

German immigration

'Hybrid identities': why Germany is updating its citizenship rules



Sponsors of the bill say the idea of having 'only one homeland is completely outdated'

Guy Chazan in Berlin JANUARY 31 2023

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Esad Sahin has lived in Germany for 10 years but is still not a German citizen. The reason: a strict ban on dual nationality that would have obliged him to surrender his Turkish passport.

That was never an option for him. “It’s part of my identity,” he said. “I wanted to become part of German society, but not at the price of my Turkish citizenship.”

Soon he will not have to face such a dilemma. The German parliament is close to passing a nationality law that will make it much easier for foreigners to acquire German citizenship. It is being seen as a small revolution in the country’s treatment of people with an [immigrant](#) background. It also stands in sharp contrast to the trend in neighbouring countries towards tightening, rather than loosening, citizenship criteria.

The draft law would allow people to apply for citizenship after just five years of residence in [Germany](#), rather than eight years currently. It also says that those who have made a particular effort to integrate — such as becoming proficient in German, doing voluntary work or performing well in school — can apply after three years.

But for the bill’s sponsors, its most important feature is the lifting of the ban on dual citizenship for people from non-EU countries. “A lot of people in this country have hybrid identities and our law has to reflect that,” said Lamya Kaddor, the Greens’ spokesperson on home affairs and herself the child of Syrian immigrants. “The idea that you have only one homeland is completely outdated.”





Esad Sahin: 'I wanted to become part of German society, but not at the price of my Turkish citizenship' © Olga Weber

The law, once passed, could have a huge impact on German society. There are some 10mn people living in Germany who do not have a German passport — roughly 12 per cent of the population. About 5.7mn of them have lived in the country for at least 10 years.

“In terms of democratic theory, it’s clearly a problem when so many people who have been resident here for so long can’t vote and have no say on laws that affect them,” said Niklas Harder of the German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM).

Research had also shown the positive benefits of speeded-up naturalisation, he said. Women’s participation in the labour market improves and children, especially boys, perform better in school.

“There are good studies from Switzerland that show how naturalisation leads to higher incomes, higher pensions, more involvement in clubs and associations — in short, more social cohesion,” said Harder.

The citizenship bill is part of a [raft of reforms](#) promised by chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and liberals that were designed to modernise German society after 16 years of rule by Angela Merkel's conservative Christian Democrats (CDU).

The coalition agreement negotiated in November 2021 also includes plans to [legalise cannabis](#), lower the voting age to 16 and make it easier for people to declare a change of gender.

But the immigration reform could be the most far-reaching. It promises to be the biggest shake-up of Germany's nationality rules since 2000, when a new law meant children born of immigrant parents automatically qualified for German citizenship for the first time.





Georg Maier, centre, minister of the interior of Thuringia in central Germany, with newly naturalised citizens © Martin Schutt/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images

The bill's preamble says Germany's rate of naturalisation is below average for the EU but adds that it is in "the interests of the whole of society that as many migrants as possible who fulfil the legal requirements decide to become naturalised citizens".

One of the people welcoming the proposed change is Jihene Dammak, a Tunisian woman who came to Germany nearly eight years ago. A trained engineer, she tried to set up her own company offering advice and mentoring services to foreign students, but her lack of German citizenship proved a massive obstacle. "It's next to impossible to set up a business and take out a loan and apply for grants without a German passport," she said.

The current system is highly unattractive for the skilled workers Germany so desperately seeks. "For the eight years you have to live here to qualify for citizenship, you're always insecure — if you lose your job, you're out," she said. "Eight years is really too long."

The bill on citizenship will be combined with immigration reform which, based on the Canadian points system, is designed to make it easier for skilled workers to enter Germany. Applicants will no longer need to prove they have a professional qualification that is recognised in Germany, relevant work experience and the promise of a job will be enough.

But for the opposition CDU, the whole reform — especially the speeded-up naturalisation — is misguided. "Five years is not long enough for real integration and to establish whether someone should really become a permanent member of our society," said Alexander Throm, the CDU's home affairs spokesperson.

"German citizenship is given for eternity and can't ever be withdrawn, so you really have to look before you leap," he said. "Eight years is entirely appropriate if you consider what significance citizenship has in Germany."

CONSIDER what significance citizenship has in Germany.

Andrea Lindholz, an MP for the Christian Social Union, the CDU's Bavarian sister party, has said allowing dual nationality would lead to "conflicts of loyalty" and "weaken social cohesion" in Germany.

The far-right Alternative for Germany party has gone further in its criticism. The government was "flogging off German passports dirt cheap to people who haven't sufficiently integrated", said AfD MP Gottfried Curio during one of the Bundestag debates on the issue.

However, the biggest obstacle to the new reform is not the views of the CDU and AfD but German bureaucracy. A recent report in the Die Welt newspaper said local authorities in some of Germany's biggest cities were struggling to cope with a huge backlog of applications for citizenship, with 26,000 applications still pending in Berlin alone — 10,000 of them dating back to 2021. Unions complain of a dire lack of qualified staff to handle the requests.

Yet officials warn that the planned immigration reform could lead to between a 50 per cent and 100 per cent increase in applications, which will in turn significantly increase waiting times.

"We are hearing of naturalisation processes that are taking two years and longer," said Harder. "The immigration authorities are completely overwhelmed. And if they don't get more staff — urgently — we're facing administrative chaos."

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