last with Yugoslavia in 1968, and between 1955 and 1973, when the global oil crisis led to a ban on further recruitment (*Anwerbestopp*), approximately 14 million *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) came to Western Germany. It is important to note, however, that the FRG under its first chancellor Konrad Adenauer had declared a policy of full employment (*Vollbeschäftigung*) to safeguard the country's social and political stability (Prontera, 2017). This can be understood as a hegemonic articulation of social relations aiming for political dominance of a national identity which in this case was built on a differentiation between "Germans" (however heterogenous) and citizens of other states who were allowed to stay and work in Germany temporarily (guestworkers). It can also help to explain why there still was opposition to the recruitment of foreign labor up until the agreement was signed (and beyond, e.g., BT-Plenarprotokoll 02/66, February 17, 1955, p. 3387). About 3 million guest workers stayed and had their families follow them; this explains why the number of foreign workers decreased from 2.6 million in 1973 to 1.6 million in 1989, but the number of so-called *Ausländer* (foreigners) living in Western Germany increased from 3.97 million to 4.9 million in the same time span (Oltmer & Hanewinkel, 2021). German politics was not prepared for these family unification processes, however; the state's failure to implement effective integration measures would continue to haunt the German nation-building project (Göktürk et al., 2007, pp. 23–25).

The 1960s and 1970s saw, after a period of perpetual confrontation (building of the Berlin wall, Cuba Crisis), an era of détente between West and East. Social Democrat Willy Brandt's slogan *Wandel durch Annäherung* (change through rapprochement) became the symbol of this development. In terms of migration governance, it mostly impacted German-German migration movements. Between 1949 and 1989, 3.5 to 4 million people arrived in West Germany from the GDR, most of them before the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. On May 17, 1972, when the German *Bundestag* (lower house of parliament) ratified the *Ostverträge* (the Moscow Agreement with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Agreement with Poland), the FRG officially accepted the German-German and the German-Polish borders for the first time and agreed to a mutual renunciation of violence (*gegenseitiger Gewaltverzicht*). This was a fundamental change in the German nation-building project, which had hitherto been built on the assumption of a united Germany. It would also prove to be a necessary precondition for German reunification, and paved the way for the establishment of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, later OSCE) through which citizens of the GDR could apply for legal exit (Effner & Heidemeyer, 2005). The FRG also accepted almost 2 million ethnic Germans from socialist states in Eastern Europe between 1950 and 1989, two-thirds of them from Poland, with which Germany signed the German-Polish Emigration Agreement in 1975.

After having received very few asylum applications between 1949 and the late 1970s, the military coup in Turkey in 1980 generated a preliminary peak of a general uptick: numbers rose from 51,493 in 1979 to 107,818 a year later (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2022, p. 5). Asylum applications would again surpass 100,000 in 1988, climb to 190,000 in 1990, and reach almost 440,000 in 1992 due to the war in Yugoslavia (Oltmer, 2018). In 1990, then Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble declared that the 121,318 *Ausländer* (foreigners) who had applied for asylum in 1989 represented a "considerable increase" compared to the 103,076 applications of 1988, and also the single highest annual inflow (Bundesregierung, 1990). In light of these developments, several measures were quickly adopted, including the expedition of asylum procedures (1982, further amended in 1991), the work ban for the first year of an asylum application (1980; raised to 5 years in 1987), and visa requirements for a number of states of origin (1987, the list has been expanded continuously) (Oltmer, 2017, p. 103; Oltmer & Bade, 2005). All of these measures can be understood as materializations of a national identity built on a differentiation between "ethnic Germans" and "others." Schäuble also noted that the rate of acceptance (*Anerkennungsquote*) had further decreased to 5.0%. After the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed, the number of ethnic German *Spätaussiedler* also kept rising (from 200,000 in 1988 to 400,000 in 1990), and the fall of the Berlin wall and the subsequent reunification of Germany drew about 800,000 people from the former GDR to Western Germany.

In the 1990s, the advancing process of European integration, especially the opening of internal borders, further impacted German migration governance and the German nation-building project. With the Schengen agreements (Schengen I, 1985; Schengen II, 1992), movement of EU citizens within the EU became much easier; at the same

time, external border control expanded quickly, making it more difficult and risky for the so-called "irregular" migrants to enter Europe (Klepp, 2011). Importantly, the ongoing irregularization of asylum migration toward Europe leaves out the fact that the legal routes available for migrants—refugee resettlement programs, labor migration—are only available for a very small number of people and do not offer a viable answer to the need of protection which a war like the one in Syria entails (Bloch et al., 2011; Collyer, 2010; de Haas, 2008). What is more, while the EU border regime is commonly dubbed "Fortress Europe," it could also be argued that it is in fact selectively permeable, as alongside increased deterrence, entry into the EU has become easier for selected nationalities and people with specific skillsets. Another feature of the EU border regime is the increasing externalization of border control and migrant surveillance to non-EU states like Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, or Turkey (Geddes & Boswell, 2011; Klepp, 2011).

German migration governance needs to be seen as embedded in and deeply interlinked with such EU policies. Parallel to the negotiations around Schengen II and considering the rising numbers of asylum applications since 1980, the German (conservative) government under chancellor Helmut Kohl had been proposing to amend Article 16(2) of the German *Grundgesetz* of 1949. This was successful on May 23, 1993, when 521 parliamentarians from the then governmental parties CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic and Christian Social Union) and FDP (Free Democrats) as well as the oppositional SPD (Social Democrats) voted for and 132 against it, thereby reaching the two-thirds of the vote that are required for constitutional amendments. While the original sentence was not changed, it was supplemented with extensive regulations which considerably limit the right to asylum (Art. 16a GG Asylrecht). Most importantly, the new regulations introduced the notion that someone who travels to Germany from a "safe country of origin" (*sicherer Herkunftstaat*) or via "safe third countries" (*sichere Drittstaaten*)—a category which includes every single one of Germany's neighboring states—does not have the right to asylum in Germany (Oltmer, 2018).

From 1993 to 2006, asylum application numbers dropped continuously. German migration governance focused mostly on integrating existing *Ausländer* (foreigners) and on the recurring issue of *Fachkräftemangel* (skilled labor shortage), which is related to the fact that German reproduction rates have long been too low to sustain the country's productivity and economic growth in the long term. Selective immigration, a point-based immigration system, and blue and green cards dominated the discussion about migration in this period. The Bundestag debated a new *Zuwanderungsgesetz* (Immigration Act) from 2000 until it took effect on January 1, 2005. In parallel, eight Central and Eastern European states joined the EU in the EU's Eastern enlargement (2004), effectively changing Germany's political and geographical position within the EU and leading to rising numbers of immigration from the new member states.

Asylum application rates began to slowly rise again from 2007 onward, with numbers peaking in 2015, when according to Eurostat, 1,255,600 first time asylum seekers applied for international protection in the EU-28 (Eurostat, 2016, p. 3). Official German statistics counted 1,091,894 migrants registered at the German border in

2015 (BMI, 2016a); however, this number was later reduced to 890,000, as many people did not stay in Germany and some migrants may have been registered more than once (BMI, 2016b; Gehrsitz & Ungerer, 2016). This massive increase in asylum applications led to the de facto collapse of the Dublin System of burden sharing in EU asylum policies (Bosswick, 2000), in the development of which Germany had played a key role. In response to this, the EU, led by Germany, brokered an agreement with Turkey—today's largest refugee-hosting state—in 2016 to curb so-called "irregular" or "illegal" immigration to the EU.

Finally, the Ukraine war of 2022 upended principles of German and EU migration governance which had been considered unalterable for decades: Instead of a lengthy process of application for asylum without access to the labor market, refugees from Ukraine were granted temporary blanket protection, including a residence permit and access to employment and social welfare. Instead of criminalizing refugees' movement, people with a Ukrainian passport were allowed to move freely around the EU, often without charge.

This brief historical outline illustrates the overall context of Germany's approach to migration governance: legal and political differences are made between ethnic Germans and *Ausländer* (foreigners), ethnic German *Vertriebene* (expellees) and *Aussiedler* (resettlers), ethnic German and other *Flüchtlinge* (refugees), European and non-European migrants, labor migrants and guest workers, and regular and irregular migrants. In the following, I show how German migration discourse has developed over time around three central themes: the framing of (potential) immigrants at moments of national identity formation; the delicate balance between seeing immigrants as economic assets or threats (Müller-Funk and Natter, 2023); and interactions between a growing European integration and domestic interests.

Analysis

Who Belongs?

In a first step, my analysis brought to the forefront the framing of (potential) immigrants at critical moments of national identity formation: the first years of the newly formed Republic after the second World War; the *Ostverträge*, when the FRG officially accepted that there were two distinct German states; and German reunification. For the first years after the war, my data clearly shows that immigration was mainly seen as critical, as illustrated by terms like *unerwünscht* (unwanted) and *Flüchtlingsmassen* (masses of refugees, BT-Plenarprotokoll 01/50, March 23, 1950, p. 1754), *illegaler Zustrom* (illegal inflow, BT-Plenarprotokoll 01/50, March 23, 1950, p. 1755), and *Ansturm* (onslaught, BT-Plenarprotokoll 01/52, March 27, 1950, p. 1883). Also, the existence of a Federal Ministry for Expellee Affairs (*Bundesministerium für die Angelegenheiten der Vertriebenen*), a refugee commission (*Flüchtlingsausschuss*) in the *Bundesrat*, and refugee administrations in the Western occupied zones (*Flüchtlingsverwaltungen*) point to the centrality of the issue. Differentiations were made, however, between *echten Heimatvertriebenen* (real expellees, also called *A-Flüchtlinge*, A-refugees) and *Ostflüchtlingen* (refugees

from the East; BT-Plenarprotokoll 01/52, 1886). The latter category included refugees from Eastern Germany, but also from Poland and Czechoslovakia, where ethnic Germans were being evicted at the time, assumedly on behest of Stalinist Moscow. Immigration from East of the rivers Oder and Neiße (*Oder-Neiße-Linie*) was considered legal, while immigration from the Soviet occupied zone was regarded as "largely illegal" (BT-Plenarprotokoll 01/36, February 9, 1950, p. 1150f).

Importantly, the incoming migrants were of German descent, illustrated by framings as *unsere Brüder und Schwestern* (our brothers and sisters, BT-Plenarprotokoll 01/52, 1882) and utterances like "jeder, der in der Ostzone (. . .) nicht mehr leben kann, [muß] aufgenommen werden (. . .), denn wir sind Deutsche" ("anyone who cannot live in the Eastern zone anymore has to be taken in, because we are Germans," BT-Plenarprotokoll 01/52, 1887), or "Deutschland muss die Heimat aller Deutschen bleiben!" ("Germany has to remain the home of all Germans," BT-Plenarprotokoll 01/52, 1882). The latter quote also points to a key fact of (Western) German national identity at the time: up until the Eastern Agreements (*Ostverträge*), the self-conception of Western Germany was that only *Gesamtdeutschland* (the whole of Germany, including the Soviet occupied zone) was the desirable and "right" Germany. Interestingly, however, some politicians also used this to argue against further immigration of ethnic Germans by presenting staying in the East as the way to achieve a unified Germany: "Germany has to remain the home to all Germans, not only the Western German Federal Republic, but the whole of Germany" (BT-Plenarprotokoll 01/52, 1884).

The fact that it was predominantly ethnic Germans immigrating at the time, not "foreigners," impacted migration discourse. For instance, the possibility that German policemen could have to deter German men and women from entering the FRG was considered unacceptable, and thus, unspeakable (BT-Plenarprotokoll 01/1952, 1881). Instead, Germany was seen as having the duty to give Germans hope and protection, and to offer a safe haven. This was, however, strongly conditioned on immigration being legal and regulated, which somewhat excluded German refugees from the Soviet occupied zone: "Das Problem der illegalen Einwanderer aus der Ostzone muss irgendwie gelöst werden" ("The problem of illegal immigration from the Eastern zone has to be solved somehow," BT-Plenarprotokoll 01/27, 849). Not surprisingly, some othering tendencies are visible in German discourse at the time, with the *einheimische* ("indigenous") German population problematizing cultural differences like dialect and religious denomination as well as economic difficulties (Feld et al., 2017). Similarly, *Aussiedler* and their children, who had been shaped by a socialist system, were identified as "different" from "indigenous" Germans (Panagiotidis, 2017). Ethnic German immigrants felt "like foreigners" (Schubert, 1971), and were seen as "not much better off than the children of guestworkers" (Ulrich, 1971). Nonetheless, in hindsight, the immigration of ethnic German refugees, expellees, and resettlers is considered a success story. Their "diligence," "attitude," and "contribution to the reconstruction of the country" after the war have been a recurring trope in German discourse since the 1960s (BT-Plenarprotokoll 5/113, June 9, 1967, p. 5574), illustrating that the articulation of ethnic German immigrants' 'Germanness' won in the discursive marketplace against their representation as 'other,' thereby ultimately contributing to a more homogenous national identity in the German nation-building project.

The political change from confrontation to rapprochement in the 1970s, which was codified in the agreements with Moscow and Warsaw, can also be considered a critical moment of German national identity formation. Where hitherto, Western Germany had been lobbying and hoping for a reunited German state, those agreements together with the Basic Treaty (*Grundlagenvertrag*) between FRG and GDR of December 1972 were a clear acknowledgment of the fact that there were two German states with distinct territories and populations. The latter's preamble reads: "*Die Hohen Vertragschließenden Seiten[,] eingedenk ihrer Verantwortung für die Erhaltung des Friedens, in dem Bestreben, einen Beitrag zur Entspannung und Sicherheit in Europa zu leisten, in dem Bewußtsein, daß die Unverletzlichkeit der Grenzen und die Achtung der territorialen Integrität und der Souveränität aller Staaten in Europa in ihren gegenwärtigen Grenzen eine grundlegende Bedingung für den Frieden sind*", thus stating that the inviolability of borders and respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states in Europe within their present borders [are] a fundamental condition for peace (documentArchiv.de - Vertrag über die Grundlagen der Beziehungen zwischen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik [Grundlagenvertrag] (21.12.1972)).

While ethnic Germans continued to have a special status in German migration governance, illustrated by the *Bundesvertriebenengesetz*, the sealing off of the Eastern bloc also meant that the number of incoming ethnic German migrants decreased considerably. Because of this, and because the economic upswing in the 1950s and low birth rates of the war cohort had revealed a severe lack of labor in the country, a new strand of discourse developed which focused on foreign labor and guest workers. Interestingly, the fact that 14 million guest workers arrived in the FRG from 1955 onward did not lead to a self-conception of the Republic as an immigration state. This has deep historical roots, as the sentence *Deutschland ist kein Einwanderungsland* (Germany is not an immigration state) was already enshrined in the Nationality Act of 1913, which was effective up until 1990 (Meier-Braun, 2016, p. 17). Also, guest workers' immigration was predominantly seen as uncritical, largely due to the fact that both the FRG and the guest workers themselves assumed that their stay would only be temporary (Feld et al., 2017, p. 13; Herbert, 2014, pp. 623, 677–680). Their immigration was seen as a requirement to rebuild Germany and to reestablish its standing in the international community (BT-Plenarprotokoll 5/142, December 8, 1967, 7312; BT-Plenarprotokoll 04/04, November 29, 1961, p. 41). Some criticism flared up as soon as the economic situation deteriorated—the very first signs of a recession in 1966 were enough to generate discussions about reducing the number of foreign workers (Brodmerkel, 2017)—but the dominant view of guest worker immigration remained positive as long as they were not staying permanently and the economic development was good. In other words, guest worker immigration was perceived as positive as long as it could function as a stabilizer for German national identity by presenting something from which the latter could distinguish itself, i.e., a classic out-group.

The reunification of the two German states was another radical change in German national identity. The collapse of the GDR and the subsequent creation of a united Germany changed the German state as well as its position within the European Union

and the world, and therefore impacted the German nation-building project in a fundamental way. German migration discourse was dominated by, on the one hand, an increasingly critical view on the immigration of foreigners, as evident in discussions about rising numbers of refugees since 1980, discussions about incoming families of guest workers, and about an increasing inflow from the collapsing Soviet Union, especially Romania and Poland. This criticism would peak in 1992 together with the numbers of asylum applications. Asylum law, it was stated at the time of the reunification, "must not become an instrument of uncontrolled immigration. This would overstrain our citizens' acceptance and the boundaries of our ability to integrate" (BT-Plenarprotokoll 11/207, April 26, 1990). In contrast, then chancellor Helmut Kohl made it clear that ethnic German integration was to be considered a mutual gift, and that their return to their old home and fatherland was seen as a signal of hope ("Wir werden die Aussiedler, die jetzt neu hierhergekommen sind, beschenken. Aber ich füge hinzu: Sie beschenken uns auch. Sie beschenken uns dadurch, dass sie ein Signal der Hoffnung in sich tragen, dass sie nicht aufgegeben haben, dass sie über ein Jahrzehnt, zum Teil über Jahrzehnte hindurch das Ziel vor Augen hatten und als unverrückbares Ziel vor Augen behielten: in die alte Heimat, in ihr Vaterland zurückkehren zu wollen," quoted in Feld et al., 2017, p. 14), making it clear that while ethnic German immigration was welcome, high numbers of immigration of 'foreigners' was considered critical. The federal government also noted that "German resettlers are not immigrants" ("Im übrigen ist darauf zu verweisen, daß deutsche Aussiedler und Übersiedler keine Einwanderer sind. Es handelt sich begrifflich nicht um eine Einwanderung.", Drucksache 11/8477, November 22, 1990). Part of the reasoning was that asylum seekers in Germany tended to belong to lower income classes, leading to parts of the German population perceiving them as competitors on the labor market and with regard to housing and social services (Herbert, 2014, pp. 994–996). Interestingly, this was particularly true in the new Eastern counties, although the number of foreigners residing there was low: At the fall of the GDR, 190,000 labor migrants from Mozambique and Vietnam lived there, predominantly young unmarried men who lived in legally unsafe and precarious social conditions, separate from the rest of the population in collective housing (Herbert, 2014, pp. 1171–1173).

Like Them or Fear Them?

A second theme which arose from my data is the difficult balance between the perception of immigrants (refugees, labor migrants, but also ethnic Germans and Jewish people) as assets or threats in German migration discourse. The most important moments for this topic were the recruiting agreements for guest workers, the ban on further recruitment of guest workers in 1973, the constitutional amendment regarding asylum in 1993, and the Immigration Act of 2005.

The view as assets is strongly linked to concrete economic gain. Guest workers, for instance, were seen predominantly as assets because they directly contributed to the German economy (Plenarprotokoll 04/05, November 29, 1961, p. 41). The connection between immigration and economic growth was also the driving force behind

Germany's first comprehensive Immigration Act of 2005. A positive view of immigration was only sayable, however, on the condition that German labor was sufficiently prioritized; as Minister of Economy and Technology Michael Glos put it in 2007:

> What we find difficult to live with, however, is the shortage of skilled workers that now exists in Germany. (. . .) First and foremost, we need to (. . .) activate those people who live in our country, (. . .) and we need to give them opportunities. In addition, the issue of controlled immigration of skilled workers from other countries must of course be on the agenda. (. . .) Germany must be able to keep up with the global competition for the best brains to better survive the global competition (BT-Plenarprotokoll 16/108, July 5, 2007, p. 11052) Please add footnote: "Womit wir allerdings nur schwer leben können, ist der Fachkräftemangel, den es in Deutschland inzwischen gibt. (...) Wir müssen in allererster Linie diejenigen Menschen weiterbilden und aktivieren, die in unserem Land leben, (…) und wir müssen ihnen Chancen geben. Außerdem muss selbstvers tändlich die Frage der gesteuerten Zuwanderung von Fachkräften aus anderen Ländern auf die Tagesordnung. (...) Deutschland muss im globalen Wettbewerb um die besten Köpfe mithalten können, um den globalen Wettbewerb besser zu bestehen."

This argument works both ways, however; in the early years of the Republic, the bad economic situation was cited as a reason to curb immigration (BT-Protokoll 01/27, January 27, 1950, 835). For instance, then chancellor Konrad Adenauer explicitly identified the return of 470,000 war prisoners and the arrival of 1 million refugees of German descent in 1949 and early 1950 as causing the very high unemployment rates of the time (BT-Plenarprotokoll 01/36, 1150f, 1162). Also, German politicians argued against further immigration by stating that the economic situation in Western Germany was so bad that no improvement could be expected for immigrants ("der Westen [ist] kein Land des Wohllebens," "the West is no country of good living," BT-Plenarprotokoll 01/52, 1882). Similar tendencies were visible after reunification and during each economic downturn the country has experienced.

The view that immigration can only be positive if it benefits the German state and economy has been criticized in a counter discourse since the early 1990s. In a *Kleine Anfrage* (small inquiry) to the (then conservative) federal government, the green parliamentary group asked for example whether a "cosmopolitan and liberal policy on foreigners" was only valid for people whose immigration was "in the interest of international economic, but also foreign cultural policy," to which the government answered that "cosmopolitanism and liberalization find their limits where they collide with the interests of the FRG and can only apply to foreigners in whom the FRG also has an interest and through whom other interests of the FRG are not endangered" (BT Drucksache 11/8295, October 25, 1990; BT Drucksache 11/8431, November 12, 1990).

Another example for positively connotated immigration of "foreigners" are EU immigrants, although each EU enlargement (Spain and Portugal 1985, Eastern enlargement 2004) also reignited fears of "too much immigration of cheap labour" (BT-Plenarprotokoll 14/44, January 19, 2001, p. 14113), or of immigrants engaging in criminal activities (Drucksache 14/1013, May 7, 1999). Overall, however, EU

immigrants are largely seen in a positive light, which is related to Germany seeing EU immigrants predominantly as fellow EU citizens; to the fact that EU immigrants are mostly well educated and are therefore not seen as straining social security systems (possible exceptions are Eastern European migrants); and to something I would call habituation, as today, more than half of all immigrants arriving in Germany each year hail from EU member states. Also, because Germany committed the historical abomination of the Shoah, Jewish immigration is considered positive, and as proof for the Federal Republic's evolution since 1945 (BT-Plenarprotokoll 14/124, October 12, 2000, p. 11850).

Cultural proximity and a willingness to assimilate have repeatedly been presented as preconditions for seeing migrants as assets and therefore, their immigration as uncritical. Regarding the former, one example of cultural proximity or the lack thereof being instrumentalized for political gain is Germany's open border policy of 2015, which has led to a significant increase in right-wing rhetoric and to the rise of openly Islamo- and xenophobic anti-immigration movements. At their core is an understanding that incoming migrants from the Middle East and other non-European places are fundamentally different from and potentially dangerous for a supposedly homogenous group of dominantly White and Christian German citizens. This debate ties back to the emotional societal debates about the question whether Islam is "a part of Germany" (Meier-Braun, 2016, p. 20ff). With regard to assimilation, the key term is *Leitkultur* (dominant culture) which was first used in 2000 by Friedrich Merz (CDU), then and now head of the parliamentary opposition. The ensuing debate was very emotional and took several years; at its core, the term was used by conservative and right-wing actors as an antithesis to the multicultural society (*Multi-Kulti-Gesellschaft*) which the coalition of Social Democrats and Greens propagated at the time. They were the first German federal government ever to include a clear commitment to Germany as an immigration state in its coalition agreement (Bundesregierung, 1998).

The debate about *Leitkultur* as well as about cultural proximity and willingness to assimilate is rooted in a much earlier discourse about migrants as threats. Political decision-makers, administrative personnel, and media representatives had demanded already in the 1970s that German asylum laws should be limited, presenting asylum seekers as not fleeing from political persecution, but instead merely seeking economic betterment as *Wirtschaftsflüchtlinge* (economic refugees, Bade, 2015, p. 6f; Oltmer, 2018). The term became very popular as a term of abuse in the late 1980s, as did *Grenzen der Belastbarkeit* (boundaries of capacity, Peşmen, 2017) to justify anti-migration views. The German word *Asylant* (derogatory form of asylum seeker) in particular stands for the manifestation of anti-migration attitudes in discourse (Link, 1993). It is important to note here that after banning further recruitment of guest workers in 1973, and in the absence of a comprehensive immigration law, Germany did not leave many other opportunities to enter the country except as an asylum seeker (Oltmer & Bade, 2005).

All these terms have remained popular until today, and it would be a mistake to think that they were only used by right-wing or populist actors. To name only one prominent example, then Minister of the Interior, Otto Schily (SPD), used *Grenzen der*

Belastbarkeit (boundaries of capacity) in 1999 shortly after being appointed (Bade, 2015, p. 7). During the national election campaign of 1986/1987, the issue of immigration was also discussed together with different conceptions of German national identity, which was primarily conceptualized as ethnic-cultural identity, and depicted as under major threat from *Überfremdung*, i.e., multicultural foreign infiltration (Bosswick, 2000, p. 47). Images of flooding or invasions became quite common in German public discourse and were taken up by populist voices, using terms like *Asylantenflut* (flood of asylum seekers) or *Das Boot ist voll* (the boat is full) for their political gain (Pagenstecher, 2008; Peşmen, 2017).

One tangible effect of these discursive shifts was the rising violence against immigrants (Müller & Schwarz, 2018), which was increasingly accepted by German citizens. Violent attacks, first targeting asylum seekers, then foreigners more generally, happened in September 1991 in Hoyerswerda, October 1991 in Hünxe, August 1992 in Rostock-Lichtenhagen, November 1992 in Mölln, and May 1993 in Solingen. From October 1990 until mid-1993, more than 5,000 violent crimes against foreigners were committed, resulting in at least 49 fatalities (Elsässer, 1993), and the numbers have been rising ever since. In an opinion poll of August 1992, 13% of the German public characterized violence against asylum seekers as *berechtigten Ausdruck des Volkszorns"* ("a legitimate expression of public scorn," Nuscheler, 1995, 21ff). It was in this societal atmosphere that the German Bundestag agreed to amend the hitherto very inclusive right to asylum in its constitutional law. After a red–green federal government had announced that Germany was, in fact, an immigration state, in 1998 asylum-seeker homes were again burning throughout the country, and the trend continues until today; xenophobia is on the rise, and right-wing positions have become more and more socially acceptable (see for instance BT-Plenarprotokoll 14/124, October 12, 2000, 1841ff, or the secret chats of the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), ARD | Das Erste, 2022).

Migration to Germany is Migration to the EU

Finally, my analysis shows that Germany's migration discourse cannot be fully understood without reflecting on the country's position within the EU, its efforts to create a European identity, and the delicate balance between European and domestic interests. As with the other two topics, both critical, anti-migration, and more welcoming, migration-positive views are discernible. Which is dominant depends on the incoming group and on the EU's goals, which are usually defined in a process of unanimous decision-making; overall, however, the view of "migration as crisis" is dominant. The most important instances of interaction between German and European migration governance are the abolition of EU-internal border controls with Schengen, the collapse of the Dublin System in 2015/2016, and the Ukraine war.

The Schengen agreements (Schengen I, 1985, Schengen II, 1992) exposed the urgent need for more harmonized European asylum regulations, which formed the background for the German debate about a constitutional amendment regarding the right to asylum (BT-Plenarprotokoll 12/89, April 30, 1992, 7299). With Schengen, movement of EU citizens within the EU became much easier, leading to a discursive

shift favoring migration within the EU, but also problematizing immigration of non-EU citizens, and stressing the need for an effective border protection and measures to safeguard homeland security (BT-Plenarprotokoll 11/91, September 8, 1988, p. 6266; BT-Plenarprotokoll 11/140, April 27, 1989, p. 10431). Such interactions between European and German legislation have grown in proportion to the European integration process and are particularly powerful when German and European interests align. In fact, Germany has a history of using EU regulations to justify executive measures toward both the parliament and civil society (Bosswick, 2000, p. 54). The Schengen agreement was presented in the dominant German discourse as a key reason why a constitutional amendment was required (BT-Plenarprotokoll 12/89, p. 7306). The proponents of this view used the term *Deutsche Sonderlösung* or *Sonderweg* (German special solution or special path) to say that in light of European history, German unilateralism could never again be a solution and therefore, German asylum regulations had to match European law, making Art. 16 GG insufficient and paving the way to constraining the right to asylum.

Another key EU regulation is the Dublin convention of 1990. It is part of a system of burden sharing in EU asylum policies (Bosswick, 2000); together with the EURODAC regulation, it forms the cornerstone of the so-called Dublin System. The goal of the Dublin System was to avoid that asylum seekers apply for refuge in more than one state; its essence is that it requires migrants to stay within the state they first set foot in until their status is determined. The Dublin System thus clearly favors EU member states like Germany over frontier states which directly border on non-EU sending states. The arrival of an increasing number of migrants at the borders of the EU in 2015, however, led to the de facto collapse of the Dublin System, as first-response states were overwhelmed with the number of incoming migrants and not only started to open their borders, but to actively usher migrants to other states' territories (Alia, 2016) to ease the burden on their own societies. After decades of adhering to a law which had put the bulk of responsibility for "illegal" immigration on EU border states, countries like Italy or Greece thus began to turn a blind eye to "irregular" migrants passing through their territory, thereby uncovering both the political asymmetry inherent in the Dublin System and the problems of access and integration that are caused by restricting migrants' movements (Picozza, 2017).

It was in this situation—German media was full of pictures of migrants arriving in Europe in rubber dinghies (ZEIT Online, 2015), dead migrants washed ashore (Spiegel Online, 2015a), and the migrant trek at the Eastern European border (Spiegel Online, 2015b)—that a major shift occurred in German migration discourse, which had been critical and fearful of admitting "irregular" migrants for decades. German chancellor Angela Merkel unexpectedly became a prominent proponent of better burden-sharing and migration-friendly policies within the EU; in response, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) de facto suspended the Dublin procedure for Syrian nationals on August 21, 2015 (bordermonitoring.eu, 2015). Ten days later, chancellor Merkel famously said "Wir haben so vieles geschafft – wir schaffen das! Wir schaffen das, und dort, wo uns etwas im Wege steht, muss es überwunden werden, muss daran gearbeitet werden." ("We have achieved so much—we can do this! We can do this, and where we encounter an obstacle, we have to overcome it, we have to work on it,"

Federal Press Conference, August 31, 2015)[6]. On September 15, after receiving a lot of praise, but also a lot of critique for her politics, she added "Ich muss ganz ehrlich sagen: Wenn wir jetzt anfangen, uns noch entschuldigen zu müssen dafür, dass wir in Notsituationen ein freundliches Gesicht zeigen, dann ist das nicht mein Land" ("Honestly, if we now have to apologize for showing a friendly face in times of emergency, then this is not my country," federal press conference with Austrian chancellor Faymann). It seems like the perception of "irregular" immigration of non-EU nationals as critical, which had been dominant in German migration discourse for decades, was temporarily overruled by the crisis which the migrants themselves had to endure at home, in their regional host states, and on the way to Europe (Fröhlich, 2017). In fact, evoking the experiences of ethnic Germans with flight and expulsion during and after the war was a central technique in building discursive acceptance for the shift toward more migration-friendly policies (Perron, 2021).

The shift did not last long, however; the backlash came right at its heels. The discursively dominant forces which had long framed immigration, especially "irregular" immigration of non-Europeans, as problematic and potentially dangerous, had not disappeared, but had only been temporarily subdued. Migrants' mass sexual harassment of women on New Year's Eve 2015 in Cologne (Michel et al., 2016) was the most obvious catalyst for their reappearance. In the following months, chancellor Merkel brokered an EU-agreement with Turkey to keep migrants away from European territory, and the term *Fluchtursachenbekämpfung* (fight against root causes of flight and displacement) became the central term of German migration discourse (BT-Drucksache 18/7046, December 16, 2015; BT-Drucksache 18/7039, December 15, 2015; BT-Drucksache 18/9658, June 19, 2016, etc.). Since then, Germany and the EU have done everything in their power to avoid something like 2015 ever happening again; this is illustrated by tightened border control, different FRONTEX and other military deterrence undertakings like Operation Sophia at the EU external border, bilateral agreements with key sending and transit states like Libya and Turkey, and a host of asylum and migration regulations, most recently the EU reform of the asylum procedure regulation and the asylum and migration management regulation in June 2023. Both the EU discourse and the German dominant discourse quickly came back to advocating for the immigration of skilled labor while at the same time framing "irregular" immigration of refugees—there is no "regular" or legal way to reach the EU for these people—as critical and dangerous.

The most recent discursive shift occurred in response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine since February 2022, which has sent millions of Ukrainians to the EU, and several hundred thousands to Germany. This war, caused by a country which Germany had been particularly apologetic of, quickly turned the EU into a united front against a common enemy: Russia. It is arguably this political situation which has made it possible to not see Ukrainian immigration as a threat—the war is the crisis, not the Ukrainian flight. In European and German migration discourse, Ukrainian refugees are considered fellow Europeans, with the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, stating that "Ukraine belongs to the European family" (tagesschau.de, 2022), and unlike the Syrians who came in 2015, Ukrainians are seen as "real

refugees" (Serrao, 2022). In consequence, the EU member states—for the first time ever!—have agreed to apply EU law which lets refugees choose their country of refuge in the EU freely, which does not apply limits on refugee immigration, and which grants refugees work permits and family reunion generously. It remains to be seen whether incoming groups which are not considered European or culturally proximate will enjoy the same rights that Ukrainians have been rightly awarded; should that be the case, it would be possible to speak of a true discursive transformation, from "migration as crisis" to a more migration-friendly approach.

Conclusion

This article has drawn on primary and secondary data to show which role the notion of "migration as crisis" has played historically in the German nation-building project. The analysis has shown that in Germany, the narrative of "migration as crisis" has been characteristic for the dominant discourse from 1949 onwards, with the slogan "Germany is not an immigration state" being part of the national DNA since long before the Federal Republic was founded. Immigration was only positively connotated if immigration was perceived as helping Germany's growth and prosperity, as in the case of the guest workers from 1955 onward, or in the case of skilled labor immigration since the 1990s, when it became common knowledge that there was a significant lack of skilled labor in certain economic fields. The immigration of EU citizens and Jewish immigration were also seen as predominantly uncritical, although migrants from Eastern EU members states like Romania, Bulgaria, or Poland were also subject to othering and criminalizing tendencies. Asylum immigration has been seen as critical from the start; however, even ethnic German refugees were considered illegal and unwanted at the beginning of the German nation-building project. The only outliers are Syrian refugees in 2015 for a brief phase of welcome culture, and Ukrainian refugees since 2022 as part of the EUropean united front against Russia.

Starting with the immigration of ethnic German expellees, resettlers, and refugees after World War II, German migration discourse shows that migration policy-making can be seen as symbolic politics which is less concerned with the incoming migrants than with domestic or EU-internal goals and interests. Throughout the decades, German migration discourse has been a field in which a supposedly worried electorate could be appeased without having to focus on the interests and needs of minorities, guest workers, refugees, asylum seekers, or ethnic German repatriates and their integration into society. The brief outlier in 2015, when Germany became a beacon of "welcome culture," and again in 2022, when Ukrainian refugees were awarded with unprecedented rights and privileges, are exceptions to this otherwise seemingly unalterable rule.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Migration is here understood as an inclusive term, thus including both migrants and refugees.
2. See https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html
3. See https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/country/4dfa11499/unhcr-global-trends-2010.html?query=displaced%20people%202010
4. For instance, the legal basis for admitting labor migrants to the BRD stems from Nazi Germany and the Great Depression. The *Ausländerpolizeiverordnung* (Foreigner Police Regulation, APVO) of August 22, 1938, was reinstated without parliamentary participation by the Federal Ministry of the Interior in 1951 to satisfy the German interest in controlling and monitoring border traffic; only a reference to race (*Rassenzugehörigkeit*) was omitted. The *Verordnung über ausländische Arbeitnehmer* (Regulation about Foreign Workers, VOüAA) of January 23, 1933, which had been developed from two earlier regulations of the 1920s, centralized control over foreign labor in the hands of the state, and was reinstated in 1952 largely without changes, even though it was written by Friedrich Syrup, who led the organization of forced labor in Nazi Germany.
5. https://www.eui.eu/Projects/InternationalArtHeritageLaw/Documents/NationalLegislation/Germany/expelleesandrefugeesact.pdf
6. Sommerpressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel (bundesregierung.de).

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