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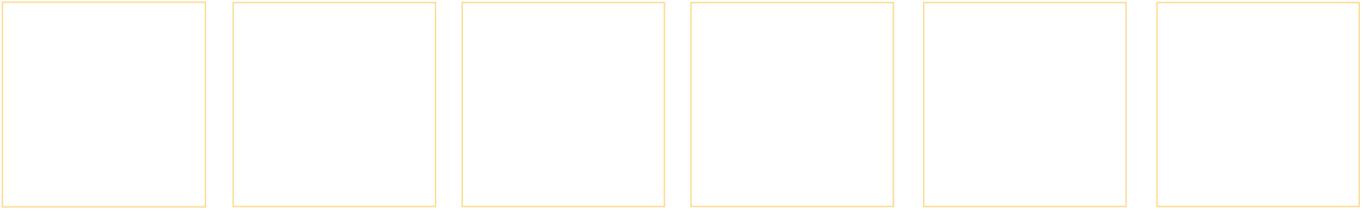
POLICY
BRIEF

Public attitudes to immigration in Germany in the aftermath of the migration crisis

Teresa Talò, Research Associate, Migration Policy Centre

During Angela Merkel's time as Germany's Chancellor, the country has seen the largest inflow of migrants in its post-war history, but overall attitudes to immigration in Germany have been remarkably stable and, if anything, have actually become slightly more positive (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2017; Eurobarometer, 2017). On the surface, stability seems to be the word that best describes attitudes to immigration in Germany. Yet, the anti-immigration Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) political party has seen a surge in its opinion poll ratings, enjoyed some electoral success, and could enter the Bundestag after the 2017 federal elections. This brief explains how generalized favourability to immigration can combine with growth in support for an anti-immigration party by highlighting the importance of issue salience.

To explore the structure of attitudes to immigration in Germany, this policy brief addresses four key features: the overall increase in positive attitudes to immigration; levels of issue salience; different perceptions of immigration among eastern and western Germans; and, finally the role played by wider trust in Germany's social and political institutions in reducing anxiety around immigration.



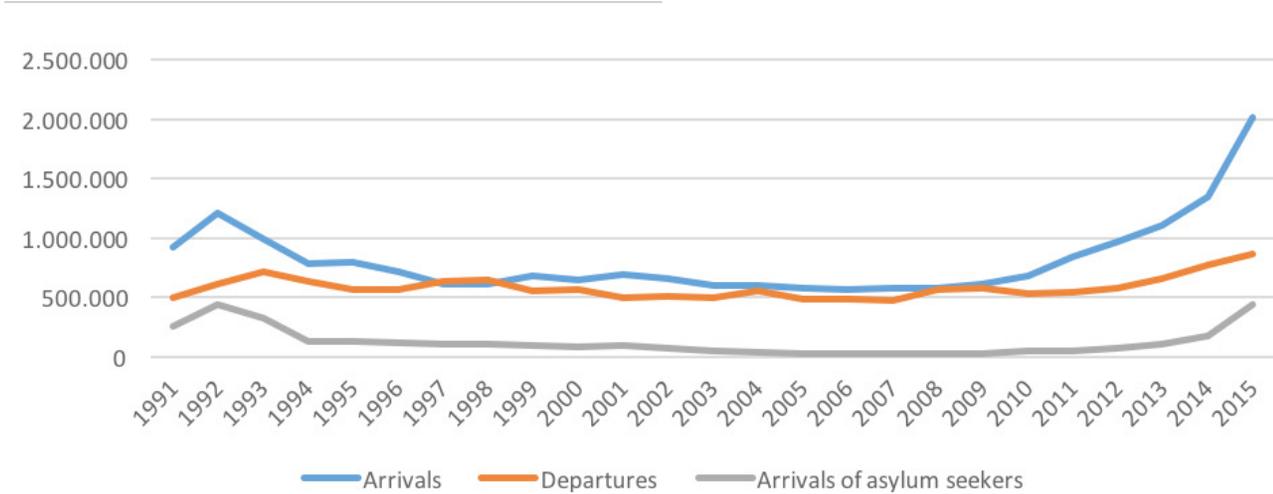
Context – Germany as a Country of Immigration

In 2016, there were 18 million people in Germany with a migrant background¹ or 22.5% of the population. The foreign population numbered 10 million, or 12.1% of the population. This made Germany the second largest country of immigration in the world after the US (Statistisches Bundesamt, OECD). Various waves of immigration have shaped Germany’s identity as a country of immigration. In the 1950s and 1960s, ‘guestworkers’ mainly from Turkey and Southern Europe moved to Germany in response to labour shortages. This flow was initially considered temporary thus explicit strategies to integrate newcomers were not considered. However, many immigrants that had come to work in Germany eventually settled in the country which led to further inflows due to family reunifications in the 1960 and 1970s. The end of the Cold War brought a new wave of immigration of ethnic German *Aussiedler* from Eastern Europe while relatively liberal asylum policies led to a peak in asylum applications to Germany in the 80s and 90s. More restrictive immigration laws slowed down the inflow of migrants substantially up to the current “migration crisis” (Geddes and Scholten, 2016). In 2015, with a net inflow of 1,139,000 migrants, Germany witnessed the highest level of immigration in Europe and in its history.

In the late 1990s and 2000s, profound changes in Germany’s immigration policies occurred at a time when immigration to Germany was relatively low and the focus could shift to how to integrate people that had settled in the country. In 2005, a systematic integration framework was created; the policy debate had changed from regulating flows to managing them and recognizing that immigrants arriving to Germany were there to stay (Abali, 2009). In parallel to this shift in policy focus, Germans’ attitudes to immigration were becoming progressively more positive. The percentage of Germans who believed there were too many immigrants living in Germany went down from 79% in 1984 to 53% in 2008 (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 1984 and 2008).

During the migration crisis of 2015, Germany was by far the top European destination for immigrants and Merkel’s ‘open-door’ policy towards asylum seekers has been a major topic of debate. However, as shown below, this did not lead to a general increase in anti-immigration sentiment.

Fig 1. Flows of non-Germans



Source: Statistisches Bundesamt

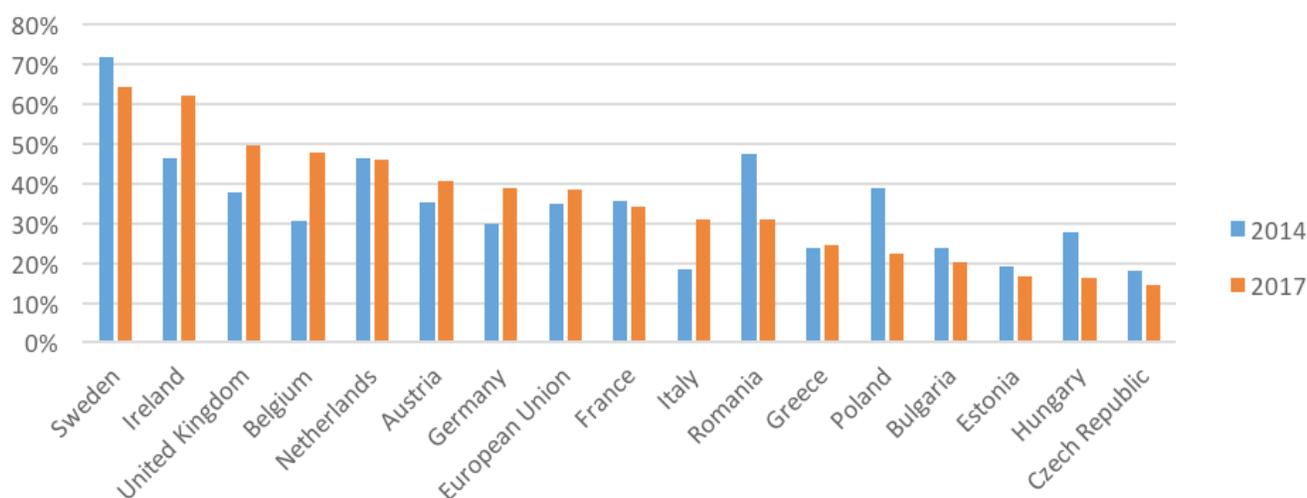
1. The Statistisches Bundesamt defines people with migrant background all immigrants and foreigners born in Germany



Attitudes to Immigration are Stable (or Slightly More Positive)

Between 2014 and 2017, the percentage of people stating that “immigration of people from outside the EU” evoked “positive feelings” grew from 30% to 39% (Figure 2). Germany is not alone in this regard. A similar increase in positive attitudes to immigration seems to be taking place in much of Western Europe. In contrast, in Central and Eastern European countries attitudes seem to be hardening.

Fig. 2 Percentage reporting positive feelings towards immigration from outside the EU



Source: Eurobarometer

Attitudes to immigration however are a multidimensional construct. This means that, when forming attitudes, people consider the economic impact of immigration, its cultural impact, whether the country should have a moral obligation to take in migrants, whether migrants are refugees or have economic motivations and a plethora of other issues. A study by Purpose found that most Germans (58%) are neither completely “anti” or “pro” immigration but fall in an “anxious middle” (IPSOS, 2016). 21% of Germans reported being sceptical of the impact immigration could have on Germany but believed that the country had the moral duty to welcome certain migrants. Another fifth of the population considered immigrants an important economic asset for Germany but expressed concern about differences in lifestyle and values.

Over the years, there has been consensus among policy makers in Germany about the need for labour migration to sustain the country’s economy (Abali, 2009; Duffy et al., 2014). With an average of 46.8 years, Germany is second only to Japan in the average age of its population and faces a shrinking working-age population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017). These considerations on ageing and the economy have often been part of the discourse on immigration in Germany and seems to be reflected in the population’s overall positive attitudes to the economic impacts of immigration. Furthermore, the country’s strong economic performance and low unemployment rates in recent years, have given lower resonance to negative arguments on migration’s possible negative economic effects.

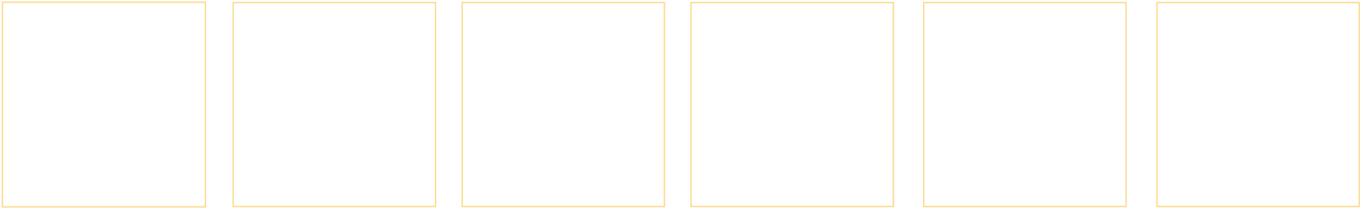
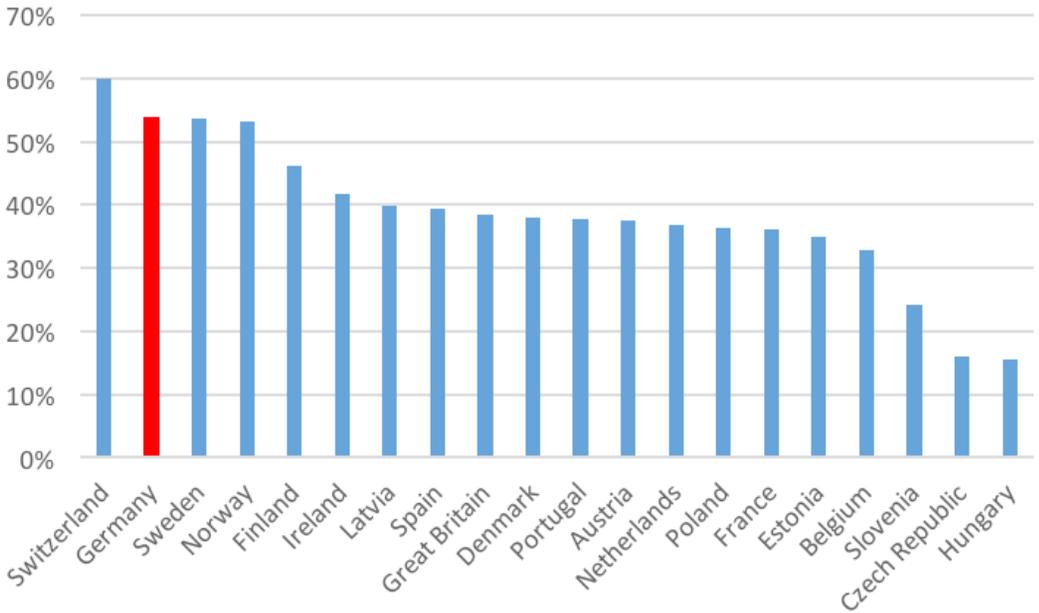


Fig. 3 Percentage saying immigration is good for the economy²



Source: European Social Survey, 2014

Salience of Immigration

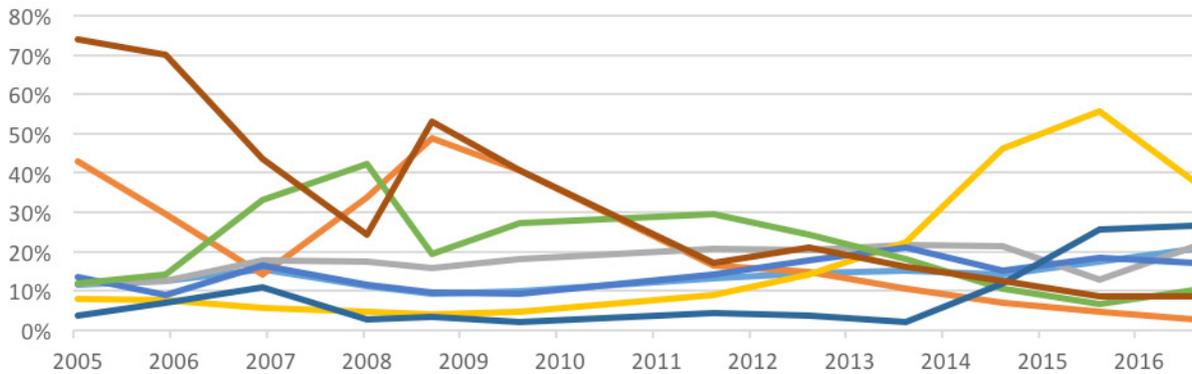
While attitudes seem to have become more positive from 2014 to 2017, support in opinion polls for the AfD grew after 2015, reaching peaks of about 15% throughout 2016 (average of polling data) and around 12% in the run up to the 2017 federal elections. How can generalized favourability about immigration be reconciled with growth in support for an anti-immigration political party? This apparent incongruence can be explained by examining issue salience, or considering how important people perceive immigration to be. Voters are likely to make their choices evaluating parties' stances on several issues; when immigration is not salient, it is unlikely that it will determine voters' choices. The salience of immigration therefore activates latent negative attitudes in the population. Before the migration and refugee crisis, most Germans considered immigration to be a relatively unimportant issue. Until 2013, Germans were less likely than other Europeans to mention immigration as one of the key problems facing their country (Figure 4).

The salience of immigration in Germany peaked in late 2015 and has remained one of the most important issue in the country since 2014. This has coincided with a sharp decline in recent years in the perceived importance of economic issues probably due to the country's relatively strong economy. The AfD's increased profile as Germany's foremost anti-immigration party runs parallel to this trend. In 2016, it obtained significant electoral successes, in particular in Saxony-Anhalt where it got 24.3% of votes and in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania where its attracted 20.8% support. The AfD now holds seats in the parliaments of 13 out of the 16 federal states. It is however far more rooted in the Eastern part of the country where, as shown in the next section, attitudes towards immigration are more negative than in the West.

2. Respondents are asked to assign a score from 0 (immigration is bad for the economy) to ten (immigration is good for the economy). Here, the percentage of those that pick 6 or higher are considered.



Figure 4. Most important issues in Germany³



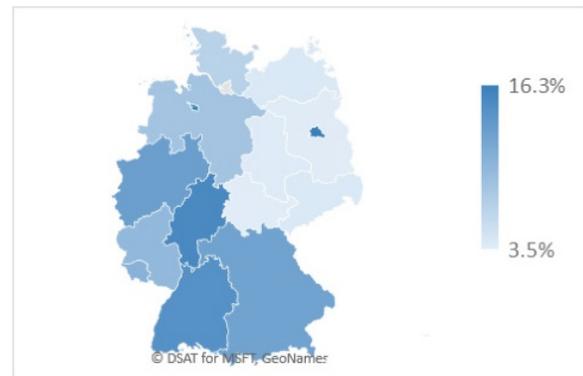
Source: Eurobarometer

East-West Differences in Attitudes to Immigration

Attitudes to immigration vary greatly between East and West Germany. This seems to follow a wider European pattern: Western European countries are on average much more open to immigration than Central and East European countries. These differences are also stable over time and are likely to have their roots in how history shaped countries' social structure and attitudes in general. Western European countries have more of a history of immigration while Eastern Europe has historically seen more emigration. Therefore, in Western Europe, immigrants and associated multiculturalism are more familiar. In Germany, most migrants have settled in the West and in Berlin, areas in which attitudes to immigration are more positive. A commonly stated hypothesis is that repeated and significant contact with migrants has a liberalising effect on attitudes to immigration (e.g. Dixon, 2006; Ha, 2010). Anxieties concerning migrants' difference in values, lifestyles, and security concerns seem to be reduced when local people are in contact with migrants. Some scholars have also suggested that the structure of attitudes to immigration is different in the East as opposed to the West. Eastern Germans that hold negative attitudes to immigration are more likely to fear economic competition from migrants than their Western counterparts (Clark and Legge, 1997).

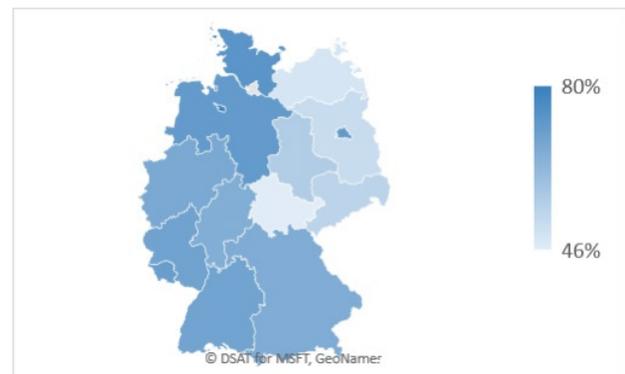
3. Respondents are asked to select two issues. The graph shows the percentage of people selecting each issue.

Figure 5. Percentage of foreign population per federal state



Source: Statistisches Bundesamt 2015

Figure 6. Percentage saying some or many migrants from poorer countries outside Europe should be allowed to settle in Germany



Source: European Social Survey 2014

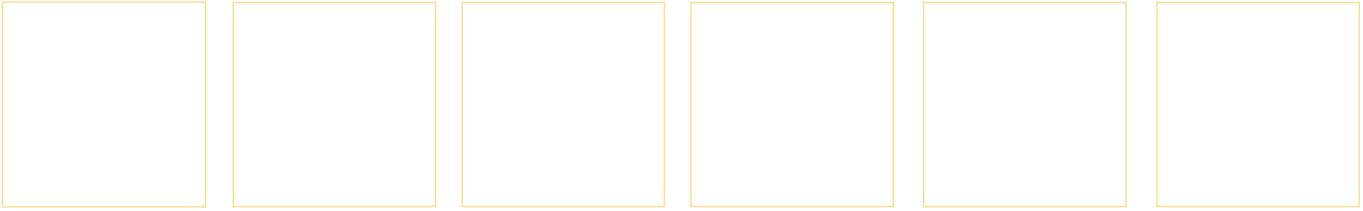


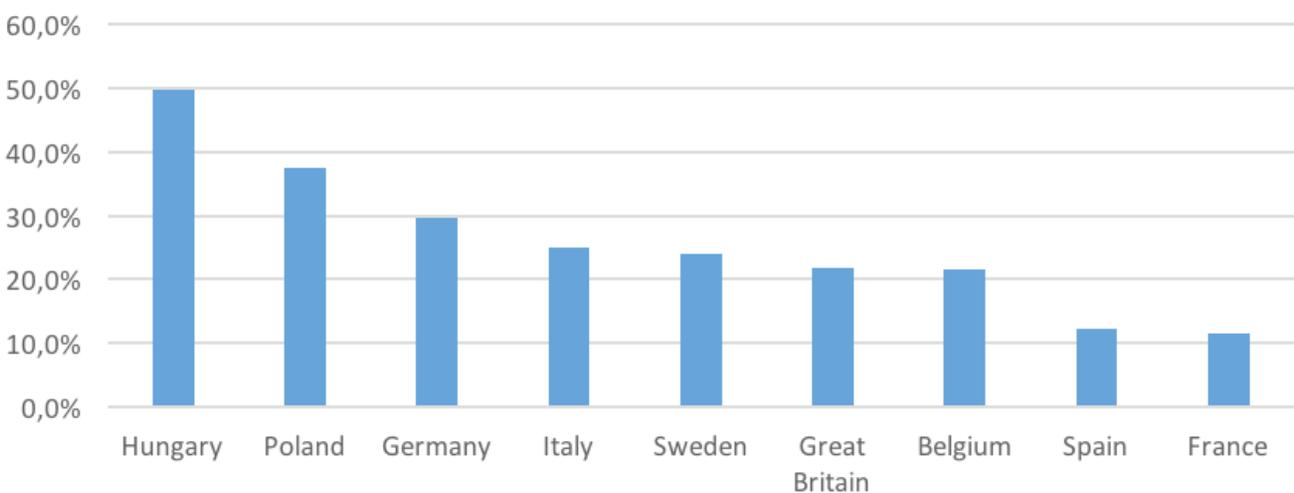
Figure 1 shows that attitudes in Germany as a whole have become more positive from 2014 to 2017. This has, however, happened at different rates in Western and Eastern Germany. While in Western Germany the percentage of those reporting positive feelings to immigration from outside the EU went from 35% to 48%, in the Eastern part of the country it increased much less substantially - from 24% to 28%. Once again, this difference mirrors what happened in Europe as a whole; attitudes in Western countries have on average become more positive while Eastern countries have overall become more sceptical of immigration.

Trust in Institutions – “Wir schaffen das”

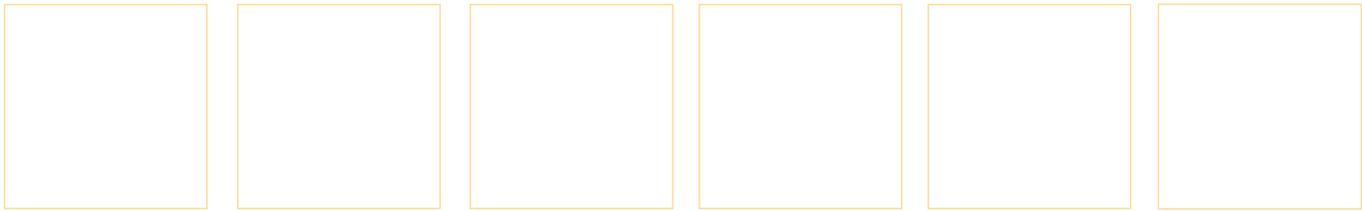
Since the landmark reforms in immigration policy of the early 2000s, there has been a growing awareness of Germany as an immigration country. This has spurred a strong commitment to making integration work. Incorporating migrants into the labour market and into Germany’s social fabric have been federal priorities for the ten years preceding the migration crisis (Abali, 2009; Duffy et al., 2014). Germany’s transparent and

comprehensive management of migration led to relatively widespread satisfaction with how the country was dealing with migration in the years immediately preceding the migration and refugee crisis. In 2013, 54% of Germans thought the government was managing migration well compared to a European average of 31% (Duffy et al., 2014). Germany’s solid economy could have also reinforced the perception that the country was strong and able to deal with migrants’ integration into the labour market. The migration crisis therefore came at a moment of relative confidence in the government’s ability to deal with the sudden influx of migrants – Merkel’s statement “wir schaffen das” (“we can do this”) is likely to have resonated with large sectors of the population. When asked in late 2016 whether the government had responded well to the refugee crisis, Germans were among the most likely to give a positive answer (Figure 7). Hungary and Poland, the two countries that score higher than Germany, enacted completely different responses to the crisis by restricting access. Therefore, approval of their government’s management to the crisis takes on a very different meaning.

Figure 7. Percentage of respondents that believe the country has responded well to the refugee crisis



Source: IPSOS Global Advisor 2016



A recent Bertelsmann Stiftung report has highlighted that resentment against the establishment and polarisation in Germany are relatively low. On refugee policy, German public opinion seems to be keener on a government that 'controls' and manages migration effectively than on preventing migrants from settling in the country (Duffy et al., 2014; Vehrkamp and Wratil, 2017).

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Migration Policy Centre
Robert Schuman Centre
for Advanced Studies

European University Institute
Via Boccaccio, 151
50133 Florence
Italy

Contact:

email: mpc@eui.eu website: www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/ twitter: [@MigrPolCentre](https://twitter.com/MigrPolCentre)

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