



Fachbereich WD 2

On defence willingness among Germans with a migration background

The Research Services of the Bundestag were requested to provide scientific insights and findings – if at all available – on the question of so-called ‘defence willingness’, i.e. the willingness to defend Germany in an armed conflict, among German citizens who are foreign-born or have foreign-born parents.

Before the available scientific findings can be presented, a few preliminary remarks are necessary to put those findings into context.

Only German citizens (both male and female) can join the German armed forces (*Bundeswehr*). Conscription is limited to male German citizens over the age of 18.

Broadly speaking, there are autochthonous German citizens and those who have what is commonly called a *Migrationshintergrund* (migration background) in German.

Over the course of the past 20 years, the legal definition of *Migrationshintergrund* has undergone some changes. In fact, it was not until the [microcensus of 2005](#) that the statistical offices on the federal and the state level began differentiating between [Germans with or without a migration background](#). Before that, the differentiation was simply that between citizens and non-citizens (though it was more difficult for migrants to acquire citizenship than it is today).

Currently, a person is considered to have a migration background if they are a resident in or a citizen of Germany *and* have been born without German citizenship *or* have at least one parent who has been born without German citizenship.

Persons whose parents were born with German citizenship but whose grandparents migrated to Germany do not fall under this definition and are therefore not counted as persons with a migration background in official statistics. However, they might be considered such on a socio-cultural level – including by themselves. Therefore, in studies and surveys where respondents are asked to provide background details on themselves, they might report having a migration background without officially having one under current regulations. This ambiguity of the term *Migrationshintergrund* – having both a legal or statistical definition and a socio-cultural one which are not always congruent – needs to be taken into account when looking at studies, press reports, government statements etc. concerning people with a *Migrationshintergrund*.

Furthermore, official statistics do not differentiate between migration backgrounds, e.g., whether a resident is of Turkish, Swedish or Austrian descent, though these differences might of course be quite significant in day-to-day life.

To complicate matters further, there are around 2.5 million citizens who are ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union and who arrived in Germany especially after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. In general, they received German citizenship upon providing proof of their German ethnicity – in many cases, it was enough that a grandparent could prove German ancestry and some proficiency in the German language for the whole family to be recognised as German and granted citizenship. Legally, these Germans do have a *Migrationshintergrund* and are often still perceived as migrants (“Russians”) by the general population but may not perceive themselves and therefore not self-report as such in surveys and studies.

In order to solve these conundrums for statisticians, in 2023, the German Federal Statistical Office introduced a new statistical category: the population with an *Einwanderungsgeschichte* (a history of immigration). This includes all people residing in Germany who immigrated to the current territory of Germany after 1950 or where both parents did so. Whereas the *Migrationshintergrund* is based on a person’s or at least one of their parents’ citizenship at birth, the *Einwanderungsgeschichte* category requires the *experience of immigration* to Germany¹ of either the person or both their parents. It also includes persons and their children who in the eyes of the law had German citizenship at birth but only migrated to the current territory of Germany later, such as the Germans from the formerly German territories in what is now Poland, Lithuania and (Russian) Kaliningrad. While most of the about 12 million ethnic Germans from these territories were expelled to what is now German territory before 1950, a sizeable number of them only arrived later. They are referred to as *Aussiedler* (emigrants).

Again, this definition does not include people whose grandparents migrated to Germany and who may both be perceived and perceive themselves as having a migration background.

To the extent that there are at all data on the migration background/migration history of members of the armed forces, older data may be outdated not only because of changing numbers, but also because the statistical categories and legal definitions have changed.

Until 2011, all male German citizens over the age of 18 were conscripted for military service. Since then, conscription has been suspended, even though it still exists. In the 15 years or so leading up to suspension, increasing numbers of conscripted men not being actually drafted for service on medical grounds, and also a sharp increase in the number of men being permitted to go into civil substitute service as conscientious objectors had, for all intents and purposes, made military service voluntary: if somebody really did not want to do military service, he could easily

1 Technically: to the territories that were recognised as being under either West or East German jurisdiction after 1950. The Federal Republic (West Germany), especially, did not formally recognise the former *Ostgebiete* as being part of Poland / Lithuania / Russia for decades. It did, however, recognise from the start that they were no longer under Germany’s jurisdiction and administration.

avoid it. From this, we may perhaps infer that those who *did* go were actually willing to defend Germany.

However, there are very few data from that time concerning a migration background of those serving in the armed forces, both among conscripts and career soldiers.

The same is true in 2025: what data there is on the migration background of German military personnel comes mostly from self-reports in surveys or estimates from experts. The most recent of these, from the report "[Bunt in der Bundeswehr?](#)" - the first survey and report ever on matters of diversity within the Bundeswehr - is from 2019. The number of military personnel who voluntarily reported having a migrant background puts their percentage in the armed forces at 8.9 percent. In 2023, around 12,4 percent of all German citizens had a *Migrationsgeschichte* according to the 2023 [microcensus](#) by the Federal Statistical Office.

This figure may indicate that people with migration background are significantly underrepresented in the Bundeswehr. However, taking into account that not all citizens with a migrant background are eligible for military service (e.g., they are too young or too old), and the fact that half of them are women (a group that is definitely underrepresented in the armed forces, as far fewer women than men apply for service in the armed forces), the underrepresentation is almost certainly not as severe as the first glance implies.

In German military politics and policy, the issue is recognised and has been brought up several times over at least the past ten years, and especially since the matter of defence has become far more urgent in the face of the threat from Russia and the reduced reliability of the United States.

Recently, the Council of Experts for Integration and Migration (Sachverständigenrat für Integration und Migration (SVR)) proposed specifically targeting Germans with a migrant background in campaigns for voluntary recruits. It cited figures from its [annual report](#) (2024) on integration, according to which the Bundeswehr enjoys a high degree of trust among residents with a migrant background: a 77 percent approval/trust rating. This is a higher number than among citizens with no migration background (68 percent).

This may lead to the following question: Based on available surveys or studies, do Germans who are foreign-born, or have foreign-born parents, report a lower, similar, or higher willingness to defend the country compared to the national average?

Firstly, the willingness to defend Germany is very similar among Germans with and those without a migration background.

Secondly, only one scientific source on this question could be found: from page 40 of the most recent (2024) [report](#) on the perceptions of the German population in matters of security and defence by the Bundeswehr's Centre for Military History and Social Sciences (Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr, ZMSBw). It must be noted that the migration background of respondents taking part in this survey is self-reported.

Representative surveys on defence willingness in Germany usually differentiate at most between sex, age, and political affiliation. The ZMSBw study is the only one found that also differentiates between the migration background of the respondents.

Its results consistently show that significant differences among respondents exist, apart from sex, mostly along two lines: that between political party preference and that between East and West Germany, particularly when it comes to the military threat posed by Russia and support for Ukraine. [Only a minority of the adherents of the far-right AfD and the populist BSW consider Russia a threat](#), unlike the majority of adherents of all other parties currently represented in the German parliaments. Russia is perceived less of a threat by East Germans than by West Germans.

Whether respondents had a migration background or not does not have a significant impact on the answers given to *most* of the questions asked in the study.

Some noteworthy differences exist, however. A far higher number of respondents with a migration background than those without support the idea of direct military support of Ukraine (61 vs. 47 percent). Also, 64 percent of respondents with a migration background agree that Germany's military budget should be increased, compared to 56 without a migration background. Furthermore, more respondents with a migration background support the concept of loyalty to Germany's allies in NATO and the EU than respondents without one (80 percent vs. 72 percent). This may be especially significant as this is one of the few questions where there is almost no difference between responses from East and West Germany, and only the adherents of the BSW party score less than 60 percent. Where differences do exist between respondents with or without a migration background, they seem to indicate that people with a migration background have rather *more positive* attitudes towards the Bundeswehr and tend to favour the principles of military strength, loyalty to Germany's allies and a robust military budget.

As to defence willingness: when asked whether they would be willing to defend Germany in case of a military attack through armed service ("*mit der Waffe*", "with a weapon"), 39 percent of respondents with a migration background responded "yes", whilst 58 percent responded "no". Among respondents without a migration background, 42 percent responded "yes" and 51 percent "no."

While there is a larger difference between both groups that responded negatively, the difference between those who affirmed their willingness is, at 3 percent, relatively insignificant. Since the study does not differentiate between citizens and non-citizens with migration background, it's not possible to tell if the difference among those declining their willingness to defend Germany is due to that factor or others. In any case, the differences between the sexes and between political preferences are again far more significant than between migrants and non-migrants. It should also be noted that only people under 50 years of age were asked.

Given the scarcity of information on defence willingness among migrants, no hard data on the question of the most important factors that influence defence willingness (in *any* segment of the population) could be found. As can be inferred from the ZMSBw study, defence willingness among people with a migration background is not significantly lower than among people without one, and that other factors – sex, political preferences and the West-East-dichotomy – are far more significant in Germany. In any case, it is plausible that a positive identification with Ger-

many and its democracy and liberties is the most significant factor for defence willingness in all the different groups that make up German society.

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